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## Rethinking 'expert sense' in international development: the case of Sierra Leone's housing policy

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### ABSTRACT

Experts have come to dominate global economic policies under certain institutional ideological discourse. But what happens when most of the policy players in developing countries do not belong to globalised institutions? This article interrogates the role of national officials in reinforcing Western institutional hegemony. A review of housing policies in Sierra Leone since independence, and interviews with housing sector officials, show that the current manifestation of such superstructure and its reinforcing nature also mask new economic interests. The review shows that local national officials, who are often presented as passive objects of power, actually have enormous interpretive agency, and the aggressive articulation of their exclusionary approach demonstrates specific actionable interventions which enable them to create space and advantage for themselves. The lack of a new articulative strategy means that commitment to local content remains only as paper plans and symbolic gestures.

[Repenser 'la compréhension d'expert' dans le développement international : le cas de la politique du logement de la Sierra Leone.] Les experts en sont venus à dominer les politiques économiques mondiales avec un certain discours idéologique institutionnel. Mais que se passe-t-il lorsque la plupart des acteurs de la politique dans les pays en développement n'appartiennent pas à des institutions internationales ? Cet article interroge le rôle des fonctionnaires nationaux dans le renforcement de l'hégémonie institutionnelle occidentale. Un examen des politiques du logement en Sierra Leone depuis l'indépendance, et des entretiens avec des fonctionnaires du secteur du logement, montrent que la manifestation actuelle d'une telle superstructure, et de sa nature se renforçant mutuellement, masque également de nouveaux intérêts économiques. L'examen montre que les fonctionnaires nationaux locaux, qui sont souvent présentés comme des objets de pouvoir passifs, ont en fait un pouvoir interprétatif énorme, et l'articulation agressive de leur approche d'exclusion montre des interventions concrètes spécifiques, qui leur permettent de créer un espace et un bénéfice pour eux-mêmes. Le manque d'une nouvelle stratégie articulée montre que l'engagement envers davantage de « contenu local » reste seulement un projet sur le papier et un geste symbolique.

### KEYWORDS

Expert sense; neoliberalism; housing; urbanisation; Sierra Leone; 'glocalised' experts

### MOTS-CLÉS

compréhension d'expert ; néolibéralisme ; logement ; urbanisation ; Sierra Leone ; experts glocalisés

## Introduction

In the past three decades, there has been an increasing presence of international staff (otherwise known as ‘experts’) in the ‘development’ arena of developing countries. With nearly 70% of the world’s population set to live in urban areas by 2050 (United Nations Habitat 2006), local urbanisation decisions are more often being made by international staff. This changing socio-spatial configuration also implies an increasing movement of capital and resources (development grants, loans and investments) mostly from Western capitals into developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and they will come along with experts.

However, as these projects, which are promoted by experts, fail to meet their intended target, scholarly scrutiny has also intensified. Critics (mostly neo-Gramscian scholars) contend that experts in developing countries represent ‘policy regimes’ that are mainly concerned with the production and reproduction of Western neoliberal hegemony and social structuration (Peet 2002). This contention is based on the observation that the international development agenda has been predominantly driven by a few dominant multilateral institutions (World Bank, IMF and UN) who operate satellite offices in poor countries, and direct their activities from far-removed headquarters in Western capitals (see Peet 2007, 2009).

However, very little attention has been paid to local national staff and their role in the shifting configuration of the policy context. This article therefore specifically explores the changing paradigm of Sierra Leone’s housing policy since independence in terms of how its approach to housing has evolved, and how these international policies have been locally conceptualised and articulated. The article emanates from the view that the discussion around the Western hegemonic effect on local policies and their outcomes is often limited to the institutional effects of power and to the notion that power only resides in centralised institutional locations in the West. Because of this assumption, local national officials of developing countries are often presented as passive objects of power who are devoid of any interpretive agency. Hence, there is very little scholarly interrogation beyond the initial process of institutional knowledge appropriation and knowledge conceptualisation. This article attempts to show that the increasing attempt at privatisation in Sierra Leone tells us a different story. I contend that local national officials – whom I term ‘glocalised experts’ – constitute a specific geographic bloc, with enormous interpretive agency. I also argue that while the continuous influence of neoliberal policies in developing countries like Sierra Leone can be explained by the effects of ‘policy regimes’ (as discussed in Baken and Linden 1993; Layfield 2009; Peet 2009), the aggressive acceleration towards new policy prescriptions like private sector enablement points to specific actionable interventions by local national officials which go beyond the spread of ‘policy regimes’. Rather, their goal is mainly aimed at earning legitimacy from abroad for their local policies, and in doing so, the glocalised experts are able to create space and advantage for their ‘rent-seeking’ agenda. Such rent-seeking is often targeted at both their international partners (through token plans and symbolic gestures) and local power structures (through the commercial activities these policies create). As a result of these activities, alternatives to the ineffectual dominant neoliberal approach to local policies continue to be handled by a combination of perfunctory plans and cosmetic gesture.

The article is divided into five sections. The second section, which follows this introduction, discusses the article's theoretical contribution to the contemporary discourse of the institutional effects of neoliberal knowledge – specifically discussing the current literature on the hegemonic effect of neoliberalism. The third section (which is divided into three subsections) introduces the case study – Sierra Leone housing policy. These subsections draw on the key historical developments – showing an evolution of a paradigm from independence-era government provision to a neoliberal market-focused policy agenda. This section specifically highlights the articulation of the neoliberal discourse of private sector enablement (mostly driven by global financial institutions) and the adoption of new housing policies in newly independent Sierra Leone, in line with this changing political economy ideology. Neo-Gramscian scholars have referred to this phenomenon as an institutional geography of power. This section therefore re-evaluates the various national and housing-specific policy prescriptions, showing not only a policy regime, but also the agency of local national staff leveraging this global phenomenon to create space and advantage for themselves. In the fourth section two broad implications of the phenomenon of 'glocalised experts' on Sierra Leone are discussed. They include an opportunistic neoliberal agenda and rent-seeking through shambolic plans and gestures. The article concludes by contextualising the key arguments and overall implications resulting from the glocalised policy regime.

### **Theoretical contribution to the institutional geography of power**

To start, I use Richard Peet's (2007) concept of 'institutional geography of power' as my theoretical framework. The last five decades have witnessed a global shift of the state's role, from ambitious schemes of state intervention to pro-market policies. This paradigmatic shift has been aided by multilateral institutions through various policies mostly carried out by highly skilled experts. Peet (2007) therefore argues that this shift is more of a spread of 'policy regimes'. Policy regimes are defined as 'a contradictory process, existing in historically and geographically contingent forms, produced during a period of institutional searching' (Peck and Tickell 2002, 383; see also Peet 2007). In essence, these ideologies are produced and reproduced through institutional forms. Peet called this 'power-spread' an 'institutional geography of power', because the 'experts' resemble more 'economic institutional thinking' than being 'civil-institutional' in character (Peet 2003, 2007, 15). In other words, rather than representing states, they mostly represent institutions that epistemologically shape these broad neoliberal hegemonic discourses. Therefore, the ideas which they spread have come to represent what we now know as 'a lived reality' (see Gunn 2006). Furthermore, the knowledge applied to the policy context is referred to as 'expert sense', – 'a pervasive general theory, learned at school or university, [which] becomes the imaginary base for hundreds of ... discourses that structure thousands of policies that affect billions of people' (Peet 2007, 17). These experts are frequently backed by 'well established, abundantly financed institutions – government departments, think tanks, banking associations, etc.' (15). In summary, 'expert sense' does not necessarily represent local reality.

The choice of Peet's work is important for three reasons. First, this article's discussion is limited to the institutional effects of neoliberal hegemony, with specific reference to the individuals who aid in the spreading of these global institutional ideas, both in terms of

their education and line of thinking (which I call cognitive). Second, the term ‘expert sense’, in Peet’s (2007) work, provides an apt description of development agendas that are mostly influenced by experts from multilateral institutions, mostly devoid of local content and local interest. Finally, like Peet’s framework this article is backward-looking (showing how these policies arose and evolved over time). But serving as a critical departure, however, the article provides a very good example of the role of local class action, in relation to the local group interests that the national staff serve, by influencing the state to serve other interests through these policy prescriptions. Together, these three features offer a critical perspective of international development policies, both in terms of how they become everyday practice in governance, and how that practice serves to reinforce class relations not only globally, but also locally. Certainly, these three reasons have Marxist connotations that would normally invite liberal pluralist counter-arguments. However, my contribution in this article goes beyond the old duality of liberal pluralist and Marxist debate on Western hegemony and power, and focuses specifically on the application of agency of local policymakers from a non-institutionalist perspective. By non-institutionalist, I refer to the absence of mere global institutional power – power that is often exerted by institutions over people (Peet 2009). This type of power has already been exhaustively debated in the literature on institutional geography of power. Rather, I focus on local actors in these small geographic blocs that are outside the institutional geography of power whom I term glocalised experts. Glocalised experts, in this sense, refer to local national officials (mostly in developing countries) with a global educational background and yet local biography by virtue of their citizenship and non-institutional affiliation. The glocalised experts are global in appeal because, like international experts, they were educated abroad, and have been taught to think and solve problems in a certain way, yet ‘local’ in function because, unlike the international staff, the glocalised experts have local legitimacy through natural birth and democratic elections. This influential set of national officials therefore has a unique appeal because, unlike foreign experts, it invites little local resistance. Its members display authority imbued with the clout of legitimacy that is often lacking in the former (institutional experts), whose ‘foreign-ness’ invites suspicion and resistance.

Therefore, I argue that while international experts have come to represent the expansion of neoliberal hegemony, glocalised experts do not just serve as an integral part of that larger policy regime (as many scholars have already pointed out), but they have leverage on this policy regime to achieve specific objectives. These objectives include using neoliberal ideologies to create space and advantage through symbolic gestures and token policy prescriptions to gain legitimacy from abroad that would enable them to engage in rent-seeking behaviour targeted at both international and local power structures. This suggests a political economy of exploitation and inequality, not only driven by global forces, but also perpetuated by a cadre of local politicians furthering a class agenda. Because of this leveraging, therefore, neoliberal policy prescriptions remain dominant in sub-Saharan Africa, significantly aided by glocalised experts who are far removed from the ‘power centres’ of multilateral organisations. The implications of this argument therefore are that understanding power solely as centralised at the level of global governance institutions (see Curtis 2002), while necessary, is not sufficient for grasping the challenges associated with ineffective development policy outcomes. It also shows that the theoretical proposition that hegemony is just as consensual as it is coercive, often implies a lack of total agency among local

staff – a common problem with the literature on hegemony. Rather, this article argues that an interrogation that recognises and differentiates a more complex interpretive local agency – identifying local power effects and individual agency – may be necessary.

### **A case study of Sierra Leone's housing policy**

The geographic setting of this article is Sierra Leone, a developing economy that is still emerging from a decade of brutal war. The country generally exhibits features of limited statehood – the often persistent challenges to state monopoly on legitimate force (see Risse 2013). However, it has also shown significant institutional changes and economic growth since the end of the civil war. It has developed some semblance of governance capacity, held successive democratic elections, experienced significant change in political institutions and improved delivery of certain public goods. In 2012, it was ranked among the fastest-growing economies in Africa (Glencorse and Marmon 2015). Despite these developments, Sierra Leone also exhibits a classic case of opportunistic neoliberal hegemony in many of its policy domains. Therefore, using a historical constructive methodology<sup>1</sup> this article analyses the country's housing policy changes in terms of how international housing ideologies have been locally conceptualised and implemented. It also analyses the political intellectualisation of these policies by local national officials and the role of interpretive agency. The housing sector is particularly important because it illustrates a major primary channel where international political economy issues have prominently influenced national reforms. It has also served as a clear example of an often negative operational experience and programme outcome normally associated with local policies which have broad international appeal (see World Bank 2008).

#### ***Sierra Leone housing: defining the problem and embracing the global paradigm***

Unlike most parts of the developed world, where land use follows planning, in Sierra Leone, planning mostly follows land use. Before the outbreak of the 1991 war, the country's housing situation was already 'highly congested and in extremely poor quality' (Thomas 2006, 4). Today, widespread poverty (an upshot of prolonged economic stagnation and large-scale unemployment) has stimulated greater desperation for any type of shelter. Spaces that were once considered environmental hazards, or reserved for future expansion, now accommodate whole new unplanned communities (mostly built from dirty clay and recycled corrugated zinc) sprouting at virtually every available space. Occasional fire accidents normally result in razing whole communities. This makes housing and shelter a vital economic development issue for Sierra Leone, but it has also made the housing sector a source of constantly changing (and often times negative) operational experience. Therefore, the country's housing policy sector has been at the crossroads of several changes since independence, with a chaotic shift from total government-provided housing schemes to an increasing accentuation of pro-market enablement with diffused state role. Decades of implementation have proven unsuccessful. Rather, the housing sector has come to symbolise an increasing leverage of pro-market ideals by national officials to gain international legitimacy that also creates opportunity and space for rent-seeking (CAHF 2014). The following brief history of the global paradigm shift shows an unsurprising yet remarkable alteration over the years.

### ***State interventionism in Sierra Leone housing***

Sierra Leone's immediate decade following independence was marked by an articulation of discursive positions around state investment in social programmes. This led to waves of optimistic commitments by government towards social transformation and a call for a political strategy towards a broader redistributive approach. The conditions for ambitious state intervention in land markets were conducive, as the new era of independence unfolded alongside a subdued sense of support from the international political climate. Therefore, the adoption of the provider status in the provision of social services became strategically important not just as a statement of radical opposition to colonialism, but also as a claim to populist legitimacy. The new independent leaders in Sierra Leone employed redistributive development strategies with only fragmentary reference to non-socialist economic ideologies (Fyle 1993). Because housing is particularly capital-intensive, the state ensured that public authorities essentially controlled its production to reduce deficits and improve the quality of life (Doherty 1985). In the capital city of Freetown, despite a complex combination of customary, statutory and common law associated with land ownership, the state intervened to address the housing gap (Williams and Oredola-Davies 2006). Therefore, the National Property Company was established to acquire land for property development and direct its future. The 1961 *Slum clearance report*, which succeeded the colonial *Fry & farms report* of 1945, produced the first comprehensive plan for Freetown, focusing on providing 'alternative accommodation' for the urban poor, in the periphery of the city centre (Doherty 1985). This 'housing-for-all' approach emphasised public housing schemes, and put together a variety of public-driven strategies and programmes that particularly targeted low-income populations similar to other newly independent African countries (see Arku 2006, 2009).

In essence, while some of these ideas pre-dated independence, the immediate post-independent housing plans visualised and articulated government's role as 'continuing the provision of low-cost housing, [and] ... extension of its civil service loan scheme to other sectors of the population' (Doherty 1985, 155). By the 1970s therefore, a wave of social housing programmes were completed. They included the Kissy Low Cost Housing Estate (*Low-Cost*) in eastern Freetown (for mostly poor migrants from the provinces), the government reservation quarters and the clerks' quarters for civil servants, and the military and police barracks. With the exception of *Low-Cost*, these housing programmes were implemented in all the 12 districts in the country as well as the capital city of Freetown. By 1982, the Sierra Leone Housing Corporation was formed 'to build [additional] low cost houses' and provide loans for construction of houses and building materials for all income families (Doherty 1985). At least 60% of all government-sponsored constructions were being built for low-income families. These historical developments in housing implied that the state assumed the role of provider in the production of housing as in many social programmes.

### ***The paradigmatic shift in housing policy after independence***

However, the end of colonial rule and 'normalisation' within the global economic system also indicated potential conflict between wide-scale redistributive efforts and the mounting demand of the free market (Malpezzi and Mayo 1987; Mukhija 2004). Therefore, the immediate adaptation of a more leftist-based agenda which advocated for mass housing quickly became subsumed in discourses around private sector-led housing production,

with minimalist state intervention. Consequently, alongside these new post-independence housing plans were comprehensive expert reports (mostly emanating from United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] experts) advocating for less ambitious government-provider schemes and suggesting fiscal restraints (see Patel 1976; UNDP 1977). The increasing emphases on private schemes by these reports also pointed at 'limitations of government resources' and introduced small contractors as a substitute for state interventionism (UNDP 1977). This new approach resonated with the global World Bank's 'enablement' model that was intended to garner the 'responsiveness' of the market to the supply side of housing (World Bank 1993). The Bank viewed the enablement approach as the 'greatest potential' for improving the housing sector performance in developing countries (see Mukhija 2004; World Bank 1993, 3). Hence, starting in the 1980s, new housing plans began emphasising an approach in line with these 'international standards', specifically focusing on 'shopping malls, boutiques, supermarkets ...' as well as a Euclidean-type zoning mostly spurred by private sector developers (Doherty 1985, 154). The ideology behind the Bank's (and, by extension, the international development community's) emerging approach at the time envisaged public housing as a national burden. Therefore, local discourses focused on limiting them to 'up-country' migrant labourers, and located those structures at the periphery of the central business district. It injected 'private enterprise' into the housing equation and minimised government's fiscal commitment, enabling 'private efforts to expand its [housing] activities' (155). Subsequent national plans introduced site-and-service schemes<sup>2</sup> as an alternative to wholesale low-income housing buildings, encouraging the need for outside finance that was only available to middle- and high-income individuals.

By the early 1990s the shift had become remarkable, representing a total overhaul from the doctrine of 'provider' to that of 'enabler', and symbolising an official government policy that was significantly disciplined by the changing global economic demands. New national housing policies no longer reflected the initial spirit of immediate post-independence public housing initiatives. Rather, much more formalised discourses had emerged, mostly written by 'experts', advocating limited government and solutions that were exclusively drawn from a partial and often misleading interpretation of Western capitalist experience. This perspective draws heavily on the parallels in the differing development experiences that both developing and developed countries underwent, as noted in the development literature (see Doherty 1985). It is well established that the experiences of advanced capitalist nations indicate that the conditions under which the state and the private market come together (often in a harmonising fashion) to expand housing supply are non-existent in developing countries. Such robust and economically beneficial state-private sector collaboration has been spurred by periods of national economic growth and growing personal wealth (Kemp 1969). In the absence of such conditions in Sierra Leone, the deprioritisation of public housing such as government 'reservation quarters', 'clerks' quarters', 'low-cost estates' and police barracks, both in terms of direct provisions (see Muana and Njai 2004) and subsidies, only scaled back much-needed infrastructural development and increased homelessness for even Sierra Leone's middle class (mostly government civil servants). For instance at *Low-Cost*, these housing efforts initially receded to only small core units with beneficiaries required to make additional improvements, eventually leading to a complete *laissez-faire*. To complete the transformation, in 2002 the government approved the sale of the remaining public housing previously

managed by the Sierra Leone Housing Corporation – a quasi government entity. These included the *Low-Cost* estates and the *OAU Villas* among others. This officially brought an end to government-subsidised housing as we knew it. Today, the few remaining dilapidated government housing infrastructures are barely a semblance of their former selves, with no available viable alternative of adding to the current housing stock for the country's growing population. There is an argument to be made that these properties were badly managed and government divestiture was imminent. But these public housing mismanagements only reflect the preceding general political-economic environment mirroring a prevailing apathy towards state interventionism in housing and other public programmes.

Moreover, by the 2000s, several national housing policies reflected this changing trajectory. Beyond public housing divestiture, parliament enacted a 'business-friendly' Home Mortgage Finance Act of 2009, which aimed at attracting private investment in the property market (Government of Sierra Leone 2009). The Act became the flagship of the government's effort at removing the barriers to traditional borrowing practices. In place of public housing, the state rather invested public funds in home financing and incorporated a new mortgage bank. By then, new housing policies represented a different outlook. The 2006–2016 National Housing Policy defines government's role as 'facilitator ... providing inputs and incentives for effective participation of the private market' (Thomas 2006, 4). These include 'seek[ing] NGOs and donor assistance' for its previous social housing role (4). As a result, housing delivery is currently multifaceted with an increased number of providers that include government (high-end homes only), the informal sector, NGOs and the poor themselves. Despite these changes, housing conditions have significantly deteriorated. The average household size is now 6.0 persons (5.7 in Freetown) (Thomas 2006). Nearly 75% of households in Freetown now use pit latrines and in many cases resort to bush, river or gutter (Thomas 2006). And the prevailing urbanisation process, the stagnant labour market and high unemployment have together led to a stagnated housing market despite a healthy government-induced stimulus.

## Discussion and analysis

This article has established that the paradigmatic shift in housing approach was mostly driven by the changing global economic order of the time. This has not yielded the desirable outcome, but reversed years of gains. But in the broader scheme of things, these changes have also come to reflect a trend that shows local officials adapting to far-reaching political and economic reforms even ahead of local demands for change. It represents a period where major sectors of governance were increasingly being absorbed into the complex web of exported expert technical knowledge. Therefore, this adaptation has manifested itself in two major outcomes. First, it led to the articulation of an opportunistic neoliberal agenda in the form of business rhetoric such as 'running the country like a business' and, second, such rhetoric has only transformed into symbolic plans, enabling elites at national level to create space and advantage for themselves while singing songs that external powers want to hear. The following two subsections elaborate this point.

### **'Run[ning] the country like a business' – an opportunistic neoliberal reform**

When Sierra Leone's President Ernest Bai Koroma campaigned for office in 2007, he canvassed on the platform of 'run[ning] the country like a business' (BBC 2007). In the

aftermath of his election, Sierra Leone government officials were so enthusiastic about displaying their 'private sector' credentials in line with the president's 'Agenda for Change' pledge that the World Bank's *Doing business 2009 report* recognised the country as 'one of sub-Saharan Africa's most active regulatory reformers' (Green 2010; World Bank 2010, 22). This display of 'private sector' credentials was a recalibration of waves of major government reforms carried out by the president's immediate predecessor. The new government signed and renewed several investment agreements such as the iron ore London Mining Agreement (signed in 2009) and the Addax bioenergy agri-business in 2011. While these 'reforms' appeared laudable on paper, there were serious challenges in accounting for their success in terms of national gain, beyond their tokenised 'private sector enablement' credential.

First, 'run[ing] the country like a business' has also come to encapsulate an abdication by government from its traditional responsibilities. In the housing sector for instance, government's role became ill-defined, priorities became misplaced, and the philosophy behind its policy is mostly driven by a wholesale application of Western planning ideologies. A review of several recent housing policies and programmes shows that there is no clear role for government in housing. Virtually every local housing official interviewed for this research argued for a more 'entrepreneurial-friendly' city and the need to 'remove the yoke of communism'. They argue that the only way to do so is by having 'less government' in direct housing provision. Like many developing countries, Sierra Leone's policy domain is a complex combination that includes government, private sector, NGOs and multilateral institutions. Within this confluence therefore, the role of government is now defined as 'providing the enabling environment' and 'full mobilization of the potential resources of the public, private and community sectors in the housing delivery process' (Madanat and Njai 2006, 141). Therefore, housing provision for the majority of the urban population is outsourced to NGOs (*Ibid.*), who have no such funding mandate. Rather, what these policies have come to serve is a demonstration of the complicating interaction of these players, with each only symbolically reinforcing the other, ensuring that these problems are handled only by a combination of paper plans impossible to implement.

Second, running the country like a business has also implied that the focus for housing has been mostly on the formal housing sector with little support for locally produced building materials. Officials argue that the formal sector is the main engine for growth in the housing sector. However, several government-sponsored reports indicate that 80% of residents in the capital rent from the informal sector (people who build private homes) and these reports recommend the use of locally produced building materials (see Government of Sierra Leone 2008; Muana 1987; Muana and Njai 2004). Yet, government red-tapeism such as registration procedure and contract tendering offers little opportunity for developing the informal sector and using local materials (Jamiru 2001). Rather, the preferences for formal contractors by the government and private housing developers have prevailed over local initiatives. Even where policy commitment has been made to promote local building materials, there lacks a demonstrable programme beyond its commitment on paper. The government-backed National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT) housing programme illustrates this point more succinctly. Public pension funds have been diverted to building high-end properties that the majority of pensioners cannot participate in. While the bulk of the provisions in the 2006–2016 National Housing Policy advocate for the promotion and use of local building materials

to make housing affordable (Madanat and Njai 2006), there is hardly any evidence of this in the NASSIT constructions, with the same enthusiasm as the initiative promoted in policy papers. Rather, contractors mainly use imported components in their construction. This is also the preferred choice for many international NGOs and aid agencies in their funded infrastructural projects. Therefore, this combination of government and international organisation practice of imported building materials over the years has come to define the way housing quality is perceived by the local population.

Third, the housing policy prescription is mostly driven by a particular market logic of Western planning. It hinges on the ideology of the social construction of space which holds that space has an exchange value because of its ability to generate rents or increase equity for the landowner (see Castells 1996; Harvey 2005; Logan and Molotch 1987). This approach has led to an ineffectual approach of developing expensive Western-style homes rather than focusing on the informal sector. The current NASSIT *Sea View* housing projects were therefore mainly driven by these exchange-value considerations, as officials who were interviewed for this research talked about 'ability and opportunity for homeowners to sell at any time' and 'the need for a ... real estate development' as well as 'strictly investment-gear'd housing. Hence, the housing project's insistence on formal housing, and the development of nuclear family-type gated communities with private swimming pools, denote a 'city-competitiveness' ideology, which views cities as 'engines of international growth' representing pivotal points of human lifestyle (Arnott 2008). The splendid-looking two-bedroom apartment prices were pegged at US\$130,000 in a country where 72% of its population live on under US\$1 per day (World Bank 2010). For many of these officials who were interviewed, the real estate is emerging not 'only as a form of security for shelter' but '[having] far-wide exchange-value opportunities for homeowners'. They ignore the use-value considerations that many households consider critical to their shelter needs, because it does not correspond to their new market logic. On the other hand, interviews with residents at *Low-Cost* (a community facing significant displacement owing to government policies) indicated a different meaning attached to homeownership. These meanings are mostly sentimental and hinge on incalculable values like 'extended-family', 'inheritance', 'community-life' and 'city-connection' rather than economic gain. These are concerns that they consider 'precious', practical and fundamental that should not be dictated by property speculators and city planners. But the new planning approach has very little room for such local concerns and local reality beyond property speculation, because these concerns go contrary to the current emphasis on market logic.

Therefore, as we have seen, emphasis on the market logic of planning now dominates local planning, even if these adopted models are inapplicable to local realities. In the process of effecting these changes, local officials have come to increasingly see their role as 'an autonomous zone of control' (see Ravenhill 2008). They have gradually come to assume their positions as instruments of obtaining stability that should hopefully lead to public goods, hence taking on the weight that they believe the largely illiterate are unable to undertake. To perform these roles, they therefore attend several workshops and international seminars, and, where needed, obtain help with technical matters – theoretical ideas that often overrule local initiatives – with the end goal of internationally legitimising their local approach. As a result, even where initiatives for local inclusion form a key component of their *modus operandi* (as increasingly demanded by international donors), these 'initiatives' often get eclipsed by a well-designed expert framework such

as Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA),<sup>3</sup> ensuring that the final outcome is regularly less reflective of these inputs. Many scholars have argued that these changing events symbolise the global influence of neoliberal institutional transition in local government policies (Malpezzi and Mayo 1987; Peck and Tickell 2002). A historian might say that the adoption of these new ideas by local policy officials reflects the rise of a bourgeoisie class in these emerging economies, representing an integral part of the larger global policy regime. But the narrative around the articulation of such superstructures has also come to mask new economic interests often accentuated through symbolic gestures. This is because these counter-productive policy prescriptions do not merely serve the interest of neoliberal policy regimes, rather they raise an important question as to whether these officials are passive objects of power who are remote-controlled from Western capitals. In essence, do these glocalised experts stand to benefit, if at all? This brings me to my next point.

### ***Rent-seeking behaviour through token plans and symbolic gestures***

The increasing accentuation of neoliberal market logic has also come to represent an interpretive agency among glocalised experts. They use this clout opportunistically to promote their own agenda. In the case of Sierra Leone, rent-seeking has been closely associated with these programmes. Many political economists (see Jagannathan 1987) have argued that marketisation and liberalisation would reduce government officials' 'rent-seeking' behaviour, but, as Stiglitz (2003) has pointed out, marketisation has actually exacerbated this activity. As already highlighted, the literature suggests that the transformation to housing enablement in Sierra Leone was in part based on the spread of 'policy regimes'. Therefore, private enterprises were given the major role '... to expand [housing] activities through various media including building and loan societies, mortgage companies and other financial organizations' (Doherty 1985, 155). However, like many developing countries facing challenges associated with limited statehood, Sierra Leone also witnessed an acceleration of rent-seeking in the public sector as the increase in market practice took centre-stage. These increased rent-seeking activities have also been closely associated with these new projects undertaken (see Government of Sierra Leone, 2013), implying a strong connection between the type of existing governance structure, and that of private sector investment. Two features have been associated with this relationship. First, the majority of the funds for these new programmes are received from abroad either through loans or grants, specifically targeting these liberalisation programmes. As a result, local officials feel less obligated to account for these funds at the national level, because such allegiance is to their international funders. Second, funds converted to these new projects often target the higher echelons who normally have little inclination to demand accountability because of their own vested interest in these projects. In both situations, the level of corruption associated has had adverse effects not only on the economy but on the outcome of the associated projects themselves.

Generally, the literature on market logic in developing countries suggests that the acceleration of these private sector projects is supposed to be in line with harnessing the prospects of economic development that comes with flexible accumulation strategy (Appadurai and Holston 1996; Brenner and Theodore 2002). However, the articulation of these new discursive policies and their reinforcing nature in Sierra Leone go beyond the neo-Gramscian conceptualisation of Western institutional hegemony. Therefore,

these new projects have particularly stood out, not so much for their economic development, but for their associated benefits to the project initiators. According to many human rights organisations, the London Mining and Addax agreements, for example, have only benefited the government officials directly involved in exchange ‘for granting different exemptions and deductions’ as well as tax evasion and corruption risks (Budget Advocacy Network 2014, 5). Furthermore, the new housing investment under NASSIT has been outstanding in terms of the magnitude of the charge. After years of public outcry, in 2010 President Koroma finally sacked the NASSIT Director General together with his deputy and the Director of Investment because of ‘financial irregularities’. In that same year, the NASSIT Systems and Financial Audit indicated that the Trust was making investments with little or no return on capital (Nevile 2015). According to the report, the two- and three-bedroom apartments which were priced at US\$125,000–150,000 ensured that ‘investment management and operating costs remain continuously above investment income’ (Government of Sierra Leone 2013, 67). Furthermore, NASSIT investments such as the US\$2 million approved by its board on behalf of Kimbima Hotel Limited (a subsidiary of NASSIT) in 2009 for ‘refurbishment and rehabilitation of Kimbima’ was conspicuously missing salient aspects of the repayment agreement including repayment commencement and instalment amount (68). These ‘investments’ which clearly target the private sector have provided new avenues of corruption practices under new buzzwords.

Second, these programmes are opportunistic because the players in the ‘private sector’ that the programmes target (builders, contractors, property speculators, homeowners) are not well equipped and are manifestly incapable of providing effective demand and supply for mass housing needs. First, many of these ‘investments’ require a strong demand sector which is often boosted by strong employment, real income and a better economic climate. However, the country continues to be inundated with balance of payments and debt crises and inflation. Income levels for the majority remain extremely low. Nearly 75% of the young people who constitute 60% of the country’s population are either without jobs or underemployed, while half of that population has no skills or is illiterate (UNDP 2011). In Freetown for instance, most sectors of the population have seen a decline in real income over the past decade, mostly among the informal sector, owing to the effects of the 10-year conflict. According to UNDP, ‘the nationwide poverty gap index is 29%, showing a high incidence and depth of poverty’ (*Ibid.*). There is a lack of sustained demand for better conditions of living, hence ‘the social order is basically sustained by a network of families, religious leaders’ (see Doherty 1985, 162) and remittances from abroad. Thus, this aggressive private sector engagement is not just ‘consensual’ in response to the actual needs of the country, but represents a shift from the ‘bystander’ or coercive status to projects that open doors for rent-seeking.

The majority of the homes built for sale remain unoccupied, even as the programme seeks newer sites for additional construction nationwide. These investments show an opportunistic corrupt agenda laced in private market investment. The 2013 national audit reports on some of the NASSIT housing projects indicate that ‘uncompetitive and unfair procurement processes, inadequate contract management and missing tender documentations were observed during the course of the audit’ (Government of Sierra Leone 2013, 3). With no risk-taking from the individuals involved in these investments, there is very little incentive for national profitability or return on investments. According to the National Advocacy Coalition on Extractives, through backdoor deals and tax incentives,

the government lost US\$224 million (8.3% of GDP) in revenue in 2012 alone, and an even higher loss of 13.7% of GDP in 2014 from these investments. Audit reports for the various ministries involved in some of these projects could not show evidence of a fair, transparent and competitive process for many of the awards. For instance, Le9.2 billion (US\$2.2 million) that were reported as procurements undertaken by various ministries, departments and agencies showed that the procurement procedures were not followed (Government of Sierra Leone 2013). Many other procurements lacked important identifiable documents such as performance bonds, Goods and Services Tax returns, and contract documents.

What the above indicate is not only a vocalisation of local politics to gain recognition from abroad through the display of private sector credentials, but an opportunity to leverage these projects. It also suggests that officials are not passive objects of power, but rather these investments appear to be opportunistic at best. Therefore, many of these commitments in this direction have been emblematic mainly in terms of implementation. A good deal of the real commitment (as the audit reports suggest) has been towards 'profitable' projects that provide access to funds. These projects have served as cash cows for cash flows that are vulnerable to corruption, with very little resistance from the influential class who are the likely beneficiaries. They are however often laced and articulated in jargon with phrases such as 'government is not a good business man' (NASSIT official, personal communication, October 12, 2011), in order to ignore even a fragmentary reference to non-market initiatives. It is not just about a societal 'disciplinarian' nature of neoliberalism, but a more complex interpretive agency of national housing officials ensuring that policies such as housing enablement are defined by anything other than local content or good public policy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article raises two important issues. First, it argues that the debate on whether Western hegemony through expert knowledge continues to overwhelmingly dominate policy discourse in developing countries continues to be informed by the old duality of liberal pluralists and Marxist conceptions. While acknowledging the historicity of international expert influence in developing countries (through multilateral institutions), this article pays close attention to the increasingly changing dynamics of the phenomenon. It is true that, following independence, state intervention in land markets aimed at providing housing for the vast majority eventually got subsumed in discourses of private sector enablement, mostly promoted by international financial institutions. Therefore, a change from ambitious schemes of state intervention to an increase in privatisation was not mere coincidence. It occurred around a time of increasing global economic liberalisation and a trend towards the globalisation of economies. In housing, these changes were part of the requirements for World Bank 'Enablement' policy that required governments to scale back funding of the public sector and focus on enabling the private sector. This led to exclusionary housing programmes for the vast majority.

The second point however departs from this broad generalisation. It shows that while the actions of local policy officials (or globalised experts) reflect the rise of a bourgeoisie class in these emerging economies (representing an integral part of the larger global policy regime), the articulation of such a superstructure also masks new economic interests often

accentuated through symbolic gestures and mere paper plans. The aggressive articulation of this exclusionary approach cannot be solely attributed to Western institutional hegemony. Rather, specific actionable interventions by these local elites has led to mere cosmetic plans, and thus enabled them to create space and advantage for themselves. In the Sierra Leone housing sector, public pension contributions have been diverted to markets that serve only a small and affluent amount of people. Often, very little credit is given to the human agency of these glocalised experts, who are normally presented as passive agents of power. The traditional narrative has refused to raise the question of agency. However, understanding the domain of modern power relations and the policymaking process within the context of developing countries perhaps requires a departure from this 'old *problematique*', which often assumes that power resides in a specific location (see Gordon 1991). As the Sierra Leone situation shows, officials have not only adapted fiercely to these global dynamic changes, but they have also undertaken reforms to a degree that has given rise to a range of negative outcomes. Because of this, the country's very weak position in the world economic system has exposed its people to the type of programmes that are not necessitated by local demands. Therefore, alternatives to this ineffective and dominant approach continue to be handled by a combination of paper plans and symbolic gestures.

## Notes

1. The methodology included a combination of document analysis (several housing policies) and in-depth interviews with local housing officials from seven institutions and 40 households of the *Low-Cost* housing estate community between June and December 2011 in Free-town, Sierra Leone.
2. Sites-and-Services schemes (introduced by the World Bank in 1972) are the provision of plots of land, either on ownership or land lease tenure, with a bare minimum of essential infrastructure needed for habitation (Oladokun 2013).
3. The PVA is an Oxfam risk analysis process (used by many development agencies) that is designed to help staff and partner organisations engage with communities to enable them design programmes based on their capabilities and vulnerabilities. But several researchers have shown that its focus is laid heavily on coping strategies and impact on existing projects rather than impact on communities. While there are fewer consensus among aid agencies on how to use it, there is even less attempt in existing approaches to downscale the assessment to include actual primary data collected from these communities (see Pelling 2007).

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