

Interview – Lucy Scott

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Lucy Scott is currently a part-time Doctoral Candidate at the University of Bradford, exploring the British military intervention in the Sierra Leone civil war. She also works full time at the university as an Academic Skills Adviser. Prior to this Lucy completed a master's at the University of Manchester in International Development: Poverty, Conflict and Reconstruction. Last year she served on the British International Studies Association Postgraduate Network (BISA PGN) Executive Committee as Grants and Elections Officer. She previously completed an internship with UNOCHA, Geneva, working with the Policy and Planning Unit, assisting with updating guides for the military and the MCDA Guidelines (Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defense Assets to Support UN Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies). You can find her writing on the success of the British intervention in Sierra Leone here.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I have a long-held belief in the moral obligation for intervention in humanitarian crises, however, I am fascinated by the idea of using force to create peace. Whilst such measures are seen as a last resort within the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), they remain the most controversial and contested aspect of the paradigm. It is this interest that led me to pursue my research framework. As I began to engage more with the literature it became clearer that much of the existing research focused on R2P as a theoretical discussion, for example, exploring the debates surrounding the conceptualisation of sovereignty or altruistic intent versus realism. Where case studies were used to provide context, again there was a tendency to view these from a structural level. This sparked my interest in exploring military interventions for humanitarian purposes from the perspectives of those involved on the ground.

I've found research by Professor Nicholas Wheeler and Dr Aidan Hehir particularly influential in stimulating my thinking. Whilst Wheeler focuses on humanitarian intervention since the Cold War, Hehir deals specifically with R2P, often calling into question the juxtaposing of the theory and its practice. Research by Professor Roland Paris was also particularly useful in understanding the inherent structural inconsistencies within R2P. Reading publications by these very different academics in the early stages of my research gave me further confidence to question the narratives surrounding my case study.

The British military intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000 is often hailed a success. To what extent do you feel this is the case?

I think that the 'success' of the British involvement in Sierra Leone since 2000 is by no means clear-cut and there is a danger with the application of such labels, as they are often applied uncritically and can conceal the reality and nuances of a situation. Whilst the initial British deployment in 2000 aimed only to evacuate its nationals from the territory, the subsequent expansion and intervention into the civil war arguably made a significant contribution to the cessation of the conflict. For some, this is the criteria for success: halting the widespread violence and perpetration of atrocities. In this respect the British involvement can be viewed very positively.

Interview – Lucy Scott

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However, it is also important to keep in mind that there is no set criteria for ‘success’ and the UK itself has been vague regarding what the ‘end state’ of their involvement in Sierra Leone may look like. It could be argued that in order to be deemed successful, there is an implication of accomplishing self-determined aims. In the case of the British intervention in Sierra Leone, this includes an explicit state-building mandate, extending beyond the short-term goal of ending the conflict, and into sustainable peacebuilding activity. This encompassed judicial reform, economic reform, infrastructure rebuilding and democratic governance. In this respect, the ‘success’ of the intervention immediately becomes debatable. For instance, there has been a significant failure to match the reforms of the security sector with a strengthening in the rule of law or the meaningful and effective tackling of corruption. As such, even where arrests are made, many still do not go on to face justice due to continued practices including bribery. These examples undermine not only the progress made in the security sector, but also the sustainability of long-term peace in Sierra Leone. Similarly, despite the vast amount of finance and resources pumped into Sierra Leone by the UK, there has been a return to the status quo through a mirroring of pre-conflict conditions (mass unemployment, poor governance, chronic poverty and weak infrastructure). This appears significant when exploring the extent to which the British have been successful in their endeavours, as many of these recreated conditions have been identified as factors contributing to the outbreak of conflict.

Arguably, the unquestioning application of the label of ‘success’ is not always useful. For instance, it can be speculated that being viewed as a ‘success story’ diverts international attentions – and with it aid and funding – away from Sierra Leone and towards other post-conflict and/or developing countries. Similarly, there is an apparent inclination to view the British intervention in Sierra Leone as a positive model for practice which appears to have influenced and shaped subsequent intervention mandates. For example, through the inclusion of a more holistic state-building approach and the extension of support beyond the first post-conflict elections. Yet, there remains a dearth of contemporary research examining the long-term effects of the intervention or an appreciation of the current impacts of what has been created in Sierra Leone. The responsibility to understand legacies such as these appear all the more salient given a current global context in which it appears unlikely that calls for forces to intervene militarily in humanitarian situations or mass atrocities will cease.

What are the most significant aspects of the legacy of the British military intervention in Sierra Leone?

I think when exploring the legacy of this intervention it is important to take a 3-pronged approach in terms of: the legacy within Sierra Leone; within British politics and its military doctrine; and the impact on wider discourse and intervention globally. As such, the legacy intersects across domestic politics, foreign policy and global practice. It is these aspects that my Doctoral thesis is currently exploring.

In many ways I think the true legacy within Sierra Leone is yet to become apparent as the continued British involvement, both physical and financial, obscures just how sustainable the country’s peace is and the extent to which local capacity has truly been built and embedded. For instance, in terms of the Security Sector, although there is currently a considerably reduced International Security Advisory Team (ISAT) footprint, the remaining advisors continue to yield a significant amount of influence in country. Similarly, the UK is yet to handover full control of Horton Academy – the highest military training institution in Sierra Leone – the result being that each new military recruit or existing personnel attending are trained within a schema of British military doctrine based on a curriculum designed by the British. This raises questions of local ownership, whilst also carrying with it implicit associations of neo-colonialism.

Within British politics, Sierra Leone acted as test case for liberal interventionism and New Labour’s ethical foreign policy. The general perception of success appears to have further validated this approach whilst also increasing the expectation of future success in other interventions and confidence in using the military for such purposes. In other words, successful intervention begets further intervention. For instance, it may be questioned whether British troops would have been later committed to the coalition efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan if their involvement in Sierra Leone was felt to have failed. Although the UK military interventions during this period are often associated specifically with the Blair premiership, the legacy of Sierra Leone certainly appears to have shaped the landscape of debate and transcended across the political spectrum. For example, the essence of the sentiments underpinning ethical foreign policy were later rebranded as “liberal conservatism” by Cameron and absorbed into the Conservative Party as a

Interview – Lucy Scott

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commitment to freedom and human rights.

I think the instance of Sierra Leone raises significant questions regarding who is best situated to intervene in humanitarian situations caused by civil war or genocide, and under what mandate; peacekeeping or peace enforcing. For example, UN forces were present as a neutral peacekeeping mission. However, my research indicates that their involvement tends to be seen as a failure by the people of Sierra Leone. Due to the number of personnel who were kidnapped by rebels, with their equipment, vehicles and uniforms seized it can also be speculated as to whether harm was done by their presence. In contrast, the UK acted unilaterally in a partisan intervention, enabling them to enforce peace swiftly and in a way which both ECOMOG and UNAMSIL had been unable to. Yet, within the discourse such impartial interventions render R2P vulnerable to misuse, such as the furthering of geo-political or strategic interests of the interveners. Whilst I'm not arguing that unilateral or biased interventions are preferential over those which are UN mandated, I do think it is important to entertain such discussions. Similarly, my research indicates that there is further exploration needed regarding the perception of legitimacy of interveners, particularly from those within the conflict-affected states.

What has your research in Sierra Leone and the UK highlighted? What has it told you about how micro-level experiences and macro-level structures fit together?

There does seem to be a tendency in both the research landscape and policy to focus on short-term impacts which, whilst important, often appears to be at a cost to in-depth discussion exploring longer-term consequences. In particular there has been limited exploration of micro-level experiences, yet these are the very individuals who are best positioned to provide real insight into events and have both valid and useful contributions to make to the development of best practice and increasing our understanding. The key findings and highlights from my research are forthcoming in my thesis.

During my fieldwork I found that although Security Sector Reform (SSR) and development were both key areas targeted by the British, there appears to have been a significant prioritisation of SSR over development. In practice, there is a sense of a linear approach, premised on SSR providing the stability for development to then take place. In turn, development should then act as a deterrent to a return to conflict through increasing its opportunity cost. However, taking a linear approach has meant that development lags significantly behind, to the point of having a potentially destabilising effect. There also appears to be little meaningful coordination between the UK Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development (DfID) in-country. Initial findings from my research appear to confirm that there is a real disconnect between theory and practice, and often even in terms of policy and implementation. In the case of Sierra Leone, micro-level experience and macro-level structures appear to run parallel to each other, with limited parity or significant integration.

What are you currently working on?

My main focus is currently the completion of my doctoral thesis, which I hope to be able to submit early next year. My thesis explores the long-term impacts of the 'successful' British military intervention in the Sierra Leone civil war. That almost 18 years have passed since the cessation of wide-spread violence allows for an analysis of the legacy of this intervention and the implications this has had, not only in Sierra Leone and on British politics, but also the impact on wider discourse and intervention globally. Many of my research participants spoke of these legacies primarily in terms of SSR, peacekeeping versus peace enforcement, and the changing nature of UK military operations.

I apply a R2P lens, as although pre-dating its unanimous endorsement at the World Summit (2005), this intervention was arguably motivated by the panoply of ethical ideals underpinning R2P. Furthermore, it is widely viewed as a successful example of using the military for humanitarian purposes. I think that whilst R2P is representative of a shift in security thinking, from state security to that of the individual, this has not been mirrored by a shift in the research landscape. For instance, whilst human security literature gives primacy to life and freedom, frequently this discussion is conceptual rather than entailing a deep exploration of the experiences of those individuals affected. However, arguably the Responsibility to Protect must also be accompanied by a responsibility to fully understand the legacy of this social phenomenon. As such, I conducted research in Sierra Leone and the UK, examining the encounters and

Interview – Lucy Scott

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narratives relating to this intervention. The resulting data provides a novel outlook on the phenomena from the viewpoint of those within the affected populations and, in doing so, enables an exploration of how micro-level experiences and macro-level structures fit together.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

My advice to early stage Doctoral Researchers would be to seize every opportunity to speak to people about their research, including presenting at conferences. This can be intimidating and something they may shy away from if they don't have 'complete' research to present. However, I've used conferences in the past as a way to present initial findings and early stage analysis. It's a great opportunity to hear insight on your work from academics, researchers and practitioners. It's also good to be challenged on your thinking and I've found that explaining and defending my research to others has led to an increase in robustness within my arguments. The more you present, the more confident you will become.

My other advice would be to ensure that you are realistic regarding the timeframe for your fieldwork, allowing more time than initially anticipated. In my case, I had made several contacts prior to arriving in Sierra Leone, arranging interviews for the first week. But in truth, I didn't manage to conduct any interviews within the first 2 weeks of arrival, due to participants' cancelling or their scheduling conflicts. Speaking to other research students, it doesn't appear that I'm alone in this experience. Though at the time it can be very disheartening, on reflection it appears part and parcel of the fieldwork process and those first two weeks proved to be useful in immersing myself within the country and providing contextualizing information which would later assist in developing my analysis.