

Constructing Sovereignty in Crisis: A Constructivist Analysis of Liberia's Ebola Response

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Abstract

This article examines how Liberia established its sovereignty, legitimacy, and international identity during the Ebola crisis of 2014-2015. While many existing research focus on institutional weaknesses and material dependence, this study employs a constructivist perspective to highlight how ideational and normative factors influenced Liberia's response.

By conducting a discourse analysis of governmental communications, UN resolutions, international reports, and media coverage, the study explores how Liberia framed its crisis management, engaged with international partners, and presented itself as a legitimate state under global scrutiny. The findings indicate that Liberia's response was shaped not only by resource constraints but also by a conscious process of aligning with international norms, constructing its identity, and asserting its legitimacy. By analyzing Liberia's experience, this article contributes to discussions on global health governance, African statehood, and the relevance of Constructivist theory in international relations.

Keywords: Liberia; Ebola Crisis; Sovereignty and Legitimacy; Constructivism in International Relations; Global Health Governance

Introduction

The 2014-2015 Ebola Outbreak in West Africa was one of the most severe public health emergencies in recent history, resulting in over 11,000

deaths across Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. Beyond the immediate health crisis, the outbreak highlighted the vulnerabilities of fragile states and tested the resilience of both regional and global governance mechanism. The crisis garnered unprecedented international attention, leading the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2177 to declare for the first time that Ebola posed a threat to international peace and security in the context of a disease outbreak and the deployment of foreign aid and troops (United Nations Press Release, 2014).

The World Health Organization (hereinafter refer to as WHO), African Union (hereinafter refer to as AU), and numerous bilateral and multilateral partners launched emergency interventions, creating a complex governance environment in which affected states were compelled to both respond domestically and engage with international actors.

Within this broader regional crisis, Liberia stands out as a critical case. As a post-conflict state that is still rebuilding institutions after two civil wars, Liberia was widely viewed as one of the least prepared to manage a health emergency of this scale. Yet, despite profound institutional and resource constraints, Liberia's response eventually gained international recognition as a success story in crisis management.

Much of the existing literature explains African states' crisis governance primarily in material terms focusing on institutional weakness, financial dependence, or external intervention. While these factors are important, they do not fully capture the dynamics of how states like Liberia navigate crises. This study argues that ideational factors how sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity are framed and performed play a critical role in shaping crisis responses. A Constructivist lens allows us to see beyond capacity-based explanations and instead examine how Liberia actively constructed its role as a responsible state within the international community (Perry, 2015).

The contribution of this article is therefore twofold. Empirically, it provides a detailed account of Liberia's Ebola response, highlighting the interplay between domestic narratives of sovereignty and international expectations of legitimacy. Theoretically, it demonstrates the explanatory power of Constructivism in understanding state behavior during crises, showing that sovereignty and legitimacy are not fixed attributes but social constructs negotiated through discourse and practice. By analyzing Liberia's experience, this article contributes to discussions on norm diffusion, African statehood, and global health governance while offering insights into why states diverge in their engagement with international norms.

Research Question:

How did Liberia establish and demonstrate its sovereignty, legitimacy, and international identity during the Ebola crisis of 2014-2015, and what does this reveal about the influence of ideational factors on shaping state responses to global health emergencies?

Research Statement:

This study examines how Liberia managed the tension between its material challenges and the demonstration of legitimate statehood during the Ebola crisis of 2014-2015. Instead of viewing sovereignty as a fixed institutional capacity, this research adopts a Constructivist perspective to analyze how Liberia constructed its sovereignty, legitimacy, and international identity amidst the crisis. By investigating governmental communications, international reports, and global media narratives, the study argues that Liberia's response cannot be fully explained by external assistance or institutional weakness. Rather, it reflects a process of aligning norms, constructing identity, and seeking legitimacy within the international community. This research contributes to field of International Relations by highlighting the role of ideational factors in crisis governance and demonstrating the value of Constructivism in understanding how African states respond to global health emergencies.

Literature Review**Global Health Governance and the Ebola Crisis**

Global health governance has increasingly become a focus of study, examining how international organizations, states, and non-state actors interact to manage transnational health threats (Fidler, 2004; Harman, 2024). The 2014-2015 Ebola Outbreak in West Africa was a pivotal moment, prompting the United Nations Security Council to classify the epidemic as a threat to international peace and security. Scholars highlight that the crisis revealed significant weaknesses in the WHO response capacity (Moon et al. 2015) and emphasized the heavy dependence of fragile states on external interventions (Kamradt-Scott, 2015).

In the African context, analyses note the AU's unprecedented deployment of the AU Support to Ebola Outbreak in West Africa (ASEOWA), which marks a rise in regional health diplomacy (Andren, 2017). However, much of the existing literature mainly portrays affected states as passive recipients of aid, rather than active agents involved in defining their own responses. This perspective neglects how states like Liberia asserted their sovereignty and legitimacy during periods of acute vulnerability.

African Statehood, Sovereignty, and Crisis Governance

The Ebola crisis emerged in countries often described as weak or failed, with Liberia in particular, recovering from civil war and relying on international donors (Dalberto, 2020). Traditional approaches in African politics and international relations tend to explain crisis governance in terms of institutional weakness, capacity deficits, or external imposition (Rotberg, 2003; Chapham, 1996). However, these explanations risk portraying African states as fundamentally incapable and overlook how governments actively frame crises to negotiate their legitimacy.

Recent debate has shifted towards viewing African statehood as a performative and contested process (Englebert & Tull, 2008; Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009). Studies focusing on security crises, peacekeeping, and pandemics indicate that African governments use discourse, symbolism, and international engagement to project sovereignty beyond their actual capabilities (Williams & Hunt, 2024). In this context, Liberia's response to the Ebola outbreak serves as a crucial case study for examining how post-conflict state aimed to reaffirm its authority and enhance its international standing during a health emergency.

Constructivism, Norm Diffusion, and the Politics of Sovereignty

Constructivist International Relations theory emphasizes that sovereignty and legitimacy are not fixed attributes; rather, they are socially constructed through norms, discourse, and practices (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore 1996; Adler, 1997). Research on norm diffusion further illustrates how international expectations shape state behavior not only through coercion or material incentives but also through processes of persuasion, localization, and identity formation (Checkel, 1999). In the realm of global health governance, constructivist scholars argue that pandemics are as much political and normative crises as they are biological ones (Taylor, 2021). States are required to demonstrate responsibility, transparency, and adherence to international norms to gain legitimacy and mobilize support. The Ebola crisis serves as an empirical case study to examine how a fragile states like Liberia engaged in "sovereignty performance" (Sending, 2015) by aligning its actions with international norms while framing them as legitimate within its domestic context.

Hypothesis Formulation and Theoretical Framework: Hypothesis Formulation

This study is guided by the following central hypothesis:

H1: Liberia's Ebola response was shaped less by material capacity constraints and more by Constructivist mechanisms of sovereignty

performance, norm alignment, and legitimacy-seeking in the international arena.

H1a: Liberia framed its crisis management discourse to highlight sovereignty and responsible statehood, despite relying on external actors.

H1b: Liberia strategically aligned itself with international health governance norms (such as transparency, cooperation, and responsibility) to enhance its international legitimacy and gain support.

These hypotheses challenge materialist explanations that view governance solely through the lens of capacity and dependency. Instead, they suggest that ideational and normative factors were equally important.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Constructivist International Relations theory, which emphasizes that sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity are socially constructed through discourse, norms, and practices, rather than being fixed material attributes (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore, 1996).

Three theoretical strands are particularly relevant:

1. Sovereignty as Performance:

Following the work of Sending (2015), sovereignty is understood not just as a legal status but as something that is enacted through specific practices and discourse. States, especially those labeled as fragile, must “perform” their sovereignty to both domestic and international audiences. Liberia’s response to the Ebola crisis offers a valuable case study for examining these performances under conditions of crisis.

2. Norm Diffusion and Localization

Constructivist scholars underscore how international norms spread through processes of persuasion, adaptation, and localization (Checkel, 1999). Liberia’s adoption of international health governance norms during the Ebola outbreak can be viewed as a process of norm localization, which aligns global expectations with domestic narratives of authority.

3. Legitimacy and Identity Construction

Crisis governance involves projecting a specific identity to international audiences. States that are facing vulnerabilities can enhance their legitimacy by presenting themselves as responsible actors aligned with global norms (Taylor, 2021). The case of Liberia illustrates how a post-conflict state can use a health crisis to renegotiate its international identity.

Framework Summary

This study adopts a Constructivist approach, moving beyond capacity-based explanations for Liberia’s response to the Ebola crisis. It conceptualizes crisis governance as a platform for demonstrating sovereignty, negotiating norms, and constructing legitimacy. This theoretical

perspective enables an analysis of how Liberia actively shaped the interpretation of its response, rather than merely viewing it as a passive recipient of external aid.

Data and Methodology

This section outlines the data sources, sample construction, variable descriptions, and empirical approach used in this study to investigate how Liberia constructed its sovereignty, legitimacy, and international identity during the Ebola crisis of 2014-2015. A qualitative, interpretive methodology is employed, utilizing secondary data sources to analyze the interaction between state behavior, global norms, and post-conflict institutional capacity. This approach emphasizes discourse analysis to examine how Liberia performed sovereignty and negotiated legitimacy in a crisis context.

Data and Sample Construction

Data sources:

The data for this study derived from secondary sources, including official governmental communications, international resolutions, media coverage, and peer-reviewed academic publications. The central sources are:

1. Governmental Communications and Speeches:

Presidential speeches by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: Focus on themes of national unity, resilience, and calls for international cooperation during the Ebola crisis (Liberian Embassy in the U.S., 2014)

Ministry of Health Communications: Includes press releases, situational reports, and directives that detail policy decisions, emergency measures, and strategies for community engagement.

2. International Resolutions and Reports:

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2177 (2014): Establishes the international legal and normative framework for interventions in countries affected by Ebola.

World Health Organization (WHO) Reports: Document the epidemic data, evaluate responses, and provide normative recommendations for managing epidemics.

United Nations Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) Reports: Contain data on the coordination of international assistance, development efforts, and mechanisms for local collaboration.

Media coverage and International Observations:

News Outlets (e.g., the Times, *BBC Africa News*): Report on Liberia's Ebola response, leadership actions, and global perspectives.

Press Releases and Interviews: Conducted with humanitarian organizations and foreign aid agencies involved in Liberia (e.g., United National Security Council Resolution 2177; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016).

Academic Journals and Publications: Peer-Reviewed Articles: Discuss the Ebola response, post-conflict governance frameworks, and global governance frameworks (e.g., Andren, R. 2017 , Baker, A. 2014; Brooks, M. 2015; Moon, S., et al.; Wilkinson, A., & Fairhead, J. 2016).

Constructivist Literature: Examine states identity, sovereignty, and legitimacy (e.g., Checkel, 1999; Wendt, 1992; Biersteker & Weber, 1996; Sending, O. J., 2015).

Sample Construction

The sample includes the following component:

Temporal Scope: March 2014-June 2015, capturing the peak of the Ebola outbreak in Liberia.

Data Type: Discourse and narrative data obtained from speeches, reports, and media coverage; official documentation of interventions and policies; as well as peer-reviewed analyses.

Selection Criteria: Sources were chosen based on their relevance to Liberia's engagement with international norms, and their demonstration of legitimacy and the construction of sovereignty. Only sources providing evidence of Liberia's interaction with domestic and international actors were included.

Table 1: Variable Descriptions

Variable	Description	Operationalization
Sovereignty	The capacity of the Liberian state to exercise authority and manage the Ebola crisis.	Measured by degree of national control over emergency response, coordination with international actors, and performance of leadership in crisis management.
Legitimacy	Recognition and acceptance of the government by domestic and international actors.	Assessed through public communication, community engagement strategies, international praise, and media framing.
Identity	Strategic self-representation Liberia as a responsible, cooperative post-conflict state.	Evaluated through discourse analysis of speeches, UN statements, and media narratives
Norm Alignment	Degree to which Liberia's policies and actions conformed to international health governance standards.	Measured by adoption of WHO guidelines, compliance with UN resolutions, and collaboration with NGOs and donor agencies.

Notes: the variables, descriptions, and operationalization strategies in this table are derived from constructivist approaches to understanding

sovereignty and legitimacy in crisis governance (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore, 1996). The empirical indicators are informed by previous studies on studies on state responses to global health emergencies (Moon et al. 2015; Kamradt-Scott, 2015) and are specifically contextualized to Liberia's experience with Ebola. This context is established through an analysis of governmental communications, UN Security Council resolutions, WHO guidelines, and international media reports.

Empirical Approach:

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive approach, using discourse analysis to examine three key areas:

- How Liberia framed Ebola as a transnational threat and communicated norms of responsibility and cooperation.
- How state identity and sovereignty were enacted through alignment with international expectations.
- How domestic legitimacy was reinforced through engagement with local leaders, civil society, and community structures.

This methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of the ideational and normative dimensions of Liberia's crisis response. It emphasizes how social interactions, leadership strategies, and global norms intersected to shape both domestic and international perceptions of state. By linking qualitative evidence with constructivist theory, the study illustrates how post-conflict states actively construct their sovereignty and identity under conditions of global pressure and local vulnerability.

Performing Sovereignty

A central paradox in Liberia's response to the Ebola crisis was the simultaneous assertion of sovereignty and dependence on international assistance. From a Constructivist perspective, sovereignty is not a fixed resource but a performance enacted through discourse, practices, and symbolic acts (Holm & Sending, 2018). During the Ebola crisis, the Liberian government needed to demonstrate both domestic authority and international responsibility amid acute vulnerability.

Asserting Control Despite International Intervention

Although the international community, led by the United States, and various humanitarian organizations, played a crucial role in providing resources, the Liberian government framed itself as the primary coordinator of the national response. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf consistently emphasized that external actors were "partners" rather than "replacements" for national authority. The establishment of the National Ebola Task Force,

chaired by the President, symbolically positioned the Liberian state at the center of decision-making (Embassy of the Republic of Liberia, U.S., 2014). By doing this, Liberia projected its sovereignty through ownership of the coordination process, despite its reliance on foreign expertise and aid. This reflects what Constructivist refer to as performance of statehood the necessity to be perceived as acting like a responsible sovereign, even when material capabilities are limited.

Framing Ebola as both a National and Global Threat

Liberia effectively framed the Ebola outbreak as both national crisis and a global security threat (WHO, 2015). The government appealed to the United Nations, WHO, and AU, emphasizing that the virus could destabilize international order if not contained. This approach led UN Security Council Resolution 2177 (2014), which recognized Ebola as a threat to peace and security an unprecedented acknowledgement for a health crisis.

By elevating the issue of Ebola to a global concern, Liberia achieved two main objectives:

1. Mobilizing international resources and gaining legitimacy: presenting itself as a cooperative member of the international community.
2. Reinforcing its sovereignty: demonstrating that it could speak on behalf of its people while influencing international narratives,

By this way, the Liberian government transformed its vulnerability into an opportunity for building legitimacy, using the crisis to reaffirm its sovereignty within the international system.

Negotiating Legitimacy

Sovereignty is established through the assertion of control, while legitimacy is built through recognition by both domestic and international audiences (Brahm, 2004; Regenerative Economics Textbook, 2024-2025). During the Ebola crisis, the government of Liberia aimed not only to manage the epidemic but also to demonstrate that it was a credible and responsible actor deserving of trust. Constructivist theories emphasize that legitimacy is not inherent; rather, it is constructed through norms and practices (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore 1996; Adler, 1997).

Transparency and Responsibility

One way Liberia sought to establish legitimacy was by prioritizing transparency in its reporting and communications. The government conducted daily press brings, issued public updates, and made international appeals, which helped portray it as open and accountable (BBC News Africa, 2014). President Sirleaf frequently asserted that Liberia has “nothing to

hide,” signaling compliance with global health norms related to transparency. This approach contrasted sharply with previous crisis where African governments faced accusations of concealment and denial, positioning Liberia as a nation that had learned from its tumultuous past.

Alignment with International Norms

Additionally, Liberia actively aligned itself with international norms of cooperation and responsibility. The government collaborated closely with international organizations (WHO, 2023; CDC, 2016; UNMEER). Instead of resisting external involvement, which could be viewed as a violation of sovereignty, Liberia framed its partnerships as consistent with responsible statehood. This strategic effort to be seen as a cooperative partner helped the country earn international recognition and resources.

Managing Domestic and International Audiences

Negotiating legitimacy involved balancing the expectations of different audiences. Domestically, the government needed to convince citizens that it was in control and capable of ensuring their safety. Internationally, it had to assure partners that aid would be managed effectively and that there were political justifications for its use. The establishment of the Incident Management System (IMS), which included both Liberian officials and international experts, exemplified this dual legitimacy. It reassured the domestic audience about the government’s leadership while demonstrating accountability to the international community.

Legitimacy Beyond the Crisis

The process of negotiating legitimacy during the Ebola crisis also had lasting effects. It allowed Liberia to reposition itself on the global stage as a post-conflict state able to act responsibly under pressure. This newfound legitimacy was not merely symbolic; it led to renewed confidence from donors, increased diplomatic engagement, and a rebranding of Liberia’s international identity, moving beyond perceptions of fragility (Cakourous et al, 2024).

Constructing International Identity

In Liberia’s response to the Ebola crisis, two immediate priorities were asserting sovereignty and negotiating legitimacy. However, these actions also contributed to a larger project of constructing international identity. Constructivist IR theory emphasizes that identity is relational- states define themselves through interactions with others, aligning with norms, roles, and expectations within the international community (Wendt, 1992).

The Ebola crisis became a responsible, post-conflict state capable of engaging with the global community.

From Fragile State to Responsible Actor

Before the Ebola crisis, Liberia was often depicted in international discourse as a fragile or failed state emerging from civil conflict. The crisis presented an opportunity to reshape this narrative (Marmon, 2015). By actively engaging with international partners, Liberia positioned itself not as a passive recipient of aid but as an active participant in global emergency. This rebranding marked a significant shift from dependency to responsibility, highlighting Liberia's willingness to share the burdens alongside the international community.

Role Performance in Global Health Governance

The construction of identity was also evident in Liberia's performance in global health governance. By framing the Ebola outbreak as both national and international security threat, Liberia inserted itself into discussions typically dominated by larger or more institutionalized states. Its cooperation with the African Union Support to Ebola Outbreak in West Africa (ASEOWA) mission symbolized regional solidarity, while appeals to the UN Security Council elevated Liberia's voice on the global stage. In this way, Liberia constructed its identity as both a responsible member of the global community.

Symbolic Leadership and Moral Authority

In addition to policy efforts, Liberia's leadership under President Sirleaf engaged in symbolic actions that conveyed moral authority. Her speeches often emphasized themes of resilience, sacrifice, and solidarity (Baker, 2014), portraying Liberia not merely as a victim of disease, but as a courageous nation fighting for the greater good of humanity. This moral framing resonated on an international level, enhancing Liberia's identity as a nation whose struggles held global significance.

Lasting Effects on International Standing

The construction of Liberia's international identity during the Ebola crisis had enduring consequences. The situation positioned Liberia as a case study in resilience and cooperation, leading to increased diplomatic visibility. While material vulnerabilities persisted, Liberia's strategic alignment with global norms improved its reputation and legitimacy within international institutions. This indicates that even countries with limited resources can reshape their identities by tactically utilizing crises as opportunities for aligning with norms and constructing a positive image.

Key Analysis

As Africa's first democratically elected female president, Sirleaf's personal background lent additional symbolic strength to Liberia's international image. Her leadership became a vital conduit for engaging in global discussions surrounding humanitarian response, post-conflict recovery, and global health governance. This underscores how state identity, particularly in times of crisis, is intricately linked to the public image and communicative choices of national leaders.

In this context, Sirleaf acted as a "norm interpretation," helping to internalize global standards through her public messaging and diplomacy. By framing the Ebola crisis as a global humanitarian issue, she repositioned Liberia as a resilient and responsible nation rather than a failing state. This highlights how leadership involves not only decision-making but also the strategic use of narratives to shape perceptions.

In evaluating Liberia's Ebola response, the image of Leadership is crucial, linking individual agency with larger social and political structures, demonstrating how Leaders influenced by their normative contexts.

Discussion and Implications

This research reveals that Liberia's response to the Ebola outbreak cannot be understood solely in terms of material capacity. Instead, it highlights how sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity are socially constructed in moments of acute crisis. By foregrounding transparency, cooperation, and responsibility, Liberia performed sovereignty in ways that rebranded it from a fragile post-conflict state to a responsible global actor.

Several key implications arise from this analysis:

1. **State-Level Divergence:** Liberia's proactive acceptance of global health norms stands in contrast to other West African countries that initially resisted external assistance (Wilkinson & Fairhead, 2016). This divergence indicates that domestic interpretations, rather than merely institutional weaknesses, drive crisis responses.
2. **Constructivist vs. Capacity-Based Explanations:** While capacity-based explanations highlight dependency and fragility, a constructivist approach illustrates that even materially weak states can exercise agency through discourse and norm entrepreneurship.
3. **AU Governance:** The African Union's role was not only material, through initiatives like ASEOWA, but also symbolic, offering Liberia a platform to express solidarity and accountability. This indicates that the effectiveness of AU governance relies on both material support and ideational legitimacy.
4. **Global Crisis Management:** Fragile states should not be viewed merely as passive recipients of aid; they can also act as norm

entrepreneurs, influencing global governance discussions. Liberia's direct appeals to the UN Security Council exemplify this proactive role.

5. **Theoretical Contribution:** The case of Liberia supports the Constructivist assertion that sovereignty and legitimacy are relational and performative. This challenges the static or purely materialist interpretations of African statehood during periods of crisis.

Conclusion

This study examined how Liberia's response to the 2014-2015 Ebola crisis through a Constructivist lens, highlighting how concepts of sovereignty, legitimacy, and international identity were actively constructed during a period of acute vulnerability. By analyzing governmental communications, UN resolutions, media coverage, and international reports, the study demonstrates that Liberia's responses was shaped not only by material constraints and institutional weaknesses but also by a deliberate alignment with global norms and the performance of statehood.

Summary of Findings

Liberia's response to the Ebola outbreak illustrates that fragile states can assert sovereignty and negotiate legitimacy even amid significant international intervention. Key findings include:

1. Liberia framed the Ebola outbreak as both a national and global threat, which facilitated international cooperation while maintaining claims to authority.
2. By aligning its discourse with the expectations of the AU and the UN, Liberia projected responsible statehood and reaffirmed its international identity.
3. The variation in responses among African states is influenced more by how governments interpret and enact sovereignty in relation to external norms than by mere capacity or resources.

Contribution to Theory

This research emphasizes the explanatory power of Constructivist approaches in understanding how African states behave during crises. It shows that sovereignty and legitimacy are performative and socially constructed concepts, rather than fixed characteristics determined solely by institutional or material factors. By focusing on ideational processes, this research challenges traditional narratives that depict African states primarily as passive recipients of international aid.

Policy Implications

The findings have important implications for the AU and global crisis governance:

1. International and regional actors much recognize the significant role that ideational and narrative dynamics play when engaging with fragile states.
2. Successful interventions should be sensitive to how states define their sovereignty and legitimacy, rather than relying solely on capacity-building or resource allocation.
3. The AU's future crisis management initiatives should leverage discourse, align norms, and enhance local legitimacy to improve effectiveness among its member states.

Directions for Future Research

To gain deeper insights into the varying responses of African states, future research should conduct comparative analyses with other Ebola-affected countries, such as Sierra Leone and Guinea. These studies could investigate the interplay of historical legacies, domestic narratives, and the adoption of norms in shaping crisis governance, creating a broader framework for understanding the performance of African states under international scrutiny.

Conclusion

Liberia's response to the Ebola crisis highlights the significance of ideational factors in crisis governance. A Constructivist analysis reveals that even states with limited material resources can assert their sovereignty, negotiate legitimacy, and influence international norms. This offers valuable lessons for both regional and global actors addressing health and security crises.

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