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Managing 'Spoilers' in Peace Negotiations: Revisiting Sierra Leone's 1996 Abidjan Peace Process

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Abstract

The Sierra Leone civil war (1991–2002) was marked by extensive bloodshed, political turmoil, and significant human rights violations. The 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord, despite being a first effort to resolve the conflict, ultimately failed due to spoilers who sabotaged the peace process for their own limited political and economic gains. Nevertheless, limited research has examined the effective management of spoilers in peace negotiations, especially in contexts where economic incentives influence conflict behaviour. The main objective of this qualitative case study is to investigate spoiler behaviour during the Abidjan Peace Process, focusing specifically on the economic incentives that trigger it. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 40 participants recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, and were analysed thematically using an inductive approach. The data indicate a robust relationship between economic goals and spoiler activities, illustrating how access to economic benefits incited opposition to the Accord. The analysis reveals the shortcomings of prevention-centred approaches and underscores the need for adaptive strategies to manage spoilers in negotiations. These findings indicate that peace processes should adopt inclusive negotiation frameworks and proactive management techniques to mitigate the impact of spoilers. Moreover, the study advances theoretical discussions of spoilers while offering pragmatic insights for peacebuilding in Sierra Leone and other fragile or conflict-affected environments.

Keywords: Spoilers, Peace agreement, Sierra Leone civil war, Abidjan Peace Accord, and Conflict management.

Introduction

Peace agreements are often conceived as turning points in protracted armed conflicts. Yet, their durability is frequently threatened by actors who resist compromise or perceive peace as a threat to their power and interests. Across diverse conflict settings, spoilers have emerged as decisive actors whose disruptive tactics undermine negotiations and derail fragile settlements (Stedman 1997;Newman & Richmond 2006). The challenge of spoilers has therefore become a central concern in both the theory and practice of conflict resolution, raising critical questions about how they can be

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effectively managed to secure sustainable peace. Sierra Leone's civil war offers a stark example of these dynamics.

The Sierra Leone civil war (1991–2002) was initiated by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by Foday Sankoh, a former corporal in the Sierra Leone Army (Abdullah, 1998). Sankoh justified the insurgency by criticising the All Peoples Congress (APC) government for failing to establish a framework for social justice that addressed citizens' welfare before the outbreak of hostilities (Francis, 2000). Despite his rhetoric of establishing a "new Sierra Leone for freedom, justice, and equal opportunity for all," the RUF quickly gained notoriety for its extreme brutality, including the recruitment of child soldiers, widespread amputations, and large-scale massacres (Abdullah, 2004;Richards, 1998). Amid this pervasive violence, efforts to broker peace remained urgent, with particular emphasis on engaging the warring parties in negotiation.

In 1996, the Abidjan Peace Process emerged as the first significant attempt to negotiate an end to the conflict (Dupuy & Binningsbø, 2008). The Accord promised to restore stability by facilitating the withdrawal of foreign military forces, establishing a power-sharing government, and integrating RUF combatants into the Sierra Leone Army (Gberie, 2000). Yet, the agreement ultimately collapsed due to the actions of spoilers—actors who intentionally or inadvertently undermine peace processes. Stedman (1997)defines spoilers as 'leaders and parties who believe that peace emerging from negotiations threatens their power, worldview, and interest, and use violence to undermine attempts to achieve it' (p.5).

This paper examines the contextual drivers that prompted actors to engage in spoiler behaviour, contributing to the collapse of the Abidjan Accord. It interrogates the identities, motivations, and tactics of spoilers, highlighting the challenge they pose to peace negotiations. The analysis focuses on ambiguous or contested provisions of the Accord, explores mediator strategies for managing spoilers, and assesses the factors that prevented successful implementation. The study argues that effective spoiler management is central to sustaining peace, shifting the focus from prevention to strategic engagement (Newman & Richmond, 2006; Stedman, 1997).

Spoilers' actions are complex and multifaceted, with economic, political, and psychological dimensions that can systematically undermine trust and confidence among negotiating parties (Mattes & Savun, 2009; Kovach, 2014). By offering context-specific insights into spoiler management, this study extends understanding beyond Sierra Leone, with implications for peace processes in other conflict-affected settings, particularly across Africa.

The article is organised into five sections. The first situates the 1996 Abidjan Peace Process as the seminal effort to end the civil war and foregrounds the disruptive role of spoilers. The second examines the inevitability of spoilers and advocates shifting from purely preventive strategies to pragmatic management approaches. The third presents key empirical findings, followed by the fourth section, which critically analyses these results and highlights the thematic dynamics shaping the Accord's trajectory. The final section distils lessons for policy and practice, offering guidance for managing spoilers and promoting durable peace in fragile contexts.

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Literature Review

The study of spoilers has emerged as a critical lens in peace and conflict research, offering valuable insights into why peace processes collapse or remain fragile despite negotiated agreements. Since Stedman's (1997) seminal formulation, scholarship has increasingly conceptualised spoilers not as marginal actors but as central agents whose actions decisively shape negotiation trajectories. Subsequent debates have expanded this framework, interrogating the forms, identities, and motivations of spoilers while critically assessing strategies for their management. This body of work underscores that spoilers are embedded in wider socio-political and economic systems, making their behaviour both dynamic and context-dependent. In this regard, the literature provides a foundation for analysing the Sierra Leone case, in which the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord illustrates the interplay among ambiguous provisions, economic opportunity structures, and spoiler tactics. Building on these debates, this review synthesises conceptual, empirical, and strategic perspectives to frame the study's analysis. Significantly, the paper extends these debates by examining how the Abidjan Accord demonstrates the limits of prevention and highlights the necessity of integrating spoiler management into the core design of peace processes.

Conceptualising Spoilers in Peace Processes

The concept of spoilers has become central to understanding the failure or fragility of peace negotiations. Building on Stedman's (1997) foundational work, spoilers are defined as actors—individuals or groups—who perceive peace as threatening to their power, interests, or worldview, and act to disrupt it. Scholars such as Newman and Richmond (2006), Höglund and Druckman (2013), and Reiter (2015)reinforce this framing, highlighting spoilers as critical determinants of peace failure and emphasising the strategic necessity of identifying and managing them. The literature underscores that spoilers are not peripheral obstacles but central actors whose behaviour can decisively shape negotiation outcomes.

Forms and Tactics of Spoiler Behaviour

A key debate in the literature concerns the modalities of spoiler action. Stedman (1997) emphasises violence as the primary instrument, yet empirical evidence and subsequent scholarship (Findley, 2007; Pearlman, 2009)demonstrate that spoiler tactics are often hybrid, combining violent and nonviolent methods such as political obstruction, refusal to demobilise, or manipulation of negotiation structures. The Sierra Leone civil war illustrates this hybrid model, with the RUF employing both armed violence and strategic noncompliance to destabilise the Abidjan Peace Process. This broader understanding of spoiler tactics informs more nuanced management approaches that go beyond coercion alone.

Identifying Spoilers: Actors and Contexts

The literature diverges on which actors qualify as spoilers. Stedman's framework privileges direct warring parties with immediate stakes in the conflict, whereas Newman and Richmond (2006) advocate a wider lens encompassing political elites, external actors, and economic opportunists. Both approaches offer analytical value; however, in the Abidjan case, empirical precision is enhanced by focusing primarily on warring factions while situating them within the broader socio-political and economic context. Environmental factors, such as access to natural resources, have been identified as key enablers of spoiler

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behaviour(Zahar, 2008; Darby, 2001). In Sierra Leone, the illegal diamond trade exemplifies how structural opportunity structures incentivised the RUF's spoiler activities (Dupuy &Binningsbø, 2008).

Managing Spoilers: Strategies and Critiques

Stedman (1997) identifies three primary strategies for managing spoilers in peace processes: *inducement*, *socialisation*, and *coercion*. Inducement seeks to change spoilers' cost–benefit calculations by offering incentives for cooperation, whereas socialisation focuses on integrating potential spoilers into the negotiation process to foster ownership and commitment. Coercion, by contrast, employs sanctions or military pressure to compel compliance. While widely cited, these strategies have faced critique for an overreliance on coercion, which can entrench resistance, exacerbate grievances, and even provoke renewed conflict (Nilsson & Söderberg Kovacs, 2011). Empirical evidence from Sierra Leone demonstrates the application of these strategies. For example, during the Lomé Accord period, British military intervention exemplified calibrated coercion that restrained armed spoilers and safeguarded negotiation space. However, participants and observers emphasise that coercion alone was insufficient; a durable peace required complementary measures. Hybrid approaches that combine inducements, institutional reforms, and enforceable compliance mechanisms—such as monitored power-sharing arrangements, demobilisation programs, and credible enforcement protocols—appear more effective in complex conflict environments. Such integration ensures that spoilers perceive both tangible benefits from compliance and credible consequences for noncompliance, thereby enhancing commitment to the peace process and reducing the risk of relapse into violence.

Analytical Insights

The literature collectively demonstrates that spoilers operate within complex socio-political and economic systems, requiring context-specific management strategies. The Abidjan Peace Process exemplifies how ambiguous provisions, combined with hybrid spoiler tactics and structural opportunities, can undermine peace efforts. Effective management of spoilers is therefore contingent not only on anticipating their actions but also on designing negotiation and implementation mechanisms that balance incentives, accountability, and strategic enforcement. This study builds on these insights but also challenges the prevention-centric bias that dominates existing scholarship. By examining the Sierra Leone case, the argument is that spoilers are inevitable in peace processes and that overemphasis on prevention obscures the need for pragmatic management strategies. Ultimately, the lesson advanced here is clear: peace processes fail not because spoilers emerge, but because they are not effectively managed.

Methodology

***Philosophical Orientation*:** This study is grounded in the *constructivist paradigm*, which posits that reality and knowledge are socially constructed through human interactions, perceptions, and lived experiences, rather than existing as fixed or objective truths (Amineh & Asl, 2015;Creswell & Poth, 2016). This orientation is particularly appropriate for the study of spoilers in peace processes, as such dynamics are embedded in subjective interpretations, contested narratives, and shifting socio-political contexts. By

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adopting a constructivist stance, the study prioritises the voices and lived experiences of actors engaged in Sierra Leone's 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord, thereby enabling a nuanced understanding of how spoilers were perceived and managed.

***Research Design*:** In line with this philosophical orientation, the study employed a *qualitative case study design*, focusing on Sierra Leone's 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord. The case study method is well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena in their real-world contexts (Yin, 2018). It allows for a holistic, contextually rich investigation of the dynamics surrounding peace processes and spoiler behaviour, providing depth and interpretive insight. As Stake (1995) emphasises, case studies are particularly valuable for examining processes where multiple perspectives intersect, making this design highly relevant to the present study.

Data Collection: Data were collected through *semi-structured, in-depth interviews* with 40 participants, including government officials, civil society representatives, negotiators, and international observers. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to probe emergent issues (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This balance ensured that the discussions remained anchored in the research objectives while allowing participants to articulate their perspectives in ways that reflected their lived realities. The method was particularly appropriate given the sensitive and multifaceted nature of spoiler behaviour in peace negotiations.

Sampling Strategy: Participants were selected using a combination of *purposive and snowball sampling techniques.* Purposive sampling enabled the targeted selection of individuals with direct involvement or expertise in the peace process (Patton, 2015), ensuring that the data generated were relevant and insightful. Snowball sampling complemented this by facilitating access to otherwise hard-to-reach informants, especially elite actors and those involved in sensitive political roles (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This dual approach enhanced the breadth and depth of perspectives represented in the study.

Data Analysis: The interview data were analysed through *thematic content analysis,* following an *inductive approach*. Thematic analysis was chosen because it provides a systematic yet flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The inductive orientation allowed themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being constrained by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. This was particularly appropriate for exploring how spoiler behaviour was conceptualised and managed in the Abidjan Peace Accord. The analytical process involved iterative coding, categorisation, and theme development to ensure both rigour and coherence in the interpretation of findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Participants: Table 1 presents the participant categories included in the study. The diversity of perspectives enhanced the *credibility* of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by ensuring that multiple voices informed the analysis of spoiler management and the sustainability of peace agreements.

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Table 1: Categories of Participants

Category of Participants	Male	Female	Strategy	Location
Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL)	4	3	Face-to-face interview	Western Area
Revolutionary United Front (RUF)	4	2	Face-to-face interview	Western Area, & Southern Province
Civil Society Organisation (CSO)	4	3	Face-to-face interview	Western Area, Southern & Eastern Provinces
Inter-Religious Council Sierra Leone	1	1	Face-to-face interview	Western Area
Mediating Team	1	1	Face-to-face interview	Western Area
International Community	1	1	Telephone Interview	Diaspora
Guarantors	1	1	Telephone Interview	Western Area & Diaspora
Civil Defence Forces (CDF)	1	1	Face-to-face interview	Southern Province
Sierra Leonean Scholars	6	-	Telephone Interview	Diaspora
Scholars of other Nationalities	4	-	Telephone Interview	Diaspora
TOTAL	**27**	**13**		**40 PARTICIPANTS**

Source: Compiled by the author, 2024.

Spoilers in Peace Processes: Why Failure to Manage Them is Failure to Build Peace?

Contemporary peace processes continue to be undermined by spoilers—actors who deliberately disrupt negotiations to protect or advance their interests. Their persistence across different contexts underscores the inadequacy of conventional approaches to conflict resolution. In conflicts as diverse as Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine, spoiler behaviour has emerged as a central impediment to peace. The repeated violations of ceasefires in Ukraine in 2022, despite negotiations that nearly produced agreements, reveal how spoiler dynamics can derail progress at critical junctures. Both the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and international media have documented these violations, illustrating the scale and persistence of spoiler activity. Similarly, the collapse of fragile truces between Israel and Hamas demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining negotiated pauses in violence in the presence of actors with entrenched interests in continued confrontation.

The scholarship consistently recognises spoilers as formidable obstacles to durable peace. Stedman's (1997) typology remains

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foundational in framing spoilers as actors who threaten peace agreements, while subsequent contributions by Newman and Richmond (2006), Höglund and Druckman (2013), and Reiter (2015) further elaborate on their disruptive potential. Schiff (2021) extends this argument by emphasising that spoilers retain the capacity to derail peace well after agreements have been signed, often exploiting implementation weaknesses. Empirical precedents affirm these claims: the 1993 Arusha Accord failed to prevent genocide in Rwanda; Sudan's 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement lost legitimacy when rebel groups disengaged; and in Northern Ireland, the Loyalist Volunteer Force rejected the Good Friday Agreement. Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF), as described by Davies (2000), epitomised a spoiler group intent on derailing peace despite formal commitments under the Abidjan Accord.

These cases highlight a critical limitation of dominant spoiler-prevention strategies. Agreements such as Sierra Leone's 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord faltered partly because of vague provisions and weak enforcement mechanisms that failed to contain spoiler activity. Prevention strategies often rely on inclusivity or deterrence, yet they underestimate spoilers' complex motivations and capacity for adaptation. The literature increasingly calls for a paradigm shift: from viewing prevention as sufficient to acknowledging that spoiler management is a central and ongoing requirement. Stedman's (1997) management framework remains underutilised, despite its enduring relevance. Later scholars, including Findley (2007)and Nilsson and Söderberg Kovacs (2011), contend that mediators continue to lack robust, actionable tools for engaging spoilers once negotiations are underway.

This study, therefore, advances the case for embedding spoiler management at the heart of peace process design and implementation. Understanding spoilers' motivations—whether economic, political, or ideological—is essential to devising mechanisms that reduce incentives for disruption. Pragmatic, context-sensitive strategies that absorb, transform, or neutralise spoiler behaviour are indispensable to sustaining agreements. Ultimately, the lesson from Sierra Leone and other cases is that spoilers are inevitable in every peace negotiation; to fail to manage them is to fail at peacebuilding itself. Durable peace, therefore, depends not on preventing spoilers from emerging, but on managing them effectively throughout the process.

Table 2: *Typology, tactics and management strategies of spoilers*

Type of Spoiler	Typical Tactics	Management Strategies	Examples / Notes
Total Spoilers*(seek to derail peace completely)*	Armed attacks, assassinations, intimidation, systematic violence	Coercion (targeted military pressure), enforceable sanctions, and negotiation exclusion	RUF factions opposing the Abidjan Accord fully
Greedy Spoilers*(seek partial gains without entirely rejecting*	Political bargaining, refusal to implement reforms, and selective	Inducements (power-sharing, economic incentives), confidence-	Confident militia leaders negotiating benefits in exchange

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peace)	demobilisation	building measures	for compliance
Limited Spoilers*(seek specific objectives, open to compromise)*	Political obstruction, delaying tactics, and minor noncompliance	Socialisation (persuasion, dialogue, institution-building), conditional incentives	Local actors seeking recognition or small concessions
External / Opportunistic Spoilers*(outside actors with economic or political interests)*	Resource exploitation, lobbying, and supporting factions indirectly	Multi-track engagement, regulatory enforcement, and transparency mechanisms	Economic actors profiting from diamonds, foreign political patrons
Hybrid Spoilers*(employ both violent and nonviolent tactics)*	A mix of violence and noncompliance, fear-mongering, and propaganda	Calibrated hybrid strategy: combine inducements, coercion, socialisation, and institutional reforms	RUF's simultaneous armed and political actions in Sierra Leone

Source: Compiled by the author, 2024.

Findings

This study generated five empirically grounded findings that align with the research objectives and advance the literature on spoiler management in peace processes, with specific reference to Sierra Leone's 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord. Each finding highlights mechanisms through which spoilers emerge, operate, and are managed, offering broader insights for the design and implementation of peace agreements in complex conflict environments.

Finding 1: Economic incentives as drivers of spoiler behaviour.

The analysis indicates a strong association between economic opportunities and the emergence of spoiler behaviour. Empirical evidence from the Abidjan Peace negotiations shows that the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) financed its operations through the exploitation of illicit diamonds. At the same time, some top-ranking officials within the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) benefited from the informal distribution of rice intended for front-line troops. These observations support the political economy perspective on conflict, which posits that access to lootable resources in fragile states heightens incentives for violent engagement (Collier, 2008). The finding underscores the need to proactively address economic drivers in peace processes to prevent perverse incentives that can reinforce spoiler activity.

Finding 2: The inevitability of spoilers in peace processes

The study finds that spoilers represent an inherent feature of civil conflict resolution. Analysis identifies three primary triggers of spoiler emergence: (i) perceived exclusion from post-conflict political arrangements, (ii) shifts in the balance of power, and (iii) ideological intransigence. These dynamics suggest that attempts to eliminate spoilers are likely to be futile. Instead, effective peacebuilding requires the development of mechanisms to manage spoiler behaviour through tailored strategies, including

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inducements, containment, and co-optation. This finding calls for a conceptual shift from the prevention of spoilers toward their strategic management.

Finding 3: Ambiguity in peace agreements undermines commitment.

Empirical examination reveals that the content and clarity of peace agreements directly shape the commitment of signatory parties. The Abidjan Peace Accord exhibited critical ambiguities: (i) vague power-sharing provisions, (ii) unspecified proportional representation mechanisms, (iii) unclear guidelines for the withdrawal of foreign troops and mercenaries, and (iv) insufficient measures to address the RUF's security concerns despite the general amnesty clause. These deficiencies generated uncertainty, eroded trust, and contributed to spoiler activity, corroborating existing scholarship that emphasises the importance of precision and mutual clarity in peace agreement drafting (Nilsson & Kovacs, 2011).

Finding 4: Effectiveness of integrated diplomacy and calibrated force

The research identifies a dual strategy—combining diplomatic engagement with calibrated coercive measures—as the most effective approach to managing spoilers. The Abidjan case demonstrates that reliance solely on dialogue was insufficient in the face of persistent spoiler threats. Empirical evidence indicates that positive inducements (e.g., political inclusion and concessions) combined with selective deterrence measures enhanced mediators' capacity to manage spoiler activity. This finding highlights the need for a context-sensitive framework that integrates diplomatic, security, and economic tools in a complementary manner.

Finding 5: Perceived partiality erodes mediators' legitimacy

The study finds that third-party mediators' legitimacy can be compromised when facilitators assume active mediation roles. During the Abidjan negotiations, ECOWAS—predominantly led by Nigeria—was perceived as biased due to its prior military support for the Sierra Leonean government, engendering profound mistrust from the RUF leadership (Rashid, 2013). The evidence indicates that clearly defined roles, transparent communication, and balanced engagement with all parties are essential to maintaining mediator credibility. Failure to uphold these principles risks undermining the integrity and effectiveness of the mediation process.

Summary

Collectively, these findings illuminate the complex interplay of economic, political, and institutional factors in shaping spoiler behaviour. They provide empirical support for strategies that combine conflict-sensitive agreement design, economic reform, adaptive mediation tactics, and careful calibration of third-party roles, offering actionable insights for enhancing the resilience and sustainability of peace processes in post-conflict contexts.

Discussion of the Research Findings

This section analyses the study's principal findings, focusing on critical themes that shaped the trajectory of the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord. Drawing on both primary and secondary data, the discussion interrogates how economic incentives shaped spoiler behaviour and situates these findings within the broader civil war literature. It further examines the structural and procedural deficiencies of the Abidjan Accord, including the vagueness of its provisions, ambiguities in its proportional representation

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provisions, and the lack of clarity regarding the withdrawal of foreign troops and mercenaries. Collectively, these factors reveal a complex interaction between economic interests, political ambiguity, and the fragile commitment of warring parties, all of which significantly undermined the peace process in Sierra Leone.

The Relationship Between Economic Motives and the Propensity for Spoiler Behaviour

Economic interests during the Abidjan Peace process were instrumental in motivating spoilers, primarily the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and elements of the military leadership. Participants consistently highlighted how the conflict evolved into a financially lucrative enterprise for diverse actors (Participant 5, interview, 2023; Participant 12, interview, 2023). Control over diamond-rich regions enabled the RUF to generate substantial revenue, which was subsequently leveraged to sustain military operations and resist peace initiatives. This finding aligns with the observation that natural resources often prolong conflict, as actors are incentivised to exploit economic gains to consolidate power and maintain operational capabilities (Ross, 2004). Similarly, military leaders manipulated logistical supplies, such as unmonitored rice distributions, to supplement their limited salaries, thereby creating a vested interest in perpetuating the conflict. As one participant noted:

> *The military viewed the conflict as a financial resource, providing it with prestige, recognition, and additional income. During peacetime, their visibility outside the barracks was minimal, and all expenditures were strictly audited (Participant 8, interview, 2023).*

This account illustrates the intersection of economic and political incentives, highlighting how material interests can drive actors to adopt spoiler behaviour. The RUF's pursuit of control over natural resources further exemplifies the convergence of political authority and financial gain, demonstrating that economic motivations were central to the conflict's persistence.

Economic Motives in the Broader Context of Civil War Literature

The economic motivations underpinning spoiler behaviour in Sierra Leone resonate with broader theoretical discussions on civil war dynamics. Collier (2008) contends that while grievances related to political marginalisation and social injustice may initiate conflict, economic incentives frequently sustain and intensify it. The RUF's control of diamond mines represents a paradigmatic case of "greed-driven" conflict, while underlying grievances regarding exclusion and marginalisationfuelled the broader war (Collier, 2008; Kalyvas, 2006). Critiques of the greed–grievance dichotomy (Ballentine & Sherman, 2003; Berdal &Ucko, 2009; Cramer, 2002) underscore the interdependent nature of economic and political motives, suggesting that these factors are often mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. This study corroborates these perspectives, demonstrating that economic incentives, including resource exploitation and financial opportunism, were critical drivers of spoiler behaviour in Sierra Leone. Addressing these dimensions is essential for sustainable peacebuilding, as interventions that overlook material incentives may fail to mitigate spoilers' motivations (Keen, 2012).

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Abidjan Peace Accord: Vagueness and Warring Parties' Commitment

A recurrent theme among participants was the lack of specificity in the Abidjan Accord, which allowed for multiple interpretations and opened the door to manipulation. Thirty-six of forty participants underscored this weakness, describing it as "a superficial bandage dressing, leaving the injury unattended" (Participant 19, interview, 2023). Such vagueness undermined trust and eroded confidence in implementation. Three provisions were particularly problematic. First, the power-sharing arrangement lacked clarity regarding the distribution of executive authority, leading to contestation between the government and rebel factions. Second, the ambiguous reference to proportional representation failed to define the mechanisms through which political participation would be ensured, leaving parties to interpret it in self-serving ways. Finally, the guidelines for the withdrawal of foreign troops and mercenaries were loosely worded, offering no timetable or verification measures, thereby prolonging suspicions and fuelling insecurity. The absence of concrete timelines, monitoring frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms meant that each actor could claim compliance while simultaneously obstructing progress. Collectively, these shortcomings weakened commitment, gave spoilers room to exploit gaps, and reinforced perceptions that the Accord was more symbolic than substantive, ultimately undermining its durability.

Lack of Clarity in the Power-Sharing Arrangement

Effective peace agreements require articulated power-sharing mechanisms to facilitate post-conflict governance. In the Abidjan Accord, the power-sharing provisions lacked specificity regarding roles, responsibilities, and implementation timelines (Dupuy &Binningsbo, 2008; Francis, 2000). This ambiguity compromised the ability to monitor compliance and hold parties accountable. Scholarly literature emphasises that precise power-sharing arrangements enhance transparency, reduce potential disputes, and strengthen the legitimacy of post-conflict institutions (Mattes &Savun, 2009; Simmons, 2009). In Sierra Leone, the absence of detailed power-sharing provisions undermined the credibility of the Accord and diminished the warring parties' commitment to its implementation.

Ambiguity in Proportional Representation

The proportional representation clause of the Accord also lacked specificity. While the formation of a coalition inclusive of both government and RUF representatives was stipulated, the exact number of representatives and their roles remained undefined (Abidjan Peace Accord, Article III, 1996). Participants indicated that this omission fostered mistrust and created uncertainty regarding power allocation (Participant 7, interview, 2023). Proportional representation is fundamental to ensuring transparency, legitimacy, and equitable post-conflict governance (Nilsson, 2008). The failure to address these details represented a critical oversight with long-term implications for peacebuilding in Sierra Leone.

Unclear Provisions for Withdrawing Foreign Troops and Mercenaries

Finally, the Accord lacked explicit guidelines for the withdrawal of foreign troops and mercenaries. Participants highlighted that although the RUF demanded complete withdrawal, the absence of defined timelines, numbers, and roles for

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international monitors eroded trust and hindered implementation (Participant 15, interview, 2023; Participant 21, interview, 2023). Future agreements should incorporate precise timelines, clearly delineate the roles of international actors, and link troop withdrawal to broader disarmament and reintegration strategies.

Directions for Future Research

The methodology and findings of this study suggest several important avenues for future scholarly inquiry. First, the analysis reveals a notable gap in the literature concerning the management—rather than the mere prevention—of spoilers in peace processes. While existing research has extensively examined the phenomenon of spoilers, particularly their emergence and strategies of disruption, there remains a limited empirical and theoretical understanding of how to engage and manage such actors during peace negotiations. The current study, which focuses on the 1996 Abidjan Peace Process in Sierra Leone, offers a valuable case within the West African sub-region but represents only a single data point within a broader geographic and temporal landscape. Despite scholarly attention to cases such as Liberia (1989–2003), Nigeria's Biafra conflict (1967–1970), and Côte d'Ivoire's civil war (2002–2007), the dominant analytical frame in these studies has emphasised spoiler prevention. This suggests an urgent need for comparative, context-specific research on spoiler management in other West African conflicts to enhance our understanding of regional patterns and to develop more nuanced approaches to addressing this issue.

Second, the findings underscore the importance of examining the content and coherence of peace agreements themselves. The Abidjan Peace Accord contained substantive ambiguities and conflicting provisions, undermining confidence in its implementation and contributing to its collapse. This raises critical questions regarding the design, clarity, and interpretive consistency of peace accords. Future research should examine how the structure and specificity of peace agreements influence signatories' commitment and the likelihood of sustainable implementation. Such an inquiry would advance scholarly and policy understandings of peace agreement design as a central mechanism for conflict resolution.

Ultimately, this study highlights the disjunction that frequently exists between those who negotiate and draft peace agreements and those responsible for implementing them. A recurring theme in peacebuilding literature is that mediators, often international actors, disengage after the negotiation phase, leaving local implementers with a limited understanding or buy-in regarding the agreed-upon terms. This disconnect can create significant implementation challenges. Future research should therefore explore mechanisms for bridging this gap, including aligning the understanding and expectations of mediators and implementers, and ensuring that local actors are meaningfully included in both the negotiation and operationalisation of peace agreements. Strengthening this alignment is crucial for promoting local ownership and enhancing the sustainability of post-conflict peacebuilding efforts.

Lessons from the Abidjan Peace Process: Implications for Policy and Practice

The 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord, signed by the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), sought to end one of West Africa's most protracted and brutal civil wars. While ultimately unsuccessful in achieving a durable peace,

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the Accord offers a critical empirical case through which to extract valuable lessons with broad applicability for peacebuilding policy and practice. These lessons transcend the specific context of Sierra Leone and are relevant to the design, implementation, and sustainability of peace agreements in other conflict-affected regions.

A central lesson concerns the role of *spoilers*—actors who seek to undermine peace processes to preserve or advance their interests. The failure of the Abidjan Accord was, in large part, attributable to spoiler activities that were insufficiently anticipated and inadequately managed. As such, this case underscores the imperative of developing comprehensive strategies for spoiler management. Beyond traditional prevention-focused frameworks, peace processes must integrate approaches that identify potential spoilers early, understand their underlying motivations, and engage them through calibrated strategies. These may include targeted inducements, political inclusion, and, where necessary, coercive deterrents. Rather than exclusion, strategic engagement of spoilers can mitigate their disruptive potential and increase the resilience of peace processes (Stedman, 1997; Nilsson & Kovacs, 2011).

The study further reveals the *political economy of conflict*, particularly the role of economic incentives in driving spoiler behaviour. In the Sierra Leonean context, the illicit exploitation of diamonds—popularised as "blood diamonds"—was a critical factor in sustaining the conflict and motivating spoiler actions by both rebel and state actors. The RUF's war economy was primarily funded through illegal diamond mining, while segments of the military elite capitalised on the unregulated provision of goods, including rice, for personal enrichment. This dynamic supports Collier's (2008) argument regarding the salience of greed-based motivations in conflict. Therefore, future peace agreements must incorporate explicit economic provisions that promote equitable resource distribution and legitimate economic alternatives, thereby addressing the material incentives that often fuel conflict and spoilage.

The *ambiguity and vagueness* of key provisions within the Abidjan Peace Accord significantly contributed to its erosion. The absence of clarity in areas such as power-sharing arrangements, proportional representation mechanisms, and the withdrawal of foreign troops created fertile ground for mistrust and divergent interpretations. This finding reinforces the importance of precision and legal robustness in drafting peace agreements. Detailed, enforceable provisions, accompanied by clear timelines and dispute resolution frameworks, are essential to minimise manipulation and reinforce commitment among signatories (Walter, 2002). Ambiguities, as evidenced in this case, not only erode trust but also empower spoilers to exploit legal and political loopholes.

The study also highlights the limitations of *rigid peace agreement frameworks* in contexts characterised by fluid political and security dynamics. The Abidjan Accord lacked adaptive mechanisms to respond to evolving conditions on the ground, ultimately constraining its ability to address emerging challenges. This observation suggests that peace agreements should include flexible design elements, such as review clauses, implementation milestones, and built-in contingency mechanisms. Adaptive peacebuilding approaches allow for context-sensitive modifications that enhance durability and reduce the likelihood of breakdown (Barnett et al., 2007).

Inclusivity emerges as another critical dimension of effective peacebuilding. While

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the Abidjan negotiations involved key belligerents—the government and the RUF—the exclusion of certain factions, civil society actors, and local constituencies weakened the agreement's legitimacy and sustainability. Broad-based participation fosters ownership, strengthens social contracts, and increases the representativeness of negotiated settlements (Paffenholz, 2015). Peace processes must therefore ensure the meaningful inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, including non-combatant groups, to avoid alienation and marginalisation that often lead to renewed violence.

Closely related to inclusivity is the importance of *local ownership and institutional capacity-building.* The lack of robust regional institutions and locally led implementation mechanisms undermined the credibility and operationalisation of the Abidjan Accord. For peace to be sustainable, it must be embedded in locally owned processes that empower national institutions and communities to lead reconstruction efforts. This entails investment in governance structures, the professionalisation of security forces, and support for community-based peacebuilding initiatives. Although local ownership was underdeveloped in the Abidjan context, the study affirms the indispensable role of *international actors* in facilitating peace processes. The involvement of entities such as the United Nations, the African Union, the Commonwealth, and ECOWAS conferred legitimacy and provided essential resources for the process. However, as demonstrated in the case of ECOWAS, perceived partiality—arising from a prior military intervention—can compromise neutrality. International mediators must, therefore, maintain transparency, consistency, and balanced engagement to retain credibility among all parties.

In conclusion, the failure of the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord serves as a cautionary tale and offers valuable insights for scholars and practitioners of peacebuilding. Effective spoiler management, the integration of economic justice, clarity in agreement design, adaptability, inclusivity, and the careful calibration of international and local roles are all essential components of sustainable peace. Embedding these principles into future peace processes can enhance their ability to navigate the complex realities of contemporary armed conflict and contribute meaningfully to achieving a durable peace.

Conclusion

This paper examined the dynamics of spoiler behaviour in peace processes through the case of Sierra Leone's 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord. It sought to understand how economic interests, political exclusion, and ambiguous provisions shaped spoiler activities and contributed to the collapse of the agreement. By situating the Sierra Leone case within the broader discourse on spoilers, the study underscores that spoilers are central rather than peripheral actors in peace negotiations, whose actions must be anticipated and managed.

The Abidjan experience is instructive in showing that spoiler management requires moving from abstract prevention to deliberate strategies that reduce incentives for disruption. Effective approaches include fostering inclusivity in negotiations, clarifying provisions open to competing interpretations, and offering credible guarantees that deter potential spoilers. Addressing the structural weaknesses of agreements and aligning the perspectives of drafters and implementers are equally essential for ensuring local ownership and legitimacy in post-conflict peacebuilding.

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The study, therefore, advances the position that spoilers are inevitable in peace processes, but their impact can be mitigated through proactive management. Rather than viewing them solely as obstacles, mediators and stakeholders should treat spoilers as integral actors whose interests must be engaged and reshaped toward sustaining peace. The Sierra Leone case demonstrates that sustainable peace depends not only on reaching an agreement but on designing inclusive, context-sensitive frameworks that anticipate and manage spoiler challenges.

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