Justice and security sector reforms in weak or collapsed states have been subjects of substantial scholarly interest following the numerous post-Cold War civil wars that raged across sub-Saharan Africa over the past twenty-five years. In Sierra Leone, the role of chiefs and traditional authorities in governance has been a particularly lively aspect of this scholarship following the onset of the country’s rebel war in 1991. Scholars have pondered whether chiefs and other traditional authorities were alternatives to the deteriorating state or contributory factors to the causes of the eleven-year war. In the aftermath of the war, policymakers and scholars have continued to debate whether chiefs and traditional authorities have a viable role to play in reconstructing the state and peacebuilding.

Lisa Denney’s book aims at contributing to this literature with a study of the United Kingdom’s intervention in Sierra Leone through its Department for International Development (DFID). The author raises several questions about the activities of development agencies, the impacts of their policy interventions on outcomes in the justice and security sectors, and DFID’s and other donor’s incapacity to engage with informal actors. The book consists of five chapters not counting an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction is organized as an overview of the book with a discussion of how and why DFID’s programs came to inordinately focus on justice and security sector reform beyond typical development interventions in sectors such as education, healthcare and human rights. Next, the author discusses the ways in which the politics and the characteristics of development agencies impact their work, focusing on the case of DFID and its work in the security and justice sectors in Sierra Leone.

The first chapter outlines how DFID was founded as the successor to the UK’s Overseas Development Agency and explains the organization’s policy approach in Sierra Leone. Chapter 2 provides an account of the rebel war in Sierra Leone. Chapters 3 and 4 provide case studies of the Family Support Units and Justice Sector Development Programs. In the fifth chapter, Denney attributes DFID’s reluctance to engage with informal actors to several factors such as the organization’s bureaucratic structure, the political environment in the United Kingdom and its founding ethos. In the conclusion, the author reiterates the resilience of traditional institutions and suggests ways for development agencies to engage with informal actors who are central to providing justice and security in Sierra Leone, in spite of the political and bureaucratic constraints that impede such engagements.

The book’s central argument is that DFID perceived state failure as the primary cause of the war in Sierra Leone. This perception, coupled with the assumption that security was integral to development, lead the organization to prioritize the reformation of the central justice and
security sectors of the postwar state instead of chieftaincies and traditional institutions of

governance which, the author argues, were also key causative factors of the war. Denney claims,

however, that DFID’s focus on state actors limited the effectiveness of its programs in Security

and Justice Sector Reform because a great deal of such services were actually provided by

informal actors and are accessed by more Sierra Leoneans than services offered in the formal

sector. The author advances several reasons throughout the book for this lack of engagement

with informal actors, including the pressures on donor staff to produce and justify measurable

outcomes that are much easier to accomplish when working with formal institutions in the state

sector than with traditional chiefs and informal actors. Nevertheless, DFID did engage informal

actors in limited ways but there is variation in how it did so, Denney argues, because the

organization had more programs in justice reforms than in security reforms.

The book contributes to several literatures including studies of development and aid,

postwar peacebuilding, institutions, African societies, and its central focus on DFID’s work on

justice and security reform in Sierra Leone. It extends explanations for development agencies’

lack of engagement with non-state actors by showing that factors in both the donor and recipient

countries and the characteristics of the development agency, in this case DFID, account for the

disconnect. In particular, Denney competently demonstrates that actors that are not considered

part of the central state machinery, at least not directly, have important roles to play in helping

development agencies achieve their operational goals, unlike what is commonly assumed within

the mainstream development community.

Denney builds upon quite impressive ethnographic fieldwork across Sierra Leone; she

undertakes extensive archival research and a wide range of interviews with key participants,

informants, and policymakers in both the United Kingdom and Sierra Leone to demonstrate and

support the central argument of the book.

Although the author crafts a decent theoretical argument, and the work covers an

important subject matter, the book has several weaknesses. Even though there is a valiant effort

throughout the text to convince the reader that the author contends with extant descriptions of the

formal or informal, Denney’s own delineation of formal and informal institutions is equally

unpersuasive with particular regard to the description of the institution of paramount chieftaincy

in Sierra Leone. Perhaps the most serious flaw of the book is this delineation because it is central

to the argument that is crafted by the author. In order for one to accept the argument that DFID

has engaged less with informal actors in Sierra Leone than central state authorities, one must first

accept the designation of chiefs as informal actors in the security and justice sectors. It is also

obvious that DFID would engage chiefs less in the security sector than the justice sector because

the state has always monopolized security in Sierra Leone, as is the case in many other African

countries.

There are several factually incorrect accounts and claims throughout the book that
diligent editorial work could have spotted and weeded out. To cite some examples:

The author’s claim on page 18 that “Strasser and the NPRC came under strong pressure

from the international community to hold the country’s first elections since 1967” is simply

incorrect. There were four elections between 1967 and the 1996 elections that the National

Provisional Ruling Council military junta eventually held. In 1973 and 1977, the country voted

in multiparty elections under Siaka Stevens’ All People’s Congress party. After converting the

country to one-party rule following the violence of the 1977 elections, the APC went on to hold

two additional elections in 1982 and 1986 before they were overthrown in a military coup by the

Also, in an attribution to Friedman on page 83 of the book, the author claims that “[chiefdom police] do not wear uniforms.” The picture on the cover page of the book showing a female chiefdom police officer in brown uniform with a beret serving in the capacity of a court messenger or bailiff discredits not only the claim cited here but also the several tropes about African women, chiefs and societies that are unfortunately repeated throughout the book. Although chiefdom police officers have never been armed with guns, they have worn uniforms and some have carried batons on occasion much like British police on the beat.

Another error is found on page 68 where the author “claims that women in Sierra Leone are generally excluded from decision-making” without any qualifying sense of variation or exceptions that could have pointed out the many examples of female paramount chiefs past and present, such as Madam Yoko, Madam Ella Koblo-Gulama and Madam Sallay Satta Gendemeh who, as paramount chiefs, were decision-makers.

Additionally, it will be difficult for many native speakers of Krio to accept Denney’s interpretation of the deeper meaning behind the common Sierra Leonean greeting in Krio of “ow di bodi?” and the accompanying response of “ah tel God tenki” (11). Translated literally, the greeting asks ‘how is your body?’ and the response translates as ‘I thank God.’ The author claims that, beyond a “thin” level of understanding, these greetings reflect deeper, corporeal undertones and “the sense in which the health of many Sierra Leoneans is perceived to be ‘in God’s hands,’ with healthcare only rarely accessible or affordable” (11). This interpretation precludes the fact that this form of greeting has been around for generations—from the time of colonialism and immediately after when the healthcare system was still quite good and accessible by all. It is, thus, illogical to associate it with the affordability or accessibility of healthcare. I leave it to linguists and those more versed in Krio to trace the etymology of this form of greeting, but it has to be noted that the author’s interpretation reflects an insufficient understanding of Sierra Leonean society in spite of the impressive fieldwork.

The central role of DFID in the study restricts the appreciation of development interventions in Sierra Leone to what the organization prioritizes or what it is doing. Consequently, the reader is made to accept DFID’s lack of engagement with what the author describes as informal institutions as a common practice among development agencies. It would have been nice for the author to offer the reader a comparative sense of other development interventions in the country and the sectors of interest. In fact, several other groups have noted the utility of traditional justice mechanisms in Sierra Leone and sought to revive them in the postwar environment to advance justice and reconciliation in communities across the country. One example of such groups is the organization Timap for Justice in Sierra Leone, supported by George Soros’ Open Society Institute and other donors, which uses traditional methods of justice to resolve disputes.

Finally, the author does not identify or allocate the causes of the war well-enough. There is no delineation of factors leading to the war into categories such as preconditions and precipitants, or enabling or permissive conditions leading to the deterioration of Sierra Leonean society. Consequently, the author discusses both long-term historical conditions such as slavery and the abuse of chiefs in the same vein as the much more recent factors such as government corruption and abuse of power as reasons for the war. It is quite clear from numerous interviews that Foday Sankoh’s main grievance in founding the Revolutionary United Front was with state authorities in Freetown who had thrown him into jail in the early ‘70s, and not the abuse of chiefs. Sankoh’s initial recruits mostly came from disaffected youths in the cities who did not live under the authority of paramount chiefs; in fact only much later, when the war commenced,
did the RUF recruit men, women and boys from villages they captured. Some of the later recruits were too young to have any sense of grievance over the misdeeds or abuse of chiefs. How then could that factor into the causes of the war if most of the young participants were unmarried before the war and could not claim that they had been abused by chiefs for “woman palava” and other causes cited by the author? The book could have achieved its objectives much more effectively had the author explored these nuances in establishing the causes of the war.

The book adds to the growing literature on postwar societies. Scholars working on many disciplines on Sierra Leone and many policymakers will find it useful for the insights it provides on how DFID’s founding ethos and the political and bureaucratic environments of aid agencies generally impact their operational goals on the ground in societies such as Sierra Leone. However, the book is unlikely to silence debates about the importance of its contributions given the points I raised earlier and many others that I could not raise for lack of space. Moreover, the book would have to contend with unfavorable comparisons to similar works on the subject, for example that by Jackson and Albrecht.¹