



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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MCCANTS: This is elections interview no. 8 with Magnus Öhman at the IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems) office in Sierra Leone. It is August 6th and the interviewer is Ashley McCants. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I'd like to begin the conversation by learning a little bit more about your personal background. So can you describe your position and what the goals are in your position.

ÖHMAN: *I'm the Country Director of IFES in Sierra Leone and also Elections and Political Processes Advisor, as the title is called. It basically means I both manage the program and assist in programmatic aspects of the program. We work with two commissions, that's the NEC, the National Electoral Commission and the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) so those are our two partners in this program. We don't deal directly with civil society or political parties unless it is through these two commissions.*

MCCANTS: Can you tell me briefly about what you've done before you took this position?

ÖHMAN: *I have an academic background. First of all I did a Ph.D. in political science in Uppsala Universitet in Sweden on party organization in Sub-Saharan Africa and started working for IFES as a program officer in 2005, working out of the London office, mainly with Sierra Leone. I moved down here in January last year.*

MCCANTS: What would you say have been the biggest challenges in the election environment here?

ÖHMAN: *The time available has always made it difficult, partly for the 2007 elections, but mainly for these elections. Obviously, we have a physical infrastructure that was very damaged in the war and is still very bad even comparing to countries in the sub region in West Africa. The literacy rate is very low and a very young population and we have a lot of first time workers. Those are some of the main challenges.*

MCCANTS: How long did the electoral process take from the first planning discussions to the release of the final count?

ÖHMAN: *The last year's elections, that process started in practice in spring/summer 2005 when the NEC was restructured and a seven-step program was created to restructure and change the commission and start planning for the 2007 elections. So we had quite a lot of time for that one. Then there wasn't any actual planning or very little planning done for the local government elections until after the last year's election actually ended.*

MCCANTS: Can you describe the decision process that produced that schedule or if it was amended as the process went forward?

ÖHMAN: *It started when the NEC was effectively disbanded in late spring of 2005 and a transitional secretariat assisted the commissioners who then created this framework, the seven steps together with international advisors from IFES and the UN, mainly UNAMSIL (United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone). Yes, it has been updated and changed as time progressed and needed.*

MCCANTS: Do you have any general advice to offer people in similar settings about timing or sequencing of elections?

ÖHMAN: *It takes an awful lot of time. That's the main thing. You need to start a few years in advance. Our main message from IFES being a body that is working with*

election management around the globe is that election work doesn't stop. There is always a cycle. Whereas there is more work in certain areas than others, planning for elections is a continuous process.

MCCANTS: I'd like to talk a little about the legal framework of the elections. Could you talk a little bit about the choice of electoral systems and how that system was chosen here? If there any kind of seats reserved for different groups, women, regions of the country, etc.

ÖHMAN: *Well, the current electoral system goes back to the '91 Constitution which calls for first-past-the-post single member district system with twelve reserved seats for Parliament Chiefs. That Constitution was created and then the war started. So it was used in '96 but in 2002 a constitutional amendment was passed that allowed for a multimember district system, if you will. Each of the districts was given eight seats. This was then mainly done for practical reasons as there was no chance of doing a proper census or a boundary delimitation at that time.*

I know that there was a public consultation made, but I don't have the details about it as for what type of electoral system people preferred. From what I hear, there was a strong wish to go back to the '91 or use the '91 single member district system instead of a PR (Proportional Representation) system. I think the NEC can probably give you more details about that.

MCCANTS: What kind of influence did the interest of parties, key parties, cultural tradition or the international community plan in the choice of system?

ÖHMAN: *I can't talk about what happened in '91. It is way before my time. I know that quite a few actors in 2002 and later wanted to have a PR electoral system. There were general arguments that it helps to create a more balanced system, not a winner-takes-all and so on. But that was weighed against the wish of, from what I understand, what the people wanted and they really wanted a single member district system.*

For the 2007 elections when the country then reverted back to a single member district system, there was quite a bit of nervousness among people dealing with these issues within the NEC—and not least in the international community—that this would benefit certain parties and hurt others. For demographic reasons it would especially hurt the then-governing party as they tended to be strong in districts that have less population and it would benefit the APC (All People's Congress). Surprisingly though it didn't. When this limitation went through Parliament, it didn't have such an impact. We thought there would be a lot more after all, but it went through fairly smoothly.

MCCANTS: What about other laws and rules governing eligibility, registration, voting procedures, candidate clearance and other matters. Were there any distinctive challenges or problems that shaped the development of the legal framework for the elections?

ÖHMAN: *It's a bit strange. We have two laws. There is the Electoral Laws Act which of course describes the elections in general and the Political Parties Act. Then, for these elections this year, there is the Local Government Act as well. But they are not—they don't form a coherent body of legislation. The Electoral Laws Act doesn't allow for parties to actually nominate candidates. While the Constitution gives the party the right to do so it doesn't give any guidance in the law of how that should be done in the Electoral Laws Act.*

The Political Parties Act hardly talks about elections. The Local Government Act hardly talks about local government elections at all. So there are a lot of gaps in the legal framework and that was a big challenge.

MCCANTS: Which bodies were responsible for developing and adopting those rules?

ÖHMAN: *They were developed, as I understand, largely by the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Laws Act, with the assistance of national advisors. Again that goes back to 2002 so I don't have additional information. They were then passed by Parliament.*

MCCANTS: Could you describe some of the features of the laws that you think make this electoral process distinctive?

ÖHMAN: *There are a couple of funny things. One is that the presidential elections, the first round, the candidate has to win 55% to avoid a second round. I haven't seen that anywhere. It can all get to be slightly undemocratic in the sense that someone can get more votes than all the others put together and still not win the election. That hasn't, since the '91 elections that hasn't happened. In 2002, Kabbah (Ahmad Tejan) won 70% and this time no one won 50%. But still it is an oddity in the law. Otherwise the main problems have to do with the gaps in the law rather than what is in the law.*

MCCANTS: Are there any features of the laws that you would recommend to other countries?

ÖHMAN: *One thing that I think other countries should look into is the notion of having two election management bodies that are both independent. One is the NEC that deals with the management of elections and the other is the PPRC—the Political Parties Registration Commission—that deals with the registration and oversight of political parties. In my mind that has helped the NEC, in particular, in being able to focus on the more practical administration and then being able to avoid more political issues.*

MCCANTS: Can you describe how the NEC was established or did it exist prior to the '91 Constitution?

ÖHMAN: *I don't have the real background to the NEC because there has been a NEC or a similar body for a very long time in Sierra Leone—in fact, since it became independent. But when the war ended and elections were held in 2002, it was felt that the structure needed to be reviewed and made more effective. IFES worked with the NEC to prepare for such a change. In 2002, 2003 and 2004, we wrote reports—joint IFES/NEC reports—on how the commission needed to be restructured. This didn't happen for a while partly because of the immediate post-war situation and partly because of the need to organize the 2004 elections, but after that came the change in 2005.*

MCCANTS: What were the main elements that needed to be restructured?

ÖHMAN: *One main thing had to do with staffing. The Commission was staffed with civil servants who then worked for the civil service and then were placed at the NEC. That meant that they could be replaced at any time and they didn't necessarily have the work of the NEC as their main focus. So they were then returned to the civil service and the NEC hired its own staff. That was the main change. That allowed the NEC to fire any staff they were not happy with. Then the structures in general were reviewed for how the commission functioned.*

MCCANTS: How would you describe the relationship of the NEC to the government in terms of independence? What steps were taken to create independence?

ÖHMAN: *The steps have largely been informal. The law is not too bad in terms of granting independence to the commission. In some countries, like Ghana, the commissioners are appointed for life and can only be removed through impeachment. Here it is a five-year appointment and they can be removed, maybe a little bit too easily. But it is the work of the commission that has established its independence. This is a big change from previous commissions where in some previous elections they have not been very independent.*

MCCANTS: What do you mean it is the work of the commission that established its independence?

ÖHMAN: *Well establishing the independence of the electoral commission has two parts, one is the legal and formal framework, but even if that is not there, and the Electoral Commission, the electoral management body can assert its independence. Even if a formal independence is there, there is nothing stopping an Electoral Commission from working together with the government or any other party or interest. So a lot of it has to do with the new chair of the Electoral Commission who came on board in the summer of 2005 who was a well-respected person. She actually came on board while she wasn't extremely famous but made it very clear to both the government and other interests that the commission does its work independently and does not accept any influence from other parties.*

MCCANTS: Transparency and the appearance of fairness are very important in elections. In what ways have people tried to maintain the transparency of the electoral management body here?

ÖHMAN: *A major part of that has been in having regular meetings with the political parties through the Inter-Party Advisory Committee which the first meetings were in late January or early February 2007. IFES is supporting that—those meetings—on request of the NEC since the beginning. We've seen it in other countries in the sub-region in West Africa how this has been very helpful in creating a good flow of information from the election management body (EMB) to the parties and the other way around. It can seriously help to lower tension and remove misunderstandings. Those meetings are held on a bi-weekly basis apart from late last year when there wasn't that much to talk about and they have been held more often than that closer to elections. I feel that that has been very helpful.*

MCCANTS: What were or are the responsibilities of the electoral management body?

ÖHMAN: *The NEC has the responsibility for doing the boundary limitation, doing voter registration, educating the people about the elections—not necessarily civic education because there is a National Commission for Democracy which is supposed to do that. They (NCD) haven't been, in my impression, extremely active the last couple of years, quite possibly because of under-funding. Then the NEC obviously does the planning and implementation of the actual election, collection and announcement of results. The PPRC, on the other hand, registers political parties, ensures that political parties are acting in accordance with the law, and receives financial reports from the political parties which is a way of creating financial transparency in relation to elections and non-elections. They have played a very large role in mitigating conflicts. While that's not legally established, that's the way it played out in practice.*

MCCANTS: If you were providing advice to somebody in another country about how to build an independent electoral commission, what particular challenges would you tell them to be alert to?

ÖHMAN: *You can only go so far without having the right staffing. So you have to make sure that you create a staff structure that is independent. Normally, the commissioners at least are nominated and elected by government in one form or another, at least nominated. You need to create a process so that can be as transparent and independent as possible and you need to get the right people in place because without that all else falls apart. The challenge is how to create transparency and inclusiveness without bringing the problems between and among parties into an election management body. So personally I am not in favor of a multi-party election management body. I think that, while they might be necessary in certain situations, in post-conflict situations for example, if you can have an independent commission that is normally the best way to go.*

MCCANTS: Do you have any advice on how to address the challenges you just mentioned based on experience here or in other contexts and are there special innovations or features of the EMBs here that you think work well and might be adopted easily in other places?

ÖHMAN: *Again, as I mentioned, this division between the two bodies I think is useful. These types of regular meetings with the political parties, which is a growing phenomenon in Africa, is helpful. Then on the nonviolent side of elections we have a particular set up of committees. I'm not sure if you're coming to post-conflict nonviolence questions later on. We can maybe save that for then.*

MCCANTS: Could you tell me about a particular success of the EMBs here that was particularly notable?

ÖHMAN: *The first success was the registration of voters. We have somewhere between 85 to 90% of the estimated voting age population actually being registered. It is probably fairly accurate as there was a new register and the voting age population was calculated from the census, which was done in late 2004. So that data should be fairly accurate even though the census was not completely without its faults. So, getting that large amount of people registered, I think, was very successful.*

Secondly, the turnout in the 2007 elections was very successful. Thirdly, the way that the electoral commission dealt with the irregularities that we saw in the presidential runoff election, the large number of polling stations that had a turnout that was over 100%. This is something that has been going on for quite a while in Sierra Leonean elections, but for the first time the NEC actually put a stop and said we're not accepting this. I think that was an extremely important message.

Then, from these government elections we had now, while the turnout was less, I think that is only to be expected; it is the third election in less than a year. It is local government which normally attracts less people, but the fact that it could be done at all given the very short time that was available and the nonavailability of funding for the early part of that period, I think, was very impressive.

MCCANTS: Elections are obviously very expensive but costs vary across different settings. Do you have any ideas on how to make the electoral process less expensive the next time?

ÖHMAN: *The main thing is early planning. The earlier you plan an election the cheaper it gets because you can plan solutions without having to do last minute solutions to problems that could have been foreseen. You also need to have some funding available at an early stage so that you can start doing things cheaply rather than doing them hectically at the end, which happens almost all the time. So I think that that was useful in this election but can be done even better in future elections.*

Sierra Leonean elections are relatively low tech, which I personally think is positive for the sustainability and cost of elections. Some things will have to change. They have to go digital—this is very practical—for the photos on the voter ID cards in the future because there's no more film. They've all used Polaroid film and Polaroid has stopped producing that, so they are going to be forced to go digital. But basically early planning and finding solutions that are sustainable are the main ways of lowering costs. I'm happy to say that in comparison to other commissions I worked with, the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone is fairly cost-focused. They want to create an election system that can work in Sierra Leone for a longer period.

MCCANTS: How were staff members recruited for the national election management office?

ÖHMAN: *Key staff, the core staff, the permanent staff was hired by the commissioners themselves and the Transitional Support Secretariat. Most of them were hired back in 2005 even though quite a few came aboard during 2006. Then ad-hoc staff as they call it—people normally on about a six-month contract—were hired by the permanent staff, most of them in November 2006. Then, polling station staff—people who work for a few days, the registration staff work for longer—they were then hired by people at a lower level. The NEC, of course, has structures in all the districts. Then they had staff members in each constituency and then down to polling station level. So it was done gradually basically.*

MCCANTS: How did the NEC ensure that poll workers have the same independence of the central EMB?

ÖHMAN: *With great difficulty and not perhaps 100% successfully. There were difficulties in the hiring process. Interviews were done and short lists were created and people were then hired. So the process was seemingly very independent but there were difficulties there. There were quite a few reports, which NEC has also acknowledged, of people being on the shortlists and then disappearing while other people who were not on the shortlist were hired. I think this is probably part of the explanation for the irregularities that we saw in the run-off election. So structures were in place, interviews, short listing and so on, but it didn't work 100%. That is something that has to be improved for the future elections.*

MCCANTS: And what would you recommend be put in place to improve that?

ÖHMAN: *It is very difficult to do. There is no doubt about it. One thing that has been done is that they blacklisted. In 2004 we also saw quite a lot of fraud. IFES worked very closely with the NEC then to try to identify what had happened. All polling station staff who were active in polling stations that had a turnout of over 100% were blacklisted, so they cannot be hired by the NEC in future elections. After last year's election, again, the staff from those stations were blacklisted. So that's one way of doing it. Unfortunately that would basically mean we have fewer and fewer people available, because there are not that many people who can do this type of work. You need to be literate, you need to have some education and so on.*

Again, doing the hiring of temporary staff earlier than it has been done—even if they don't actually go to work until election day or a couple of days before election—doing it earlier allows for more oversight and more control of the process.

MCCANTS: Was the staff size adequate for the election and what kinds of skills were in short supply in your view?

ÖHMAN: *The NEC, their opinion will be more detailed than mine on this but overall I think that they were fairly well. The staffing wasn't too much of a problem. Voter education was an area where maybe there could have been more staff available. It was maybe not the most successful area, certainly not last year. But overall, I think that the staffing was fairly sufficient. I know on the IT side that they had some difficulties with more qualified staff. The thing with IT staff in election management bodies is that they get hired, they get trained and then they move on to more well-paid jobs.*

MCCANTS: How were poll workers trained and did the international community have a role in that? Did you think it was adequate?

ÖHMAN: *They were trained in cascade training. Basically the training unit at the NEC, they trained district level that then trained constituency, and they trained down to poll worker level. That was assisted by funding from the UN. I don't think that it was entirely adequate. Certain areas could have been covered more. We saw some practical aspects of that: how the packaging and return of materials was not done entirely in accordance to regulations, and how they missed certain things during polling itself like checking if people had ink on their fingers and so on. But I did see that there was an improvement in 2008 over 2007, which of course is what you're looking for.*

MCCANTS: Do you have recommendations on how to change or improve that system given that you have to train so many people in such a short amount of time?

ÖHMAN: *It has to be done in a cascading way. The basic principle that was used here has to be done in that way. It cannot happen too early, that's the problem, because you need to have all the modalities in place. You need to know exactly what you're training them and if you do it too early they will also forget. But again, if the NEC puts the procedures in place earlier on—which again has to do with early planning—that allows them to have all procedures at an earlier stage which means that the training can take a little bit more time. Other than that it is just the quality of the trainers and the training materials and having the right staff to train.*

MCCANTS: How are staff members who worked away from headquarters monitored for compliance with protocols and rules? Were there observers, managers, or did people wait for people to complain about it?

ÖHMAN: *I don't know the details about that. I know there were UNV's—UN volunteers—in each district who worked fairly closely with the NEC offices which I'm assuming was a way for the UN assistance team to monitor their activities. I know that staff is quite often brought down to Freetown and HQ staff quite often went up. IFES worked mainly with the voter education staff out in the district so we brought them down to Freetown about four or five times during this time and trained them and debriefed them which is one way of oversight. But obviously, it can be very problematic.*

MCCANTS: What steps were taken to protect poll workers from threats and how well did they work?

ÖHMAN: *That's a challenge because you want that process to be as safe as possible but the only real way to do it is to have a lot of police in place which has its own problems because you don't want a lot of police in and around polling stations. Obviously we also don't have a lot of police officers in Sierra Leone so they had what they called the MACP program, the Military Assistance to Civil Police. As far as I'm aware they were hardly used though during the elections. The military was only there for transport of materials. But the police did have quite a bit of a presence during elections. So there were very few reports of disturbances with some notable exceptions in the outskirts of Freetown in the first round of last year's elections.*

MCCANTS: Can you describe how the boundary delimitation process worked? Who was responsible for it? What laws shaped their work?

ÖHMAN: *The laws, basically the Electoral Laws Act. There was some information in the Constitution that talks about well and how boundary limitations need to be done. And, for the local government elections, there is also some information in the Local Government Act. It is done by the Electoral Commission with quite significant assistance from the Statistics Sierra Leone which they provided information about it from the census which they did.*

In 2007, the boundary limitation for the parliamentary elections was generally approved. There was very little talk about it among the people as such and, as I said, it didn't cause so much of a fuss when it went through parliament. It was somewhat different for the ward delimitation for this year's elections where there were quite a lot of calls saying that this had not been done with full consultation. There were calls by a lot of civil society groups arguing that it should be more or less re-done. You go into the NDI (National Democratic Institute) office. They have it on the wall there.

The NEC was basically saying that this was a continuation of the boundary delimitation that was done last year, which technically it was. I think the main reason it was done in the way it was is that it would have been completely impossible to hold the elections within the time frame if they didn't do it the way that they did.

MCCANTS: How was that timeframe determined?

ÖHMAN: *For the last year's elections, they were meant to be held in late July but no one had thought, or no one had realized that the Constitution specifies that candidate nomination cannot be held before a certain number of days after parliament has resolved. The election cannot be held with less than a certain number of days after candidate nomination has been done. So the date that the President announced in 2006 for the elections was only possible if parliament agreed to dissolve early. This was only really discovered in the spring, I think around Easter last year. It was a mistake. It was a practical mistake. There was a lot of discussion then. The reason that those elections were actually moved, it was a constitutional. It had to happen as parliament refused to close early. So that was basically the basis.*

The Constitution sets the framework for when parliamentary and presidential elections have to be held. Back in 2005, there was a lot of discussion whether it would be at all possible to hold those two elections at the same time. They

managed to sort that out in the end. As for these elections, the local government elections, there is almost nothing in the Act. It doesn't say at all when these elections should be held. Presumably the idea is that they need to be held so that there is not a lot of gap between one set of local counselors and the other. But there was, for a very long time, discussions to hold these elections after the rainy season. The original date that the NEC put out was in May. They started saying that late last year. That was a practical impossibility which is why it was first June and then in the end in July. But a lot of people wanted them to be held after the rainy season to be able to do it practically. That would have meant that the country would be without councils for a very long time.

MCCANTS: What kind of operational and logistical obstacles were encountered during the delimitation process?

ÖHMAN: *I can't really speak with any confidence on that I'm afraid.*

MCCANTS: You mentioned earlier the contention around the boundary delimitation. Were there any steps taken to produce reconciliation or acceptance?

ÖHMAN: *A bit. Part of what happened was that Parliament didn't accept the original bill, or whatever is the legal term for the document that the NEC put. So Parliament introduced quite a few changes to that document. That was then the basis, that was the final version. That was largely what happened. Some problems did continue. I know, for example, if you look at Goderich outside of Freetown, there were quite a lot of discussions that villages were split between wards in ways that didn't make sense to people. So while the NEC tried to be accommodating, again, the timeframe made it very difficult. You cannot do voter registration or ask people to register before the boundaries and limitations are in place. So that is a step that has to happen before a lot of others.*

MCCANTS: Can you describe how registration took place?

ÖHMAN: *In February and March 2007 a completely new voter register was done. Stations were used that were later on turned into polling stations. It also helps to ensure that people know where they're actually supposed to go to vote. Each station/center was supposed to register—I'm not 100% sure about the figure—I think 1,000 people. Occasionally, there would be more, which would mean then that they would be split so that one center would have more stations. Then people—everyone over 18 was eligible to vote—they were simply asked to turn out to be registered with identification papers if they had any, but most people don't. To a large extent, it was up to the polling station staff to accept or not accept these people. There were what we call non-written forms of evidence. You could bring, I think for example, a chief or an imam or a priest who could verify that this person is 18. People were also given ink on their finger to try to avoid double registration.*

MCCANTS: How is the integrity of registration lists safeguarded after the lists were compiled and what steps were taken to prevent tampering?

ÖHMAN: *The data center would try to make sure that all the information in there was correct to the extent that it is possible. First of all that we wouldn't have anyone whose age was listed as under 18 or over 100. So there were some of these practical steps. Then of course the register was publicly displayed in May or so, which basically enabled people to come and check that their name is on the register and to challenge any names on the register they thought were inaccurate or so on. The problem with displaying of the voter register is that*

people very seldom turn up. It is not compulsory. It is not entirely an interesting thing to do for many people. So not that many names were actually verified. I don't have an actual figure, maybe around 30%, but that's at least one step.

To make that process more efficient the political parties need to be more active. They need to realize that this is an important part of the reform process. If they have people who can go there and actually make sure the errors are sorted out, then that will be helpful. Of course, for the elections this year, the existing register was updated which is the first time as far as I'm aware that that has happened in Sierra Leone. Previously they'd done a new register for each election. That is cost-effective. It is easier. Each time you update a register and the longer it goes, the less accurate it gets, of course, not at least because people who die are not taken off the register. For the 2012 elections there will need to be, as far as I understand, a discussion as to whether to create a new register.

MCCANTS: What kind of logistical or operational obstacles were encountered during voter registration?

ÖHMAN: *That was quite a while ago. I know there were some reports of material shortages, some problems with the cameras. But as far as I remember, they were quite small. On a couple of occasions there were cases with intimidation, one or two cases where polling station staff or registration station staff actually registered people in the evenings, in people's homes and so on trying to boost the registration. So some of these things went on, but it seems at a very low level.*

MCCANTS: How is the structure of the ballot decided upon and who was involved in that decision?

ÖHMAN: *That was done—and that was part of the inclusiveness that we talked about before, in the inter-party advisory committee meetings. They brought up the issue and the parties had a say on the order of the names on the ballot. There were several options. Normally, one would list in the order they'd been registered, but the idea for the nomination was to have different days where different parties would come to be registered. That wasn't really an option. But it was done in consideration with the political parties at a central level, in what I now remember was called a political parties liaison committee (PPLC).*

MCCANTS: Were there things such as photographs or numbers on the ballots to assist illiterate voters or were there any distinctive features on the ballot?

ÖHMAN: *The ballot had a picture and name of the candidate, the symbol of the party and, if I'm not wrong, the name of the party as well. Somewhere between 70 to 80% of the population being illiterate, anything written doesn't really matter. The photograph of the candidate can matter, but by far most important is the symbol of the party. That is what people recognize.*

We should remember that many of the main parties, the APC (All People's Congress) and SLPP (Sierra Leone People's Party) have been around for several decades. It is reasonably easy for people to recognize them and their symbols.

For the 2008 elections, it was actually decided not to have photographs of candidates on the ballot paper for practical, and to some extent cost, reasons. Again, it had to do with a very tight timeframe. That was the idea anyway. But, when the NEC met the PPLC in a special meeting which actually took place a

couple of days after the nomination of candidates had already started, it was agreed to do pictures on the ballot papers. The parties then had to run around and get the pictures and get them to the NEC. We were all very worried that they wouldn't be able to do so but actually most ballot papers did have all the candidates on paper.

MCCANTS: What would you change about the ballot design?

ÖHMAN: *I think the ballot design is basically as effective as it can be. Always we are discussing how to get around, how the ballot papers are folded, how to avoid getting marks on other places on the ballot paper which can invalidate votes especially as the majority of people here vote with a thumb print which can be smudged. But I think the system we have in place is more or less the most effective to do.*

MCCANTS: Who printed the ballots and how is the chain of custody from transportation to warehousing to distribution guaranteed?

ÖHMAN: *They were printed out of country but the actual process of that is something the NEC or the UN would be able to explain much better.*

MCCANTS: Were party-supplied ballots legal?

ÖHMAN: *No, parties were shown sample ballots, ballot papers which had the exact design of the ballots but without the names and the photographs and so on. So, they could see the actual layout.*

MCCANTS: What was the level of ballot spoilage and were blank ballots employed as protests?

ÖHMAN: *First of all, blank ballots are not cancelled separately from invalid ballots. So we don't have any figures for it. From me observing these elections, the first and the second round, the by-elections and the local government elections, I don't have any evidence that blank ballots would be used as a protest. Having talked to other observers, I think that is a little bit too advanced. The idea that someone would come up and vote but then not vote for someone, I don't think that will happen so much.*

Spoiled ballots are ballots that are destroyed or damaged before they're put in the ballot box. They were very rare, but invalid ballots then coming out of the ballot box were quite common. They were disturbingly common in the first round in the 2007 elections. I think they were up around 8% which is high also by international standards. My impression in talking to other observers seems to be that part of that was that presiding officers were overzealous in invalidating ballots. Basically, if there was any kind of mark apart from one candidate, some presiding officers were invalidating the votes.

The NEC then went back and explained to the presiding officers, the main principle which is the intention of the voter. If the intention is clear, then it should go through. We saw a very significant drop in invalid ballots in the run off which was then only a month or so afterwards. Some voter information also went down to try and get that down. But largely some people simply voted for two candidates or they simply smushed the vote.

MCCANTS: Were ballots provided for special needs voters like the vision impaired?

ÖHMAN: *No, what was used was what is called tactile ballot cards. Tactile ballot cards being a fold in which you put the ballot and it has holes for each candidate. If I want the third candidate from the top, I can count the number of holes and then put my vote there. That is the system that was used for the first time in Sierra Leone in 2002 which was the first time it was used in Africa. It was used in 2007 and in 2008. The problem was that there was not enough education to blind voters about it. That happened too late. So, few blind voters knew about it and even fewer knew how to use the tactile ballot. I think it is still a good idea. They don't cost very much, but it is a matter of training and getting the information out to the blind and visually impaired voters. Obviously, the main idea is that they will then be able to vote without assistance so that that will then ensure the secrecy of their ballot.*

MCCANTS: Were any ballot security measures put in place at polling stations to inhibit vote fraud by election officials or political contestants and how well do you think they worked?

ÖHMAN: *The main way was that first each polling station was given bundles of ballot papers. They have serial numbers on the stub of the ballot paper and those serial numbers were then recorded. The polling station then has to account for all the ballots. So basically the number of valid and invalid votes and the spoiled votes must together with the unused votes equal the number of votes that were issued. The next thing they did to make it as simple as possible is they gave all polling stations 600 ballot papers. That makes it much easier. The downside is that some polling stations would only have about 300 people registered so they had a lot of extra ballot papers and if you don't control the process it can be a temptation for them to use those ballot papers.*

Apart from that, the person who issued the ballot papers would stamp the ballot paper on the back meaning that if someone managed to steal some ballot papers in advance they would also need to get hold of a stamp. So that was another way to strengthen the process a bit.

MCCANTS: How did you preserve the secrecy and integrity of the ballot and were there things that you would recommend to others?

ÖHMAN: *First of all, security staff and police are not allowed in the polling station unless they are requested to go into the polling station by the presiding staff. That's something I've seen in some other countries—where they hang around and by their mere presence they can work as intimidation. I think the police acted very well in that regard here. I haven't heard any reports of other things either.*

Apart from that, the ballot paper was given to the voter who then went behind a screen to vote and he or she then put the ballot in the box themselves rather than anyone else doing it. So generally, I think that the process did allow for secrecy. You then could have assisted voters.

I know that in some countries, I was a bit interested to hear that, in Kenya, over 10% of voters are actually assisted. I don't understand the purpose of that. The illiteracy rate in Sierra Leone is very high, but still the number of invalid votes, apart from the first run is running less than 5% which is around the global average. So you shouldn't have too many assisted voters. Polling station staff do not assist voters. That has to be done by someone they bring themselves.

MCCANTS: Roughly how many parties emerged at the beginning of the electoral period and did those numbers change over the course of the campaign?

ÖHMAN: *No one really knew in the beginning. There was a rumor going around—still going around—that there are 27 political parties in Sierra Leone because a political party is a political party until they've been de-registered by the PPRC (Political Parties Registration Commission). Well, when elections started in Sierra Leone there was no PPRC so the NEC did the registration of all these parties. They handed over these registration papers to the PPRC but no one really knows where they are.*

In practice, there were nine political parties in the early stages of last year's process. It then turned out that seven of those presented candidates. So those were mainly older parties that were registered in 2002 apart from the PMDC (People's Movement for Democratic Change), and then the smaller CPP (Convention People's Party) which came on board. They only barely managed to get there just before the elections. After that, in March I think, this year PPRC did a verification process of all parties. Their statement was that Sierra Leone de facto only has four political parties active and they were then the four that actually presented candidates in the election. Again, no deregistration of parties has been done so all the parties that did exist still exist.

MCCANTS: How would you characterize the kinds of parties? Are they based on roots outside of urban areas? Do they represent economic interests, regions, cultural groups?

ÖHMAN: *It is very mixed. We should separate the two or three major parties from the others. There is a huge gap between PMDC (People's Movement for Democratic Change) and the rest. So after the APC, SLPP and PMDC and then the other parties, there is only one fourth party that was in these elections and they only put up five candidates who didn't go anywhere. But of these three, the PMDC is the breakaway party from the SLPP largely centered around Charles Margai and largely drawing its support from the SLPP. The SLPP and APC are these decades-old parties. There is some regional/ethnic pattern in their voting in the sense that Mende tend to vote SLPP and Temna for the APC, but it is not to the extent where ethnic statements are very clearly made by political parties. It is banned in Sierra Leone law for a start in political parties in ethnic groups. But there are these aspects. Then there is an urban/rural divide in the sense of the SLPP being in government. They're not very popular with the urban population, slightly more, to some extent slightly more educated, professional population. That's a regional African pattern that government is often very unpopular in bigger cities.*

MCCANTS: Did the PPRC play a role in vetting candidates or were there certain types of people that were excluded from holding office? How did they manage the process so that there wasn't disruption or resentment?

ÖHMAN: *The candidate nomination process was done exclusively by the NEC. So the PPRC did not play a part in that. The biggest debate was that public officers, as the Constitution specified, are not allowed to stand elections unless they have resigned at least twelve months in advance. That was impossible because it was less than twelve months—the date of the elections was announced less than twelve months before the elections. So that it effectively meant that it was impossible for any public officer to stand for office. That happens to be the same now for the local government elections. The key question regarded what that means and the key group of people it relates to are the teachers because there are a lot of teachers and they tend to be well known. They are educated and they often stand for election. As it happens, they were not allowed to stand because that was the legal interpretation. After a long and painful process, that was the legal interpretation that was found.*

But basically, the candidate nomination was based on a fairly comprehensive structure when I was involved in it. I would say that that was something that started at a very early stage and the procedures were in place quite early. IFES funded training of potential candidates both last year and this year so that anyone who wanted to be nominated could first come and get training on how that was done. That information was given out at these meetings for the parties and throughout other media. So the candidate nominations generally ran very smooth and that was also acknowledged by both the observers and the candidates themselves.

MCCANTS: Were there any rules in place that required political parties to register the date, time, and place of campaign rallies?

ÖHMAN: *Yes, basically they need police permission to hold rallies so they would need to notify the Sierra Leone police. I know that there were occasionally some discussions in rural areas regarding the role of the police versus the role of the Paramount Chief in allowing matters to go ahead. There were some issues where chiefs and/or the police were seen as not being neutral in that activity. But generally, the idea which I think was very positive, was to have different dates from different parties to clarify that, largely on the district level, some from the regional level. Today, only this party goes out and campaigns. I think that was very helpful.*

MCCANTS: What were the main methods that political party leaders used to try to reach potential voters? Were there certain advantages or disadvantages to different methods?

ÖHMAN: *Well TV is out because nobody has TV. Only about 5% have access to TV. Newspapers are out because not that many people read and they have a very low circulation. So basically, it is radio and then rallies and that type of more hands-on activities. That is what was generally used. There were a lot of rallies. Whether these were always the most effective means of reaching voters, I'm not sure. I'm not convinced.*

MCCANTS: If you were providing advice to other countries about what steps you've taken here with respect to regulating political parties and candidates, what would you recommend?

ÖHMAN: *You mean in general or in terms of a peaceful campaign or?*

MCCANTS: In general.

ÖHMAN: *Make sure you have the information in place and available to parties at an early stage. Try to isolate the candidate nomination period or process from the candidate selection process because the selection of candidates within parties is almost always difficult and full of conflicts and problematic. You want to make sure that the nominal process done with the Electoral Commission does not spill over from those problems within the party. So you need to specify very clearly when someone comes to be nominated for a party—how do we know that this person is actually being nominated from that party?*

It has happened in Sierra Leone. Previously, it had happened in other countries that they have more than one person turning up from one party being nominated in the same ward. To avoid that—which I think is useful also in other countries—we made sure that the parties had to submit lists from the party centrally, saying that, in this ward or this constituency, we nominate this person so that the NEC

had those lists available when people turned up to be nominated. That's one important part to it. Then training. If possible, to train potential candidates in advance, I think that's very useful.

MCCANTS: What kind of training do you think that they mostly need?

ÖHMAN: *Exceptionally hands on. I mean, first of all, it was what you need to do or what criteria do you need to fulfill. So basically you could explain, people could understand, oh, I can't actually be a candidate, or to be a candidate I have to get this paper. Then we went through the actual nomination forms and the different stages. So they were hands on. They would be filling in nomination forms. We would have mock nomination processes that people would go through and be nominated. This allowed this procedure to be smooth, to be transparent. I think that is part of why it was successful.*

MCCANTS: Could you tell me more about how the Electoral Management Body employed the media in the election?

ÖHMAN: *Again, it's radio because that's the only media that really works. There is a network of independent radio stations. Unlike in many other countries, most radio stations are independent. They're privately owned in Sierra Leone. So the NEC used the radio stations a lot to get their message across. They were provided air time by the UN. They were provided air time by IFES this election and they were also given quite a lot of free air time. So that was the main way of reaching media.*

MCCANTS: How effective do you think the media campaign was in helping people to understand what to do and where to go to register to vote?

ÖHMAN: *Given the limited availability of media, there is really only one means that works. I think it was fairly effective in getting things across. There are certain things you can't do. You can't explain in detail that everyone should go and register which is why other means had to be employed such as posters and so on. But, given the limitations of the media, I think it was quite effective.*

MCCANTS: Partisans sometimes try to reduce press coverage or other coverage that they consider favorable to their opponents, was that a problem here?

ÖHMAN: *How do you mean?*

MCCANTS: Potentially by closing the printing presses or capturing other resources necessary.

ÖHMAN: *Not really. One radio station in the north of Sierra Leone was reported to refuse access to anyone apart from a certain party. Of course, the new government closed down the SLPP radio station a few months ago for a short period of time, claiming that there was a problem with their license. That was solved after only a week or so. Those are the only cases that I know of.*

MCCANTS: Did any political campaigns use the media for propaganda or for hate speech?

ÖHMAN: *Not in the media, as far as I'm aware. No.*

MCCANTS: Was there an assessment of threats against this process in advance of the elections?

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- ÖHMAN: *Yes, quite a lot of that was done. The ONS, the Office of National Security, did a mapping together with the Sierra Leone police. And a group called Democracy Sierra Leone, an umbrella group of NGOs, also did a mapping of potential hot spots, supported by NDI. IFES then used the code of conduct monitoring committees in all the districts to monitor the conflicts, potential conflicts in each district.*
- MCCANTS: In the assessment of threats, who were the likely victims and who were the likely perpetrators? And, what might have been their motives?
- ÖHMAN: *Most of it was party supporter against party supporter. You would have the SLPP and PMDC fighting mainly in the south. You would occasionally have the SLPP and the APC fighting in the east. Then, for the election this year, we saw the conflicts in Kono between the APC and the SLPP mainly where the APC was trying to make inroads into Kono in ways that weren't appreciated by everyone. This year, we also saw what seems to have been—there were reports of intimidation against voters, average Sierra Leoneans, but most reports had to do with supporters, reporters and/or candidates being victims of intimidation.*
- MCCANTS: Were there any attempts to spoil the elections? Any groups that were trying to act as spoilers?
- ÖHMAN: *No, not really. On election day in the runoff, we had this case of over-voting, but not to spoil the electoral process as such. No.*
- MCCANTS: Did security partners meet with the electoral management body and others involved in the election process to develop scenarios of things that might go wrong in advance of the election?
- ÖHMAN: *Yes, there were a lot of meetings. I can't tell you exactly what was developed but the Office of National Security met with the NEC and to some extent the PPRC and the Sierra Leone police to develop plans. I know the armed forces were involved to some extent. There were also regional and district level security committees that were set up to monitor the situation.*
- MCCANTS: In terms of voter education, what was the process for crafting the kinds of messages that the EMB had to convey?
- ÖHMAN: *The NEC did that largely with the outreach unit. We were assisting in bringing in the district staff to develop messages and to develop materials to go out. Printed materials, mostly done in English as that is the only language that people can read. A few people read Krio. But no other languages are really written, so there are limitations in what you can do, obviously. A lot of radio and verbal messages were developed.*
- MCCANTS: At which points in the process were the messages released?
- ÖHMAN: *That was done gradually. Especially in 2007, there was a delay. They weren't released in the stages that were hoped largely because of delays in the provisional voter education material.*
- MCCANTS: How effective do you think voter education was and how would you measure that effectiveness?

ÖHMAN: *I think it was fairly effective, especially in 2007. We measured by seeing how many would turn up and how many of them were able to vote for a candidate—basically not having their ballots invalidated. I think there is more that can be done. I think there was an expectation that the NEC would do voter education. We organized meetings between the NEC and civil society groups, regular meetings, but there was always a feeling that there was an expectation that the NEC would do all the work or provide all the information and materials. What needs to happen in a country like this, is that civil society and all groups must be as active as possible. An electoral national body can never do that amount. They wouldn't have the staffing to do that type of information.*

MCCANTS: Do you have any thoughts on what types of messages were most compelling?

ÖHMAN: *That's very difficult to say.*

MCCANTS: Were there any steps taken to enfranchise marginalized populations, women, young people, or the disabled?

ÖHMAN: *Yes, there was work done. There were messages targeted at young voters and women voters and disabled voters. They were the main groups that were targeted. Especially in this election, we had a lot of work done to increase the participation of women. Even though it has to be said that the participation of women is fairly equal to the participation of men. In women, it's basically 50/50, more or less the same as registration.*

For the young voters, it is a lot about getting messages out in ways that they might appreciate—jingles, election songs, put on plays at night clubs. We did a process of a soap opera that the NEC did about the elections that we had distributed to video centers throughout the country, so those types of messages.

For people with disabilities, there was a lot about working with groups. There are various umbrella groups and various other groups that deal with these issues. We were working at getting the messages out through them and certain media messages targeting people with disabilities as well.

MCCANTS: Are there two or three mistakes that you commonly observe that donor countries or international organizations, like the United Nations, make with respect to relationships with partner country personnel or politics?

ÖHMAN: *Personnel and politics. Well the first thing, they're always too late. The money is always, always too late. It doesn't have to be 10 years in advance, but money needs to be available a few years in advance, not a lot but a bit so you can start planning and so that you can save money. The key message is, giving money early makes it cheaper.*

Apart from that, there has been a process in Sierra Leone of making the election management more independent. I think that is a very common mistake in election support, in general. Too much is done by international advisors who then do the elections and leave. We've seen it. It is more common than not. But in Sierra Leone, gradually we've seen a process I think where independence has grown. Last year, there was less involvement than in 2004 and, this year, it was a pretty hands-off approach from the various international assistants.

We were here. We would give advice, and we would help out but we wouldn't do the work for the commission. I think that is a mistake that we actually didn't do here which is very common.

MCCANTS: If you were going to offer someone else advice about how to work effectively with personnel, say Sierra Leoneans here, what recommendations would you give?

ÖHMAN: *It has to have, at least some people who can build a gradual relationship with a body and with personnel. You can then bring in people on a shorter term basis, but it is difficult when people come, when basically everyone comes for a short period of time. They're here and then they all leave. So we've been here for a few years. I've worked with this commission for nearly four years. That can be done also by the UN in doing this type of work, to build a relationship. UNAMSIL (United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone), when they were here, had a very close relationship with the Electoral Commission, even when there were no elections. Building a gradual relationship is very important.*

Then you have to ensure that you provide the most relevant advice. This is obvious—but to make sure that it is adjusted to whatever works in the country itself.

MCCANTS: And final question, what are the biggest challenges you think that the Election Management Body will face when it has to conduct elections on its own and what can be done to prepare for those challenges?

ÖHMAN: *Obviously the next election is everything at once. You have presidential, parliamentary and local governments, so it's a huge challenge in itself. The level of staff turnover means that you will always have a lot of new people. The main challenge is to be able to prepare and plan so that this can be implemented with the staff. It takes more time and it needs more effort if you do it without a lot of international advisors. Then to create whatever system is the most effective in Sierra Leone and maybe ditching some things that we advisors have been saying and doing something else that they find works better here. The planning is always the most important.*

MCCANTS: Thank you so much.