CRAFTING A BETTER FUTURE IN LIBERIA

Hustling and Associational Life in Post-War Monrovia

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Abstract

Despite post-war reconstruction, Monrovia is an insecure, uncertain city. Many people are «hustling», an emic term for insecure income-generating activities. «Hustlers» are often part of associations. Associations strengthen identities, and form social relationships and solidarities. They fill the gap of war-affected social relationships, and contribute to social security, solidarity and integrate the marginalized. This article shows how social imaginaries serve as motor of change, and how associational life shapes social spaces as islands of certainty amidst uncertainty.

Keywords: *associational life, urban, post-war, social imagination, Monrovia, Liberia*

Introduction: Monrovia – A Setting of Uncertainty

Johnson: I expect to have better life in the future. A better life.
AK: ‹Better life› – what does that mean for you?
Johnson: Today, you are speaking to me as Johnson of the Liberian Motorcyclist Transport Union. Maybe tomorrow, you will be speaking to me as director or department head for a ministry or another organization or another department, where I will be living – my needs will be met.
AK: So presently your needs are not met?
Johnson: Not exactly so. I'm just from school. A real life. I'm living a better life at this time. I think I should be going over my lesson now. But instead, I'm here, working. I will be here up to 6, 6:30, before I get home, take bath. 7 o'clock. Probably, I'll be looking over my lesson up to 9, 10 o'clock. Sleep. Early morning I wake up, get ready for class. Immediately, I come from class... I have no rest! Indeed, I have no rest.
(Interview, Monrovia, 02.03.2010)

Johnson, a young motorcycle taxi driver stands at the junction of «Red Light Market», the biggest market in Liberia's capital Monrovia. Together with other motorbike drivers, he waits for customers, parked symmetrically next to the others along the busy road. Johnson is a college student in his free time, and active in the leadership of one of the two Monrovian motorbike unions. Despite the challenging present situation he finds himself in he has a clear plan for the future. His explanations give insight into quite a diversified range of agency linking the challenging present to an uncertain but imagined better future. He is shaping a way towards a better future by motorcycle taxi driving, by going to school, and by participating and building a reputation in the leadership of the union. The Liberian Motorbike Union is an active association that bargains interests of the drivers with the police, resolves conflicts, or organizes workshops to train motorcycle taxi drivers. The leadership position in this association gives Johnson an aspiring role, responsibilities and visibility, which are important ingredients for upward social mobil-

ity. Despite the promising efforts, Johnson considers his life on hold, in contrast to the imagined better future. Everyday life is challenging and he works restlessly along avenues that have led others to a better future.

Johnson's reflections upon his imaginaries and the way in which he works towards reducing uncertainty in post-war Monrovia are examples of the variety of projections that are attempted to become realized in this intricate context. Much has transformed since the war ended in 2003. There occurred many positive changes, but a range of deep rooted problems remain. In particular, the war had undermined the social fabric, as the Liberians would often say. Material post-war reconstruction efforts contribute to the recovery of the economy. However, it is not absorbing the huge labor force, and people face unemployment and underemployment. Security is precarious, and robberies are frequent. Public goods and services such as save drinking water or access to health services are scarce. In the urban context of Monrovia, these complex problems add up due to a dense, fast growing population and over-used infrastructures (Kaufmann 2016). The Ebola epidemic of 2014 revealed many institutional weaknesses and increased uncertainties in the broader population once again.

Social actors like Johnson are engaged in various ways to shape spaces of predictability and familiarity in order to reduce uncertainty. Against the background of past experiences and new perspectives, fuelled by the influx of international donor money and post-war reconstruction programs, new imaginaries and novel forms of collective action emerge. I argue that associational life creates social spaces in which imaginaries are shared and shaped, and translated into words and social practice. They inform and support collective and individual action towards a better future.

This paper is methodologically based on ethnographic research on associational life and social imagination in Monrovia. I conducted 14 months of research in Monrovia between 2009 and 2012, and focused on the relation of associations with the state. Therefore, I conducted interviews, and participated in the everyday life of Liberian city dwellers of various backgrounds, and specifically members of associations. I followed their associational life throughout the research period to grasp the meaning of associations in their lives and the relation of their association to state actors and institutions. The paper first lays the conceptual framework of uncertainty in relation to agency, imagination and associational life. Within this framework, the paper will provide insights into Monrovian dwellers everyday life, in particular focusing on the practices of «hustling», yet with clear goals that are socially shared in manifold associations. I will then lay out the argument that social imaginaries serve as motor of change, and demonstrate how associational life shapes social spaces that create islands of certainty in an uncertain setting.

Agency, Imagination and Associational Life

Through the lens of agency, uncertain situations are understood as settings that are difficult to assess and change. From a temporal perspective, the future is by its very nature uncertain, and the present often contains intricate moments in which decisions need to be made. Uncertainty increases in particular if the present is socially and structurally unstable, as for example in times of war. In such situations, it is difficult for individuals or groups to orient their agency due to the absence of stability and predictability in the shifting social environment (Vigh 2006, 2009).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) show that social actors normally rely on their past experiences to identify schemes in order to clarify motives, goals or intentions, and to identify future constraints for their projects. For the purpose of this article, agency is understood as the social actors' engagement with the temporal-structural dimensions of iteration, situated within the past (habits and routines); evaluation, in the present; and imagination, the projection towards the future (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 970).[1]

Though uncertainty exists everywhere, the meaning and implications are severe in war-affected contexts where people experience unstable economic opportunities, or unreliable security providers, and have weak or absent family ties. In this dynamic post-war context, past experiences give little orientation. Social actors have to re-adjust their agency as new options and opportunities open up or close again (Johnson-Hanks 2005). These post-war characteristics have been conceptualized as a continuum of war and peace (Richards 2005), or a «peacekeeping-to-statebuilding continuum» (McGovern 2008). Both conceptualizations emphasize the temporality and characterize a process that brings profound political and social change.

Change requires adjustment of one's agency along the continuum from a war to peace context. The post-war setting, the temporal setting of this paper, is difficult to assess from the pre-

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[1] Each instance of agency consists of the interplay of imagination, judgement and habituation (Emirbayer & Mische 1998).

sent point of view. In an urban post-war environment, social actors are constantly urged to evaluate possible trajectories, as the social environment and the social forces relevant therein are continuously shifting. It requires all components of agency at all times, which has been conceptualized as «social navigation» in contexts of war where complete uncertainty exists due to «motion within motion» (Vigh 2006: 128), or forging and fixing one's position in relation to an intricate social and structural context of social becoming (Fuh 2012).

The post-war, urban context requires a constant evaluation of the present situation and anticipation of possible future projects. In this article, I argue that associational life is a way of creating spaces of predictability in uncertain settings. Associations are important for social organization. In the West African region they have been explored in the context of urbanization in the 1960s, where social actors moved from face-to-face societies to anonymous cities to work (Little 1980 or Wallerstein 1970). Drawing on AbdouMaliq Simone (2001), associational life is conceptualized as a non-normative, meaningful combination of voluntary associations and everyday life (Kaufmann 2016). Associational life as emerging from shared imaginaries creates a space for the (re)production of shared identities, images, and imaginaries, and thereby informs the collective yet also the individual agency. They become islands of certainty in uncertain contexts.

Aspects of everyday life in these forms of social and political organization are crucial for the individual, beyond the mere functionalist welfare, economic organization or political function. Firstly, it means inclusion. At the center stands shared interest, contestation and / or grievance, formulated into a claim that binds the individual to the group. Associational life is one aspect of everyday life and the lifeworldly reality, and associations may be more ephemeral than other social categories of belonging (Simone 2001: 102). Secondly, associations provide alternative or additional access to social networks, which are of particular relevance for post-war contexts where family relations are affected, alliances of «big people» have shifted or old networks have become marred (Utas 2012). New social relationships are vital for access to resources and social security, hence, in order to reduce uncertainty. Associations enable personal aspirations and are a tool for upward social mobility. Thirdly, other forms of collective action may emerge from associations. Associations are framed by the making and sharing of individual and social plans due to shared imaginaries of the present social reality. As such, these imaginaries are linked to moral expectations towards other influential persons. Differing from organizations, which are characterized by their structuration, greater size and formalizations, associations are smaller and working on the community or special interest level.

Lastly, it is critical not to neglect the social aspects such as companionship and sociality that associations can provide. These are aspects that are often not given enough significance although they are contextually just as important: spending time together, resolving interpersonal conflicts, exchanging stories and sentiments – especially around shared grievances contrasted against imaginaries-, discussing private issues, and recalling past events or discussing visions of the future. In short, these activities generate a sense of conviviality and familiarity (Little 1980). This contributes to the (re)building of intersubjectivity, solidarity, and social cohesion among the members. This is particularly so for marginalized social actors since associations create a space in and through which identities are shaped (Fuh 2012: 504, Lindell & Utas 2012: 410).

Associations as spaces of familiarity facilitate the emergence, sharing and shaping of social imaginaries, as they are commented upon, discussed and utilized to underline their own actions. They demonstrate how spaces are created in which a range of narratives of comparisons, visions, stories or legends are shared and how these relate to the imagery of the post-war context. Past events take an important position in the everyday of the post-war setting. Alternative imaginaries of society are constructed and articulated against hegemonic ones. In general, social imaginaries enable (collective) practices (Taylor 2002). Hence, shared imaginaries potentially inform political agency of the associations whose problems need solutions. Achieving these solutions might require capacities of more than one social actor, often ideally the society or the state. Associations adopt different forms of contestation and claims-making as part of their repertoire.

For the purpose of this argument, the following section lays the groundwork for the role of associations in dealing with uncertainty in post-war Monrovia.

Dealing with Uncertainty in Post-War Monrovia

As Johnson's story showed, vast part of everyday life in Monrovia is concerned with daily struggles to make a living and work towards a better future. In a post-war setting, where the social fabric, the economy and security provision remain fragile, uncertainty is high. Social actors are constantly engaged in assessing the situation and trying to increase predictability. Since the end of the war in 2003, there were many improvements, particularly in the economic environment and in state institutions including provisions for security and the health sector. In contrast to uncertainty in settings of «motion within

motion» which make predictability of any situation or social actor hardly possible (Vigh 2006: 130), social and physical spaces of predictability increase in the post-war context.

Still many people consider their own situation to be insecure. Their practices show that there are different ways of reducing uncertainty. One way is to establish relationships to influential «big persons» whose elevated social and economic position entails a range of societal obligations (Utas 2012), for example funding a motorbike for a young man such as Johnson who relies on initial financial support from a «big person» to start a business. «Big persons» let others participate in their wealth and grant access to other resources, and (re)distribute along complex rules of affinity, consanguinity, and dependence (Johnson-Hanks 2006: 30). Comparable to many other African contexts, social security is not provided by the state, but through support from family members, lovers, friends or acquaintances (Fuest 1996).

«Trying» is a common expression in Liberian English that highlights a particular temporal aspect of agency. «Trying to make ends meet» was an expression with which «hustlers» summarized their diverse economic activities. «Trying» was also frequently used in greetings: A person would ask the other how he or she was doing, and often received the response «I'm trying». It is often put in the plural tense, «we are trying» and indicates on the one hand that the present situation is not too unbearable, or else the person would indicate accordingly. Trying is strongly embedded in the presence, in which it is directly related to existent struggles, and the future, which is uncertain but composed of projected hopes and expectations: It entails a projection towards the future, and indicates the efforts of a social actor towards the respective aims. Its shapes may or may not appear on the horizon (yet), and they remain trying to make their future more predictable. Social actors are constantly evaluating possible avenues and horizons. Deriving from the concept of agency (Emirbayer & Mische 1998), a person draws on their own as well as others past experiences and rewarding practices.

Likewise, there are experiences of chances and opportunities that are also unpredictable: for example, an orphan might be supported by a person without kin relation. These instances often occur not only through rational decisions of patrons over clients, but as in other parts of the world when it comes to opportunities, a person may take a chance despite potential risks.

Trying to achieve access to «big persons» can be exhausting. Often, a «big person» is asked for support, and despite the rejection, a person has to remain calm and continue «trying», in the absence of a better strategy. Still imaginaries of a better life are so strong as to lead a person to take extra risks and efforts towards it. However, it is simply a radical necessity and as such there is not much alternative to it in this intricate context. Shaming another person is an alternative method to put pressure on somebody. «We are tired» can be opposed to the expression of «trying»: «We are tired» was displayed on posters at demonstrations in Liberia, both in the past and present. It was also used in the famous slogan by the Liberian women's peace movement towards the end of the civil war: «we are tired, we want peace».

At some point social actors do not tolerate a certain condition anymore. «Being tired» is an indicator of the turning point, the person or group is giving up trying. When there does not seem to be any getting closer to a better situation, the imaginary seems to move even further away towards the horizon, then there sparks the need for reorientation of one's agency to other options.

«Hustling» for a Living

Having a formal, steady, well-paid office job at an international or national organization, or the government is the ideal, hence the hope of a wide range of Liberians. Generating formal employment is an expectation many people have towards politicians. This has repercussions on the people's way they try to make a living, yet also on how imaginaries are shaped and structured. For the majority – in particular youth – «hustling» is the daily reality.

I situate the emic concept of «hustling» centrally to people's economic agency in a context of uncertainty.[2] It encompasses temporal and situational practices as well as relational subsistence, and is therefore strongly situated in the present. It contains basically all insecure income-generating activities (Munive Rincon 2010: 208). The insights into Johnson's practices and imaginaries showed that he anticipates a better future by actively engaging in a range of activities, including working as a motorbike taxi driver, saving money and fostering his education. He has already moved a step up on the ladder of social mobility, namely, from a street seller to a motorbike taxi driver, and now has a position in the leadership of the association.

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[2] Comparable practices in uncertain contexts have been conceptualized elsewhere, prominently by Henrik Vigh (2006: 128) as «dubriagem» respectively «social navigation».

Importantly, the practice of «hustling» alone does not lead to upward social mobility. Formulated differently, «hustling» as defined as a set of practices in absence of a better opportunity that would lead to the better future, it requires a range of other, simultaneous engagements. A «hustler» might have support from a «big person» who granted a credit, which has some conditions attached, such as paying back the credit. It also includes making and shaping relationships to «big people», and to improve one's position towards such a person, because this active making of a future is not only about financial security, it is also about exhibiting and proving values. The especially important value in the context is the willingness to work hard, hence, to build a good reputation. More often than not, these economic activities are rewarding: Johnson explains that he had been a street seller beforehand, and now he has ascended to be a motorcycle taxi driver.

«Hustling» activities are an essential contribution to make everyday life go in Liberia (Munive Rincon 2010: 215). These various dimensions and forms of economic activities exist against the ideal type of formal, state-regulated institutions visible to the «bureaucratic gaze» (Hart 2010: 148). Much of Liberia's economy runs through these systems of patron-client relationships and related redistributive practices. These are diversified and interlinked with other social actor's activities. Individual «hustlers» in the markets for example, are formally organized through the Liberian Marketer Association (LMA), to which many pay a small fee. In turn, they get an authorization to sell at a predefined and marginal area.[3] Remarkably, for each economic activity of the «hustlers», there exist specific associations based on shared interests and with manifold purposes.

Many of the «hustlers» say that they are dissatisfied with their present condition, and would emphasize that they were working informally or not working at all. Many people, from young street sellers to marketers or motorcycle taxi drivers answered my question of how the business is going, with «it's not easy», followed by a detailed account of their temporal and situational struggles and problems. Indeed, the economic reality of many Monrovian informants was composed of narratives of risks, dangers, and an uncertain future, which marked the central characteristics of the informality of their work. However, they would also talk about past chances and opportunities they had experienced, as many had someone behind them that helped with funding for their economic activity.

Their narratives also showed that associations were important for their personal and economic lives. Associations such as the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY), the Liberian National Students Union (LINSU) or the Liberia Motorcycle Transport Union (LMTU) are exemplary for efforts to negotiate the interests of their members. These associations serve as a legitimate vessel to demand state action in particular for job creation, youth training and empowerment. Furthermore, they provide standards and guidance for their members, and lastly, social values such as creating a space of familiarity.

Associational Life

In many interviews and informal conversations with informants engaged in different «hustling» activities and «trying» to make a living, an informant would mention his or her participation in a professional association as a member, often with a particular role or ambition. Further in the conversation, the person would often mention his or her participation in other associations such as faith-based, leisure-related or neighborhood-related. Participating in an association is an important means to expand one's range of agency, and enhance social or individual interests in an uncertain context. These interests include economic activities and aims, but also social, religious or other interests. Many mention an emotional component for their participation, in particular shared grievances, which often had war-related backgrounds.

The «West Point Women» are an exemplary association that contains these various elements. The West Point Women for Health and Development Organization is a women's association of a stigmatized «slum» neighborhood in Monrovia, where incidents of sexual violence are frequent. Women of the West Point neighborhood formed an association in 2002, during the war, and have continued to fight against this form of violence (Kaufmann 2016: 262). Their members are from diverse religious, economic or social backgrounds, and most of them are «hustling» to make a living. The association also makes claims to the national and local government. At the same time, the associations' participation in various activities and events are entertaining, such as for example their participation at the international women's day. The association is exemplary for generating a space where social imaginaries are shaped and shared. It strengthens and stabilizes the «we-identity», and creates a contrast to the malfunctioning of the state and society.

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[3] Larger associations, mainly in the domains of trade and transportation, administer and monitor the economic activities, survey standards, resolve disputes and enforce systems of taxation.

Many associations have temporal and situational purposes and characteristics. Associations are often strongly structured in regards to hierarchy and leadership roles or membership. Meetings are regularly held, and often, members contribute to a treasury from which common projects are funded or members assisted. Associations also have control over their members, and communicate and connect them to other organizations or institutions. Hence, in a social environment that is constantly in motion, associations generate stability through their structures and functions, thus creating durable points in ‹scapes› (Vigh 2009: 433).

The most popular are faith-based associations and Rotating Credit and Savings Associations (ROSCA), and these have a long history and significance beyond only Liberia. There are many associations with cross-cutting elements and aims. The strong structure including standardized roles, titles and protocol is partly due to the state's registration and the «NGOization» process: In Liberia, a vast range of international organizations and state institutions support local initiatives of NGOs in the context of post-war reconstruction. In order to be eligible to receive funding, they have to be registered in a formal procedure defined by the Government of Liberia (2008), with requirements such as an e-mail address, an office space, personnel and a signboard. The «area of intervention and area of operation» are pre-defined categories which are checked on the registration form's spreadsheet (Government of Liberia 2008: 14). This coupled process led to a mushrooming of NGOs with standardized programs, recurrent development rhetoric, and a plastering of Monrovia with NGO signboards. Project applications are written by professional proposal-writers (interview, Monrovia, 11.11.2009).

I argue that these push-factors do not automatically lead to a welfare and business orientation of pleasing the donors nor do they result in passivity of the beneficiary. Rather, local groups are creative in combining donor's agendas and their own (Ellis & van Kessel 2009: 5). A range of associations have emerged from the grassroots and have partaken and influenced social and political processes without abundant resources; the «West Point Women» are a good example. Diverse push and pull factors have encouraged collective action in particular since the famous Liberian women's peace movement.

The public discourse of democratization and political participation, and activists' rhetoric reflect the international discourse about strengthening civil society in fragile or war-affected states. A Liberian human rights activist explained

«A couple of years ago, there was nothing called civil society. People were all by themselves. [...] Civil society has got a big stake in that government, you know that? A very big stake. A big one. Because civil society is engaging government into processes» (interview, civil society activist, Monrovia, 04.02.2010). The history of Liberia has been formed by pressure groups and political activities of a multitude of associations. Today, they have received vast space in the post-war society and on the political landscape of reconstruction. The argument of this activist reflects the imagined and real importance associations have in personal, social and political life in post-war Liberia, as compared to the pre-war and war setting. They are no longer «by themselves», but institutionalized. This makes social life more predictable by reducing uncertainty in collective engagement. Collective action leads to remarkable change of both the individual and social life.

This is confirmed and emphasized by Abraham in an interview about a neighborhood organization in Monrovia (interview, 04.03.2011). «Where there is union, success is assured» he said, citing a quote from the Liberian National Anthem, which is repeatedly used, such as in the final statement of Johnson Sirleaf's 2006 inauguration speech. Abraham did not consider the concept of union in the political sense of national unity, but rather in the context of spaces of social cohesion in the city and the lack of face-to-face encounters and familiarity in Kenneth Little's (1970) or Immanuel Wallerstein's (1970) sense.

When Abraham came to live in this neighborhood with his wife and children after the end of the war, the neighborhood was very insecure, and there used to be night watch teams, he said. Each household would contribute with 25 LD[4] per week for young men to keep watch at night. These night watch teams had temporarily institutionalized, but then ceased to exist despite their importance. Abraham was concerned about the lack of social cohesion in Monrovian neighborhoods. Abraham regretted the lack of social structures and showed examples of the neighborhood contrasting how things should be: People should take responsibility, create awareness, organize themselves and take action collectively. He based his expectations on pre-war experiences and lamented that much changed with the war and in post-war times. He planned to draw awareness by writing an according newspaper article, like he had previously done. The newspapers are considered as a means to voice opinions like his. This way, he anticipated, other individuals would share his imaginary about society. He had previously read

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[4] 70 Liberian Dollars (LD) equaled approximately 1 US Dollar.

articles of people who shared his view. Abraham's action was most probably not going to lead to the founding of an association, but sharing his views with neighbors and newspaper readers could be a start, and it could lead to a reintroduction of community efforts.

Abraham was member of several associations. He was a founding member of a socio-religious association which was also politically engaged. For example, it received funding by the National Election Commission (NEC) for civil education and observing the 2011 elections. Furthermore, he was member of a religious association, and thirdly, as «head of the family» he held responsibility for social cohesion of his many and regionally dispersed family members. Yet, despite this position that applies to the social category of a «big man», he considered his everyday as «hustling». This is because even though he had a formal job, his income was not sufficient to maintain his family.

Abraham's reflections and his biographical background show how associational life is a central aspect of social life. Abraham's case clearly demonstrates how imaginaries of how things should be like are linked to collective action: only if people take responsibility and coordinate, improvements can be obtained.

This short insight into Abraham's understanding of association, in contrast to Johnson's, also shows that there exist diverse and broad perspectives on associations. Abraham's perspective expands the individual purpose. The examples of Abraham, Johnson and the «West Point Women» show how specific concerns or multi-layered problems are embedded in an urban context affected by war, where daily life is subject to challenges such as disruption by armed robbers and other forms of violence, including sexual violence.

Imagining a Better Future amidst Uncertainty

Uncertainty in the post-war, urban context challenges everyday life and social actor's plans for the future. This does not mean that they are devoid of agency. This article has shown that «hustling» as a social practice of the individual and associational life as a social space designed to increases certainty are important avenues towards a better future.

Most people are involved in associations for a combination of reasons. I emphasize the social actors' agency in three major characteristics of associational life that merge into interrelated political, functional and social aspects of associations.

Following the conceptualization of associational life as a combination of voluntary associations and everyday life, this article shows that associational life provides not only personal and functional opportunities, such as political avenues for a better future, but also emotional support in that they contain grievance and establish a space of sociality.

New options and opportunities open up, but social actors do not leave this up to happen passively. Rather, they shape their better futures in various ways and try to reduce uncertainty and create spaces of security, hence certainty. Johnson's and Abraham's individual, and the «West Point Women's» collective actions are different ways of aiming to shift and shape the social reality along the avenue from an intricate present of uncertainty to an imagined better future. Against the background of past experiences and new perspectives, new imaginaries and novel forms of collective action emerge, disappear and re-emerge in this transforming post-war setting. Each social actor has his or her subjective experiences which inform present evaluation and imaginaries of the future. Shared imaginaries are both factual as well as normative (Taylor 2002), as social actors draw upon a common understanding of how things usually go and how they should go (Taylor 2002: 107). Whereas Abraham has a clear understanding of how pre-war times have been, Johnson is too young to have according knowledge to draw upon, yet he shares the imaginary of «normal days» as rooted in the collective memory.

Abraham's claim on social cohesion does not address political leaders directly, but rather, he expects that sharing his imaginary will cause it to link up with similar views of other social actors. Similar are the «West Point Women's» approaches. These examples show in what way an imaginary can become shared, and how social actors use spaces such as the media as a means to draw attention to a certain condition. Abraham addressed his imagined open letter to society at large, which included a range of responsible, influential persons in communities and the government.

In the Liberian post-war context, there still exists a range of grievances and the vast majority of the population is deprived and poor. Despite the social position of a «big man», Abraham has to «hustle», as does Johnson, who has an elaborate set of well-arranged economic practices and strategies. Yet there is space for associational life, and a need for this space. Abraham illustrated:

Where there is union, success is assured. When there is union. But where there is no union, success is very limited, at times. So coming together and presenting your concern honorably and peacefully to the national government, I think that's the

best way forward. But protesting, violently, and resulting to arms, is not the right approach. But again, government should take heed when people present their plight. People present their concern. People present their problem (Abraham, Monrovia, 04.03.2011)

Abraham would receive wide agreement with his assessment – even from within the present government, which fosters political participation. During the conflict and after it, temporary or new forms of social order emerged in the absence of authorities and due to the precariousness of social order, Abraham explained. Social actors gather and share their state of mind and knowledge about a certain problem, and formulate these into claims and demand state action. Indeed, the backgrounds on which claims grow are often voluntary associations built on shared identities and grievances, usually from a shared societal or professional background. Claims based on shared grievances are crucial to the understanding of imaginaries. Shared grievances lead to social imaginaries that enable or activate (collective) practices (Taylor 2002), as they facilitate the emergence of a *negative* imaginary of how things are and could be, against which the better future is reflected upon.

Finally and most importantly, associational life creates social spaces of familiarity in which imaginaries are translated into words and practices, and shared. «West Point Women» members find a space where their everyday troubles and grievances are discussed and where they face advice but also empathy and entertainment. As such, associations inform collective action to enhance or demand change in order to make their professional or social environment more predictable. Secondly, sharing of experiences, knowledge and ideas also informs individual agency, for example the «hustlers» in their insecure and uncertain economic and social environment.

The conclusion of Abraham posits a central role on associations. Associations, if formed around shared interests and, most prominently, shared imaginaries of how the social ought to be, have two basic purposes, namely, establishing and strengthening subjective and shared identity and building on its role in society, and secondly, forming horizontal and vertical social relationships and solidarities (Lindell & Utas 2012: 410). They contribute to social security, a degree of solidarity, and integrate marginalized social actors or those with weak social ties and create awareness to political leaders especially in their large numbers. This is especially the case for groups that stem mainly from marginal social and / or physical spaces of urban Liberia such as slum dwellers, ex-combatants, or some marginalized ethnic groups.

Associational life as a way of creating novel and alternative horizontal as well as vertical social relations, extends the means of social security, may integrate challenges of «hustling» activities, and has entertaining and inspiring aspects. Associations tie groups together in a heterogeneous and changing urban context and contain grievances. These social spaces create islands of certainty in an uncertain setting. They provide a social space for sharing social imaginaries as they link the intricate present and the desired better future. Hence, social imaginaries serve as motor of change.

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