



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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Interviewer: Varanya Chaubey

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CHAUBEY: Today is May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009. My name is Varanya Chaubey and I'm here with Mr. Calvin Benn who is Deputy Commissioner of the National Registration and also Deputy Chief Election Officer of Operations at GECOM (Guyana Elections Commission) in Guyana. Thank you Mr. Benn for participating in this interview.

BENN: *You're welcome.*

CHAUBEY: I'd like to begin by asking a little bit about your personal background so would briefly describe your roles and responsibilities in your current position and a brief description of how you came to this position?

BENN: *Well, Varayna, I arrived at this position after a number of years working with the Guyana Elections Commission on a part time basis. I am basically from the field of education all my life. Prior to working at the Elections Commission I worked with the Ministry of Education. I came through the ranks of teaching and eventually I was part of the ministry's professional arm in supervising schools. Now, during that process whenever there was election or registration, I took the opportunity to apply and I took part on a part-time basis at the various registration exercises and elections. I started my tour of duty on a part-time basis with the Guyana Elections Commission since 1975. That's working at the different levels in the field. In 1990 I was appointed to supervise the conduct of registration and elections in District 3. Thereafter, I climbed the ladder. In 1994, I supervised the conduct of local government elections in Georgetown.*

*I should also tell you that in 1992 I supervised the conduct of registration and elections in Region 3. In 1996 I was Registrar and Returning Officer for the conduct of elections in District 4 but almost close to elections time I was promoted to the rank of Senior Manager at the Guyana Elections Commission. So, in 1997 I came over and joined the, you can say, the Secretariat staff of the Guyana Elections Commission. So having completed the registration aspect in '96, I came over and joined the Secretariat in '97 at the Guyana Elections Commission.*

*After that, we continued working on a part-time basis whenever there was need to. Then some vacancies were advertised in 2000 for persons who wanted to join the Secretariat permanently. I applied and was successful and here I am performing the duties of Deputy Chief Election Officer and also Deputy Commissioner National Registration*

CHAUBEY: Would you describe what your responsibilities are in each of those areas?

BENN: *Well, in terms of the Deputy Commissioner National Registration, I am responsible for all the data collection in the field, all the activities in the field that support the work of the Secretariat. I am responsible for ensuring that the different activities as they regard to registering persons in the field are done in accordance with the laws and the rules and regulations of the Guyana Elections Commission. I am responsible overall for ensuring that the data collected, that they are imputed at the center and that the relevant lists and ID, ID meaning identification cards, are produced.*

*I am also responsible for ensuring that the relationship between our field staff and scrutineers. You might be aware that political parties according to the law are allowed to scrutinize the process out there. So we have to ensure that there's a good working relationship out there so that whatever is our final product, the product would have gone through a process whereby other persons authorized*

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*by law would have actually overseen what is there and help us to build confidence in whatever product comes out there. We are responsible for also ensuring that when the ID cards are produced that they're distributed and that the relevant persons are in receipt of their correct identification cards with the correct data. You name it, in terms of operations; we are responsible for everything that causes the [Elections Commission](#) to work.*

*For elections, it's similar. We are responsible for ensuring that we have competent staff appointed. We are ensuring—we are responsible for ensuring that the right number of polling places are identified. Not only the right number but that polling places are adequate and suitable. We are responsible for getting the materials out there on time. We are responsible for ensuring that on polling day that persons are properly afforded the opportunity to vote. That the vote is counted, that reports are written. Statements of Polls are written. That the results are transmitted by way of Statements of Poll and by way of other means of communication to the center and handed over to the Chief Election Officer. So if you look at that carefully, you'd recognize that it's almost the entire process that I'm responsible for overall to get elections conducted in accordance with the laws and regulations.*

CHAUBEY: Now you've seen the electoral process from various angles in your many years of experience with the Elections Commission. I wondered if you could share with us in your view what some of the most significant administrative and operational changes have been at GECOM in your time here?

BENN: *I think some of the important changes have been—I give you them at random as I remember them. One, let me look at 2006 which most people have described as the most successful in recent times. When we examined our performance in 2001, and you know that before 2001 people complained a lot about the election results being slow to come in and that people deliberately withheld results and such. When we looked at the 2001 elections, we recognized that at the managerial level in the field that we needed to do something to improve our rate of return of results because what has been happening over the years is that the slow pace at which results were coming in was the main cause of disgruntlement, dissatisfaction and cause for persons out there to want to start to create problems.*

*So we recognize that the—at the level of the Returning Officer, that some Returning Officers were not afforded the full number or sufficient number of deputies that would help to make management effective out there. When you look at the principle of management you recognize that if you want—your span of control should not be too wide. So we had out there—let's look at District 4, the largest district. In 2001 we had something like about twenty-something deputies for a district that had almost 50% of the electorate. Now, it meant that a Deputy had in some instances, twenty-something polling places for which he was responsible. So the rate at which the results were coming to that one Deputy obviously would have been slow.*

*So what we did in 2006, instead of, I think it was about twenty-something Deputies as I said, we increased the number of Deputies in District four to 67 or 68. So what happened there now, it afforded a Deputy a smaller, more manageable number of polling place so that results will come in to that Deputy at a faster rate seeing that he had far less number of presiding offices to treat with. So when that happened it also helped each Deputy now to get the results quicker to the Returning Officer who was overall in charge and it helped the Returning Officer in turn to get the results quicker to the Command Center.*

*So we were able to avoid problems that happened in 2001, not so—too much a great problem but we were able to avoid problem of this slow rate of return and we were able, if you remember, in 2006 within three days we were able to declare the elections as opposed to the number of days in 2001. As you go farther back, history will show you the number of days that those results took to come in.*

*In addition to increasing the number of managerial staff at that level, what we did in terms of all the logistics, we had people on the ground who were there to collect the Statements of Poll from different clusters and get them straight to the Center here. Originally, what happened is that we relied on what the law said word for word, that the Returning Officer must get the Statement of Poll to the Chief Election Officer. He must collect all the Statements of Poll from his people down there and he was the sole person to get everything up here.*

*So what we did, we facilitated that process by having our people on the ground to collect the Statements of Polls that were to come directly to the Chief Election Officer. So while we were compiling our results here, at the same time, they could have been compiling. So when they did bring up their results there, you already had a jump start here having had copies of those already factored in here. So those kinds of things helped to get rid of the problem where we had this slow pace of results and you know the political parties will collect copies of the Statements of Poll. So you had a situation where political parties are declaring results for areas and you can do not—you not declaring which gives the impression that you are deliberately stymieing or withholding information from the public which got some people angry and people started to protest and so on.*

*So we put those two—those are two significant reforms we put in place. In addition to that what we did, at the polling place, traditionally we used to just concentrate on one polling booth and we decided, listen, why have one polling booth when you can have two polling booths and you can have two persons voting at the same time. So that helped to quicken the rate at which people were voting at the various polling stations. So even though you may have had long lines pretty early in the morning because people wanted to vote early, you didn't have these long lines for long periods in the day because you were able to fast track the voters as they come. I think those are three things I can remember off the top of my head.*

*In addition to that too what we did in terms of getting the materials, election materials, to the different districts, originally what was done you would have the different Returning Officers coming to the Center individually and you check off their materials and then each Returning Officer would have left and gone back with his set of materials utilizing a large set of—fleet of vehicles on an individual basis, individual Returning Officer basis. What we started to do from 2001, we started to—we have our own terms, we say containerize the election materials. So, for District 6 we will get a container or two and we have the Returning Officers do the check off here and we pack those containers and we ship all the things for Region 6 and we place them at particular points.*

*So on election day or whenever the Returning Officer is distributing his materials, the materials are at particular points already in the region at central points supported by the necessary security measures. We did that for all the different Districts as far as practicable. That also help to increase and improve, to a certain extent, a kind of managerial systems that we had in place.*

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*One of—another thing that we also did was that we met with the Returning Officers on a regular, very regular basis so that we provided opportunity for clarification of issues, disseminating information on a need-to-know basis as information comes so that you kept them up to date with whatever changes, whatever issues there were so that they were current in what was happening. We encouraged even—we encouraged some of them even to do mock, like what do you call it, like mock results. There's a term which I can't remember now but you pretend to have an election and then you calling in—*

CHAUBEY: Mock poll?

*BENN: No, the mock poll is at the polling place. I remember what—what's the term we call it? But this one now, maybe in your country you can call it mock poll but you pretend as though polls have been held and results are there now and you call them into a command center like and see how long this thing will take you, what problems you would encounter in your communication flow. So there was a lot of on the ground preparation that helped you to foresee or forecast the likelihood of any untoward incident that may jeopardize your efficient conduct of elections.*

*In terms of mock polls, in our case, what we did, we appointed the polling place staff sometime, a couple of weeks well before, I think it's almost for a month, before elections and we encouraged the Returning Officers to let them hold mock polls at their respective polling places. So long before election day you had a feel of your polling place. You know to arrange your furniture. You had a feel of exactly how things will flow, what to do, whether your polling place is arranged in such a way to facilitate the free flow of voters and so we encouraged them to do that on a weekly basis. People long before elections would have started would have had the opportunity of experiencing in that way, you know, simple procedures that involved the conduct of the poll.*

CHAUBEY: I'd like to go back to some of these reforms and ask some questions about them in a little more detail. Going back to the question of increasing managerial staff, you mentioned that earlier there were 20 deputies for was it District 4? District 4 I believe.

*BENN: District 4.*

CHAUBEY: Then the number was increased to 67. I wondered if you could share with us how you went about determining how many more managerial staff you would need. How did you arrive at that number of 67?

*BENN: Well what we did actually, we applied strictly managerial principles. One of the things is that, my field is management and the principle of management tells you if you really want to have effective management supervision, you shouldn't have more than about 7 to 10 persons being controlled by a supervisor. So we utilized strictly managerial principle to arrive at that. When we look at the number of polling place across Region 4 and the number of deputies we had and so on, we made that kind of adjustment and it worked.*

CHAUBEY: The other question I had is, so in terms of a Returning Officer earlier they had twenty deputies that were sending them results and now they had 67—

*BENN: That's right.*

CHAUBEY: How did they adapt to that much larger number of people reporting to them?

**BENN:** *Well, what we did, we gave a Returning Officer more staff, administrative staff. So it's not—even though so you're sending result but not directly to the Returning Officer himself taking the results. So he would have had in his office, let us say, three or four clerks. So each clerk would be responsible for a cluster of this 60-something. So they would be reporting to the clerks in the office of the Returning Officer and that facilitated everybody sending the results there. Of course we utilized cell phones, HF (High Frequency) VHF (Very High Frequency) radio sets and so on.*

**CHAUBEY:** So to clarify, staff were increased also at the Deputy level, but there were also additional clerks—

**BENN:** *At the office of the Returning Officer.*

**CHAUBEY:** Then I wondered about—you mentioned that the number of polling booths at each center were increased from one to two. How did you decide on having two? Why not three or four?

**BENN:** *Well, you see, three or four could have caused a little bottleneck when you—because you utilize one ballot box, right? So, if you have two—if you have more than two persons coming at the same time to utilize the same ballot box you could have a little bottleneck there. What we did too, we instead of giving some polling places with a large number of electors, instead of giving them one Assistant Presiding Officer you give them two. So that help you to handle the additional, to deal with the additional number of electors, but really we saw if you—. Maybe you might have been able to go to three but then we foresee that you could have had a little problem when two or three persons standing, waiting to put the ballot in the box but with two it could have been easily facilitated and did not interfere with the flow of the electors.*

**CHAUBEY:** On the subject of distribution you described briefly that you containerized election materials and we're wondering if you could share what did these containers look like? What was the capacity?

**BENN:** *All right, I'm sure you would have been seeing while traveling on our roads those large containers that ship things overseas and so on, those steel containers, 60 foot and so on, those containers. So when we pack—when the Returning Officer would have checked off all his election supplies, put them in the respective ballot boxes and so on, we now place them in those containers.*

**CHAUBEY:** So there would be boxes—

**BENN:** *Ballot boxes, ballots and so on and they travel in those containers. So you could ship an entire District materials in one of those 60 foot containers straight to the District rather than having, let us say, maybe about ten, fifteen trucks going that way.*

**CHAUBEY:** What was the reason to do this?

**BENN:** *The reason was to limit and have more control over what—because if you have fifteen trucks or twelve trucks and a number of security men, you have to get a number of staff that have to go with them as against one thing taking all the materials there.*

**CHAUBEY:** So you mentioned they were shipped mostly by road?

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- BENN:** *Yes. For the hinterland, where we could have used roads, there are some hinterland communities like Region 8, Mahdia, Lethem, that's Region 9. But for places like Mabaruma, Kamarang, Parmakatoi, and so on, we made use of airplanes. We used the airplanes to ship our stuff into those locations. There is no other way, strictly by airplanes.*
- What we did in some regions too, we had on election day, we bought a certain number of hours time with the airplane so they had—we had them in the region so in case any emergency, the Returning Officer could have made use of them and also he had to use them to share out his ballots, his ballot boxes and materials and to collect them. So he had them on the spot there when he was ready to just move and collect them rather than when he is ready, calling for the aircraft from Georgetown to get in there and then to go and do what we call shuttles. So that helped. Also in the hinterland communities, to have the results returned to the specific location, the one spot where the Returning Officer was at the faster rate.*
- CHAUBEY:** The aircraft that you use, were those state aircraft?
- BENN:** *No, no they were private aircraft from the normal private companies that are responsible for aircrafts in Guyana. Those companies are the companies that provide aircrafts to take people to the hinterland and so on. So it's those same companies we utilize.*
- CHAUBEY:** In terms of budgeting, this must have added some significant cost?
- BENN:** *Yes, elections are pretty costly in Guyana. Those aircrafts indeed carry a significant cost but I always say democracy is very costly.*
- CHAUBEY:** Another thing you mentioned is that you met with the Returning Officers quite regularly and this seems to have helped prepare them. What was the format in which you met and how regularly were these meetings held?
- BENN:** *We met with them—let me first say that they were appointed several months in advance.*
- CHAUBEY:** Sorry, just to clarify, was that the case earlier as well that they were appointed several months in advance?
- BENN:** *Yes. We met with them on a monthly basis, that's the longest period. But sometimes we met with them on a fortnightly basis depending on the need for such meetings. But the longest period you would've had was every month but most often it was long before the month period and in many instances was every fortnight we met with them. So you are able to intervene on a timely basis and any problems were not allowed to go for too long because the longer the problems go, the situations escalate and sometimes they are out of control. So we were able to meet with them regularly and we ourselves paid visits. We visited all the time the regions. We monitored what was happening so we didn't only call them to the Center, we went into the locations, met with them, discussed with them, helped to solve any problems that they might have had and provided the kind of support that they needed.*
- CHAUBEY:** I know this was a long time ago but if you have any examples that you might recall off the top of your head of interventions that you were able to make based on the information they provided, that would be very useful.

**BENN:** *I think off the top of my head, sometimes the choice of a polling place might have been cause for concern from members in the community. When you get down there and you observe what was happening, it helped you to understand the problems from the electors or the parties standpoint and you were able to discuss with the Returning Officers and sometimes fortunately you knew some of the regions very personally because from my standpoint I have worked quite a lot in the hinterland. So sometimes I was able to relate immediately with the problems that people complained about. So you go there, go on the ground, visit with the Returning Officer and possibly the party officials and you would have been able to intervene and help them to determine alternative polling places that would more facilitate equality of access and so on where electors were concerned.*

**CHAUBEY:** One of the things that seems to have helped as well is to have a sort of dry run of how to communicate results. How did the idea to do that come about?

**BENN:** *I think we borrowed significantly from—I think this idea specifically came from the logistics people within the operations department. What happened, we have some persons here who are from the army who came to the logistics section and it is my understanding that the principle in the military is that before you go to an operation it is always good to have a simulation, that's the word I was looking for, simulation exercises. So we borrowed from the military and that started to become part of our regular operations. It more particularly came here when Major General Joe Singh in 2001 was the Chairman of the Guyana Elections Commission.*

**CHAUBEY:** Were there some adjustments you also made in terms of the equipment used for communication?

**BENN:** *Well what was happening in the beginning, we were just relying on landline phones. We recognized that they weren't enough so we made adjustment. We started to have HF and VHF radio sets. We also utilized fax machines and we started to utilize cell phones. So there were a variety of equipment that we used that helped to ensure that results could have been passed and passed swiftly. Not only were they were sending by radio but they needed to fax the machine—fax the results so you could have compared what was sent on the telephone or radio with the hardcopy to see whether you are getting the same kind of results and it aided in a kind of verification or validation of the results that came by one medium.*

**CHAUBEY:** Also on the subject of mock polls, you mentioned Returning Officers were encouraged to ensure people ran exercises at the polling station maybe a week before election day?

**BENN:** *Two weeks before we started. They had to report to us on how—we didn't only allow them to have it done but there was a format that they had to report how many mock poll sessions you held and comment on how well each session went and so on. So you ensure it was done in a structured, coordinated way.*

**CHAUBEY:** Now, and I'd also wondered where the idea for the mock polls came from.

**BENN:** *If I can recall we've been utilizing that since in the '90's. I can't recall how it started but we wanted—the idea—what we recognized was that listen, one, if you are going to have elections done you needed to be familiar with your polling place long before so we encouraged them to visit the place. You must know where the place is located so you don't go looking for it on polling day. Second,*

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*we say if you visit this place you must see if it has enough furniture. Thirdly, we say listen, not only that, what about going to these place and doing a mock poll and so you can get an idea to see if you are arranging your furniture in a way that it facilitates the smooth flow and everybody must agree to see, you know, Because if you can fix your furniture so that it facilitates a smooth flow, then right away it aids management of your lines and so on, on polling day.*

*So I think it's just thinking starting with one bit of idea and then going deeper and deeper and then you eventually recognize here there's bigger picture in this thing that we can utilize. One of the things we also do, we normally utilize the, we get some company, some theatre company and we get them to dramatize the different stages of voting and we tape that and we make cassettes for enough—enough cassettes for the Returning Officers. We provide them with television sets so that they can actually play the cassettes and let people see how polling should proceed, the entire process of voting on election day from the time people gather, when we open the polls, we will check the ballot boxes, you see the ballot box, voting goes on, how you proceed to count, how you fill out the necessary forms, how you close the polls, how you write up the different forms, which form goes in which envelope. We asked them—we get them to do that regularly before polling day. So it's not only doing it by yourselves but it's also the visual there to help remind you for you to see how things should proceed in an orderly manner.*

CHAUBEY: Was this done for the first time in preparation for the 2006 election?

BENN: *This was done for the first time in 2001 if I remember. I think we did something in '97 too, '97. But it was intensified and it became more like a routine, a compulsory part of our preparation for 2001 and 2006.*

CHAUBEY: I also have a question about whether security forces were part of these—any of these simulation exercises.

BENN: *Not really because what happens is that the security forces because of how they operate you would have to get permission and all of that for them to be part. Then remember they would have—they would be preparing their own kind of simulation exercises. But what happened is that we would have been meeting with the security forces on a regular almost on a weekly basis. We would meet with all the commanders of the different Districts. We would have briefing sessions so we would be working hand in hand to ensure that on polling day everything goes smoothly. We would have been—they would have also been involved in voting before election day when everybody else voted so that on voting day when every—when the majority of the electorate is voting, they would have been free to perform their duties at the different polling place.*

CHAUBEY: Now it seems like there is some significant merit to having polling staff going and sort of looking at the polling stations ensuring everything is in order. You mentioned the furniture, in similarly, is it important for security forces to go and sort of scope out the polling area?

BENN: *Yes they do that you know. They—we have to give them a list of all the polling places long before polling day. I mean, to their credit sometimes they would come and say, listen, we don't think that location is ideal because from a security standpoint. So sometimes they make recommendations to us based on their knowledge of security, their knowledge and experience that helps us to have a second look and maybe in some instances, not many, but in some instances to change a particular location that we might have identified for polling place.*

CHAUBEY: Now the 2006 elections as you mentioned and I've been reading, were declared the most peaceful. So have there been any changes that you could share with us that security forces have made in the way that they approach election security?

BENN: *I don't know if you're asking the right person the right question. But I think what's happening is that there is a better coordination between us and the security forces. There is a greater appreciation of the need to work together and to see ourselves as partner in this business. Because when all is said and done the intention is to have a peaceful, trouble free, free and transparent poll. I think over the years both security forces and officials of the commission have come to realize that this is not security forces and the commission it is a group of us trying to ensure that elections are run peacefully and in accordance with the laws.*

CHAUBEY: One of the things that I noticed is that the staff size considerably increased for the 2006 election, the managerial staff. Were those people employed permanently or on a temporary basis?

BENN: *Temporary. They were employed on a temporary basis. Most election staff are at the junior staff level, like the Presiding Officers and so on, they would have been employed for just a few weeks. The Returning Officer, we employ him for a longer period because, remember, he has to help us identify places of poll. He has to know his boundaries, he has to ensure that all the infrastructure that they're in place. Of course we provide the necessary support and even when the polls are closed and results are declared, he has to now do what we call mop up.*

*You have your pre-polling activities, then you have polling and you have post-polling activities. So when those polling day staff go home, he has to ensure that all the materials and equipment, the non-sensitive materials we call them, are returned to the center, all the polling signs are taken down, buildings that we rent are returned to persons in the state in which we got them, that we pay—those places that we rent that we pay the persons their rental and all of that. So the Returning Officer and his Deputies we keep them on for a longer period to ensure that there is a smooth transition having completed the poll and that all the mopping activities are completed.*

CHAUBEY: Now in going out and recruiting a fresh pool each time, do you find that you rehire a lot of the people that have been used in the past since they have had experience with this?

BENN: *Yes we find that because there are some people who are always waiting out there for when there is an election period or when there is a registration period so you find that some people have been rehired over 20 years, you know, 25 years, that they have been working with the Guyana Elections Commission. Then of course, you have some new ones coming on board from time to time but generally you have quite a lot of people who have previous experience and have been working with us over a long period of time*

CHAUBEY: Do many of them come from a particular profession?

BENN: *Yes. A very large percentage comes from the teaching profession. That's quite understanding because basically teaching has the largest workforce in Guyana and we welcome it because teachers generally are supposed to be operating at a certain level with integrity, honesty, sincerity. Then in terms of preparation of documents, unlike me, they are supposed to have good handwriting so you*

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*shouldn't have difficulty in deciphering whatever it is that they have recorded. So it serves a good purpose.*

CHAUBEY: What are some of the ways in which the Central Administration ensures that people working in the field and having direct contact with voters maintain a professional attitude especially in terms of being unbiased on election day or while they are conducting other exercises?

BENN: *Well one of the things we do during our training of these polling day staff or registration staff, we emphasize the need to be impartial, not to be associated with political parties even if they have their private dealing then there has to come a time when there must be a separation of what you want or your personal political aspirations or wishes because obviously people will have that. But when you are discharging the duties and functions of the staff of the Guyana Elections Commission we expect that they will operate at a certain level not showing political bias.*

*Then you have to take an oath and then we ask them to adhere to a particular conduct code—code of conduct that says if you belong to political parties, for instance, if you're a known political activists there, you are not employed to work with us. You may apply, you may go to the training but somewhere along the line the net catches you and someone brings it to attention that you're a political activist and you're not employed. If we find people while working with us engaged in political activities which will bring disrepute or harm to the commission then we ask them to go—we dismiss them.*

CHAUBEY: I'd like to move now a little bit toward the registration section. You've also been in charge of this recent house-to-house registration verification exercise. Would you describe how you went about planning this and also some of the motivations for moving to continuous registration?

BENN: *The recent house-to-house exercise which we held last year planning entailed—we had to come up with an estimate. That's where we started. We look at the number of the persons who were on the last voters list and we start—we use that to kind of estimate a possible number of persons that would be out there. Of course when you estimate you are never accurate. It could either be more or less.*

CHAUBEY: Sorry, just to interrupt, was there a particular formula that you used to make that estimate?

BENN: *We used I think it was 20%, either 10% or 20%. We added that on to the last list of electors and we did that because for the house-to-house registration we were involving 14 years of age and older where as for electors it is from 18 years and older. So we discussed with our registration officers out there because remember registration officers have been permanent in the order since 2005. So we utilize their knowledge and expertise and they suggest that 20% would be a better number to go with because when they looked at the schools and the 14 year old and older and so on, they said 20% would be a good number to go with. So we use that how we came up with the number.*

*For each region, as I said, the registration officers were an integral part of this and utilizing that no more. The registration officers and we at the Secretariat started to determine the number of staff we would require to do the registration of the amount that we came up with in each district. We looked at the number of things, the number of—the kind of information we had to collect from each*

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*person. How long it will take to do a registration of one person and depending on how long it will take and the time available for registration, how many people we would employ. Then we look at the number of persons and the geographic spread to determine where we will place offices that will facilitate persons working from and so on. So we went about it in that kind of way.*

*Then we looked at the registration process itself to see what kind of materials and facilities would be needed to help us achieve this—the goal or objectives that we set. We met with the registration officers on a regular basis and developed a plan we fine-tune it, they identified the buildings that we would need to use in their areas. They approached the respective, the relevant agencies in charge of the buildings. Got permission. We trained people. They were part of the trainers. The registration officers assist us in training. When we were finished training before we identified people, we also looked at the area in which they lived to ensure that in each area that we had sufficient persons representing the registration staff there because we didn't want the problem where you have—you select a whole set of people but when you look at the spread, you do not have people for different areas but yet you have your full complement of staff.*

*So it was a whole host of continued planning with our registration officers and so on that eventually ended up with buildings, staff, equipment, the number of days that and we targeted—we help them to determine-- target yourself, so "listen, within this period try to finish 'X' number of registration." So they were working towards a target within specific times.*

CHAUBEY: Why did you create a target?

BENN: *Because if you don't create a target people can cause time to slip away. When you are coming to the close then some people may realize, you know, we only have four more days but look at this, I'm working in this area and I've only touched a quarter of the persons. But in setting a target it helped to keep them on their toes and help us to be ahead rather than have people operating in a laissez-faire manner, oh, I have until July. But if you have a target you have to reach the target and don't let July, look at the end of the period but that you work and you know, listen, let me try to complete 50 persons by the end of this week or whatever it is. Now if you do that, it means that coming on in the long run, if you finish before it allows you time now to mop up, to revisit those areas which you didn't find people at home and then also to do a thorough job and make sure that indeed you covered your area and that you touched every nook and cranny. Make sure that you visited every single area.*

CHAUBEY: This is very interesting, the idea of setting targets. Where did this idea come from?

BENN: *We started that some years ago. We feel that if you are working and you don't have—targets have to give you purpose, not only purpose but it helps you to share up, divide up your work into portions and make sure that at certain points, like you, not timelines, there are specific thresholds that you have to reach at different points in time. It helps you to keep you there, keep you on the goal to make that sure that you work assiduously towards the overall objective.*

CHAUBEY: Now, just to clarify, were these weekly thresholds?

BENN: *No. They were monthly. We worked for six—it was from January to the 7<sup>th</sup> of July, thereabout.*

- CHAUBEY: Were these thresholds part of the printed materials or manuals that registration officials were given?
- BENN: *No, no. They were just developed with the registration officer would have sat with his staff so individual targets would have been specifically applicable to different areas.*
- CHAUBEY: So the registration officials were given some degree of flexibility in how they—
- BENN: Yes, yes.
- CHAUBEY: Just to back up a little bit to the issue of establishing permanent registration offices, this was—this happened with the continuous registration exercise?
- BENN: *That's right.*
- CHAUBEY: So would you describe a little bit the motivations for shifting to a system of continuous registration?
- BENN: *Well as I said in the beginning, we recognized that this periodic or some people call it episodic, all sorts of words were used to describe the system of registration we had because we only registered, as I said, when some election was imminent, you know, around the corner. We recognized that during the five-year period you do not—you don't do any registration but then you have the 14-year-old coming up, they need according to our laws, fourteen years is the time when we should provide people with ID cards. So what happens between that five-year period, you know.*
- So we started to find ourselves in a situation where people are of age, no ID cards because we are waiting for an election to hold registration. Then what happen, because registration was held to hold election, people started to politicize registration and we felt that wasn't right. Registration must be seen separate and apart from elections because the idea of registration is to provide eligible persons with an identity document by which he or she can be identified wherever he or she goes in Guyana and possibly outside.*
- So we said listen, the only way we can go about this is to have a system of continuous registration where whenever someone becomes eligible they can just go to a registration office in his or her area and become registered rather than everybody coming down to the Secretariat. We developed a concept paper, we looked at this thing as I said to you, I went on an attachment to the Elections Commission, Elections on Boundaries Commission in Trinidad and Tobago for twelve days. Mr. Lowenfield my assistant, he went to Jamaica for twelve day. But as I said prior to that we were doing a lot of reading on continuous registration.*
- So we went there and studied those systems and based on what we saw at the two elections commissions, we did a merge. We decided to establish that system in Guyana. So we said, listen, there are ten registration districts. We must provide offices in each district so that people can register within their district. So utilizing that concept and the geographic spread of the area and so on and the dense-- population density we identified 23 registration offices for the start. We really said in our concept paper that we should move to 33 offices in the long run but you know as things would have it, we still have the 23 and we have one, two, three, four sub-offices. So it's 23 permanent offices and as the need arises we open these sub-offices from time to time.*

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CHAUBEY: What were some of the benefits of moving to continuous registration in your view?

BENN: *Well some of the benefits is that it took a lot of pressure off of you at election time. It reduces the surge of persons coming to register because they have been registering all of the time. Apart from that, it provided you with less stress in terms of preparing the relevant registers, ID cards. You could have done your work with less pressure and you could have done work that was more accurate and reliable. I think one of the things too is that with continuous registration, it help—it is helping to break down this belief or this trend where people only see registration as an election something. People recognize, listen, you need to get registered whether there is election or not because you need to have an ID card. You have to transact business or you need a job or you want to get a passport. So it is getting the kind of significance that we expected it to have out there.*

CHAUBEY: Now as the Deputy Commissioner for National Registration, you have seen this process from a high level. What were some of the challenges that you faced during this process?

BENN: *Well, I think the challenges were many. One, getting people to accept the process in the first instance. Two, shaping the process because remember it's from nothing we had to shape this whole process of continuous registration. So one of the things we had when we developed the concept paper and we circulated it to the stakeholders, somehow some stakeholders were looking at the document strictly from a political standpoint and there was rejection in the first instance.*

CHAUBEY: After the 2006 elections, that list was entirely jettisoned and a new list was constructed through house-to-house?

BENN: *Well, let me see how I should put this, because we haven't come up with a new list yet because what's happening is that we're taking all the ten fingerprints. There were allegations that people were deliberately registering more than once. Once the registration exercise is clean and perfect, that will facilitate a clean and perfect electoral list.*

*So one of the things that we proposed in the registration exercise to build confidence in the registration process was to take the ten fingerprints and we cross reference then we cross match them like what's happening in Jamaica and Antigua and so on. So you can change your address, you can change your looks, you can do whatever you want but you can't change the fingerprints. So we sent our fingerprints to, cross match outside of Guyana. Now when they came back they came back with some duplicates on them, persons, two different persons supposedly having the same fingerprints. So what we are doing right now, we are interviewing those persons with the a view to determine what exactly transpired and with a view to ensuring that if somebody indeed registered more than once, we are only going to have them once on the list. So we are going to cancel the false registration and keep the most recent.*

*We are at that stage and the Commission is to make some decisions. When those decisions are made, then we are going to truly have the second aspect of the database because what we have right now, we just have this data there but with the decision of the Commission, we are going to commit finally all the data to the database and then we will have really, our new list (the old database will just be kept for historical and research purposes). So as it is, we don't have a list per*

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*say, we are half way there. As soon as we finished resolving the issues, we will really be having our new list, the National Register of Registrants.*

CHAUBEY: Now the interviewing process to sort of determine why people are registered twice, is that done just to determine whether—their intent or their motivation?

BENN: *Well let me say the law makes it an offense. Persons can be charged for registering more than once but we, the Commission is looking at both to determine their intent and also maybe to charge some persons. But what we recognized is that maybe you can say through lack of knowledge, ignorance or whatever it is. Some people when they registered the first time, they were living in one location and they had moved their permanent residence since then and to make sure—their idea was they wanted to make sure that they are indeed on the list of Registrants. So having come to another area they registered there again. Those are some of the things we are coming up with. So I think in instances like those, one might tend to overlook that because it is a genuine case the person told you why they were registered. But if on the other hand, I think you find somebody who was deliberately setting out to beat the system and to commit a violation of the laws then I want to feel the Commission may eventually apply the laws and charge a few people so that it serves as a deterrent to persons who deliberately want to conduct double registration.*

CHAUBEY: One of the things that is apparent is that there is somewhat of—it seems like the supplies used here have increased since the house-to-house registration exercise. You needed cameras, printers, things like that. What is the procurement process here?

BENN: *Well we have what you call, National Procurement Process which is stipulated by the government. To procure items you have to advertise it in the newspapers. People have to submit tenders and then those tenders have to be evaluated by persons from the Tender Board and so on. Then they are selected based on whatever criteria they use and those persons would be the persons allowed to supply whatever materials and equipment used by some national process that all ministries and Government entities, national entities must go through to procure items.*

CHAUBEY: So is it the Tender Board that actually goes through the process?

BENN: *There are limits. The department here has certain limits. I can't remember what the limits are now. Once you surpass that limit, it has to go to a National Tender Board but if it is within with your limit, there is what you call Department of Tender Board which comprises persons here and persons outside of here who make up the Department of Tender Board who would have to judge from the tenders presented and so on and select whichever tender they consider more suitable. But once it surpasses that amount, the National Tender Board and then Cabinet approval and so on.*

CHAUBEY: So for the last election was it the internal Tender Board that—

BENN: *Well it would have depended. Most, 90% would have had to go to the—because of the volume for last election. The volume of those items are—almost all had to go to the National Tender Board and Cabinet for approval.*

CHAUBEY: One thing that you mentioned at the beginning that I would like to follow up on is that you said you were also overseeing the relationship between field staff and scrutineers from political parties. Could you elaborate on that?

**BENN:** *All right. Now, because the scrutineers are from political parties, at times their whole approach to registration could be different to ours and they might interpret one's actions strictly from a political standpoint. So some of the actions of our staff might be quite simple and professional and so on. Sometime there is this aggression in some of the scrutineers, you know, and they are there to catch people whereas it is not about that. So there are times you would have to, in particular from our staffs standpoint, in our training also we try to tell participants, listen, scrutineers are a part of this process whether we like it or not. The laws provide for scrutineers to be a part of the process. It's always better to try to have a good relationship because in the long run we recognize that once they are able to—scrutineers get to understand that all the people are there making sure that the job is done correctly, professionally and so on.*

*They sometimes build a kind of relationship that helps them to operate as one, but especially since sometimes you are recruiting fresh staff, while we call it claims and objections, now our permanent staff alone cannot do it so we have to get some fresh staff. Some of these fresh staff don't understand the framework within which they work, so you have to consistently be reminding them and visiting them and letting them understand that listen, you all have the same job it's just that you are from two sides of the fence but it is the same job that you are doing. So we have to kind of monitor that kind of relationship, fuel it with positive things, you know, hold some strict positions where our staff are concerned to ensure that the two eventually gel and get this work done properly.*

**CHAUBEY:** How do you get them to come together? Are there training sessions?

**BENN:** *We have refresher sessions. We train the scrutineers. We train our staff. We would also go into regions and hold refresher sessions with them. So when we hold those refresher session we let the scrutineers be part of it. So if the Scrutineers have problems with those staff we encourage to talk right there. The staff has problems and so on and sometimes we have do some little problem solving and so on. But in the long run it always works out well.*

**CHAUBEY:** This is a pretty challenging thing I think to deal with. Are there some tactics that have worked in the filed? Some examples you remember of a conflict that may have arisen and how it was resolved?

**BENN:** *I think one of the things that we've always been doing—when we train—well we train separately. We train staff and then we train scrutineers separately. But we always try to, when we go out there and visit, we always try to let the scrutineers recognize that whatever it is we are doing with the staff you did it *in* their presence. So you don't call the staff one side and talk to them because the suspicion is always there like you know, as if you want to do something you don't want them to know. So it's always better to, I mean there are certain managerial issues you may need to talk with your staff separately. But generally there are issues regarding the process and so on and shortcomings. You talk to your staff in the presence of the scrutineers. So after time some times scrutineers don't even show any interest that you are there because they recognize that it's an open process and whatever you are doing there has to do with the process and nothing to do with giving anybody any edge.*

*So it's always better when you visit the whole meeting with your staff one side. Visit and even if there are shortcomings of the staff because the intention is to get the process going good for everyone, you meet and discuss with everybody*

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*so scrutineers recognize. After time they call you "boss" and "chief" you know, even though you're not their boss. When they have problems, they come to you to have the problems resolved whereas sometimes in most instances you have to tell them listen, "I understand, we can't solve this, it is a party problem, you have to talk with your party", "but chief we're seeing you." So you have to set the tone and establish the kind of rapport that scrutineers would recognize from the one we're part of this whole thing it's just that we are one side of the fence.*

CHAUBEY: Now how are scrutineers paid? How do they receive their reparations?

BENN: *Right now we have, we have what you call Chief Scrutineers who are for the whole country, for each party. Then you have Deputy Chief. A Deputy Chief is assigned to a district for each party. We have what we call Assistant Chief Scrutineers. They are the ones who are regularly paid. They are attached to Registration Offices. They are there on a day-to-day basis. If I remember this, I think they are paid \$25,000 a month just to—basically what they do is oversee what's happening.*

CHAUBEY: That comes through GECOM's budget?

BENN: *No, not really, you know. I think the CEO will tell you more but it's a special set of funds put aside for scrutineers and then we have divisional scrutineers who would go when we going to do field verification to verify that yes, John Brown lives at Lot 15. Those divisional scrutineers now go and verify. They're paid as per head. The CEO would have a rate that they're paid. For every verification they are being paid a specific sum of money.*

CHAUBEY: More generally on the subject of paying staff, many election management bodies face the challenges of getting payments out on time to a wide range of field staff. What have been the ways that have worked here in terms of how you pay people on time?

BENN: *What we do, well, because of how the system of payment operates here, all the payment is processed at the head office. There is no other way it can be done. We process here as per offices and the respective office—let's say, when election time comes around in particular, the Returning Officer, the payment is done in such a way that the Returning Officer can uplift the payment for his people and execute the payment in his or her area. That facilitates a free movement. What some Returning Officers for to do, after elections are finished they would now involve their deputies so it's further filtered down so that you don't have everybody in the region coming to one point. They will go to the same points at which their deputies operated which they knew and they will go there to be paid. Of course we do it with a very high degree of—high security presence. We have very high security presence.*

*For the permanent registration staff their salaries are paid into their bank so once they know when the money paid into the bank and they go and uplift their salaries from the bank so you avoid any problem of people likely to want to snatch payroll because there is no payroll. The money goes directly in the bank.*

CHAUBEY: Well we've covered a wide range of topics and I'd like to ask you now if there is something I haven't brought up that you'd like to discuss.

BENN: *Let me see. I think in terms of having effective election management bodies I'd want to suggest that officials are trained in elections management and not just elections management but I think officials should be exposed to managerial*

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*training because once you have been exposed to training and that training impacts on you. I think our approach in terms of managing people is likely to be one that facilitates organizational development and so on.*

*I think one of the weaknesses of third world countries and so on is sometimes we lack the experience and knowledge of managing people per se and that we engage in activities that can totally negate what we set out to do. I think in our experience in Guyana too what we find is that, at the level of the Commission for instance, the Commission is a policy making body, you may read. What we find is that some election management, some Commissions in particular, our Commission I can talk about, get involved in matters which they should not be involved in. They get involved in Secretariat matters and in the long run it causes them to—they lose their focus many times.*

*I know, I may say that I think Commissioners should go to training sessions that help them to shed some of the personal misconceptions of what their roles are on the Commission. The Secretariat is not best served when those kind of things happen.*

*I think also because of the lack of the training in management on the part of some persons we don't adhere to the chain of command and channel of communication. So that you find that there's not this chain of command, so that in itself causes its own problems. I don't know if it is immaturity in terms of people who manage, but some of the things you would also find, you'll find, people feel that management is about power. A total misconception about what management is. Management is about leadership.*

CHAUBEY: I'd like to thank you very much Mr. Benn for all the insights and information you've shared with us. Thank you so much for participating in this interview.

BENN: *You're welcome and I want to thank you for affording me the opportunity also of sharing these ideas with you.*

CHAUBEY: Thank you.