Bringers of light:
performing resource revenue transparency in Liberia

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Abstract

Initiatives designed to increase transparency have become a tool for improving governance and fighting corruption in the natural resource sector. The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) is an international organisation that administers a voluntary standard for natural resource revenue transparency. In line with liberal democratic ideals, EITI aims to empower citizens through the dissemination of information supporting governance improvements, public scrutiny and accountability in the sharing of benefits from resource extraction. Adopting a critical lens to transparency, the article examines EITI's efforts to disseminate natural resource revenue data in rural Liberia. By focusing on how transparency is performed through dissemination workshops, the article creates a nuanced understanding of transparency by analysing how it is operationalised and practiced in encounters with people in areas where resource extraction takes place. The paper begins with an overview of relevant research and the conceptual framing of the study focusing on the performance *in* and *of* transparency and continues with a discussion of EITI internationally and in Liberia. Then follows a discussion of the ethnographic approach – travelling with the Liberian EITI-team on their dissemination trip. Through the analysis the article enables an understanding of the workings of transparency by examining how practitioners perform transparency through the performance *in* the workshops: the structure and orchestration of the workshops; and the performance *of* transparency by understanding the ways in which the workshops become spectacles that help to legitimise, rationalise and camouflage the fragmented and contradictory realities of extractive industries and their implications for people.

Keywords: Transparency; EITI; Liberia; performativity; natural resources; governance

1.0 Introduction

Since its announcement at the World Summit for Sustainable Development in 2002, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) has emerged as a key institution within international natural resource governance policy, now boasting over 50 member countries. EITI's purpose is to establish itself as a global standard for natural resource governance and revenue transparency. The initiative's rise reflects a more general advance of neoliberal governance agendas in the post-cold war era (Haufler, 2010). Structural changes associated with the globalization of trade and capital flows, the hegemony of free market economic policy and the pre-eminence of the liberal democratic model has seen a widespread re-engineering of the state and the geographic reorganization of regulatory duties across scales – linking to more localised participatory processes and international governance regimes (Jessop, 2013; Peck, 2002; Swyngedouw, 2005). In this context, transparency has become a celebrated policy with profound impacts for nation states and local communities and has been promoted as an important measure supporting good governance and combatting the 'natural resource curse' (Collier, 2008; Karl, 2007; Le Billon, 2006; Ross, 2012; Stiglitz, 2007). By increasing openness and information flows, transparency is often seen as important for democratic accountability and complementing multistakeholder governance initiatives that increasingly displace the traditional regulatory duties of the state and privilege an emerging class of non-state governance actors (Swyngedouw, 2005). The coordinated promotion of transparency has thus enrolled the support of a broad array of actors with often contradictory strategic and ideological agendas (Haufler, 2010). EITI gained from the backing of International Finance Institutions, Western governments, multinational oil and mining

companies, activist organizations and academic researchers helping to initiate and promote EITI internationally and within countries (Epremian et al., 2016; Gillies, 2010; Haufler, 2010).

While transparency research is often conducted with little distance to transparency policy (Alloa, 2018), in this article, we join an alternative critical perspective, viewing transparency as a performative and paradoxical phenomenon (Albu and Flyverbom, 2016; Strathern, 2000a) and explore how transparency is operationalised through practices within 'policy implementation'. In order to contribute towards insights about what transparency means and how it operates, we explore spaces formed through the encounter between transparency practitioners and citizens. We approach the task through an ethnographic study of a series of information workshops carried out by EITI in Liberia. The workshops represent how transparency has been made operational, is performed, and thus reveal some of "the 'real' workings of the institution" and the policy of transparency (Strathern, 2000b, p. 314). Analysing how information dissemination is performed enables us to unpack ways in which transparency practitioners make their institution work and survive in their particular institutional, political and ideological context. The article is a contribution to understanding how transparency can be made to operate for garnering recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of 'stakeholders' and 'partners' by performing to the vested interests of its various audiences. In addition, we show how the enactment of transparency can serve to depoliticise political processes by superimposing its conceptual abstractions over the lived experiences of people and the material reality of extractive industries.

In the following section, we introduce a conceptual framing for the study, present two broad approaches to transparency research and an analytical framework for studying transparency as performance. We then describe the institutional and political context for the dissemination workshops analysed in the paper, presenting the global EITI project and its translation into a national governance institution in post-war Liberia, before introducing the reports that were the subject of the dissemination exercise. This section is followed by a description of our ethnographic approach before we analyse EITI's dissemination workshops. In light of the account presented, the article concludes with a discussion on how the analysis helps to identify meanings and workings of transparency expressed through its practice in Liberia.

2.0 Transparency as governance and performative object

Transparency represents a longstanding ideal of western political and knowledge philosophy and is often associated with the classical works of Emmanuel Kant, Jean Jacque Rousseau and Jeremy Bentham (Baume, 2011; Birchall, 2012; Hood, 2006). As a concept, transparency stands at the apex of the scientific and political agendas of the enlightenment with its emphasis on reason and truth, and values of clarity and openness as moral and ethical concerns (Hansen et al., 2015). Contemporary transparency policy represents a specific instrumental manifestation of these ideas (Heald, 2006), emerging in the broader context of technological advancements in global communication giving birth to an 'information age' and widespread optimism around the radical democratising potential of the internet (Birchall, 2014; Mol, 2006). This context has seen the proliferation of transparency policies offering information as the solution to a host of regulatory and political problems supporting liberal goals

of market efficiency, bureaucratic effectiveness, democratic accountability and good governance (Gupta and Mason, 2014). This instrumentalisation of transparency can be understood as 'governance by disclosure' (Gupta, 2008): "public and private governance initiatives that employ targeted disclosure of information as a way to evaluate and/or steer the behaviour of selected actors" (Gupta and Mason, 2014, p. 6).

Below, we expand further on instrumental transparency, presenting an understanding of some of the conceptual and ideological commitments of governance by disclosure before turning our attention to two broad approaches to its study in the literature.

2.1 Transparency's abstract promise

Transparency is claimed to benefit democratic governance by empowering citizens to scrutinize and hold powerful state- and private actors to account. Instrumental conceptions commonly borrow economistic rational choice models depicting dealings between actors as principal–agent relationships. Principal-agent models were originally used to depict economic relations between individuals in which relative access to information decides a principal's ability to conduct transactions, enforce contractual obligations, and set appropriate incentives to the agent (see Moe, 1984; Stiglitz, 1989). According to this approach, reducing information asymmetries and preventing secrecy are key to accountability and better governance by enabling citizens to enforce the democratic (social) contract (Besley et al., 2002; Stiglitz, 1999).

This logic underpins academic support for transparency as a policy solution to corruption and poor natural resource governance in the resource curse literature (e.g. Collier, 2011; Karl, 2007; Ross, 2012). The resource curse itself is often understood – although not always explicitly – as a principal-agent problem whereby citizens, left in the dark regarding the quantity and use of abundant resource revenues flowing to the government are prevented from scrutinizing and making informed demands on government spending and allowing a (rational) inclination to corruption, rent-seeking and poor governance to go unchecked by the democratic process (Karl, 2007; Ross, 2012).

The perspective outlined above informs mainstream liberal policy agendas, such as EITI. It understands transparency's facility to bring about change according to a causal chain narrative whereby a transparency initiatives precipitate informed public debate and scrutiny, empowering citizens to hold government to account resulting in improved governance (for a more detailed discussion see Epremian et al., 2016; Gillies and Heuty, 2011; Lujala and Epremian, 2017).

The ever-increasing preoccupation with transparency in policy circles has meant that the topic has received considerable attention as a research agenda. This is discussed in more detail below.

2.2 Transparency's empirical limits

Research predominantly shows that enthusiasm for transparency is rarely matched by empirical evidence showing its utility and effectiveness. Two important findings predominate: 1) that while transparency initiatives seem in some cases to have measurable impact on project goals, the general picture is at best inconclusive with

frequent examples of disclosure initiatives failing to live up to their promise (Kosack and Fung, 2014; Lujala and Epremian, 2017); and, 2) that the impact of transparency frequently has paradoxical effects causing reactive behavior potentially leading to more, rather than less, opaque governance and bureaucratic processes (Bannister and Connolly, 2011; Heald, 2006; Larsson, 1998; Prat, 2006; Roberts, 2006).

Most studies on extractive sector transparency have focused on EITI with much of this research based on large N cross-country studies that investigate the link between EITI membership and the goals of transparency on a variety of economic and governance indicators, such as corruption (e.g. Corrigan, 2014; David-Barrett and Okamura, 2016; Harnack et al., 2016; Kasekende et al., 2016; Kolstad and Wiig, 2009; Papyrakis et al., 2017; Sovacool et al., 2016). While some studies offer some correlation between EITI membership and reduced corruption (Corrigan, 2014; Papyrakis et al., 2017), evidence for a causal link is weak. Parallel to this literature are a bulk of qualitative case studies focused on EITI implementation in specific countries generally based on stakeholder interviews (e.g. Andrews, 2016; O'Sullivan, 2013; Öge, 2014; Scanteam et al., 2011; Shaxson, 2009; Sovacool and Andrews, 2015; Van Alstine, 2014; Wilson and Van Alstine, 2014). The overwhelming consensus in both groups is that there is little evidence that EITI achieves its developmental goals such as improving governance in implementing countries (see Rustad et al., 2017 for a detailed overview of the research).

Despite exceptions (e.g. Bebbington et al., 2016; Bracking, 2009), much of the research on EITI and transparency more generally has been conducted according to what Gupta and Mason call the "dominant liberal institutionalist perspective on the role of information and power" (2014, p. 8). While often

7

contributing valuable insights into the impacts, implementation and limitations of transparency schemes, the bulk of transparency research has, to varying degrees, been limited by an uncritical view of transparency's normativity and underlying moral and epistemological assumptions – often based in principal-agent thinking (Alloa, 2018; Gupta and Mason, 2014): research on transparency more often than not "is research through transparency and not about transparency" (Alloa, 2018, p. 31 emphasis in original).

Consequently, transparency's failure to live up to its promise is often attributed to issues of poor policy design and implementation, the difficulty in institutionalizing practices – i.e. not enough effective transparency. Other explanations indicate the role of 'challenging contexts' that hamper implementation and make the intermediary assumptions in transparency's causal chain narrative problematic (Epremian et al., 2016; Kosack and Fung, 2014). While a large portion of these studies often share a common framework and assumptions with the transparency-policy agenda, the observation of transparency's sometimes paradoxical effects has formed the basis for a turn towards more critical research to which we now turn.

2.3 Transparency as Object

A number of scholars are now critically examining the contemporary concept of transparency itself by questioning the binary opposition between transparency and secrecy highlighting transparency's ability to hide as well as illuminate material processes (Albu and Flyverbom, 2016; Bennington, 2011; Birchall, 2015; Fenster, 2015; Flyverbom, 2016). This body of work criticises a view of disclosure as the

neutral, 'noiseless' transmission of information from government, in which meaning is self-evident and decipherable, to a public equipped to decode and act on its content (Fenster, 2015). The research shows how transparency policies can depoliticise the public sphere by redefining democratic accountability as a technical accounting puzzle (Birchall, 2015), or by shifting focus from political issues to the provision of information about them (Dean, 2002). Crucially, this body of critical research has shown that transparency has important material consequences by legitimising policy, strategic representations, and practices. Transparency is ultimately constituted through practices in a field where different actors, agendas, and ideological commitments come together to perform transparency in different settings (Albu and Flyverbom, 2016; Mol, 2014; Strathern, 2000b).

2.4 Performing transparency – an analytical framework

From the above review, we understand the performance of transparency as an assemblage of different powers, norms, interests and actors that come together to make transparency a dominant discourse. Transparency policy in this context emerges as it is performed through a process of translation and the constitution of meaning designed to legitimise and garner recognition for specific projects and policies (Mosse and Lewis, 2006).

In analysing transparency as performance, we take inspiration from a small but established literature on performative governance (see Futrell, 1999; Hajer, 2006), to which we seek to contribute through an analytical framework that takes the performance of transparency as it starting point. Performance itself can be understood in a Goffmanesque way – through an emphasis on the agency of

practitioners, their strategic use of dramaturgical devices and staged practices that can be described through theatrical metaphors (Turnhout et al., 2010).

In developing an analytical framework, MacDonald (2010) employs three analytic devices of 'structure', 'orchestration' and 'spectacle' to study performance within formalised disciplining spaces of encounter, such as meetings or workshops. Inspired by MacDonald and borrowing from Spira's (1999) distinction between performance *in* and performance *of*, we analyse Liberia EITI's dissemination workshops as performing transparency simultaneously to and with different audiences and with multiple outcomes. Performance *in* refers to the way facilitators carry out workshops: the design, planning, presentation, orchestration and interaction with the immediate audience – the workshop attendees. This is about the dynamic on-site encounter, the real-time performance that is internal to and constitutive of the event.

Performance *of* refers, in contrast, to the way workshops exist as signifying objects marking that transparency is being practiced. Here, the act of dissemination has meaning for an audience that is present, but also for distant audiences through the reporting of events (Spira, 1999). Performance *of* may then be understood as 'spectacle'. In MacDonald's (2010) understanding, based loosely on Guy Debord's (1967/1995), 'spectacle' is an instrument in processes of ideological and material domination, conditioning people to be passive observers, imposing a sense of unity onto situations of fragmentation and isolation.

Through this framework, we enable an analysis of how power is manifested in the institutional norms, networks and scripts that guide and set limits to performance in accordance with acceptable ideological and discursive frameworks (Ferguson,

1994; Mosse and Lewis, 2006). Performance *of* therefore refers to the way discourses are actively mobilised and narratives strategically deployed within schemes of orchestration, but crucially also out of necessity as responses to institutional and political constraints experienced by practitioners (Mosse, 2005). Before moving on to describe our methodology and present our analysis, we will introduce the transparency project of EITI and its adoption in Liberia.

3.0 The transparency project: Liberia and the EITI

EITI was set up in 2003 as an initiative of international civil society groups supported by governments, the World Bank and companies. Today, national EITIs are governed on a tri-partite basis by a Multi-Stakeholder Steering Group (MSG) bringing together representatives of government, companies and civil society to oversee the work of a Secretariat that carries out the day-to-day work implementing the international EITI standard (EITI, 2013). This replicates the governance structure at the international level where a similarly composed board adjudicates over country validation and oversees the work of the International EITI Secretariat in coordinating membership and implementation by member countries. Although not formally represented as an EITI stakeholder on national and international MSGs, the support of donor organisations, such as the World Bank, plays a key role in the way the initiative operates.

While the overarching aim subscribed to EITI is to improve governance and reduce corruption through increased public scrutiny and accountability of extractive sector revenues, EITI also proposes that membership supports public trust and positive perceptions of government and companies. EITI explicitly markets membership to governments as a way of accessing aid and investment by improving

the country's reputation with donors and investors. Similarly, EITI is presented as enabling companies to demonstrate positive contributions to host societies and helping to quell tensions with local populations (EITI, n.d.). While the win-win narrative allows distinct rationales to coexist in the abstract realm of global policy, EITI's national and local application presents further challenges to maintaining coherent representations and the initiative's unity of purpose.

3.1 Post-conflict governance and natural resources in Liberia

In Liberia, the EITI began in late 2006 as a World Bank project within a broader set of governance reforms forced through by donors in the post-war period and based on its history of natural resource dependence and violent conflict. Since the country's founding in the 19th century, natural resource dependence has been a historically defining feature of the Liberian economy and political life. The emergence of a concession based export economy dominated by foreign capital was reinforced with the expansion of large-scale mining in the mid-20th century and later timber concessions from the 1980s.

Resources were also an important factor to the more immediate context for the present study as a crucial source of funds bankrolling warring parties during two periods of civil war between 1989 – 1996 and 1999 – 2003 (Global Witness, 2001; UN Panel of Experts, 2001). As a result, Liberia is often presented as an archetypal victim of the resource curse and 'conflict resources' – a designation that eventually prompted UN Security Council sanctions on the trade of diamonds and timber with the West African country.

The end of the conflict in 2003 and the democratic transition culminating in the election of Ellen Johnson Sirlief in 2005 paved the way for the eventual lifting of sanctions and an intensified peacebuilding agenda in which donors took an unusually hands-on approach in forcefully steering the country's post-war development trajectory (Bøås, 2009). The Liberia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (LEITI) emerged together with other initiatives parallel to a growth strategy focussed on reinvigorating the natural resources sectors under a new economic and political governance regime seen as essential to ensuring that the country, this time, benefitted from its resources and avoided a return to conflict (World Bank, 2015).These technocratic reforms, while enthusiastically implemented by the Liberian government, failed to address longstanding modalities of Liberia's political economy (Solà-Martín, 2011) often driven by informal networks of association and elite exploitation of state resources (Bøås and Utas, 2014; Utas, 2012, 2008). In practice, the liberal peacebuilding agenda of governance initiatives and the renewal of formal representative democracy have met a context that privileges patronage networks and "big man" politics (see Daloz, 2003; Utas, 2012, 2008). Here, norms oblige deference, rather than calling to account, in dealings with public officials and politicians. The ideal of accountability is further hampered by the nature of the highly centralised Liberian state in which direct presidential appointment guarantees legitimacy to all levels of officials (Sawyer, 2005) who may in addition have accrued added status through their war records in one of the continent's most brutal conflicts. The idea of a new era in which the government ensured that people benefitted from the country's resources became greatly discredited by the failure of various revenue sharing arrangements set up since the end of the war (UN. Panel of Experts, 2013).

Liberia's post-conflict economic strategy of prioritising foreign investment in mining, agricultural concessions and offshore oil (Liberia PRSP, 2008), while resulting in rapid growth did nothing to change Liberia's status as one of the most resource dependent countries in the world. In addition, the growth strategy's relative continuity with Liberia's past model also meant that the country's fundamental economic and political structures remained in place (Beevers, 2015; Solà-Martín, 2011).

The structure of government revenues varies according to sector and type of concession, but involves a mix of production and export taxes, land rental fees, and signing bonuses. All the resource sectors have employed some form of benefit-sharing arrangement ostensibly designed to transfer revenues to areas where resources are extracted – both at the county and community level.

In reality, however, fieldwork showed that such provisions have failed to deliver the benefits promised to people living in resource producing areas. The timber sector's National Benefit Sharing Trust Fund has never been operational, while the County Social Development Funds – paid into by mining and agricultural companies – have also been subject to pervasive mismanagement and irregularities according to a number of General Auditing Commission reports. In addition, initial plans to use 20% from the funds to compensate communities affected by company operations have been abandoned, with lawmakers using their influence over the allocation process to reinforce their local standing.

The lack of local benefits from resource investments, including the failure of companies to employ local people, has become one of a number of issues contributing to heightened levels of conflict around concessions. The other major

14

source of tension has been conflict over land caused by the increasing rate of

government allocation of new concessions and the expansion of existing company

operations, often through corrupt and fraudulent practices (Global Witness et al.,

2012; Special Independent Investigating Body, 2012; UN Security Council Panel of

Experts, 2013).

3.2 From global policy to national institution-building in Liberia

Liberia has become both an exemplary and an exceptional case for

understanding transparency initiatives. Due to the role played by natural resources in

the conflict, EITI was incorporated into the broader donor-led peace-building project

and was positioned as one of a number of a key governance safeguards put in place

since the end of the war to avoid past delinquencies connected to the extractive

sectors (Dwan and Bailey, 2006). As a result, LEITI's mandate was extended well

beyond basic EITI requirements, expanding the initiative's scope to include

agriculture and forestry and broadening reporting to include the publication of

contracts and periodic auditing of concession allocations. LEITI was in turn

established in law through the 2009 LEITI Act guaranteeing the initiative's mandate

and the multistakeholder representation on the MSG.

At the time of the fieldwork, representation on the board was comprised of

eight state representatives[1], four private sector members[2], and three representatives

of civil society[3]. In addition, a number of donor agencies regularly participated in the

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[1] Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Lands Mines and Energy, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Forestry Development Authority, National Oil Company, the National Senate and House if Representatives
[2] Arcelar Mittal, BHP Billiton, Chevron, the Liberia Timber Association, and the Gold & Diamond Dealers & Brokers Association
[3] Publish What You Pay Coalition, the Federation of Liberian Youth and the Gold & Diamond Miners Workers Union

board meeting as observers[4]. In practice, then, the diverse interests and personalities represented on the MSG has meant that the role of LEITI has been less clear cut with government, civil society, the private sector, and donors behind the scenes, vying to direct the work of the Secretariat. The negotiations have involved different interests, but also the collision of distinct rationales for EITI implementation. The LEITI Secretariat's work is therefore carried out in front of a heterogeneous audience, requiring implementation to respond to a number of divergent expectations. While civil society representatives generally described LEITI as a vehicle for supporting greater accountability and giving them a foothold in governance processes, government and private sector representatives articulated LEITI's role as combatting suspicion and conflict related to extractive projects. Amongst donors, on the other hand, EITI was increasingly discussed in terms of its contribution to a wider reform agenda.

3.2 The dissemination project

With joint World Bank and African Development Bank funding, the dissemination began in April 2014 aiming to present two recent reports commissioned by LEITI: the Annual Reconciliation Report and the Post Award Process Audit. The dissemination was to be carried out by LEITI staff consisting of two to three workshops in each of Liberia's fifteen counties. Laid out in planning documents, LEITI's formal objective for the workshops was to: 1) "educate citizens on the key findings and major areas of concerns in the reports"; and 2) to create "a platform for citizens to discuss the reports, make recommendations to improve the process, or take other actions where necessary" (LEITI, 2014, p. 1). A key aspect

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[4]African Development Bank, German Development Cooperation, IMF, UN Development Program, UN Mission in Liberia, US State Department and the World Bank

alluded to by LEITI management was the role of the workshops in distributing information to people living in rural areas where the consequences of resource extraction were felt most directly and facilitating discussion and debate between stakeholders gathered at the events. Additionally, the dissemination was conceived as a form of two-way communication between 'communities' and government, with LEITI playing the role of conduit for the flow of information back to ministries in Monrovia.

The primary focus of the dissemination was on distributing LEITI's 4th Annual Reconciliation Report (LEITI, 2013a). Reconciliation reports represent the core activity of EITI and include data on payments made by companies to government based on comparing amounts reported by each party and highlighting eventual discrepancies. In accordance with EITI rules, the findings and data from the reconciliation report were published in a more accessible summary report (LEITI, 2013b) that in turn formed the basis for the content of the dissemination workshops. LEITI's 4th reconciliation report differed from those in most other countries at the time. Firstly, it provided information on "what ought to have been paid" meaning that auditors made independent calculations of company tax obligations required by law comparing them to government calculations of due amounts. This revealed systematic underpayment by a number of companies and a failure of government to pursue the full tax obligations required by law. Secondly, auditors attempted to "follow the money" – tracing specific earmarked payments within the state system. Two payments from oil companies were highlighted where the subsequent forwarding of payments was not properly documented by the National Oil Company. Notwithstanding these issues, the 4th Report, like previous reports carried out by

LEITI, did not clearly indicate any acts of corruption. The second, more controversial, report was the Post Award Process Audit (LEITI, 2013c), which assessed government adherence to procedural obligations in allocating concessions and exploitation contracts. The report's finding that 64 of 68 contracts had not been authorised in compliance with the law resulted in conflict within the MSG as civil society, company and government representatives clashed over the accompanying recommendations that would need to be submitted to the president. Consequently, the audit was politically sensitive for secretariat staff who were careful in public to describe the contracts in question as 'non-compliant' rather than 'illegal'.

4.0 Studying transparency as performance

Tracing the implementation process of transparency requires tracing a 'chain of translations' (Mosse and Lewis, 2006) as global policy is heterogeneously manifested in project rationales and designs, and the work of practitioners who seek to rationalise their practices according to the multi-scaled contexts in which they operate. It is through their performance of transparency policy that practitioners respond to these dynamic pressures. The study takes an ethnographic approach to explore the performance of implementing transparency as policy by analysing the organisation and execution of a number of the workshops for disseminating the reports outlined above. Here, we understand dissemination as a necessity to achieve recognition internationally and among all stakeholders and partners, described in EITI documents as 'audiences': actors within government, the donor community, extractive companies, civil society and the media (EITI, 2008). The dissemination is analysed through the experience, participation and observations of the lead researcher who travelled, lodged, shared meals and socialised with the LEITI team

on their dissemination trip. As an active participant, the lead researcher documented the trip through written notes and reflections as well as recording three of the workshops[5]. Conversations with staff during the journey, the experience of travel, the affective build-up before and after meetings – including various negotiations with local stakeholders – played a crucial role in understanding transparency as practice. Insights from interviews conducted prior and after the dissemination with LEITI staff, LEITI MSG members and other stakeholders representatives from national and local government, local, national and international civil society, extractive companies, donors, and political and local community representatives have also contributed to the analysis in the paper. The observation and participation in the dissemination was part of a long process of studying LEITI[6], interviewing staff, sitting in on other meetings, interviewing stakeholders, and observing the implementation of transparency at different levels in the state system and in the regions. The lead researcher conducted fieldwork in a number of locations both in rural Liberia and the capital Monrovia prior and subsequent to the dissemination carrying out 146 interviews with more than 80 specifically in five areas where important forestry and mining concessions were being operated.

The researcher's fellow travellers were all male representatives of LEITI: two mid-level employees and a driver from the Secretariat, and one member of the LEITI MSG. The group left Monrovia on the 23rd of April, 2014, headed for Greenville in Sinoe County, the location for the first of a planned twelve workshops to be carried out in the South East of the country[7]. Figure 1 shows the route, planned workshop locations and the concession areas. The team's journey was realised over the next

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[5] This material consisted of one video and two audio recordings.
[6] Fieldwork totaling seven months was carried out in Liberia between February 2013 and June 2014.
[7] Sinoe, Grand Kru, Maryland, River Gee and Grand Gedeh counties.

eleven days across a region historically referred to as Liberia's hinterland, where post-war infrastructure improvements are lacking.

By travelling with the team, the lead-researcher became very much part of the dissemination, sometimes helping to set up before the events, making notes during the workshops – which was seen as a useful resource by the team, while conversations that the researcher had with the team became part of the presentation that the team made in the workshops. While the team was aware of the researcher's outsider role within the group, at times attendees took the researcher for one of the LEITI team. Often people took him for the senior member in the group, presumably due to being the only white man. During the workshops, attendees would regularly approach the researcher to give thanks for the workshops, or to make complaints, thinking that he had the authority to intervene on their behalf. This was most often related to the attendance fee or access to reports – issues to which we return below. Due to limited time at each location, these informal encounters were the only conversations held with participants and the paper does not thus aim to present the experience of attendees. The researcher's ethnographic practice was one of 'observant participant' (Thrift, 2000): both as a witness to transparency in-the-making and through his conspicuous presence and integration within the team – a full member of 'the cast' whose performance constituted the workshops. As a researcher, he thus did participate, and while questioning some aspects of the dissemination, did not directly contest the practices of the team, but tried through conversations and observant participation to understand the team's performance of transparency through the journey and the workshops.

Before we move to our analysis, we would like to return to our framework of performing transparency. Crucially, the presence and participation of people in the performance *in* transparency is itself an integral element to the enactment *of* transparency. From the recorded data, we undertake an analysis of performance *in* by unpacking how structure and orchestration are brought to bear through the concrete practices involved in organising and coordinating events. We focus on the effect of these practices in limiting the range and type of possible interactions, as well as decisions that conditioned people's ability and entitlement to participate as a means to better understand the aims of organisers (MacDonald, 2010).

We understand the workshops as spaces that are produced through the strategic practices of LEITI staff who, while always subject to disciplining structures, also manoeuver through their own agency in planning and executing the workshops. Performance *of* may then be understood to rely on the social pressures that push participants to synchronise their interactions with dominant discourses, thus reproducing subjectivities and constraining possibilities for alternative articulations (Butler, 1990). A focus on performance as a way of analysing the workshops allows us to study how discourse relates to the governance setting as it is enacted through practices and revealed by the encounters and interactions that are produced (Hajer, 2006).

Figure 1. about here

5.0 Performing *in* transparency: structure and orchestration of the workshops

The dissemination was planned as one of three trips intended to cover all of Liberia's fifteen counties. LEITI Secretariat staff and management selected workshop sites prioritising both regional coverage – by planning two to three workshops in each of the five counties of the south east –, and attendance by selecting locations based on population size to meet attendance targets of 200 – 250 people per workshop. Responsibility for organising venues, publicising the events (usually via local radio) and invitations to specific attendees was subcontracted to LEITI's contacts in each of the locations. Usually these were local members of civil society, journalists, or, in one instance, a government official. How particular workshops were organised and who, and how many, people were invited depended greatly on the networks and priorities of these organisers. Attendance registers showed that attendees came predominately from the immediate more urban areas meaning that attendance by people living directly adjacent to concessions was very limited. In line with standard practice in Liberia, organisers would try to ensure representation from local elders, chiefs and women's and youth representatives in addition to local officials, civil society, local media, political representatives and companies. However, not all of these groups were represented in all of the workshops.

The planning of the dissemination had a bearing on how workshops were structured and orchestrated in particular ways toward a number of objectives, achieved through the management of proceedings and people, and the articulation of a number of strategic representations. Below, we describe and analyse these practices and some of their effects.

22

5.2 Structure and organisation of workshops

The first key element to running a 'successful' workshop was fulfilling EITI's formal dissemination requirements of communicating the principal findings of the annual reconciliation report, distributing the summary reports, and instigating public discussions amongst 'stakeholders'. This was in addition to the specific demands of those donors who had financed the trip requiring attention to professional norms and procedures. The other key element of success that became apparent was that events were well attended and ran smoothly according to a predetermined itinerary, while keeping conflict and discussions considered controversial to a minimum.

The team would arrive at a venue, usually the city or town hall and begin by setting up the 'stage'. This involved erecting four banners summarizing the most important information from the reconciliation report. One banner was a national overview of the total amounts paid to government in each natural resource sector. The other banners had information summarized regionally. A member of the team would set up a table for registering participants. People would endure long waits in line to register and copies of the summary reconciliation report were distributed.

For attendees, registration was necessary to receive the $5 'sitting fee', which appeared in many cases to be the principal motivation for attending. LEITI aimed for 250 participants in each event. Generally, however, attendance was not much more than 200 and, in some cases the team would use the promise of financial compensation to attract passers-by to bolster the numbers. Registration also reinforced difference between the attendees themselves, as more prominent figures were not required to stand in line and register, but nevertheless received their (often higher) payment at the end of the event.

An important requirement of LEITI's work is to bring together all actors in discussions on natural resource governance. In the workshops, people were seated facing the stage in the typical manner of an audience, while local officials were seated to one side of the stage facing them. Participants who stood up to ask questions and give their opinions would have to do so facing the officials, but prominent government and political representatives are seldom openly challenged and criticised at public meetings by ordinary people. In one such instance, attendees were faced by representatives of a county administration that had, in the months prior to the workshop, engaged in a campaign of intimidation against local people involved in a land dispute with a foreign palm oil company, involving arbitrary arrests, and physical brutality by police (Global Witness, 2015). In addition, the company had sent observers to the meeting who made their presence felt, sitting in on the workshop and parking the company vehicle prominently at the entrance to the venue.

Commencing workshops, the facilitator would welcome attendees, present the team and organise the singing of the national anthem, before inviting the most senior public official to give a welcoming address. The facilitator then presented LEITI explicitly describing it as a "government agency", a characterisation that was designed to garner credibility in the eyes of the specific audience at the workshops, but stood in contrast to the official line articulated by the Head of Secretariat emphasising LEITI's tripartite status and independence from the government.

The main portion of the workshops began with a presentation by LEITI of the main findings from the annual reconciliation report. In addition to information about the findings, the purpose of the presentation was the marketing and legitimating of

LEITI as a key governance watchdog. In contrast to the somewhat limited scope of its activities, EITI was presented as a key protagonist in Liberia's post-war development trajectory highlighting its role in preventing conflict and ensuring development through the fair and equitable distribution of extractive sector revenues.

5.3 Orchestrating discussion

Following the initial presentation, the facilitator opened up for participation from the audience. Audience members would raise their hands to either make a statement, or ask a question. In each case, the facilitator would respond and move on. This more interactive portion of proceedings was important to LEITI's formal goals of contributing to "informed debate about how natural resources are being governed" (LEITI, 2013d, p. 10), where participants could potentially raise more contentious issues related to prevailing practices and political relations around resource extraction.

As described above, however, the composition of attendees and the way the events were organised meant that certain norms of accepted behaviour were privileged with the effect of constraining the potential for discussions to step onto more radical terrain. Furthermore, the team orchestrated the discussion through framing the question and answer session around the initial presentation. This ensured that most participants asked questions related to issues the team had an interest in discussing – the contents of the summary report. Crucially, the presentation made no mention of the more controversial Post Award Process report (see section 3.3) reducing the likelihood of discussions straying onto the legitimacy of company operations.

Nevertheless, participants did in some cases raise concerns regarding issues not directly addressed by the presentation. Key frustrations related to the inadequacy of existing benefit sharing mechanisms, the failure of companies to live up to promises made to local people, as well as more general scepticism regarding the potential of extractive projects to benefit local people. In a few cases, people raised the subject of how to oppose the companies' operations. The team's replies seldom addressed the people's concerns and were instead intended to prevent confrontation and the discussion from straying on to more radical terrain.

In such instances, it was often women who spoke most forcefully about confronting companies, challenging government, and calling for action to secure community benefits. However, it seemed easier for the LEITI team to cut women's critical comments off: "(He cut) her off because she had been talking for a while. Next, he shouted out a slogan about women's empowerment and got the crowd to join in. This seemed to involve a good degree of irony and seemed to be funny to many of those present who chuckled and he himself was smiling broadly." (From field notes, 25.04.2014). Such strategies were generally enough to allow the facilitator to move on without engaging directly with sensitive subject matter.

6.0 The performance *of* transparency: spectacle and audience

Once you hold the information, you can then go and engage the government (…) knowledge is power (From LEITI's presentation in the workshops).

The workshops become spectacles in that they are theatrical performances that help to legitimise, rationalise and camouflage (see Boje, 2001; Igoe, 2010) the fragmented realities of extractive industries and their implications for people.

26

Analysing the workshops as performance *of* transparency helps to provide insights into the meanings of transparency as they are acted out by LEITI and to understand what audience transparency is performed for. We explore the relations between LEITI and the participants through the constitution of the 'public' made visible in the understandings of democracy and its citizens conveyed in the workshops. We then show how the relationship between information, knowledge and power was expressed during the workshops, and finally how the performance of transparency that we analyse relates to broader institutional and political structures and agendas.

6.1 Between transparency and the citizen: the making of 'the public'

Aside from the explicit purpose of disseminating information on resource revenues to the public, in practice the events were celebratory displays – symbolic objects conveying a spatially distinct mode of democratic governance where 'Monrovia' travelled out to the people in an act that represented a break with the past and the dominant post-war narrative of decentralisation, democracy and citizen participation. However, these displays were in some ways contradictory to the purpose of bringing knowledge to the people as was demonstrated by the team's cancellation of several of the planned workshops. The artisanal mining town of Government Camp was considered too remote and not populated enough to warrant the journey. Similarly, the planned workshops in Grandcess, Sasstown and Ziah Town were cancelled with the team reasoning that the small populations of the towns promised low attendance not in line with their targets.

The seeming lack of importance place on these places contrasted with the way the workshops that did take place were carried out. The ceremonial opening and closing of the events contributed to creating a sense of occasion and coherence that

distracted from the more fragmented conditions and practices through which the workshops had been constituted. Women and youth would be selected to give closing comments that often took the form of passionate calls to action. However, while giving these groups a platform from which to articulate their views, these addresses took place after the facilitator had formally brought an end to the discussion and were treated as part of the closing formalities.

In instrumental discourse on transparency, people are understood in terms of a 'public' that stands as the receiver of information freed from the transparent state (Fenster, 2015). The way the workshops were orchestrated brought people more actively into the performance, casting them as engaged citizens who performed their role through acts of questioning and requiring answers of LEITI staff. However, as we described above, when transparency is performed *in* the workshops, 'the public' is used more concretely to describe a group of people – 'citizens' – that make up the audience. It is a performance that ignores diversity of interests and power relations, constituting people in the abstract into a particular role of a specific kind of citizen: a rational actor with identifiable and predictable preferences who sees their relationship to the state as a (social) contract that they will actively engage in enforcing, when endowed with sufficient knowledge. The LEITI reports were presented as informing 'voter power' enabling people to hold political representatives to account at the ballot box. Government was portrayed according to its constitutional role, dependent on citizens for its mandate and consequently responsive to their demands. This framing was key to LEITI's depiction of the reconciliation report as a vital tool enabling citizens to participate fully in democratic

governance processes and legitimising the facilitator's declaration to participants: "you yourself can now advise government."

Those in government who are formally answerable for the governance of the country's resources were not present. Questions were instead fielded by LEITI staff and there is little indication that LEITI's frequent claims of taking people's concerns back to the government corresponds to what happens in practice. As such, the questions and input of participants functioned mostly as aesthetic markers signifying an idealised democratic governance and giving the workshops the appearance and form of productive encounters – constructive meetings between state and newly enlightened and empowered citizens.

6.2 Transmitting empowerment: knowledge and information in transparency

Transparency is understood to represent "a communicative act, one that advances in a linear fashion as a message moves from the state to the public" (Fenster, 2015, p. 153). However, it is a conception in which the problematic issue of meaning in transparency is either ignored or is reduced to a stable neutral entity. Consequently, it was never made apparent how in practice people could use the reports and what kinds of demands the information would enable people to make. Instead, the dense numerical information served a more symbolic visual purpose, with the very impenetrability of the numerous pages of text, tables and charts supporting the facilitator's representation of the reports as containing important much needed information, while the glossy pamphlets represented tangible objects – knowledge that could be held and physically conveyed. Holding aloft his copy of the report the facilitator told participants "you here, you have the power". In this sense, the

workshops performed empowerment as an exercise in knowledge transfer through the physical handing over the reports, but it was a display that relied on the double manoeuvre of conflating information with knowledge and, in turn, equating knowledge with power according to the popular trope.

Much of the information presented in the workshop, albeit superficial, seemed difficult to grasp for many of the participants, particularly for the non-English speakers and no formal arrangements were made for translating between English and the local languages. Complaints from people who found it hard to keep up with the presentation were met with the suggestion that they had the report and could go through it in their own time.

The team also made important choices regarding what information to share, and typically excluded themes linked to specific companies and concessions in the local area. In one workshop, a member of the audience asked for LEITI to tell the communities what and how much was owed to them by the companies and government. The facilitator responded by directing people to read the concession agreements by accessing them online or travelling to LEITI's offices in Monrovia, neither of which were viable options for most participants.

Perhaps the most significant decision pertaining to what information to share was regarding the overall finding from the Post Award Process Audit that 64 of 68 contract processes were found to be 'non-compliant'. What 'non-compliance' meant and the significance of the findings – that the legality of the majority of concession contracts awarded since 2009 could potentially be called into question – was not shared with participants. Neither was the fact that a number of the companies

concerned were the very same companies operating in the local area that in some cases were involved in ongoing disputes with local people.

The circumspect approach to sharing information contrasted starkly with the theatrical manner in which it was acted out. The workshops performed to metaphorical notions of transparency as 'shedding light', giving 'clarity' and 'insight' and the attainment of truth and moral certainty (Albu and Flyverbom, 2016). A key factor for the success of the dissemination trips was to demonstrate LEITI's importance in *bringing* this insight – allowing people to 'see'. The audience played their role both as passive receivers of information, and through appreciative confirmations that "today our eyes are open", an echo of the facilitator's proclamations of the audience's transition from ignorance to enlightenment.

6.2 The political economy of transparency: maintaining status quo

Framed around a particular understanding of the relationship between knowledge and information and what type of and whose knowledge counts, the performance involved providing information in a way that met the expectations of a variety of (influential) actors – most of whom are members and observers on LEITI's MSG.

People in the workshops were often eager to discuss what would be done about corruption and malpractice and what action LEITI would itself take to hold those responsible to account. In one instance, a participant asked what would be done in a specific case where the National Oil Company had failed to account for a payment of $100,000. A member of the team responded telling the audience, "I am here to give you information. What you do with that information is up to you." While seemingly contradicting earlier claims regarding LEITI's important watchdog status,

the response was nevertheless consistent with the way transparency was presented and the designation of specific roles to citizens, the state and information released through transparency. In the team's discursive representations transparency expressed empowerment, but, contextualised by such encounters, transparency rather took the form of an abdication, a shifting of the burden of enforcing governance standards from the state onto the shoulders of marginalised 'citizens.'

As discussed above, a principal concern of the LEITI team was to avoid specific controversial subject matter that risked inspiring more discontent with concessionaires. Conversations with LEITI management revealed that a clear goal for the dissemination was to provide information that would increase trust and ease suspicion in communities: "we want to be there tranquilising. We want to be there in that space where our objectivity, our autonomy, helps to allay tensions in these communities." An explicit message frequently articulated by LEITI at the workshops was that people should not oppose companies, whose presence in Liberia was vital to development. A version of reality was thus presented where direct opposition to company operations was inherently illegitimate, and where the only reasonable course of action was for citizens to use LEITI reports to engage a supposedly benevolent government in discussions over the use of revenues.

The team also pointed out that "it is a long way to Monrovia" telling people to take their concerns to local officials and political representatives rather than lobbying ministries and the president in the capital. By asking people to engage locally, they were directing people's political action away from national level political spaces where decisions are made and into spaces where the effect of protest would at best be diffuse and indirect. More importantly in the present context, local political spaces

emphasise people's dependence on local relations of power and patronage networks and represent limited possibilities for political action in Liberia. The effect of LEITI's approach was therefore to discourage the 'scaling-up' of actions into spaces where engagement had greater possibility of fostering change by engaging with the state's highly centralised decision-making processes.

7.0 Towards an understanding of the meanings and workings of transparency as governance

Transparency – often taken for granted as a common good – is believed to support good governance and democracy by empowering the public with knowledge. It may not be possible to assess what impact the workshops had such terms, but the events we have narrated cast doubt on whether empowerment and accountability represent the primary concerns to which LEITI's dissemination responds. 'Success' and 'failure' of the workshops can instead be understood through their function of providing legitimacy to claims of success for broader projects of EITI and other influential actors linked to LEITI. From this follows that transparency, rather than bringing light to its citizens, performs a practice of governance by disclosure.

Studying the dissemination as performance *in* and *of* helps to reveal the workshops as spaces where transparency is expressed through the practices of LEITI staff and their relations with attendees and the wider audience for their work. Practitioners operate in a context where their actions have distinct significance at multiple levels of governance. The operational reality is a constant negotiation, often necessitating ambiguity in the signalling of meaning attached to practices that are

viewed simultaneously through the heterogeneous expectations of multiple

audiences at multiple levels. EITI's tripartite make-up points to this explicitly and

builds such a context of ambiguity into the formal structures surrounding their work.

A particular practice may be understood as an attempt to simultaneously play to the

expectations of donors, government, the International EITI secretariat, national and

international civil society groups, and the various people who attend the workshops.

The practices discussed in this article should be viewed as attempts by LEITI staff to

balance conflicting expectations within their work. This unenviable task was

performed by staff with the knowledge that their actions would be scrutinised by a

variety of influential actors on which employees and LEITI's institutional survival

depends. What is crucial, however, is how transparency emerges in practice and is

produced through relations of power. In a given context, the performance of

transparency is, therefore, directed towards 'those who count', and directed mostly

towards those who count the most.

Transparency reconfigures relationships between information and those

people and institutions that prepare it for public consumption (see Power, 1997 in

Koyama & Kania, 2014). The workshops represent the mediation of the relationship

between policy, information, the government, the industries and the people from

where an idealised version of reality is performed for particular audiences. We have

shown that the workshops, as the practice of transparency, help to conflate the real

workings of power in natural resource extraction. Through the workshops a particular

version of the material reality in which people live is created. This version is

compatible with the policy narratives of EITI and more broadly with a prevailing

growth strategy supported by government and donors where commercial interests

are frequently pitted against those of local people. We show that the dissemination trips were political spectacles that conceal real policy costs and benefits helping to depoliticise the transparency process by making critical interrogation and democratic participation more difficult (see Uddin et al., 2011; Winton and Evans, 2014).

The workshops represented governance as an aesthetic expression (Eggen, 2012) in that the act of 'giving sight' (dissemination) took precedence over the sight itself (knowledge). The workshops, as key to the success of LEITI's work, were therefore vehicles for showing LEITI to be 'bringers of light', but the workshops cannot be dismissed merely as aesthetic. What is important is to understand the effects of this performance – how the objects and subjects of transparency were constituted through strategic representations and practices in the workshops – and how transparency produces spaces whereby visibilities are made and managed (Flyverbom, 2016; Strathern, 2000b).

In this context, the coherence of the dissemination exercise was maintained through the performance that assigned roles to citizens, government, companies, LEITI and the reports they produce and distribute. In this view, transparency's abstract categories and modes of relations, while illusory abstractions, work to encourage neoliberal subjects whose political agency is individualised to that of citizen watchdogs, and who are made responsible for enforcing a democratic accountability redefined according to the administrative logic of auditing (Birchall, 2015, p. 19).

The approach we have taken enables us to look beyond practices of transparency as merely contradictory to idealised notions of transparency, towards understanding them as the expression of more fundamental contradictions *within*

transparency. By considering transparency as governance in Liberia and worldwide, we have pointed to the ways in which transparency becomes a spectacle that helps to depoliticise and pacify the public in relation to securing their interests vis a vis the interests of industry and government. The spectacle of transparency distracts from the content and objects that transparency ostensibly aims to make known. In this context, spectacle as transparency may be a contradiction in terms in that some dimensions of reality are concealed through the portrayal of others. Selective and strategic representations are ever-present features of participatory processes and political projects. The insidious paradox of transparency may be that it enables such representations to be made under the guise of enlightenment itself.

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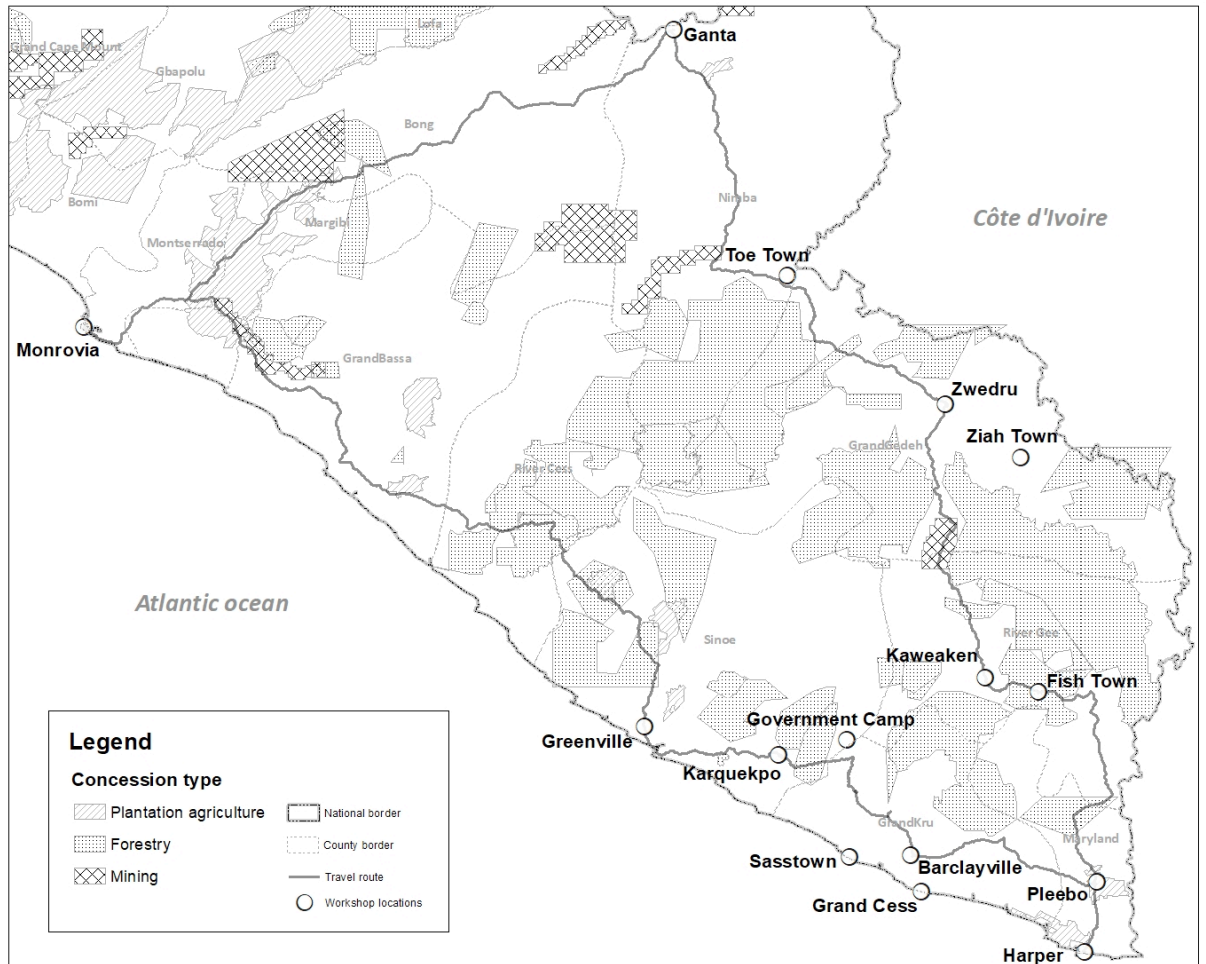Roberts, A., 2006. Dashed expectations: governmental adaptation to transparency

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Figure 1.

Figure 1. A concession map of Liberia showing locations and route of LEITI's dissemination to the south east, 2014*

*Data for Plantation agriculture and Mining represent Agricultural Concessions and Mineral Development Agreements respectively. Forestry represents aggregated data comprising Forest Management Contracts, Timber Sale Contracts, Community Forest Management Agreements and Private Use Permits. Offshore Oil blocks, class B and C mining licenses and exploration licenses are not shown. Workshop locations not on travel route represent cancelations.
Data sources: (Bunte et al., 2017; GADM, 2015; WFP-Geonode, 2017).