

Ambiguous Provisions of Peace Agreements: A Crucial Barrier to Implementation and Motivation for Spoilers in Peace Processes

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Abstract. Peace agreements in post-conflict settings are often undermined by vague or ambiguous provisions that hinder implementation and create opportunities for spoiler behaviour. Despite extensive research on peace processes, limited attention has been given to how the clarity of agreement provisions influences implementation outcomes. This study examines the relationship between the specificity of peace agreement content and the commitment of warring parties, using Sierra Leone's 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord as a case study. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were collected through 40 semi-structured interviews with key informants selected using purposive and snowball sampling. The findings show that ambiguous provisions weakened stakeholder trust, encouraged divergent interpretations of key commitments, and facilitated spoiler activities that contributed to the collapse of the peace process. The study concludes that precise peace agreement provisions are essential for strengthening accountability, improving implementation, and reducing spoiler risks. It recommends clear, enforceable commitments to support sustainable post-conflict peacebuilding.

Keywords: Peace agreements, Spoilers, Abidjan Peace Accord, Post-conflict peacebuilding, Sierra Leone

1 Introduction

In recent decades, peace agreements have become a central mechanism for ending civil wars and facilitating transitions from conflict to peace. These agreements, often the result of protracted negotiations between warring parties, represent both a cessation of hostilities and a framework for post-conflict governance, security, and reconciliation. However, the durability of peace agreements remains uneven across contexts. A growing body of scholarship has highlighted how the design and content of these agreements influence their prospects for successful implementation [1] (Olivius & Åkebo, 2021). Among the critical design issues identified, the role of vague or ambiguous provisions has received increasing scrutiny for its potential to weaken the enforceability of agreements and to open avenues for spoiler behaviour, in which actors deliberately undermine peace for strategic or ideological reasons [2] (Nilsson & Svensson, 2020).

The 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord, signed between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), remains a notable example of a peace agreement that ultimately failed to deliver sustained peace. Despite initial optimism surrounding its signing, the Accord was short-lived, with hostilities resuming within months. Analysts and practitioners have since criticised the Accord for its lack of clarity in key provisions on disarmament, power-sharing, and the withdrawal of foreign forces [3] (Bangura, 1997). These ambiguities are believed to have contributed to a lack of mutual trust, divergent interpretations among parties, and the strategic manipulation of the peace process by spoilers [4] (Gberie, 2000).

This study investigates the extent to which the vagueness of the Abidjan Peace Accord's provisions contributed to its implementation challenges and eventual breakdown. The central objective is to examine the relationship between the specificity of peace agreement content and the commitment of warring parties, with the Abidjan Accord serving as a focal case study. Guided by a qualitative research design, the study relies on 40 semi-structured interviews with key informants selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods. Through this empirical approach, the study seeks to understand how actors interpreted and responded to the Accord's content during the post-signing phase [5] (Maley, 2020).

The paper argues that the lack of specificity in peace agreements can undermine implementation by eroding accountability, enabling spoilers to exploit textual ambiguities, and generating uncertainty among stakeholders. Drawing on the Sierra Leonean case, the study illustrates how weakly articulated provisions in the Abidjan Accord created a permissive environment for non-compliance and manipulation. Although this research explicitly examines the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord, the analysis of textual ambiguity and actions that undermine peace agreements is relevant to broader trends observed in other peace processes. Comparative studies of agreements such as the 1999 Lomé Peace Accord in Sierra Leone, the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan, and the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan reveal that unclear provisions—especially regarding sequencing, enforcement, and power-sharing—often hinder implementation and encourage strategic defection. By situating the Abidjan Accord within this wider comparative context, the research advances a theoretically grounded argument that ambiguity constitutes a structural weakness in peace agreements rather than an isolated issue specific to Sierra Leone. By examining these dynamics, the paper contributes to broader debates in peace and conflict studies on the importance of agreement design in peacebuilding processes [6] (Bell & Wise, 2022).

The paper is structured into five sections. Following this introduction, the second section provides a review of relevant literature on peace agreements, spoiler behaviour, and the implications of ambiguity in post-conflict settlements. The third section outlines the research methodology, including the case selection, data collection, and analytical framework. The fourth section presents the findings and discusses how the vagueness of the Accord shaped the behaviours and expectations of the signatories. The final section concludes the paper by synthesising key insights, policy implications, and recommendations for future peace agreement design.

2. Literature Review

The effectiveness of peace agreements in civil conflict settings has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. As civil wars have increasingly ended through negotiated settlements rather than outright military victory, peace agreements have become critical instruments for laying the foundation of post-conflict governance and reconciliation [7] (Mac Ginty, 2014). However, the success of these agreements has varied widely, prompting scholars to investigate the design features that influence their durability. One line of research has focused on the comprehensiveness of peace agreements, positing that agreements that address a broader range of conflict issues—such as power sharing, disarmament, justice, and economic reform—are more likely to result in lasting peace [8] (Kreutz, 2018).

Beyond comprehensiveness, recent research has highlighted the clarity and precision of the language used in peace agreements. According to [9] Bell and Wise (2022), while broad provisions may allow flexibility in implementation, excessive vagueness can undermine trust and foster uncertainty. Their study of post-conflict transitions in multiple contexts reveals that textual ambiguity, particularly with enforcement mechanisms and timelines, can hinder implementation by creating space for conflicting interpretations. Similarly, [10] Pospisil (2018) argues that peace agreements drafted under intense political pressure often include vague language as a compromise tool; however, such ambiguity becomes a liability during implementation, when divergent understandings harden into irreconcilable positions.

This concern is echoed in the work of [11] Nilsson and Kovacs (2013), who explore the impact of unclear provisions on stakeholder behaviour. They note that vagueness in peace accords may be strategically included by parties seeking to preserve room for manoeuvre post-agreement. However, this flexibility can also be exploited by spoilers. In this research, spoilers are defined as individuals or groups that intentionally disrupt peace processes because they view negotiated agreements as a threat to their political, economic, or security interests [12] (Stedman, 1997). These spoilers can be either part of the negotiating parties or external to them, and they may act openly through violence or secretly through obstructive tactics and manipulation of interpretations. Their motivations are diverse, including a desire to maintain power gained during wartime, to evade accountability, to safeguard access to resources, or to resist changes in political power. Notably, spoiler actions do not always involve a complete rejection of peace agreements; instead, as this study illustrates, spoilers frequently exploit ambiguous language to assert formal compliance while effectively undermining their implementation.

The Abidjan Peace Accord of 1996 exemplifies many of these dynamics. Scholars have described the Accord as insufficiently detailed, particularly in its provisions on disarmament and security guarantees [13] (Francis, 2009). [14] Binningsbø and Dupuy (2009) note that while the Accord symbolised a significant diplomatic breakthrough, its vague formulations lacked enforceable mechanisms and precise sequencing, thus weakening its credibility. These deficiencies not only eroded trust between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) but also created openings for spoiler activity from within and outside the negotiating parties. [15] Reiter (2015) notes that peace agreements lacking

strong monitoring or enforcement clauses tend to collapse in contexts where spoilers retain coercive capacity and face minimal costs for violating the agreement.

The literature also underscores the importance of *actor perceptions* and how ambiguity affects implementation behaviour. [16] Walter (2021) emphasises that credible commitment is central to successful peacebuilding and that clear, enforceable terms reduce the temptation for actors to renege. Conversely, ambiguity undermines this commitment by lowering the reputational and material costs of non-compliance. [17] Scandellius and Cohen (2016) demonstrate that stakeholders often interpret ambiguous provisions in light of their own strategic goals and perceived grievances. Their findings align with the premise of this study: that ambiguity, rather than being a neutral compromise device, can actively fuel misunderstanding and the resurgence of conflict.

Despite the rich insights offered by existing scholarship, relatively little empirical work has focused on the Sierra Leonean case, particularly on the textual analysis and implementation experience of the Abidjan Peace Accord. While broader studies have examined the failure of peace in Sierra Leone [18] Gberie (2005), few have systematically connected the specificity or vagueness of the Accord's content with the dynamics of the spoilers that ensued. This study, therefore, fills a critical gap by empirically investigating how the language and design of the Abidjan Accord contributed to its eventual collapse. In doing so, it builds on the theoretical arguments advanced by [19] Stedman (2001), offering new evidence on the relationship between provision clarity, stakeholder commitment, and spoiler behaviour in peace processes.

By combining conceptual insights from peace agreement design and spoiler theory with original qualitative data, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature that calls for more context-sensitive, evidence-based, and textually grounded analyses of peace accords. This strengthens the argument that specificity in peace agreements is not merely a technical detail but a strategic necessity for ensuring compliance, building trust, and deterring actors from exploiting uncertainty for violent purposes.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the extent to which the vagueness of the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord contributed to its implementation challenges and eventual failure. The case study approach is particularly suitable for in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within their real-life context [20] (Yin, 2018). Given the historical and political specificity of the Abidjan Accord, this design enables a contextualised examination of how ambiguity in peace agreement content interacts with actor behaviour and institutional dynamics in post-conflict settings.

The study population comprised individuals directly involved in the Abidjan Peace Process or with expert knowledge of Sierra Leone's civil conflict and peacebuilding efforts. A total of 40 participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of information-rich cases—such as former government officials, RUF representatives, civil society actors, international mediators, and members of the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace—based on their relevance to the research

questions [21] (Palinkas et al., 2015). Snowball sampling was employed to access additional informants with insider knowledge, particularly in cases where trust and discretion were essential for participation.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided the flexibility to explore emergent themes while ensuring consistency across interviews through a standard guide. The interviews were conducted between April and September 2023 in Freetown, Makeni, and Bo, with additional virtual interviews for informants based outside Sierra Leone. Interview questions focused on participants' understanding of the Abidjan Accord's provisions, their perceptions of the clarity or ambiguity of specific clauses, and their insights into the challenges of implementation and the behaviour of key actors.

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach proposed by [22] Braun et al. (2019). This involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The coding process was both deductive, guided by the research objectives and conceptual framework, and inductive, allowing new patterns and meanings to emerge from the data. Particular attention was given to themes related to textual ambiguity, stakeholder interpretation, trust and commitment, and spoiler behaviour. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data across different participant types and sources, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings [23] (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

4. Results

The findings of this study reveal that the vagueness of the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord significantly contributed to its failure by undermining trust, enabling divergent interpretations, and creating openings for spoiler behaviour. The data from 40 semi-structured interviews with key informants—ranging from former government officials and RUF members to civil society actors and international stakeholders—produced five major themes: (i) ambiguity in core provisions; (ii) divergent interpretations of agreement clauses; (iii) absence of enforcement mechanisms; (iv) erosion of trust between parties; and (v) manipulation of the peace process by spoilers. Each theme is examined in turn below.

4.1 Ambiguity in Core Provisions

A recurring theme across interviews was the lack of clarity in the Accord's provisions, particularly those related to disarmament, power-sharing, amnesty, and the withdrawal of foreign troops. Over 85% of respondents stated that the language used in key sections of the Accord was vague or "diplomatically worded" to the extent that it failed to provide concrete guidance for implementation.

One civil society participant¹ noted:

The Accord sounded hopeful, but it was written in such a way that you could interpret the same sentence in opposite ways. For instance, the disarmament clause lacked any concrete timelines or third-party oversight.

¹ Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 10 October 2023

Table 1 below illustrates the key provisions of the Abidjan Accord that participants identified as ambiguous, along with their perceived implications.

Table 1. Ambiguous Provisions in the Abidjan Peace Accord and Their Perceived Effects

Provision Area	Description of Ambiguity	Spoiler Effect
Disarmament	No timeline or third-party mechanism	Delayed disarmament, distrust
Amnesty	Broad, unconditional framing	Perceived impunity by victims
Withdrawal of Forces	No specification of foreign or mercenary actors, and the date for their exit	Continued RUF suspicion of state collusion
Power-sharing	No agreed structure or division of roles	Conflicting expectations, zero-sum thinking

This vagueness, respondents agreed, allowed both the RUF and the government to claim compliance while simultaneously preparing for renewed hostilities. Several noted that it was unclear whether specific provisions were to be implemented immediately or sequentially, leading to significant coordination failures.

4.2 Divergent Interpretations of Agreement Clauses

The lack of specificity contributed to starkly divergent interpretations of the Accord's meaning and intent. This problem was most acute in interpreting the amnesty clause and the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (CCP). For example, RUF representatives interpreted the amnesty provision as granting complete legal immunity to all combatants, whereas government officials considered it conditional upon disarmament and the cessation of hostilities. Over 70% of participants noted that these differing interpretations became increasingly problematic during implementation. As one former peace monitor² explained:

Each side had its own script. The government thought the RUF would disarm first, while the RUF believed political reforms would precede disarmament. No one agreed on the sequence, and there was no arbiter to resolve this.

This misalignment of expectations meant that perceived breaches of the Accord were interpreted not as misunderstandings but as deliberate acts of bad faith, thus deepening mutual distrust.

4.3 Absence of Enforcement and Monitoring Mechanisms

Another key finding is that the lack of enforcement mechanisms left the Accord vulnerable to non-compliance. Unlike other peace agreements that provide for third-party monitoring or peacekeeping oversight, the Abidjan Accord made no provisions for international monitoring bodies to oversee disarmament or political reforms. Participants described the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (CCP), which was tasked with implementing the Accord, as toothless. As shown in Figure 1, when asked about mechanisms for monitoring and

² Author's interview conducted by telephone on 5 September 2023

enforcement, 78% of participants either said "none existed" or described the mechanisms as "symbolic and ineffective."

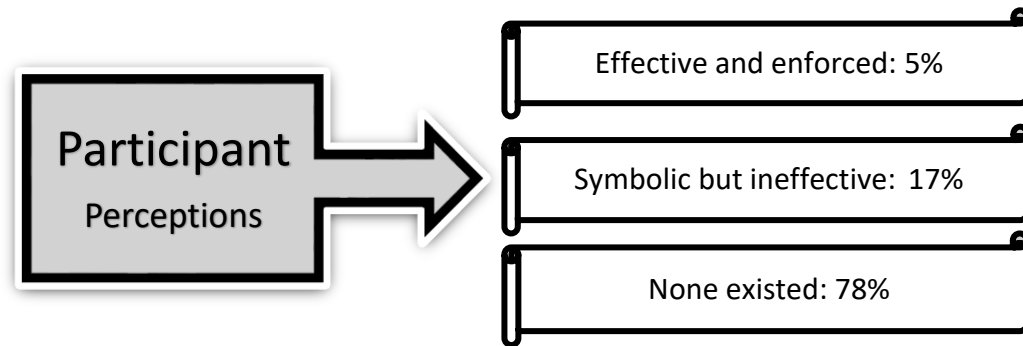


Figure 1. [1] Participant Perceptions of the Abidjan Accord's Monitoring and Enforcement Mechanisms

Several informants described the CCP as politically compromised and lacking independence. A former commissioner³ stated:

We were meant to oversee implementation, but we had no funding, no legal teeth, and no mandate to sanction non-compliance. Both parties ignored us.

The absence of credible monitoring meant that violations went unpunished and the political costs of non-compliance were minimal, creating fertile ground for spoiler activity.

4.4 Erosion of Trust Between Signatories

The research further found that ambiguity and weak implementation arrangements undermined trust between the RUF and the government. Several participants described how early implementation failures—such as delayed troop withdrawals or contested interpretations of amnesty—signalled to both sides that the other was acting in bad faith. Trust, as a key condition for successful peace processes, was rapidly eroded. A former government negotiator⁴ observed:

Trust was low from the beginning, but the ambiguous wording only made it worse. The government doubted the RUF's intentions, and the RUF doubted the government's in return. It was a recipe for collapse.

Participants noted that the absence of verification mechanisms meant that compliance had to be taken at face value—an impossibility in a highly polarised, militarised context. As trust deteriorated, the incentives to cheat or defect increased, with each side believing the other was planning to resume hostilities.

³ Author's interview conducted in Bo on 6 April 2023

⁴ Author's interview conducted in Freetown 17 October 2023

4.5 Spoiler Exploitation of the Peace Process

A significant finding of the study is that spoiler actors – both internal and external – used the vagueness of the Accord to their strategic advantage. Over 60% of respondents identified actors within the RUF, the government, and the broader region who actively sabotaged the peace process by exploiting its ambiguities. One military participant⁵ recalled:

There were factions within both the government and the RUF who never supported the Accord. They waited for the chance to interpret the clauses to suit their aims and justify a return to war.

Ambiguity enabled spoilers to deny violations, reinterpret obligations, or manipulate public opinion by claiming compliance while undermining peace behind the scenes. For instance, the presence of foreign mercenaries—officially unacknowledged in the Accord—was cited by the RUF as evidence of bad faith. At the same time, government-aligned actors justified delays in implementation by referencing the lack of clear timelines. Table 2 summarises key spoiler behaviours identified by respondents and the ambiguous provisions they leveraged.

Table 2. *Spoiler Strategies and the Ambiguous Clauses Exploited*

Spoiler Actor Type	Strategy Employed	Exploited Provision
RUF hardliners	Delayed disarmament	No precise sequencing or deadlines
Pro-government factions (Kamajors)	Continued militia mobilisation	Vague reference to the ceasefire scope
Regional spoilers	Arms smuggling, no border controls	No enforcement or verification

These findings affirm the argument that ambiguity in peace agreements is not merely a legal or semantic flaw, but a strategic vulnerability. In the case of the Abidjan Accord, it allowed spoilers to operate with impunity, fatally undermining the prospects for sustainable peace.

4.6 Summary of Findings

In summary, the study finds that the vagueness of the Abidjan Peace Accord critically weakened its implementation and rendered it vulnerable to collapse. The research identifies several interrelated consequences of this ambiguity: key provisions were imprecisely worded and lacked the operational detail necessary for effective execution; the parties to the agreement developed divergent interpretations of critical clauses, which fostered confusion and contention; there was an absence of credible mechanisms for monitoring compliance and enforcing commitments; trust between the signatories deteriorated rapidly; and spoilers actively exploited these ambiguities to subvert the peace process. Collectively, these dynamics underscore that imprecise language in peace agreements—far from being a benign diplomatic compromise—can function as a significant catalyst for post-agreement instability.

⁵ Author's interview conducted in Kailahun 12 May 2023

5. Discussion

This study set out to investigate the extent to which the vagueness of the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord contributed to its implementation challenges and the eventual resurgence of conflict in Sierra Leone. The implementation of the Abidjan Peace Accord was significantly influenced by Sierra Leone's local sociocultural context, which shaped interpretations and responses to ambiguity within the agreement. Cultural norms regarding authority, patronage, and conflict resolution led to obligations being seen as negotiable rather than strictly enforceable, especially when there was no precise enforcement mechanism in place. In a post-war society marked by deep-seated mistrust, oral agreements often held more significance than formal documents, causing ambiguous clauses to be viewed through the lens of historical grievances, local power dynamics, and survival tactics. These sociocultural factors interacted with the Accord's unclear language, fostering selective compliance and eroding common perceptions of obligation, ultimately diminishing the chances of lasting peace. The findings offer a compelling empirical basis for re-examining the critical role of clarity and enforceability in peace agreement design. At the heart of the Abidjan Peace Accord's failure lies the following deeper structural problems.

5.1 Ambiguity: A Strategic Space for Actors

First, the ambiguity embedded in the Accord's core provisions—notably disarmament, amnesty, power-sharing, and foreign troop withdrawal—did not function as neutral or unintended oversights. Instead, they created strategic space within which actors could manoeuvre to preserve or expand their bargaining power. In this context, ambiguity served as a strategic tool, allowing each party to adopt interpretations of the Accord that aligned with their respective interests, while still appearing to uphold their commitment to the peace process. By avoiding rigid definitions, negotiators create space for differing interpretations, thereby facilitating consensus without resolving all underlying disagreements. However, as this study shows, such ambiguity may become destructive in the implementation phase, when the absence of operational clarity leads to paralysis, contestation, and ultimately, collapse.

The ambiguity in the disarmament provisions, for example, illustrates this dynamic. Without a sequenced roadmap or third-party verification mechanism, both the Government of Sierra Leone and the RUF held mutually exclusive expectations about when and how disarmament would occur. This not only led to delays but also allowed each party to accuse the other of non-compliance, thereby justifying their inaction.

Although this study climaxes textual ambiguity as a critical factor in the collapse of the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord, it does not suggest that ambiguity alone accounts for the collapse of the peace process. The Accord was negotiated within a highly volatile political and economic context characterised by weak state institutions, wartime political economies, and profound mistrust between the parties. The behaviour of the lead rebel group – Revolutionary United Front (RUF), particularly under the leadership of Foday Saybanah Sankoh—was shaped not only by interpretive latitude in the Accord but also by strategic calculations aimed at retaining military leverage, controlling resource-rich territories, and resisting disarmament in the absence of credible security guarantees. To this end, external influences, including regional instability and limited international enforcement capacity, further constrained implementation. Therefore, textual ambiguity interacted with these structural and actor-driven factors, amplifying their destabilising effects rather than replacing them as explanatory variables.

5.2 Divergent Interpretations and the Fracturing of Consensus

The data also reveal how divergent interpretations of vague clauses fractured any initial consensus between the parties. This dynamic is particularly evident in the treatment of the amnesty provision. RUF members interpreted the Accord as granting complete legal immunity regardless of future behaviour, while government officials viewed amnesty as conditional on disarmament and demobilisation. This misalignment underscores the risks associated with what [24] Joshi (2021) describes as a situation in which negotiating parties lack a shared understanding of the terms of a peace agreement. Despite the formal conclusion of negotiations, the parties may interpret key provisions differently, leading to divergent expectations regarding implementation. Such discord reflects a deeper challenge in peace processes, wherein agreements may be signed without a harmonised conceptualisation of obligations and responsibilities, thereby undermining their durability and effectiveness.

Such divergence is not a semantic issue; it represents a breakdown in shared meaning, which is a cornerstone of successful implementation. As mutual understanding eroded, violations were no longer viewed as operational setbacks but as existential betrayals—fuelling an escalation in suspicion, brinkmanship, and ultimately, violence. The absence of interpretive clarity thus contributed not only to logistical delays but also to a profound normative disjuncture between the parties, undermining the legitimacy of the peace process itself.

5.3 Institutional Weakness and Enforcement Vacuum

Crucially, these issues were exacerbated by the absence of credible enforcement mechanisms. The Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (CCP), established to oversee implementation, lacked independence, resources, and the authority to resolve disputes or sanction violations. The lack of enforcement capacity rendered the agreement a non-binding political declaration rather than a governance framework with institutional backing. This weakness allowed violations to proliferate unchecked and encouraged actors to treat the agreement as instrumental and revocable, rather than obligatory and enduring. This finding strengthens the argument that effective peace agreements must be backed by monitoring institutions with coercive and legitimising powers. In the absence of such mechanisms, parties are not incentivised to comply; instead, they resort to self-help strategies rooted in mistrust and deterrence. From a rationalist perspective, the lack of enforcement reduces the cost of cheating, thereby raising the likelihood of defection, especially in volatile security environments.

5.4 Spoiler Behaviour and the Weaponisation of Vagueness

One of the most analytically significant findings is the weaponisation of textual vagueness by spoilers. This study extends spoiler typology by demonstrating that spoilers not only act against peace but may do so from within the procedural boundaries of an agreement, exploiting its grey areas to pursue destabilising goals while claiming formal compliance. This strategic use of ambiguity allows spoilers to subvert the peace process without openly violating its terms—a form of "compliance sabotage" that is difficult to detect or punish in the absence of strong monitoring. This insight pushes the literature beyond binary categories of compliance and non-compliance, urging scholars to consider the contested and performative nature of post-conflict behaviour. Spoiler behaviour in the Sierra Leone context was not

always overt; rather, it manifested in subtle reinterpretations, administrative delays, selective implementation, and discursive reframing. These actions were enabled—and in some cases incentivised—by the lack of normative and legal clarity in the Accord itself.

5.5 Ambiguity, Trust, and the Breakdown of Commitment

Perhaps the most far-reaching implication of the findings is the connection between ambiguity and erosion of trust. Ambiguity not only provides strategic room for spoilers; it also signals to all parties that the agreement was inherently unstable and open to manipulation. This perception undermined the fragile trust built during negotiations, replacing it with suspicion and contingency planning. As a result, the parties approached implementation not as a cooperative project but as a competitive arena for positional advantage. This erosion of trust validates the core premise of commitment theory: that in the absence of enforceable and mutually understood commitments, peace agreements are unlikely to survive [25] (Fearon, 1995). In the Abidjan case, trust deficits were not just emotional or interpersonal—they were a structurally produced design flaw in the agreement's content. Therefore, the study contributes to the growing recognition that the form and language of peace agreements are as consequential as their substantive goals.

5.6 Relationship to Research Questions

These findings directly address the study's central research question: *How did the vagueness of the Abidjan Peace Accord affect the commitment of the warring parties and contribute to its failure to be implemented?* The evidence demonstrates that ambiguity in the agreement critically undermined its enforceability, created space for divergent interpretations among stakeholders, enabled manipulation by spoilers, and ultimately eroded trust and diminished the parties' commitment to the peace process. By empirically examining this question through a case study of Sierra Leone, the research advances existing theoretical frameworks that link peace agreement design to post-conflict outcomes, while also offering context-specific insights that deepen understanding of how textual ambiguity can shape the trajectory of peace processes.

5.7 Theoretical and Policy Implications

Theoretically, this study highlights the importance of agreement design in shaping post-conflict trajectories. While much attention in peacebuilding literature has focused on power-sharing, inclusion, and external interventions, this research highlights textual clarity as a critical variable in peace durability. Ambiguity may offer short-term diplomatic flexibility during negotiations, but this study shows that it can have long-term destabilising effects when left unresolved during implementation. From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the imperative for peace agreement drafters, mediators, and guarantors to prioritise the use of precise, enforceable language, particularly in provisions on disarmament, transitional justice, and the sequencing of commitments.

In conclusion, the dynamics observed in the Abidjan Peace Accord mirror patterns identified in other post-conflict settings, where ambiguity facilitated competing interpretations and spoiler manipulation. For example, the Lomé Peace Accord similarly suffered from vague amnesty and security provisions, while the Sudanese CPA revealed how imprecise timelines and enforcement mechanisms generated elite contestation. These parallels suggest that

ambiguity operates as a recurrent design flaw in negotiated settlements, reinforcing the broader applicability of the study's findings while remaining grounded in the Abidjan case.

6. Future Research

Building on these limitations, future studies should consider comparative case studies of multiple peace agreements to explore patterns of ambiguity and implementation across different settings. Quantitative content analysis of peace agreement texts—measuring levels of specificity across different clauses—could complement qualitative findings and provide a broader, generalisable framework. Additionally, there is scope for longitudinal research into how interpretive disputes evolve and how ambiguity in agreements influences actor behaviour at different phases of the peace process. Research could also explore how local communities experience and interpret ambiguous agreements, thereby contributing to more inclusive and grounded understandings of peacebuilding.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how the vagueness of the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord contributed to its implementation challenges and the subsequent resurgence of conflict in Sierra Leone. Grounded in qualitative data from 40 semi-structured interviews with key informants and anchored in scholarly debates on peace agreement design, commitment theory, and spoiler behaviour, the study demonstrates that textual ambiguity in peace agreements represents a significant structural weakness rather than a mere technical oversight or negotiating compromise.

The findings highlight how ambiguity in core provisions – particularly those on disarmament, amnesty, power-sharing, and the withdrawal of foreign forces – generated confusion and inconsistencies during implementation. This lack of clarity led to divergent interpretations of critical clauses, fracturing the post-agreement consensus and prompting mutual accusations of bad faith. The absence of credible enforcement mechanisms further weakened the integrity of the Accord, making it difficult to monitor and enforce compliance in any meaningful way. Moreover, the study reveals that spoilers – both internal and external – strategically exploited the grey areas within the Accord to pursue destabilising objectives while maintaining a veneer of formal compliance. In this context, ambiguity became not merely a passive flaw but an active enabler of manipulation and obstruction. As trust between the signatories deteriorated, ambiguity intensified suspicion and justified pre-emptive non-compliance, ultimately undermining the foundation of the peace process.

Collectively, these findings reinforce and extend theoretical insights within the literature on peacebuilding and negotiated settlements. The study emphasises the vital importance of clarity, sequencing, and enforceability in the design of peace agreements, particularly in fragile post-conflict environments where trust is low and incentives for defection are high. Beyond its empirical contribution, the study offers a novel interpretive lens for understanding the failure of the Abidjan Peace Accord. Rather than attributing the collapse solely to the intransigence of actors or the volatility of the Sierra Leonean context, the study points to the structural ambiguities embedded in the Accord itself as a central explanatory factor. By linking these textual features to strategic behaviour and conflict outcomes, the research strengthens the case for greater rigour in attention to language, legal precision, and institutional design in both academic analyses and practical peace negotiations.

8. Recommendations

Drawing on the empirical findings of this study, it is evident that the design, language, and implementation mechanisms of peace agreements play a critical role in determining their durability and effectiveness. To address these challenges and guide future peace processes, this section outlines tailored, evidence-based recommendations targeted at key stakeholders involved in post-conflict peacebuilding – namely, policymakers, conflict resolution practitioners, mediators, and drafters of peace agreements.

8.1 Recommendations to Policy Makers

To facilitate sustainable governance reforms and enforceability, policymakers should ensure that peace agreements are consistent with national legal and institutional frameworks. In addition, they should encourage inclusive peace processes by integrating civil society, victim organisations, and local communities into both the negotiation and implementation phases to enhance public ownership and legitimacy. Furthermore, policymakers should institutionalise domestic dispute-resolution mechanisms capable of resolving disagreements over the interpretation and implementation of peace agreements, and establish confidence-building measures, including security guarantees, disarmament incentives, and joint implementation bodies.

8.2 Recommendations to Conflict Resolution Practitioners

Conflict resolution practitioners should proactively identify and manage potential spoilers by conducting comprehensive risk assessments and advocating safeguards to reduce the likelihood of agreement breakdown. They should advocate for the implementation of independent monitoring and verification mechanisms to improve compliance and accountability, while simultaneously promoting locally led peacebuilding initiatives rooted in community ownership and trust. In addition, practitioners should enhance the implementation capacity of national institutions by providing the technical, logistical, and institutional support needed to implement the provisions of peace agreements successfully.

8.3 Recommendations to Mediators

Mediators should ensure that peace agreements are drafted in plain, precise, and operational language that outlines the responsibilities, timelines, and implementation procedures. Agreements should include realistic, phased commitments supported by measurable benchmarks and appropriate incentives for compliance, as well as effective dispute-resolution mechanisms. Mediators should also be aware of the potential for spoilers to exploit ambiguities and should develop provisions that reduce the likelihood of manipulation and enhance the longevity of peace agreements.

8.4 Recommendations to Drafters of Peace Agreements

To ensure peace agreements are explicit and actionable, drafters should use precise, clear language that defines roles, responsibilities, implementation timelines, and accountability mechanisms. To facilitate implementation, agreements should include robust enforcement provisions, independent monitoring and verification arrangements, and appropriate sanctions for non-compliance. Additionally, the legitimacy, ownership, and sustainability of peace agreements should be strengthened by incorporating inclusive and participatory provisions that ensure meaningful engagement of civil society, affected communities, women, and other stakeholders throughout the formulation process.

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The Accord sounded hopeful, but it was written in such a way that you could interpret the same sentence in opposite ways. For instance, the disarmament clause lacked any concrete timelines or third-party oversight.

⁶ Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 10 October 2023

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