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Cuffy presented each section of the manual to airport staff to make sure they understood and supported the procedures. During months of discussions with the staff during 2008 and into 2009, Cuffy tweaked the procedures to reflect workers' concerns and ideas. "We went through it [the manual] religiously, page by page, day by day. ... I made sure they signed off on it," he said. When the manual was complete, he held training sessions during a one-month period in early 2009 on implementing the procedures and submitted the manual to the airport's board of directors for approval. The complete airport operations manual was Roberts' first since the Pan Am era ended in 1984.

GEMAP also required Cuffy to build capacity among airport staff. When he had arrived in 2006, he said, capacity was so low that "sometimes you had to do everything." He led workshops on financial procedures and mentored officials individually. He also brought in officials from the Ministry of Finance and private consultants, when necessary, to lead workshops on computer skills, public sector management and other topics. "Our duty was to work ourselves out of a job," he said. "That's where the institutional capacity-building part of the project came in."

As the airport's financial position improved, Simmons was able to train staff in other areas where capacity was lacking. "We looked at what was required," he said. "People needed the training; people needed to be trained because they had been in a time warp for 10, 15, 20 years where nothing was done." He identified serious needs in electrical support, aircraft handling and operations, air traffic control and other areas. He sent airport staff on study tours to Malaysia,

Sweden, Singapore, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and the U.S.

Simmons also supported airport staff pursuing graduate degrees at local universities. One student the airport supported was Corneh, who was groomed to replace the departed financial controller and to maintain the reforms put in place by Cuffy. Corneh recalled receiving the offer to train to take over financial operations at the airport. He said he took the news "like a blessing." Cuffy "told me frankly, 'Look, if you are willing to learn, you will learn. If you don't want to learn, it is left with you.'" So then I decided to learn," Corneh said. While he trained with Cuffy at the airport, Corneh also received financial support in pursuing a master's degree in finance at Cuttington University in Monrovia. As Corneh developed his skills and knowledge, and the airport's financial situation stabilized, Cuffy incrementally transferred responsibilities to Corneh. "It was a nice transition from Alex [Cuffy] to Jacob [Corneh]," Simmons said.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Cuffy initially struggled to implement reforms as a result of resistance from both airport management and staff. Layoffs and benefit cuts angered the rank and file. Corneh said that when GEMAP and Cuffy first came to Roberts, "The first reaction was good." However, after Cuffy introduced cuts to travel allowances, staff support for reforms began to wane. Cuffy said he received threatening text messages, and his car windshield was shattered, though he could not identify the culprits.

Cuffy's initiatives alienated some managers as well as staff. For example, one deputy managing director did not qualify to keep her position under new personnel standards that required at least a master's degree for officials at her level. Forced to choose between a demotion and a severance package, she opted for the latter. In another example, the local financial controller who was

Cuffy's initial counterpart resisted the constraints placed on his office by the introduction of an external controller with cosignatory authority. Essentially, every decision he made became subject to Cuffy's approval. Their disagreements came to a head when the local controller encouraged financial staff not to attend Cuffy's training workshops.

To overcome this obstacle, Corneh said he and Cuffy called a meeting for financial staff to explain the potential benefits of GEMAP and determine who would participate going forward. "We called this meeting," said Corneh, "The controller did not attend. So we talked to them and told them how beneficial this program is, what they should expect and if they cooperate how far they will go in their own career. So they started coming on."

The most serious dispute arose between Cuffy and Dennis, who was managing director before Simmons. Dennis objected to the benefit cuts and to the reforms in general, preferring to resuscitate procedures from the Pan Am era rather than introduce far-reaching procedural changes. One event typified the difference of perspectives between the two men. Cellphone company Comium had held equipment at Roberts while it disputed its tax obligations with the Ministry of Finance. When the ministry allowed Comium to recover its equipment from Roberts, Cuffy insisted the company pay warehouse fees of about US\$150,000. Dennis argued that because the company had stored its equipment at Roberts because of a disagreement with a government ministry, those fees should have been waived. Called upon to settle the argument, GEMAP'S supervisory board, chaired by Johnson Sirleaf, sided with Cuffy. Soon after, Dennis left his position at the airport.

When Simmons succeeded Dennis in mid-2007, he enthusiastically backed reforms and provided Cuffy with the managerial support he had lacked. Corneh said that when Simmons arrived, "Things changed ... I could say 100% plus

... He came in, and in the accounts department we had the power to implement the financial policy to the fullest."

Simmons took a harder line with recalcitrant staff, a position made easier because he did not have the personal relationships at Roberts that Dennis had developed during his tenure. Simmons said he wouldn't allow staff to oppose reforms or violate procedures. "They're not running the organization, and I'm not going to do things contrary to what I want to achieve in an organization because somebody objects," he said. "If I am going to do that, I might as well just turn it in and do something else. I was doing it more out of a need to see the organization improve; I wasn't looking for a job. So there was no leverage they had. What could they do? Tell me to stop? I'd tell them 'OK, goodbye.' End of story."

## ASSESSING RESULTS

By late 2009, Simmons and Cuffy had moved on, having accomplished nearly all of their goals at Roberts. Cuffy agreed to design and lead a capacity-building program under GEMAP, while Simmons entered the private sector. Cuffy determined that, with financial controls in place and improved capacity in financial management, Roberts no longer needed an external controller. In August, he released his cosignatory authority, although he continued to monitor Roberts' finances from time to time over the next year, as required by GEMAP, to ensure reforms were maintained.

Cuffy, Dennis and Simmons successfully implemented the first stage of the airport's master plan compiled by NACO-SSI. The financial position of the airport improved from a US\$500,000 deficit to a surplus of more than \$1 million from 2006 to 2009, largely because of the financial controls and procedures Cuffy put in place. New procedures and improved facilities brought in new airlines, including Air France and Delta (by 2010), though capacity for further growth remained limited without the added

investments envisioned in the master plan. The three men reduced staff from roughly 450 to 283, offering the remaining workers higher salaries, training and improved housing facilities at the airport, while cutting other benefits and increasing the personal income tax airport officials paid by bringing tax procedures in compliance with Ministry of Finance regulations. They completed a seven-part operating manual that brought Roberts into compliance with requirements of the International Civil Aviation Authority, and the U.S. Transportation Security Administration approved the facility to handle flights to and from America.

However, Roberts continued to lack capacity in some areas, partly because some qualified staff were lost during the retrenchment process. Additionally, though officials considered financial and administrative capacity at the airport to be sufficient for the tasks at hand, technical aviation expertise remained in short supply. The airport employed one retired technician on contract and a second technician who was approaching retirement age. There remained a need to train younger technical workers.

Former Deputy Managing Director for Operations Edna Lloyd, who left the airport in 2007, argued that Cuffy was too quick to introduce reforms and did not allow the staff enough time to acclimate. “We didn’t necessarily object to it [the new procedures], but he [Cuffy] didn’t discuss it with us,” she said. As a result, she thought Roberts had instituted “new procedures that don’t fit the system.”

## REFLECTIONS

GEMAP financial controller Alexander Cuffy earned praise for his efforts at Roberts International Airport. He was feted during an airport ceremony in 2009 that was attended by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Clinton praised Cuffy during her remarks at the ribbon-cutting ceremony, according to a 30 September article in the Liberian newspaper *The Analyst*.

Abraham Simmons, who became managing director at the airport in 2007, held Cuffy in high regard. “He [Cuffy] was very, very effective as a controller,” Simmons said. “Where there were things that had to be done, reports done, studies that had to be made, he mobilized the resources within the organization to make sure that that was done so that we get a clear picture of where the organization was financially. Alex was very effective.”

Pennoh Bestman, deputy managing director for administration, said the fact that Cuffy was a Liberian, the only one among GEMAP financial controllers, contributed to the willingness of staff to work with him.

Cuffy credited Simmons with establishing an environment conducive to reforms and providing the political support for Cuffy to do his job effectively. “For the period he [Simmons] was there we accomplished a lot, because as a GEMAP official you needed the support of the head of the entity. You needed to work as a team,” Cuffy said.

Bestman agreed. “What he [Simmons] put into place, it’s what got this airport going today. ... He set a lot of things straight; he was a good leader,” Bestman said. While acknowledging that Julius Dennis did get reforms started during his stint as Roberts managing director beginning in 2006, Bestman said Dennis had been too close to the staff to push through difficult reforms. “Dennis worked here before the war, so coming back in 2006 was like coming home to a lot of friends,” Bestman said. “I felt that he did not want to hurt certain people.”

Observers made several points about the utility of the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program (GEMAP) at Roberts. Cuffy recognized the sensitive position he and other airport staff were in as a result of his cosignatory authority on all financial transactions at the airport. In particular, it marginalized the role of the local controller, who left the airport in 2007. Cuffy described GEMAP as “an

imposition” to people in some cases, and he said the key to his success was his conciliatory approach. He emphasized that GEMAP officials should not “impose themselves in a way which was demeaning to people. It is not because you have the signature authority so you could exercise it like a hammer and knock everybody’s head.” Cuffy stressed the need to build relationships with staff and to recognize that they saw themselves as responsible and productive.

Jacob Corneh, the airport’s chief accountant, said he thought capacity-building efforts under GEMAP might have been more effective if the program had provided refresher courses for staff beyond 2009, especially considering that much of the staff had turned over between 2006 and 2011.

Although some critics at other state-owned enterprises in Liberia considered GEMAP an impediment to progress, Simmons did not share that perspective. “I understand in some other organizations, GEMAP was viewed as a hindrance,” he said. “I don’t know what conditions they were operating under, but I didn’t see that at the airport. Number one, because I saw no need to hide anything from GEMAP. Number two, if GEMAP was acting contrary to the established goals and objectives of the organization, I would have been the one complaining to get it changed, and I never had that. So I think it was a positive experience, it was something that was necessary. It brought in a caliber of support that the airport needed.”

Simmons said the key to reforms at Roberts after the 14-year civil war was instilling a proper set of values among staff. “People need to understand that any organization starts with values, and these should be shared values,” he said. “People have to understand why they exist and how exceeding those bounds that are established defeats the purpose of what you’re trying to achieve. When they buy into it and see that it is a top-down commitment, people follow suit and attitudes change.”

## EPILOGUE

In August 2009, the Liberian government signed a contract with Lockheed Martin Corp., the U.S. aviation and security company, to manage Roberts International Airport. On the advice of the Liberia Civil Aviation Authority and the National Investment Commission, the government brought in Lockheed Martin with the expectation that the company would invest in Roberts according to the master plan developed by NACO-SSI, including construction of a new passenger terminal and additional runway. Although Roberts was bringing in roughly US\$5 million in revenue annually, such projects as envisioned in the master plan would cost in the tens of millions.

In 2011, LCAA Director-General Richelieu Williams expressed disappointment with the deal. He said that in addition to new construction, he had hoped Lockheed Martin would send staff at Roberts for additional training and take advantage of Lockheed’s vast supply of human capital. He also had hoped that the airport’s association with an internationally known company would attract new airlines to Liberia. However, Lockheed did not invest substantially in Roberts, either in human capital or in infrastructure. Williams surmised that Lockheed’s interest was tied to negotiations between the U.S. and Liberian governments over the potential to locate the U.S. military’s Africa Command in Liberia. When those negotiations faltered, Williams said, Lockheed apparently lost interest in significantly upgrading the airport. A spokesman for Pacific Architects and Engineers Inc., a former subsidiary of Lockheed Martin that continued to operate the airport into 2011, declined to comment on the matter.

Between 2009 and 2011, Lockheed Martin’s management team at Roberts did not veer significantly from the procedures put in place by its predecessors. Bestman said the financial and human resources policies and procedures were still

in place and had not been amended. He considered this to be “an endorsement of the processes put in place under GEMAP.” Cuffy continued to monitor Roberts as part of GEMAP until mid-2010 and credited Lockheed with

improving security at the airport. Still, he recognized that the core of his reforms remained intact. “I made my bed,” Cuffy said, and Lockheed “slept on my bed.”



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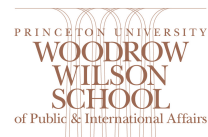
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