



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

AN INITIATIVE OF  
THE WOODROW WILSON SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
AND THE BOBST CENTER FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

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Series: President's Young Professionals Program

Interview no.: B 31

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Interviewee: Minister Saah Charles N'Tow

Interviewer: Blair Cameron

Date of Interview: 14 April 2016

Location: Monrovia, Liberia

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CAMERON: This is Blair Cameron and Pallavi Nuka with Innovations for Successful Societies (ISS). It is the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, 2016 and we are here in Monrovia, Liberia with Minister Saah Charles N'Tow. Thank you so much for your time Minister.

N'TOW: *No problem, sir.*

CAMERON: To begin, can you tell us a little bit about your background before you became the program director of the President's Young Professional Program (PYPP) and how you came into that position?

N'TOW: *Well, I was actually working in Liberia. I was in my final year at Tufts University. I was doing fieldwork. My university accepted the work of a colleague of mine who was a professor at George Washington University. He got this work here with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). They were interested in customary justice or legal pluralism. Our country has both customary and formal justice. So they wanted to see what Liberians' perceptions of justice options were at the time. So he was leading the research and he asked me to come. I was in my final year and he was one of those who was more like an external adviser to me.*

*I came to Liberia to lead the fieldwork. I became the lead field researcher and that brought me on the ground. I met some of my friends here. That was when I came across the program, the Liberia Fellows Program. I was recommended by one of the fellows, Robtel Pailey, now Dr. Robtel Pailey. We had this conversation where she said, "Saah, there is this program that I think you're just made for. You may want to give it a try. The guys are in town, I want you to please see if you can have a conversation with them; if you like them, that's fine, if not, no problem. Go and have a conversation."*

*So I went and sat down with Carrie Hessler-Radelet and Steven Radelet. Steven was one of the economic advisors to the president and Carrie was at the time the head of JSI (John Snow Inc. Research & Training Institute), the JSI operations here. So we sat down together and they told me about the program. Robtel had earlier said to me what her thinking was. In her exit interview one of the recommendations she made was, "Look, we could have something that is an offshoot of the Liberia Fellows Program that will focus more on local people." Then that began my involvement.*

*We were challenged in that conversation to look at how to design something. Before then, we had this opportunity with Steven Radelet and Carrie Hessler-Radelet to visit the president. We were discussing this program. The president posed the question, "Can we have something that taps into some of our local talent here? Can we grow that to the point where they will be as sophisticated as these fellows?" That was the question that became our marching orders. So we took it from that level. We set out at the time with Betsy Williams. Betsy Williams was at the time with JSI as a program officer for JSI's program here in Liberia. We were asked to write a concept for the program. So we designed something. The rest became history.*

*We put forth a suggestion of a program that would tap into young people that would look at the opportunity of pairing them up with professionals. Those professionals through a period would guide them and support them. The idea was for them to somehow end up in the position that our professional mentor was in. That was the original idea. The professional was working him or herself out of a job, like a development worker. The other thing that we added was that we*

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*didn't want to assume that those guys would be that good to just catch up as quickly as possible. We saw that in real time we could design another component of the program, which was more of the training. We called it "responsive training."*

*It was responsive because it was intended to address the emergent challenges as expressed by the PYPs (President's Young Professionals) themselves. Like every time they go to work and something challenged them, we provided a space for shared and peer learning. So every month we came together. That was when we did the responsive training. But as part of the training also was this piece where you had the PYPs sharing their experiences, like some of the challenges and some of the successes that had happened.*

*Our thought was that once the PYPs share the challenge or whatever joys they were having, from those shared experiences perhaps the lessons that we could not teach or the skills we could not teach, they would learn from each other, draw strength from each other. Maybe it would be the basis for further conversations, informal conversations outside of the training circles. Maybe there is something that is troubling them, say that a PYP girl goes to work and she starts to experience sexual harassment. It is not an easy subject to discuss amongst friends but when she mentions that and maybe another friend shares a similar experience, that becomes an opportunity for her to engage that friend outside of the regular circles to see how that friend is coping. In fact, they become almost like a support to each other to see whether it is still happening or stuff like that. So that was the idea, the opportunity for the regular training and shared learning. That was the component we put in there and talked about. There were just several pieces that we put together.*

CAMERON: When you came up with that first concept who contributed to that document?

N'TOW: *It was reviewed by Betsy Williams and by someone at JSI at that time called Sharon Rocco. It was reviewed at that time and argued about. Of course, Steven and Carrie had their own look at it. I think once they approved it that was how we started to go about it.*

CAMERON: Do you remember about what time that was?

N'TOW: *We formally launched the program in 2009. So we're talking about three or four months before that time. I don't quite remember the exact time but I can look through my computer and see the time we actually sent that document. It is possible we can have the footprint.*

NUKA: At that time you were a Liberia Fellow?

N'TOW: *No, I was just hired to manage the program. I'm sorry I didn't go into that. At the time they already had the Fellows Program.*

NUKA: They had the Liberia Fellows Program?

N'TOW: *Yes, they called it the Scott Family Fellows Program. I don't know if you've heard of that.*

NUKA: And JSI was managing that?

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- N'TOW:* JSI was managing the Scott Fellows Program. I was only brought in to manage the Fellows Program. The fellows were here and they needed support. They came from abroad and they were here working. There were issues of transportation, any issues with their boss, their placement, and other things. It was just to facilitate easy living. So I was the one responsible.
- NUKA:* You were working for JSI at the time?
- N'TOW:* Yes, I was hired to work for them.
- CAMERON:* Okay, let's get this timeline exactly right. When was it that you were here doing that field work and then how long after that was it JSI hired you?
- N'TOW:* I think I came back to Liberia and was off and on from 2007. Then I finished up my schoolwork in 2008. So I was back and forth in Liberia doing fieldwork. I had other work that I was doing here as well. I worked for the United Nations (UN) Liberia Peacebuilding Office. I worked as a conflict sensitivity and training officer. I think that's where I was before I finally came to JSI. I was going back and forth. Because the fieldwork was not 100 percent full time so I had the chance to do some other things as well.
- CAMERON:* That was after you graduated?
- N'TOW:* Yes.
- NUKA:* When did you join JSI, was that in 2009?
- N'TOW:* Formally, yes. There was some kind of informal arrangement when I was with JSI.
- CAMERON:* How did you first get hired by JSI? Where did they meet you?
- N'TOW:* Like I said, Robtel Pailey was the one who recommended me. So my first encounter with anything or anyone in JSI was Robtel because she was working as a fellow. Then I met Steven Radelet and then I met Carrie. We had this informal sort of meet-up. That culminated in this arrangement to work as the manager of the Liberia Fellows Program.
- CAMERON:* In that initial concept note were there any aspects that were topics of hot discussion? What were the different approaches you were considering and what were some things you finally decided on through that process?
- N'TOW:* At that time we were looking to organize a program that would not only focus on Monrovia but everything about Liberia since most of the time the focus was centralized. So we were thinking about having something that would also touch the counties. That was one of the aspects that we brought into it. But that didn't go too far because I think maybe at that time whatever was available to support the program could not have gone that far to bring in the counties, but that was one of the things we had discussed.
- CAMERON:* By working with the counties do you mean working with local government?
- N'TOW:* Local government and the counties, seeing if we could bring young people from all these different places or extend the program to those areas. But there were

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*several challenges with that. The first would be that the people who are attracted to the program, the PYPs, are usually people who finished their first degree. Most of the major universities were based here or at least the major university at the time was based here, in Monrovia.*

NUKA: That's the University of Liberia?

N'TOW: *University of Liberia. Cuttington University is up the road. The places where PYPs were to be placed in, those agencies and head offices were all here in Monrovia. It was a difficult thing to do. During recruitment we did outreach and went out to the counties. But all of the major students from the counties who would have otherwise been qualified to apply were down here in Monrovia. That was a major issue.*

*The hot topic was selection criteria, I think. We had just endured a long period of war. Our universities were all interrupted. The quality of learning somehow eroded. So we couldn't have the expectation that we would have a student or a graduate who would come out with a 3.75 or 3.25 grade point average—here we have the grading system on four points. So, our criteria was, they needed to be a young Liberian and a citizen to be proven by police clearance. They needed to have some extracurricular or community service experience. At the time we were looking for young people between the ages of 18 and 35 because that is our definition of youth.*

NUKA: 18 seems young.

N'TOW: *Yes, 18 to 35; that is the definition of youth here. It is the AU (African Union) definition that we subscribe to. But we did get lots of young people around 25, 26, and 27. Then we started to get some younger ones in the second or third class. In the initial year the ages were slightly older. In the initial year I know someone who was 35 at the time when he applied. He turned out to be a great guy but some of the folks in authority didn't think that we needed to have a person that age. That wasn't their idea.*

NUKA: They had prior work experience?

N'TOW: *Yes, they had prior work experience at the time. So for the selection criteria we were aiming for exceptional people. We were aiming for the best. But the argument was that we could not find those kinds of people here because most of the guys who went to school here, people downgraded them. They didn't think they had enough quality time at school given the interruption of war and everything so their output would have been different. At the time that was a battle, as we had to convince people, "Yes, we could find some of these people here."*

CAMERON: Can I just ask you a follow up question there? Who was suggesting that you wouldn't find those people here and who did you have to convince that you could?

N'TOW: *We had to convince the public. We had to convince other young people, skeptics and cynics who were saying, "You can't find these kinds of people here. You're only trying to exclude a whole lot of us." This was 2009 and elections were in 2005, so we still had a divided public. Of course the winning parties that won had to do favors for people or at least that was the perception. People were saying, "I*

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*ran your campaign so you have to do something for me whether you're qualified or not."*

*Then you had all these representatives who had been elected for the first time to the House of Representatives and Senate. Each person had a whole lot of followers and they wanted to use influence to see how they could get people in there. So running the program at that time that was one of the biggest problems that I had. The question was, "How could we design a transparent system, a system wherein people would come and know that you didn't get in because someone recommended you? You didn't get in because you knew this big guy. You got in because you went through the process and you were successful." We wanted to make sure there was no way anyone would cheat you if you made it.*

*So that was the biggest thing. We had to think a lot about the strategy around that. There were stages in this screening process. The applicants sent in all the initial requirements. Then we would bring in a team of people to screen them. We split them up depending on the number of applicants. We split them up into different groups. So there would be a Group A and Group B.*

*They would actually screen them. Group A would screen and grade separately from Group B. Then they would swap. They would be screening another set. One group would screen and then they would swap. So for the mark we took the average of the two grades to move someone to the next level.*

NUKA: *Were they screening the applicants on a blind basis? They took out the names of the applicants at that point or later on?*

N'TOW: *At that point, no, for the initial screening, no. It was when they came in to sit do the test. Grading the papers of the test was when we blocked out the names. We didn't want anyone to see someone they knew. That was when the applicants became numbers; they became numbers or some kind of a marker. We had a key, a legend so someone could trace that person back.*

*What we tried to do was eliminate the possibility of someone using influence to get in. We were blessed at the time because at that time we still had fellows. So sometimes we invited the fellows to participate: Those fellows who were about to leave to go to another country or finish up their work. So they would come in and would have no particular interest in any one person. That helped us a lot.*

*So after the screening I think they came in to do their computer test. Then they did the writing test. We asked them to do an essay. We would give them a topic on the day and then they would write. For the grading of the test there were two separate professors grading them and then they would do the same swap. This was just so that we could get some sense of what this person was capable of doing.*

*We didn't always get the best. If anyone was feeling cocky like, "Oh, I graduated with 4 points, or a 3.75," the process broke them down, made them human again. It made them feel like, "Okay, this is something. There are other smart guys here as well. I'm getting into something that requires me to be focused and to be myself so that I don't go around bragging like I'm the best thing around here." That is the first thing that kicks them out of where they go to work because then they start to look down at people. The whole process made them feel human*

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*again. They were competing. They were making mistakes. At the same time they were trying to see how to compete.*

*When a guy comes to the interview and he's nervous, you may know this guy is exceptionally good and that you're talking to a human being now. Then there is something in them telling them, "Okay, what was I thinking? I'm actually coming into a process."*

*We tried to drill into them that they were pretty much our hope. These guys were like the nation's hope. We were coming against people who said it could not happen. First, we couldn't find them and we found them. Then we wanted them to know, "After you go through this process you're going to go into a place where you're going to try to learn more about the country and you're going to use whatever it is that you know to help move this country to another level." That was the thing.*

*One other thing I wanted to just point out is this. Before we started to receive any information from anyone, before recruitment started, we had these technical support sessions. Because we were going to ask them to write an essay, because we were going to ask them to come and sit for an interview, because we were asking them to submit their resumes or CVs (curriculum vitae), we didn't assume that everyone knew how to write a CV or an essay. We did not assume that everyone knew how to sit for an interview. For those who wanted to, we had these open technical support sessions.*

NUKA: Did you do that starting with the first batch?

N'TOW: *The very first batch, yes. I would normally go in and give a talk to them first to encourage them. We called everyone and anyone who wanted to come, who heard the announcement. They came and we would go and motivate them. We would let them know, "It's possible; you could do this." We tried to encourage them. We then started to give them training on how to write a CV, how to define themselves as a product on a piece of paper that was only going to be in the room with a guy who was looking at it and they were not going to be there. We asked, "What do you put on that paper about yourself that makes the guy want to call you back?" So that was one thing for which we brought in people who had some expertise in that and they provided that.*

*Then we went into the essay. We asked, "How do you write concisely, succinctly? You know something about a particular topic that limits you to a certain amount of words. How can you not be intimidated by the fact that all the things you want to say have to be packaged in 500 words?" We brought people in to do that. Then someone came in also to teach them how to sit for an interview, how to prepare for an interview, how to sell themselves. First they sold themselves on a piece of paper. Then they explained themselves in an essay. Now they had to come in.*

*We told them, "We want to hear more; we want to hear from you. How do you make the case further?" We did that. That has become something that we've been doing all the time.*

NUKA: For those technical support sessions, do you hold one in Monrovia or do you hold one at all the universities?

*N'TOW: No, most of our work was concentrated here so we did most of that here. That's what we did here. We spread the word about the program in the counties but in terms of all of the work we had to do, everyone came down here (Monrovia) to do those technical support sessions.*

**NUKA:** So you would just advertise saying that you were having a technical support session before the deadline for applications?

*N'TOW: Yes.*

**CAMERON:** How many did you have before that first class do you think?

*N'TOW: We normally just had those three: one for resumes, one for essays and one for interviews. We normally just had those three. The only thing we had to do was to make sure we advertised them enough.*

**CAMERON:** Who did you get to run those sessions?

*N'TOW: We had different groups of people here. We would sometimes go into government. If there was someone who had a particular expertise in an area, we would bring that person to run it. Some of the sessions were actually conducted by fellows who were here. For example there was a fellow, Lincoln Ajoku. He was an education specialist, so he enjoyed training. Every time we asked, he was always willing to come.*

*Then there were other guys here as well. Some of them were mentors and fellow. We drew from the fellows, the expertise of the fellows. They came in; they were willing, Robtel as well. They came in and gave different sessions. They did not just give those technical support sessions but even what we call the responsive training. The fellows also participated in that. That was another way they were passing on whatever it was that they were doing to the younger guys.*

**NUKA:** Were people volunteering to do these trainings or did you have to have a budget?

*N'TOW: At the time with the budget, we didn't have much. We didn't want to leave the impression that this was one expensive program. So all we did was we tried to provide food for the young people who were coming to these sessions. Sometimes we gave just some token to whoever came to present. By all standards they was really just tokens, it wasn't that much.*

**NUKA** Just in terms of the logistics and financing, especially for that first year when you launched the program—it was a program of JSI so did JSI allocate a budget to fund the program for the first year? Did you—Betsy, Steve Radelet—did you have to go out and find funding? How did that work?

*N'TOW: I may have been the founding director but the founding inspiration behind this was Betsy, Betsy Williams. Betsy was one of those because she saw the concept. We discussed it and she kind of fell in love with it; she just wanted to see it run. So Betsy's family—you know she is a Hess? So with the Hess Family Foundation she managed to convince her family to provide the seed money. I don't quite remember how much it was, I think it was \$500,000 to start the whole thing. That's how the program started. So we drew on that support but that*

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*money was channeled through JSI. So JSI had someone like a program officer who worked with me to manage that particular fund.*

NUKA: That was Andrew Swindell?

N'TOW: *Andrew Swindell. It was Betsy first, then Sharon Rocco, then Betsy, and then Andrew Swindell. After Andrew we had Rachel Macauley.*

NUKA: So JSI was the administrator of the program; they managed the funds?

N'TOW: Yes.

NUKA: Then you were actually running operations?

N'TOW: *Yes, on the ground.*

CAMERON: When did you get that \$500,000 commitment? That concept that you'd written, did that get passed on to the Hess Foundation and then they committed? How did that work?

N'TOW: *Maybe because Betsy was also the administrator at the time I think through JSI they lifted that to the family. Whatever that channel or process was, that was something I didn't concern myself with too much. My focus, as was defined in whatever my TOR was, was to make sure that the program worked on the ground. Betsy and others were supporters and would make sure that we didn't want for anything. So here, that was my job. I wasn't thinking beyond Monrovia or Liberia at the time; there was someone else thinking about that.*

NUKA: When was your TOR (terms of reference) to run the program set in place?

N'TOW: *I think it came around 2008, around that time. Then the program formally kicked off in 2009. There was lots of groundwork to do so that was pretty much what we did.*

NUKA: Did you remain responsible for the Liberia Fellows and Scott Fellows Program at the same time?

N'TOW: Yes.

NUKA: So you were managing all three fellows programs?

N'TOW: *Yes. For me that was the most interesting part. Now I had a taste of the big guys and then I had to look at the young guys. It was really a good thing; it was always a good thing. It was good just to have this bird's eye view of the entire program, to see the impact of the Fellows Program and to see how an offshoot of that program, through Robtel and the idea she had and the president's challenge, how those things turned into another program that looked like it.*

NUKA: So you were program manager and program director here on the ground. Who did you have in terms of support staff? I mean obviously you couldn't manage all three fellows programs yourself.

N'TOW: *I don't know; there was something about this that just kept me running. I had like a program assistant.*

- NUKA: Who was that?
- N'TOW: *That was Titus Harris and then we had a program volunteer, Sadia Stubblefield.*
- NUKA: She is still there; we know her well.
- N'TOW: *She came in as a volunteer really. Those were my staff then plus the driver, the accountant, and the security guards. So those were my staff. But the work was such that I didn't really have to do too much. I already knew my way around Liberia. I knew a lot of the players here.*
- NUKA: You grew up here?
- N'TOW: *Yes, I grew up here. I ran away during the war but I grew up here.*
- NUKA: When did your family flee?
- N'TOW: *1990.*
- NUKA: Where did you go?
- N'TOW: *I went to Italy. First I went to Sierra Leone and then my friends from Europe got me a ticket and took me to Italy.*
- NUKA: How old were you when you fled?
- N'TOW: *I was a man at that time; I was not a boy. I was pretty passed my 20s.*
- NUKA: So you had done university studies here in Liberia?
- N'TOW: *Yes, we were the last class. The sounds of guns were coming when we held our graduations. It was a pretty tough one. I finished up. Our class was actually—was that 1988? We held the ceremony in '89. We finished one year and had to hold the ceremony to the next year. Then the war came.*
- NUKA: Then you went to Sierra Leone and Italy?
- N'TOW: *Yes, I went to Sierra Leone. I was part of an organization called AIESEC (International Association of Students in Economic and Commercial Sciences / Association internationale des étudiants en sciences économiques et commerciales). I studied mathematics so they felt it was close enough. I was national president for AIESEC here. Before the war I had gone to several conferences and I made a lot of friends. My friends became concerned when the war started.*
- When I made it to Sierra Leone some of my AIESEC friends got together, got me a ticket and got me into Europe. They thought that far. No one thought about the next steps. They thought, "All I want is for my friend to get out."*
- NUKA: They wanted to get you out of immediate danger?

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*N'TOW: Yes, they got me out and then I was confronted with what to do next. But it was a wonderful thing to be out. I learned how to depend on others. By the grace of God I'm here.*

*NUKA: How did you end up studying at Tufts from Italy?*

*N'TOW: I was in Italy and then I went to England. I studied at Brunel University in England. I did youth and community work-studies there. Upon the completion of my studies and after a brief stay in the UK, I moved to the U.S. and went to Tufts University.*

*NUKA: Then you came back here afterward during Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's selection?*

*N'TOW: Well, I'd always felt that this is where I wanted to be. I had a chance, just like some of these young people in the PYP to see Liberia from a different vantage point. If they're a young person working in the Ministry of Finance, the conversations that they are privy to are not the same as the ones that ordinary young people hear every day. They hear about how the country is trying to develop plans to get out of debt. They hear about what investments the country is making. Therefore they know what they need to fight for.*

*I had the opportunity as a student leader, as a leader of AIESEC, to represent Liberia at different places. I was always fighting to be relevant in the eyes of my colleagues. I was always more like a flag-bearer for my country. So I always felt like a fraud after I studied, after the UK (United Kingdom) gave me the chance because the status they gave me was "exceptional leave to remain." It wasn't a full refugee status but it was a status that recognized that I had a situation in my country. They respected that. They would give me all I needed to survive until the situation in my country improved. During that time then they would expect that I do the honorable thing and come back home to use whatever it was that I learned.*

*Then before that time was over I went to the States. So when I graduated from Tufts my mind was totally troubled every time. There were great jobs I had in America but the problem was staying there I felt I was always cheating this country. That is not why they let me stay. They let me stay because they understood that the human resource capacity in my country was being depleted because of the war and other intervening events. I had the chance to come out and I needed to do well enough to learn enough to come back and be able to help to join the struggle to rebuild the country.*

*So coming back was an easy choice, a very, very easy choice. My mind was troubled. I was grateful to America, grateful to the UK, grateful to all the countries that allowed me at that time to build myself to come back. That was pretty much it.*

*NUKA: Your family in the US didn't mind?*

*N'TOW: Of course my wife minds, but the problem was that after I kept coming back, it led to a divorce. That is one of the challenges of a diaspora. There is a new term they have now, "transnationals," they tend to face that challenge. We have to decide. We get somewhere and we make a family and then the family also has a choice. If I wanted to come home, that's fine. But they need to decide whether or*

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*not they wanted to come with me or not. Unfortunately my family didn't think that would be a good thing.*

CAMERON: What did you study at Tufts?

N'TOW: *Humanitarian assistance.*

CAMERON: So that's a master's degree?

N'TOW: Yes.

CAMERON: Returning to where we were a bit earlier. When you were designing the program and selection criteria and thinking about having these trainings to train people to do CVs and do the interviews, were these just ideas that came to you or did you look to other programs for a model?

N'TOW: *When I was in the UK I started to get involved in community work. One of the things that I saw, which just became something I adopted, was that every time someone put out like a bid, a grant proposal or a call for proposal, it was always preceded by a technical support section. It would tell you what this thing was all about and how if you apply certain rules you would stand a better chance.*

*What I realized through that was that they always got the best people. They always got the best people because it is like, "Okay, we're not going to assume you know this stuff but we will tell you what this is all about. We thought about it; we have this thing. Let's explain what we really mean to you so that when you come you can then tell us the best way you can fit in these categories."*

*Looking at that is what really led us to say, "Yes, we have smart people but these are people who perhaps never had an experience like this before. Why don't we try to give them the support and explain to them as much as possible so that we can see if we really get the best ones?" So it was not to conceal anything from them but to give them support wherever they needed it.*

NUKA: How about for designing the selection process and the vetting process, had you witnessed it elsewhere?

N'TOW: *No, we never saw that anywhere. We were just challenged by the reality of our time. The real challenge was that I didn't want to be guilty of having some young person say, "I got in because of someone who I know. I know the senator, I know this person, that's the reason why I got in." I didn't want that. Like I said, at that time we had not too long ago come out of an election where people belonged to different parties and all that. So to have the young people feeling that it wasn't because of their skills but because someone recommended them, that's why they got it, I didn't want that.*

*One particular experience really strengthened that whole thought. One of my very best applicants, this guy melted through the entire system like when a hot knife touches butter. That is how this guy was passing through the thing; he was shining. Then one day I get a call. A "Mr. Big Man" calls me and says, "How you doing, man?" I said, "I'm okay." Then he said, "Look, I need you to do me a favor." I said, "What favor?" He said, "I've got one young man who is going through your program, I really need you to favor him." I'm like, "What are you talking about?" He mentions the young man's name. I said to myself, Wait a*

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*minute, Saah, don't say a word, just listen to him." So he explained that he has been this guy's benefactor throughout time; he was helping him through school. The young man I'm talking about had one of the best records; he didn't need help. But the impression until today that is in this country, especially when it comes to girls, is that you need someone's help in order to move through the system.*

*When he said that I said to him, "Please sir, do me a favor. Do not let this young man believe that you're the reason why he is going through the system because he is going on his own. Really, this call is not necessary." I had to break it to him that the call really was not necessary. He did not have to leave this young man thinking that he needed to depend on him or someone else all the time. This man was going through on his own.*

NUKA: How did the caller react?

N'TOW: *The caller? What did he say? He wouldn't say much; he just said, "Oh, okay." I had to break to him that the guy was doing well. So he didn't have to pressure me any longer. I just pleaded with him, "Please, do not let this man believe that you're the reason why he is going through." It happened to a girl as well. Now in this country influence and affluence lead to abuse of young people. I didn't want a program that would fuel that in any way. That's the reason why we had to go through the kind of things that we went through. Even the interviewers in the interviewing team, we had to split them up into teams in fact and shuffle the deck every time. We had to keep changing them because we didn't want anyone to say, "Oh, this guy was on the interviewing team last time so he will be there again." So do we go and start lobbying the guy? No, we didn't want that. We wanted them to come on their own. I felt that they had what it would take to get there. Plus, we were not looking for superstars; we were only looking for young people who were willing to be superstars.*

CAMERON: Was there any resistance to this approach that you took? Were there any people trying to change the transparent approach?

N'TOW: *Yes. There were so many. I got people coming to twist my arms. All I did was get on the radio, talking and just explaining the process to people. Then after the first class I think, I remember, there is a guy who graduated from the program two classes ago. This young man tried for three different cycles. He didn't make it; he didn't get in. He was not disgruntled. He kept trying until he got in and he made it.*

*When we first started, the actual placement of the PYP, was done by the president. Do you know how I felt sitting in the company of Madam President on the days when I had to take the final fifteen? It was fifteen since the first class was ten. So ten were highly recommended. Five were more like the wild cards. So you take those in and she would look at them. We had their dossiers prepared, like their background, what they did. There was a record on them. It also had their noteworthy qualities. That was on there.*

*She would look at them and she would say, "Okay, this one I think will do well in this ministry." By that she meant, "This is where I need them." So that's how we placed them, the first few. But then when the classes kept coming, she didn't have the time to do that all the time. The president has never missed a PYP graduation. For all the classes that have come, she never missed it, never. She has always been there.*

*Her speeches, I think over the years you can see how they have changed or so.*

CAMERON: Let's talk about the placement a little bit more. For that very first class did you have an idea of what ministries the PYPs were going to go into?

N'TOW: *When we sat with the president that is when she told us where they would go. When the president said, "This person will go here," that began my work. Then I would go engage with the minister or whoever that person was, let them know more about the program, and let them know that this is where the president was placing this young person. Then I'd tell them about the young person as well. After that I would maybe arrange a meeting with the young person and the mentor.*

*In the initial stages it wasn't just me. I wasn't attending cabinet meetings at the time; I wasn't a cabinet minister. There were other champions. There were people like the former foreign minister, Augustine Ngafuan, he was one of those guys who believed in this program just like the president did. He was always talking about it. Then the outgoing finance minister also became a believer and he became a champion for the program.*

*There were others like Dr. C. William Allen, the director general for the Civil Service Agency (CSA). These were people who were inside cabinet meetings and were talking about the program, pushing the program to their colleagues. There was not much resistance from the placement host but judging from the experiences shared by PYPs, negotiating access to these places for the PYPs themselves could be difficult. Once they were placed, it was a matter of "How do they get into the inner circles of their placement? How do they negotiate their entry? How do they talk to the people? How do they become one of the insiders?" These were the kinds of challenges that they kept bringing up. That is how we started to bring on the kinds of training that we did.*

*A lot of them had challenges with getting to understand the types of communication in different work environments. So communication became a major part of it.*

NUKA: Written communication?

N'TOW: *Written communication, just navigating the place. I mean one of our PYPs said she went to work the first day, I think she was placed with the finance minister—.*

NUKA: That was Nyanda (Finda Yekee-Davis)?

N'TOW: *Yes, Nyanda. Nyanda got to work the first day and she had to go to this big old World Bank-type meeting with all these guys. They call me Uncle Saah, and some call me "PD" for "program director." She came back to me and said, "Uncle Saah, I like the job but this place is kind of tough." So I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "They dropped me in this meeting and everyone was sitting there and then my minister said, 'You take the notes.' Okay, so I know how to write but in that space I felt really, really frightened and intimidated. So not only am I in this space but I'm going to be the one to capture all the things these guys are saying. What? Are you kidding me?"*

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*Guess what? She did it. After a couple of cycles she was the one teaching people how to take notes. That was for me the power of this thing. She took notes. I think she did well. What they did, they sent her for further training on note taking, so the program tapped into that. So when we were giving one of those trainings, she gave those trainings. Then another person from the class came in and also went for that training to give notes too. So it wasn't about bringing just different people; I think the strength of the program is the opportunity for peer learning. It's about saying, "Okay, it is not like my situation is all that unique. There are people going through similar things. If I just pay attention or maybe just look back at myself, I may be able to just get through these difficult moments.*

NUKA: Did you ever have any ministries who declined a placement and said, "I don't want this, don't send this person to me, I want someone better or I want someone different"?

N'TOW: *We had a situation with one of our placements. This guy graduated with a very high grade point average in biology and chemistry. His goal was to become a medical doctor. He wanted to study medicine. We didn't have any particular places at the time. Then the president suggested that we try JFK, John F. Kennedy Medical Center. So we took him there. The administrator at the time placed him with the chief medical officer.*

NUKA: Is that Dr. (Wvannie-Mae Scott-) McDonald?

N'TOW: *No, Dr. McDonald is the administrator. The chief medical officer is a guy called Dr. Billy Clinton Johnson. Billy Clinton is a fine doctor; he is a teacher at the medical school. When I first took the PYP, Abdoul Derrick Duannah to the medical center, Billy straight up in the meeting said, "I don't need this man." Derrick is sitting there and Billy is saying that. I take pride in myself as being someone who is able to breakdown all kinds of barrier but that barrier was one of those things that was really difficult to break that day. I first had to convince Dr. Clinton and then I had to motivate Derrick. It was the hardest thing for me. Here I was, I was taking this young man to his placement and I was saying all kinds of great things about him. Then we got there and this guy said what he said.*

*Derrick and I worked through this for some time. He kept going to his placement. He'd go and sit outside and Billy would get up and just walk past him and go. From what we learned later on I think Billy was trying to test this young man to see if he really wanted to be there because the business of medicine Billy said is not something to joke with. It is not something you just say, "Hey, I want to do this." That was his way of testing this young man. Derrick kept staying. He was one of the most self-controlled PYPs. This guy was very polite and determined.*

NUKA: This was Derrick?

N'TOW: *Abdoul Derrick Duannah. He was this quiet young man; he was just determined so I took him. We kept working on it. Now I had to spend more time. That was in fact one of the things that I did. I had to initially spend more time with him to motivate and work with him through difficult times.*

NUKA: How long did it take for Dr. Clinton to eventually come around?

N'TOW: *It wasn't that long because I was working with both of them. I kept sort of pushing him to take this young man, to just try him out. Before long he came around, it*

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*wasn't more than a month or so because he saw Derrick every day. So one day Derrick said Dr. Clinton was going to do his rounds in the hospital so he gave Derrick the white overalls, gave him the PPE (personal protective equipment) and said, "Walk with me, let's go. You take notes." So Derrick then had access to the hospital that no ordinary medical student could have. He was actually going on the rounds with the chief doctor. So he went. Derrick said that was the best day for him.*

*From that day he sort of changed things around because of the conversation they had after. I don't know what he said to Dr. Clinton, but somewhere in there he started to trust him with some little research. He was doing some research and Derrick became more like a research assistant. Then before you know it Dr. Clinton started to take Derrick on more rounds, started trusting Derrick more. Today they are like the best friends. Derrick I think has almost completed medical school.*

*There were those difficult times. There was another place where the mentor didn't reject the PYP but the PYP went in without certain skills that the mentor thought the PYP would have. That was at the Ministry of Information. At the time this was Norris Tweah. He was the deputy of administration at the time. Lucia Gibson was working with him. This girl topped her school. This was one of the best PYPs I've ever had. She was very mature, very calm, collected, and composed.*

*She went to this place and this guy was just pushing her off simply because she didn't have computers or something like that. He would call me and say, "This is not what I want; this is not what I called for." The interesting thing is that Norris was a Scott Fellow. So if anybody understood the program, we thought he would.*

*In any case, I think that was his own trial period for her, I guess. But the long and short of it, she decided she was going to focus on building that skill on the computer. She is now super. Now I think she is the director of personnel at the Ministry of Information. But there are lots of things that I can't tell you all about since there could be a whole book you can write about it, how these young people actually navigated on their own and with our help, some of the different challenges, how they got into places. Each class had different challenges they had to meet.*

*In the last couple of classes you find that the standards set by the classes before them became one of the biggest hurdles they had to surmount.*

NUKA: So the expectations become higher after the first few classes?

N'TOW: *Very, very high, yes. The resistance and the rejections, they didn't know them. They saw the level of commitment from these young people. You have other young people in the place but no one else was delivering as much as these guys were. We were staying with them and we were on top of them. We were keeping them focused on the task and a whole lot was dependent upon them. I'm glad that a lot of them did what they did to the extent that they raised the profile of the program. Another turning point was when we had to hire four special PYPs. They didn't come as any particular class, I think there were four.*

NUKA: This was after class three, I think?

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- N'TOW: Yes, we had to recruit four PYPs for the Office of the President because they were just setting up this new unit called the President's Delivery Unit. So when we advertised, instead of four I think we got six. But the president's office could only pay for four. For the other two, there was this new PPCC (Public Procurement and Concessions Commission) that was set up; the other two went there.*
- I was in a meeting and there was this program called USAID-GEMS Program (United States Agency for International Development – Governance and Economic Management Support Program). The director apparently had come into contact with one of these PYPs from the PPCC that was assigned there. The way this man talked about the program, I thought he was talking about a different program. I didn't think he was talking about the PYPs. He praised these guys for exceptional levels of excellence. He was so impressed by them.*
- NUKA: I actually met Michael Kwabo.
- N'TOW: Yes, he was one of them.*
- NUKA: I didn't meet with the other PYP there, I think she is studying abroad right now.
- N'TOW: I think so. I don't know but whatever happened, I don't know, I was not there, but that man was beaming.*
- NUKA: The man from USAID-GEMS?
- N'TOW: Yes, he was beaming. It was on the strength of that that they decided that they were going to support one of our classes. The young people rose up to the challenge. They started to sell themselves. I will not take any credit for what this program has become. I mean all I can say is that what we did was helping the young people see what they have and if they were to just build on whatever they have. Like I said, we didn't go out looking for superstars but we were looking for people who were willing to be superstars. The ones who have gone through this, I think they're willing to be superstars.*
- As much as we may talk about them now, they are still willing to learn. That is the beauty of the whole experience.*
- NUKA: Who was the USAID-GEMS director or manager, do you recall their name?
- N'TOW: Dr. something. The one before Victoria Cooper.*
- CAMERON: It sounds like there was a lot of positive feedback about the PYPs. Was there any negative feedback or people that sort of resisted the program?
- N'TOW: Class five had this negative thing about them, people started to call them spies for the government.*
- NUKA: This is pre-Ebola? This is 2014?
- N'TOW: I think class five went through the Ebola period. I think it is class five; it was the last class. They went into the Ministry of Finance. A lot of them went there because of their background. That's another thing, certain ministries were asked*

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*for certain people. So we recruited on the basis of what the ministries were asking for.*

NUKA: USAID-GEMS also supported a whole class, right?

N'TOW: *Yes they did. It was part of their program. But in any case, the PYPs went in and the news went in before them that the PYPs were there to replace people in the ministry. People thought the PYPs would come in, they would be taught, and once they learned then the government through the PYPs was going to take people out of their jobs. So the place just became crazy afraid of these guys.*

NUKA: Actually I talked to one of the PYPs who was in that class. He said for the first two weeks they were just sitting in another room outside the ministry; no one gave them any work to do.

N'TOW: *Exactly.*

NUKA: No one gave them any work to do; no one talked to them.

N'TOW: *That became one of the challenges for the class and for the program. Do you know what it means to walk around in a politically-charged atmosphere with someone saying that they are there for someone's job? In this open political space, trust me, it is not good. A lot of them started to get this kind of resentment. There were PYPs who even after having justified themselves, people still kind of pushed them back. You need to talk a little bit with Nada Ajami-Tondo. Have you spoken with Nada yet? She was in class one. She had an interesting experience.*

NUKA: She was at Ministry of State?

N'TOW: *No, Ministry of Education. The other interesting PYP that would lead more to your question would be Cassandra Hampton.*

NUKA: We're speaking with her tomorrow.

N'TOW: *Cassandra started off with one placement and ended up in another placement. So there was tension in the placement. We had to move her to another placement. I can't say too much about that. Since you are talking to her it would be good if you get what the experiences were from her. We started to get complaints from the mentor. I think the whole thing about power was different. There were two young women, the mentor was young and Cassandra was young. They two had this tension between them. Somehow I had to listen to the boss and try to make the best decision which was to negotiate for Cassandra to move to somewhere else where she could apply herself. I observed for a while to see if I was going to get the same kind of complaints. But I did move her and it was like she hit the ground running.*

NUKA: After she moved?

N'TOW: *Yes, after she moved to a new place. I know it was a difficult experience for her. I would not want to put any young person through any such experience. It leaves them thinking that there is something wrong with them. But Cassandra, she bounced back really quickly. She got to this new placement and just took it on and started moving. That was good.*

NUKA: I was wondering if we could move on and talk a little bit about the management side of the program. Obviously from our discussion it is clear you were a hands-on manager. How did you find the time to do that? What kind of support did you have from JSI or from other staff here in Liberia?

N'TOW: *What JSI did for me was that they made sure I was happy and satisfied. Betsy and I had long discussions. We didn't agree all the time but one thing she always did was to make sure that I had the support that I wanted. When she was running it, she was responsible. Then it passed on to Andrew. With Betsy, she wasn't here most of the time. With Andrew, I think because of the experience with Betsy not being here, he became more hands-on. There were times when Andrew would come here. He even came at times to help with the recruitment and stuff like that. So the backstop and all of that was really, really strong.*

*Then JSI started to address some of my other concerns. That made me happy and satisfied so I was prepared to work countless hours. I could go to work before seven or even six and come back from work right around nine or ten in the evening; it didn't matter at all. I was happy.*

NUKA: So they gave you a promotion?

N'TOW: *Yes, every year they offered me the opportunity to go back to the US and visit with my friends and family there. It was a huge support. If someone makes that kind of investment in you, you just want to give them everything you've got. Everywhere in JSI that we turned, whenever I picked up the phone and called, I had an answer. If I said, "I need to prepare a press release but maybe I don't have the time to do it," as soon as I made that call all they would ask me was, "What are some of the things that you're looking for?" The next thing I know they write it and send it. So there were times when I wrote it but that's just to give you an impression in terms of the backstop.*

*So it didn't feel like so much work to do because they knew the level of work I had to do here, engaging everybody. They were ready to put in place any level of support. If it meant somebody traveling, they would come. So I wasn't just on my own. It may have been remote and distant but that backstopping was really strong.*

CAMERON: What were the areas that you needed the most support?

N'TOW: *Sometimes it was critical communication, proposal-type things that required a level of expertise that my office staff was not prepared to give me.*

NUKA: Communication with funders?

N'TOW: *Yes, communication with funders, facilitating conference calls, things with funders, and stuff like that. Those were some of the things I needed. Most of the other pieces were things I could handle.*

*The program has four components, you know that. We have the mentoring component, the training component, the performance management component, and the immersion/excursion component. So those other pieces were things that I could sort of handle on the ground a lot. I could handle the performance management pieces which were the follow-ups and things I was doing with the PYPs like writing up their stuff, their stories, their experiences, doing one-on-*

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*ones with them, and one-on-ones with the administrators or the host. I would just bring them together, hear their experiences, and draw suggestions from them for what the next training should be. So those were things I could do down here.*

NUKA: In terms of developing the annual budget for the program and things, was that more Andrew's job?

N'TOW: *We did that together. After discussions he would draft what he thought we agreed on and send it to me. I'd look at it and sometimes Frank DeSarbo would help. Did you guys talk to Frank at all?*

CAMERON: I did.

N'TOW: *Frank was this guy who would leave us but whenever we got stuck, then he would come. He thought that he needed to give us time to express ourselves. Whenever we needed any heavyweight help, he would come. But he had Andrew and he had me. He felt that we were moving. He wasn't hearing anything negative or anything crazy. He just left us to do the work but he was still supervising and he was still hands on. He was the kind of guy who let you express yourself.*

NUKA: Did you ever have any difficulties over the budget when you wanted to do something or you wanted to expand the program in a certain way and JSI wasn't willing to go along with it?

N'TOW: *No, we never really had that. Before we would even get to that point, we would discuss a lot. We were constantly engaged and sometimes those things that we wanted to do consistent with the program would come up in conversations. They would say, "Oh yes, let's try this." Then we'd all agree to it. So when it came to the budget then we would just ask for it and we'd get it.*

NUKA: Did you ever consider expanding the number of PYPs you take in?

N'TOW: *We always wanted to do that. I always felt like we needed more PYPs. I was looking forward to the day I could recruit a class of 50 PYPs and place them in all of these different agencies and ministries. But the budget could not allow that. It also would have meant I would have to bring someone else on, probably two other staff members to be more effective.*

NUKA: So when you began the program was there any kind of long-term vision of how the program would run, whether it would ever be absorbed by the government?

N'TOW: *Yes, that was the major thing that we were talking about. We wanted to do this so that we could bring to the government's attention the possibilities for grooming our own young people here to do public service. The kinds of talks we had at the time were that at the end of the day maybe the legislature could make some budgetary allocations to take it on or we would ask for the president's permission or intervention to put up some kind of executive order. Instead of what we have now, we thought maybe we'd have a Liberian-owned advisory board and all of that. So yes, we thought about it being Liberian-owned. But thinking through some of the difficulties we're seeing now, they were not part of the original thinking.*

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*With some of the difficulties now and going for a Liberian-owned board, the program has never been used to being on its own.*

NUKA: On its own without JSI?

N'TOW: *Not just without JSI but without external backstopping. Now that is something that the program has to live with and figure out who is going to play that role. I think the role now is one that has been defined for the advisory board. That board is going to work with them to see how we can source some more funding and provide a sort of technical support and things that JSI was providing.*

NUKA: We talked a little bit about the technical support JSI was providing as basically accounting, dealing with donors, and critical communications. Are those the main backstopping functions?

N'TOW: *At the time with JSI, yes.*

NUKA: Are those the functions that the program needs to fill now?

N'TOW: *It needs to fill them but the most important thing is sustainable funding just to keep them going. Funding brings a lot of things. It gives us the chance to hire somebody with the skill set that you need who would prepare this critical communication and all that. We either have to bring on additional staff or whoever we hire to run the program should have these skills.*

NUKA: Do the program staff themselves now need to develop proposals for funding?

N'TOW: *I think that is what it is. If this model stays, yes, that is what it is going to be. Then maybe what the program is going to do is raise money to get a program development officer, someone with a particular task of playing that role that JSI was playing back then, making sure that they not only negotiate with funders and other things but try to find ways for the program to stay afloat.*

CAMERON: Do you think the program will exist indefinitely or do you see a point where it would be phased out?

N'TOW: *I think like with everything else there will come a point where it probably will phase out but I'm hoping not. I think as the program puts out more graduates who are in good positions and well placed, they develop this core group of advocates for the program. They will now be planted in places where they can make a difference.*

*I think one of the reasons for this is that if anyone would make decisions not to continue the program, it would simply be because they haven't had the experience or don't know the program. So while PYPs are still shining so brightly, for anyone to say, "Don't continue this program," just the PYPs' performances would make it difficult for people to come to that conclusion. I think that is the kind of thing. So all we have to do is to make sure that the PYP selection process is still transparent, objective, and balanced, and that the process brings us the best. Through the experience of the program, if we can just build them strong enough we wouldn't need to advocate too much for the program because the work they do will speak for itself. To me that is the most important part.*

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*The alumni association will grow and they will become very powerful. There will be this core group of professionals that this country will look to from time to time. Some of them will get into politics. I heard one of them is running to become a representative. So if he wins it means that he is going to go into the House of Representatives. That means he will be close to the circle that discusses laws. Some of them may end up becoming ministers. We have an assistant minister already.*

NUKA: Who is this?

N'TOW: *Boakai Jalieba, he is not here, he is in the States. He is an assistant minister for technical education and training. Then you have Nyanda, who is the director for passports. We do intend to elevate this matter to Madam President, to tell her, "Madam President, the idea was to see if we could raise a cadre of young people who would be capable of becoming deputy ministers and ministers; we have them now. There is a pool of them here."*

NUKA: Has the government indicated any willingness to kind of absorb the program as part of a Civil Service Agency program?

N'TOW: *I would say yes because if you look on the board and all the discussions that we've had, I'm there on the board of directors. I'm a minister in this government. There is George Werner who is the minister of education. Then there is also director-general of the Civil Service Agency. So these are top positions. The president is very well aware of this.*

*The entry point, the one who speaks for the program is the director-general of the Civil Service Agency. She is the one who connects with the president from time to time about this program. I don't know if you're going to meet her.*

NUKA: I think we're going to try and schedule an interview.

N'TOW: *Dr. Puchu Leona Bernard. She is not one who knows a lot about the program, but the minister of Education does.*

NUKA: I spoke with Mr. Werner.

N'TOW: *He is someone who knows the program. One person you should speak to if you can get to him by phone is the previous director of the Civil Service Agency, Dr. William Allen. He is now the ambassador to France.*

CAMERON: I spoke with him on Monday.

N'TOW: *He's good. At the time there were lots of blessings. There were times when I just didn't know what to do. I drew blanks. I would see this guy and I would walk into his office without any appointment. He would sit me down and he would just read through me and he would say to me, "I know you're worried about this but it is really not as bad as you think it is." I was in the business of lifting up the PYPs but this is the guy whom I always went to when I drew a blank and I just didn't know what to do.*

*It was like he was not working for JSI or anyone; he was like a big brother, like a mentor. I was mentoring PYPs but he was my mentor. He showed me how to engage the Office of the President. He showed me how to communicate with the*

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*Office of the President. He showed me how to work with government ministers. He helped build me up to the point I got the confidence that manifested itself in the way I did my work. He was pretty much like the guy running the program because I always went to him for advice.*

NUKA: What do you think now are the barriers that prevent the government from absorbing the program? Are there legislative barriers? Financial?

N'TOW: *Financial more. I don't think the legislature would have a problem honestly but you have to do what is politically expedient. At a particular point you've got to take some stance that would align with whatever the political directions are. To lend this program to that political discussion right now in this open space before elections, they think it would kill the program because we have the opposition. It is not because they don't like the program but they don't support the president.*

*So then they would have one group just being totally one-sided with the evaluation of the program because they support the president. So you wouldn't have something there. So to put the program in that space, I think due to the wisdom of the president and others that it might be a disservice to the program to begin to discuss this action. It would just not be on neutral ground; it would not be on fair and even ground to discuss this sort of program that is so important to the country.*

*If you're talking legislation then you have to argue and, convince people, which is not right. I think the president is also of the mind that the program is selling. Young people themselves are selling the program just by their performances. So it is easy to mention them from time to time in speeches.*

*One of the unintended goals of mine is happening now. I wanted the young people to do what they're doing so well that they would make it difficult for anyone to just cross them out. That is what I wanted. This is just something deep inside me. I didn't put it on any piece of paper. I didn't share that with many people but that's what it was. I wanted these guys to shine so brightly that for you to turn off the switch someone would notice you; someone would challenge you. That is what I wanted to see.*

NUKA: If the opposition party wins the elections do you think that support for the program is likely to continue in terms of ministers being willing to take in placements? Will members of the administration be willing to continue to have PYPs placed in their offices?

N'TOW: *I think we're at the point right now that only someone who has a really ugly agenda for the country will come and say they will not use a program like this. We're talking about continuity. We're talking about talents that are groomed right here. PYPs have something that no other groups of graduates have. One, they have the skill set. They've graduated from our schools, our universities right here. Second is that they know the national agenda; they are committed to it. Why? Because they have been in these different places where they know how the country is progressing.*

*We don't have people coming out of school with that. I don't care what grade point average they came out with to have that kind of knowledge. So nationalism is already embedded in them through the experiences that they've had. It was after the 2011 elections when there was the post-election violence. Young people*

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*were all involved in it. This PYP, I think it was Nyanda, said, "Uncle Saah, one thing that really pains me is that a lot of my friends don't know what we stand to lose. If they knew what I know about what we stand to lose by breaking down things, I don't think they would be in the streets."*

*Nothing could be more poignant; nothing could be more powerful than a young person saying that to you. I think it was Nyanda and she was in this place where she was working with the minister of finance, working on HIPIC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative) issues, clearing the country from debt, and knowing what investments were coming to the country. So she knew what we're standing for, what there was to lose by seeing young people in the street and doing all kinds of things. They didn't know as much as she knew now. That's true for what all these other guys are doing, someone working with the minister of education, someone with the minister of youth, all these things. They're seeing how the country is actually dealing with these different issues and knowing what is coming to or leaving from the country.*

*So they know the country in a way that no other young person will know. It puts them in a position to be of a great service to the country. It increases your level of patriotism in addition to their skills.*

NUKA: So there has been no opposition attacks on the program or anything like that?

N'TOW: *I haven't heard any. I heard people talk about me but not about the program.*

NUKA: That's obviously important for ensuring the stability of the program. I think that is something donors are also looking at with some trepidation. Will the PYPP continue to have the same level of effect that it has had under President Sirleaf? Will it continue under the next administration?

N'TOW: *Honestly, I think it will but rather than wait I think PYPP had the opportunity to position itself and do that well. The PYPs can do that through the alumni network that they've created, if they strengthen that and begin to act as a group to tackle other national issues. To me, that might not be a bad idea.*

*I think the same technical support that we gave them before they come, I think the alumni have started to do that. They call it "Job Shop." They started to do this with universities. When students are graduating, they go to these places and they run these programs. If you continue to do something like that or you lead national discussions on topical issues among young professionals, the more relevant they make themselves and the harder it will be to really dismantle this program.*

CAMERON: I have a couple of quick clarification questions. When did Hh Zaizay come on board?

N'TOW: *When I was leaving I think in 2013.*

NUKA: He was a PYP in the first class?

N'TOW: *Yes, but I left in 2013 and that's when he came on.*

CAMERON: Was he working as your assistant for a time before that?

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**N'TOW:** *It was a short time that he worked. I think he worked for less than a year as my assistant. It took a while before we accepted that we needed to have an assistant for me. I guess it was mostly me; I was just enjoying it. But then when he came on it was for a very short time. It wasn't long before he was on his own. I was still trying to groom and mentor him when all of us got this pleasant shock when the president called my name on the radio and said I had been appointed as a deputy minister for youth development.*

**NUKA:** She didn't check with you beforehand?

**N'TOW:** *No, I didn't know it was coming like that. She called me and said, "Saah, I need help in that ministry." I said, "Okay." She said, "You know what? Go back and check that ministry out and see." I was supposed to come back to her to tell her, "Ma'am I like it," or something. She didn't even give me that chance; she just announced it. It was a pleasant surprise.*

*Everyone knows that I'm here because this program worked. So it is definitely because the president wants to see something more like this.*

**CAMERON:** You also mentioned that for the first class the ministries didn't request people, that the president placed them. When were ministries first able to request PYPs for specific functions?

**N'TOW:** *I think it came up with the third or fourth class; that is when we started. It came up that for most of the time we didn't have job descriptions or things like that. It was the third or fourth class that we had that. Hh can be more precise on it because I think he would know.*

**CAMERON:** The other thing I wanted to ask about was mentors and supervisors. Were they initially meant to be two separate people? I know sometimes they ended up being the same, the mentor was the supervisor.

**N'TOW:** *They were meant to be two separate people. The original idea of this mentorship was that it would be something separate from the work environment and that some people would make some time. It could be one and the same but we just wanted them to form a relationship that was not totally attached to the office environment. We wanted them to have some relaxed areas where they could plan time to meet and discuss informally. At least what we thought originally was that sometimes the office environment could be too intimidating for certain conversations. We thought that being a mentor, they could try to find ways to informally meet and talk. But most of the mentors ended up becoming supervisors, at least most of them. In some cases there were different mentors and supervisors.*

**CAMERON:** Why was that? Why couldn't you have the separate mentors and supervisors?

**N'TOW:** *These guys hit the ground running every time they got into a workspace. So some supervisors were mostly focused on the job. What the PYPs then would do is find the friendliest support and to lean on that person, someone they bounced ideas off with at the time. In some cases the guy we identified as the supervisor ended up being that person. This was true except in the case of the USAID-GEMS class that they supported because USAID-GEMS what made them different was that they actually identified mentors.*

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NUKA: They were in the GEMS program?

*N'TOW: Yes, so each young person, each PYP had a USAID-GEMS mentor. Then they had the mentor in the workplace. That was the only difference.*

NUKA: Thank you so much. We really appreciate it.

*N'TOW: No problem.*