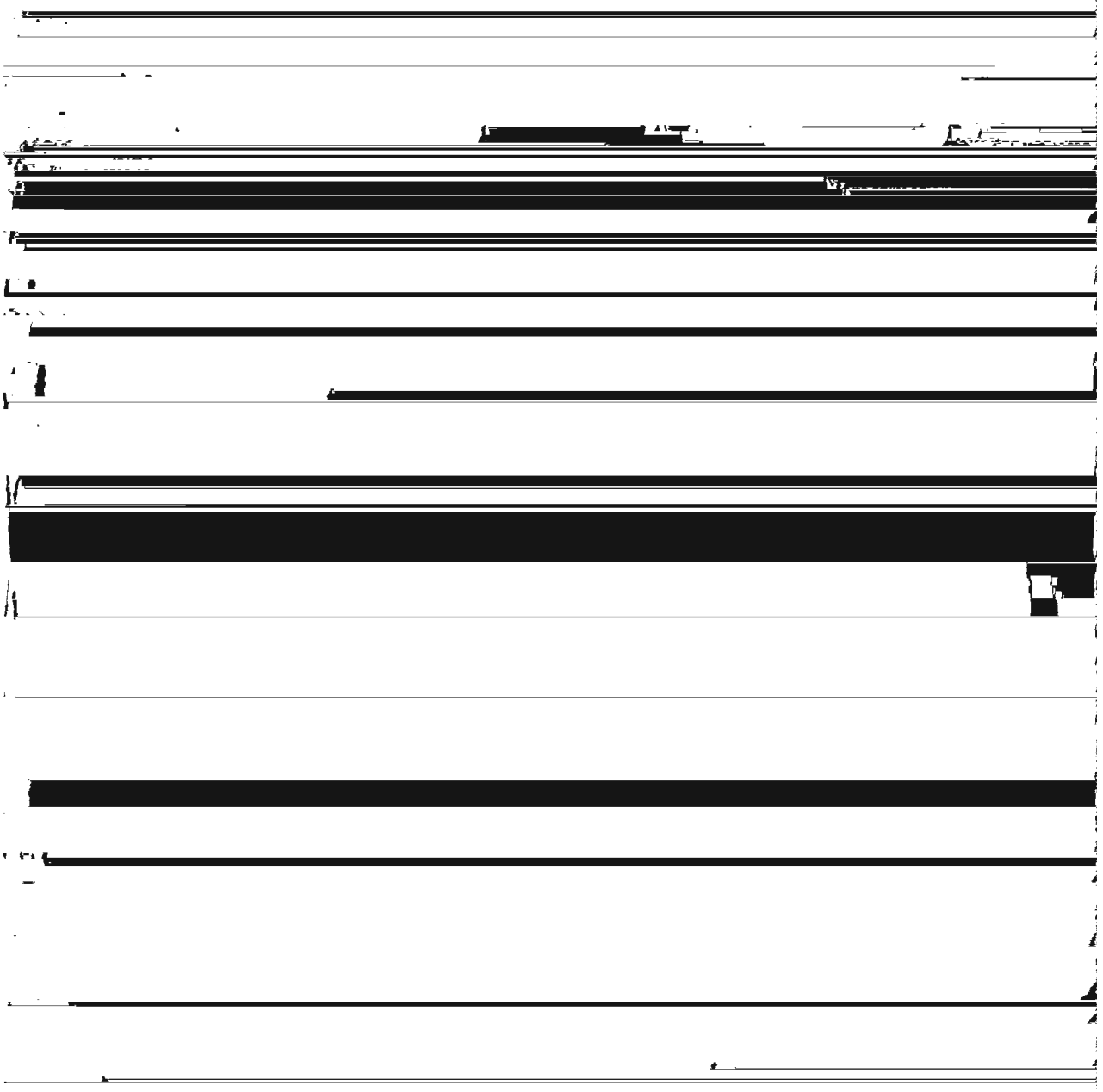






## Foreword

The Carter Center has been actively involved in Liberia since the early 1990s when former U.S. President Jimmy Carter was requested to assist in regional efforts to bring an end to the brutal civil war that ravaged the country between 1989 and 1996. Some 200,000 Liberians were killed in the war, and nearly half of its pre-war population of some 3 million was displaced. The country's economy and



Accord was negotiated in 1996 under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The Accord called for the disarmament and demobilization of combatants and for

presidential and legislative elections. Although disarmament and demobilization were only partially

With nearly a decade of engagement in Liberia, The Carter Center has accumulated a wealth of experience in the country. Through its post-election programs, the Center has endeavored to strengthen human rights and to support and sustain the small but vitally important Liberian civil society sector.

Given the difficult context of a war-to-peace transition and the Taylor administration's apparent determination to thwart efforts to strengthen civil society, however, it is hard to measure the impact of

these efforts. This is true both in terms of assessing the country's overall democratic development and more narrowly in gauging the impact of Carter Center programs.

**ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>**

This paper addresses a deceptively simple question: what are appropriate standards for local non-

governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in especially challenging political contexts? The Center

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Center's experiences in Liberia during the 1990s offer several lessons in this regard. First, the failure of a

program to meet its goals might create a misleading impression of inefficiency on the part of

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of a group in organizing and representing its members, the independence of a citizen in defining and voicing his or her priorities. The result is somewhat of a paradox: high expectations about outcomes, but ~~hesitancy about interfering in processes.~~ This hesitancy is accentuated by the desire shared by both local

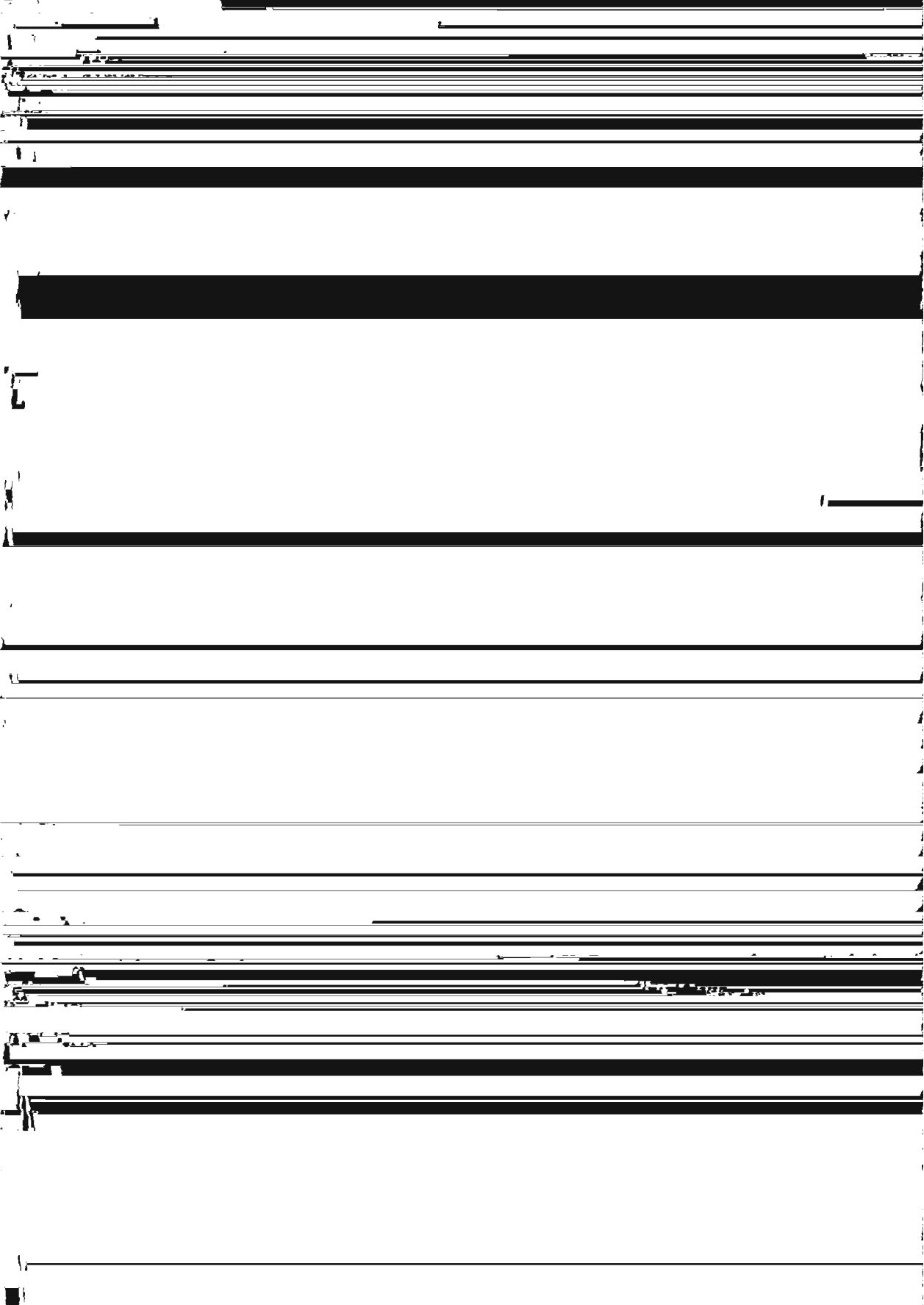
and international actors for local politics to be natural and self-sustaining. Thus, even though local NGOs may benefit from the assistance of external partners and the urgings of the international community, these relationships generally bring distinct tradeoffs and drawbacks.

Our paper explores the dilemmas involved in implementing and evaluating efforts to promote human rights and the rule of law in an especially challenging political environment. In staking out this area of interest, we recognize that some may deem the context redundant. After all, doesn't the sense of

urgency surrounding these aspirations presume a deficient, hostile setting? We believe that there are qualitative differences among the countries where such issues arise (*e.g.*, Mexico is hardly on a par with

Sudan or even a neighbor such as Guatemala), and wish to better understand how these circumstances affect the interplay between local NGOs and international actors and standards. In particular, we take a close look at the forms of direction and assistance that are provided, the types of difficulties and conflicts that arise, and issues concerning how progress is measured.

The thin foundation is hardly surprising: much of Liberia's political, social, and economic life







may begin to fade now that a peace accord has been signed and a transitional government installed. The latter issue, however, remains a source of considerable anxiety and instability. In mid-August 1999, for example, at least 16 (and perhaps as many as 100) hostages, including foreign relief workers from Médecins sans Frontières, the International Rescue Committee and the London-based medical charity

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followed an earlier incident in April 1999 when an armed group attacked Voinjama, causing many residents and NGO staff-members to leave the town indefinitely.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, despite having taken the nominally positive step of holding an election, Liberia has not developed a particularly vibrant competitive politics. President Taylor's National Patriotic Party

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offensive in an effort to gain unilateral control over the country (Operation Octopus), the intensification

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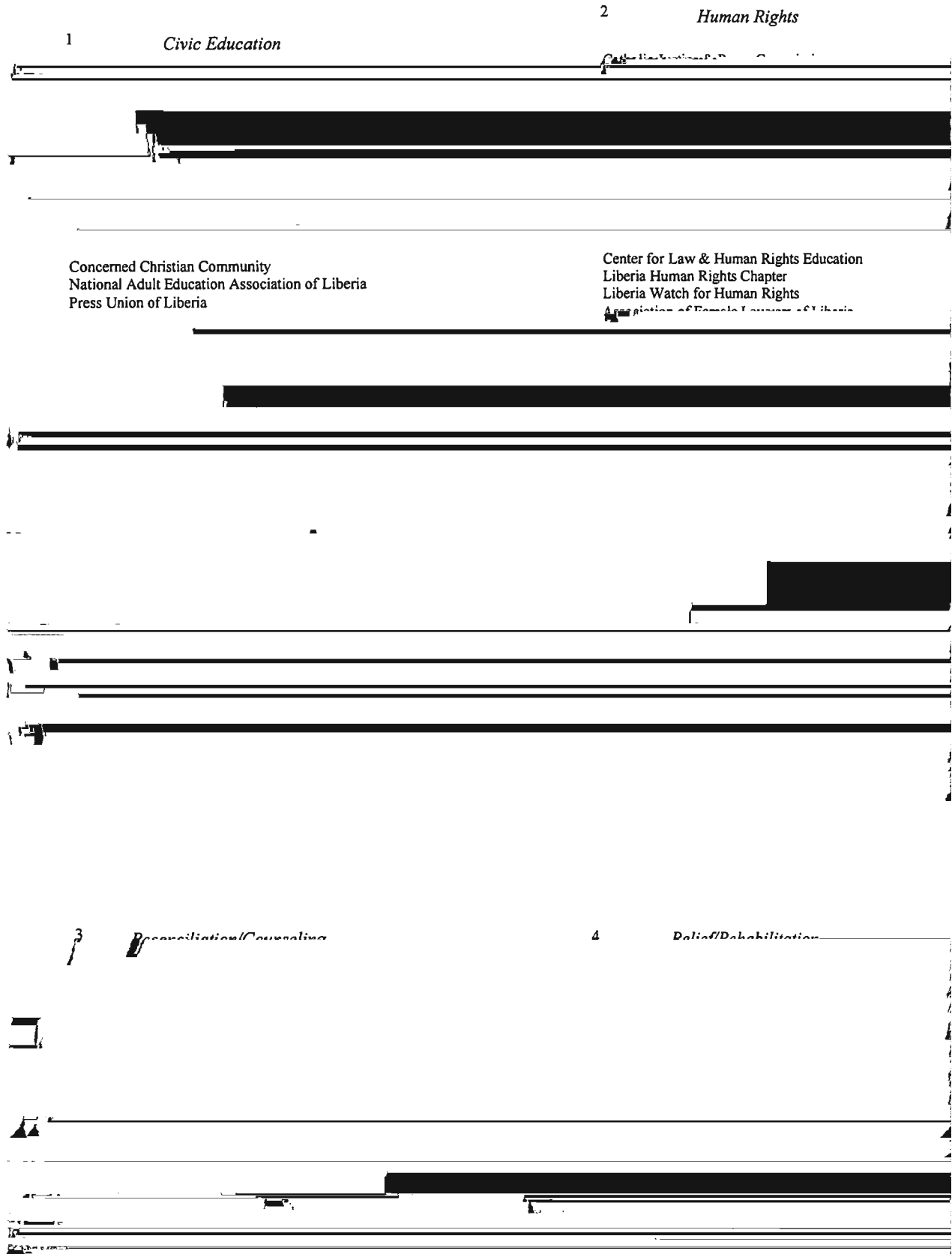
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**Figure 3**  
**The Liberian Network for Peace and Development**



the interruption created a void that the participants were probably not prepared to fill—even

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The Carter Center returned to Liberia in 1997, conducting a series of pre-election

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employee's restrictive approach to the freedom of the press. The letter became a controversial issue.

after President Taylor announced plans to create a human rights commission to investigate abuses and a reconciliation commission to heal the wounds of the past. Many human rights NGOs were

disheartened by the fact that the human rights commission was not permitted to investigate allegations of abuses that transpired during the civil war. The Ministry of Justice, however,





Media support: Center for Democratic Empowerment (CEDE) . The primary objective of the sub-grant to the Center for Democratic Empowerment (CEDE) has been to enhance the role of the media in public life.

the Press Union of Liberia's Code of Conduct. In addition, CEDE began a series of "Democratic Colloquia" designed to educate journalists and to encourage members of the media and the legal community to work together on a more regular basis.

With additional support from the Center, in 1999 CEDE also sponsored a major conference designed to involve a broad spectrum of individuals in a constructive dialogue to identify ways of overcoming impediments to economic growth.

independent media organizations in Liberia. Currently, there is only one independent printing press. The press is owned by a Lebanese businessman and comes under pressure periodically.

from the government for printing materials critical of the government. As a result, this single independent press is vulnerable to official pressure and will sometimes refuse to print some

### 3.5 THE FUTURE OF THE CARTER CENTER IN LIBERIA

Although the current grant from USAID expired at the end of 1999, The Carter Center has applied for a one-year renewal. The proposal includes support for the field office in addition to extending the programming that has been undertaken during the past year. As we write this paper, however, the future of this project is in legislative limbo. During the annual Congressional budget negotiations, both the U.S. Senate and House Foreign Relations Committees placed a hold on all non-humanitarian aid to Liberia, citing concerns about the record of President Taylor and his administration. Unless this freeze is lifted—or alternative funding can be secured to bridge

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In fact, a similar juxtaposition can be drawn with The Carter Center's LCHR

programming. The Center's original objective was to ensure that the Commission became a fully operative and credible institution, capable of scrutinizing and redressing human rights issues. The underlying assumption was that only a credible and independent Commission would be seen as legitimate, and that without it, the government's stated intentions to improve human rights would be rightly questioned and doubted on all sides. Therefore, The Carter Center in effect said to President Taylor and his government, "if you are really serious about improving human rights in Liberia, demonstrate the seriousness of your intentions, and we will help you."

Although local NGOs initially engaged in an advocacy campaign after the government ~~formed~~ a commission with limited authority, no funding and inadequate staff, they soon gave up

any hopes that there a credible institution would emerge. Therefore, they turned their attention elsewhere, and focused instead on engaging in training, education and legal aid, and on providing the monitoring service that the government has thus far refused to provide.

The Carter Center, for its part, has taken the lead from civil society actors and NGOs in terms of how and whether to engage with the LCHR. For a while, the Center considered that it might still be worth trying to assist the LCHR, as a means of testing whether the government of Liberia was serious about implementing its proposal, which the whole world would then be able to evaluate, for better or worse.

To some extent, there was also an element of reasoning that perhaps a weak LCHR is

has developed since then. Nonetheless, at some point it becomes necessary to question whether this dialogue can be effective. Cynics suggest that President Taylor simply tells President Carter what he

wants to hear on subjects like human rights, accountability and transparency. Another critic says that "it's not

clear that the United States is doing anything to help the people of Liberia.

But the administration says that the United States is doing a great deal to help the people of Liberia.

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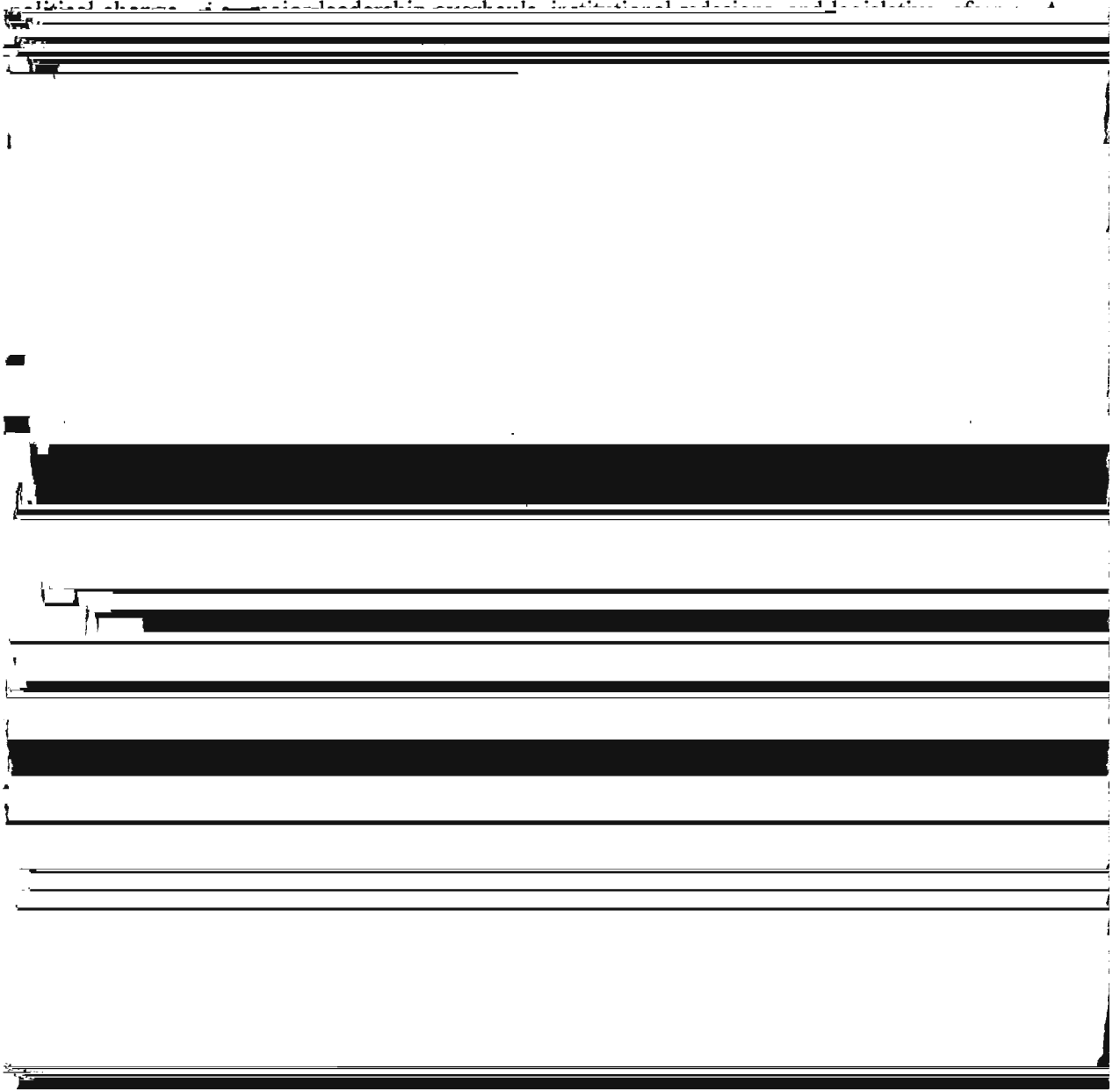
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a legal system, regulatory agencies, etc., and institutional support. Instead, a fully operating market

economy must go through a process of evolution whereby participant firms habituate themselves to a world in which they freely enter into contractual relationships, choose to develop and sell new products,

best efforts of civil society, international actors, and even certain participating officials. Therefore, it is important to consider the need to adjust for constraints when measuring the "influence" of an emerging civil society. Some of the desired structural, institutional and policy effects may emerge over the long term, but during the initial stages the results are likely to be more diffuse, ephemeral, and/or obscure. This is particularly the case with programming dedicated to grass-roots development: education, training, and other forms of community empowerment and mobilization take time to embed and diffuse.

This paper raises a deceptively simple question: what are appropriate measures of success for NGOs operating in especially challenging political contexts? A natural instinct is to focus on substantive



discuss at the outset, however, rapid, significant progress on these dimensions is probably unrealistic under those circumstances. Although most subscribe to this point of view, we question whether their apparent pragmatism translates into reasonable expectations of civil society. Even the most benign

the basic capacity of civil society and encouraging broader forms of popular mobilization. This approach offers only limited immediate rewards and therefore requires tremendous patience on the part of those

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