



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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LOPEZ: This interview is with Muniru Kawa, Project Manager, the Records Management Improvement Program at the Public Service Reform Unit of Sierra Leone. The interviewer is Summer Lopez. Mr. Kawa, thank you for agreeing to take this time. I'd like to ask you first of all to just describe your role in public sector reform, civil service reform here in Sierra Leone.

KAWA: *My role is very specific. I am the project manager of the Records Management Improvement Program, which is a component of the Public Sector Reform Unit. The unit itself is a directorate under the auspices of the Office of the President. Our role is to address the poor record keeping in Sierra Leone. It is understood by every civil servant in the civil service that the records that are created by government are in a very poor, miserable, and chaotic situation over the years as a result of a combination of factors.*

One is neglect. Records have not been given priority like any of the other resources that are managed in government. Two, the awareness of the importance of records is not there. So it is just you create records, you use it and you dump it, you forget about it. You forget about the future use of it based on the evidence that you would need for financial transactions, for personnel management, human resources and that kind of thing.

Over the years government has stumbled in its implementation of various policies because records are not there to back up the plans, to implement the plans and to work out strategies for effective management in government. So, after the war the international community, including the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), recognized the need to manage records in government as a basis for good governance. They thought that without the reliability of records, no reference would be made and no management principles would be put in place. So they funded a project, an initial project in 2005. That was when the program itself, the Records Management Improvement Program, was set up, in 2005.

It was initially set up to look at a broader perspective of how records have been kept over the years in Sierra Leone and what approach should be put in place to address the deplorable situation that records have been kept in Sierra Leone. My first visit to Freetown, Sierra Leone, was in April 2005 where I assessed the situation and made recommendations for not only the management of the subject of policy files which are created in government, but also it was essential to look at the personnel records, which—to my mind, and it has been proved right—had a fiduciary link to payroll integrity in every government.

After that first phase of funding by the UK government, DFID felt that it was indeed necessary to look at not only the subject files, the policy files that are created by civil servants in the administrative departments, but also to look at the human resource base. That is the Establishment Secretary's Office (ESO) where personnel records are created, to look at the personnel records and how complete these records were and how could you link the personnel records to the payroll, because they might tell you at the Establishment Secretary's Office that when employees are recruited in the civil service, files are created for them. I mean essential documents based on that recruitment are put in each personnel file.

Most of these essential documents were missing. There were a lot of gaps in personnel records. There were people on the payroll who did not have personnel files. There were people, employees on the payroll whose essential documents in the personnel files were not there. They were not complete. For instance, they

would not even have letters of appointment; they would not even have an acceptance letter, they would not have medical certificate of fitness. So there was a need to first of all address the completion of those personnel files, see across the civil service who has a file, who does not have essential documents in those files and how those files could be completed.

One aspect of it was to see how each of the 16,500, 16-1/2 thousand personnel, employees in the civil service, who has a file and who hasn't. Only a third of that number had personnel files, 6000 plus had personnel files, the rest did not have personnel files. So you're talking about over 10,000 employees did not have personnel files. So the project launched a campaign of creating a personnel file for each of the 16-1/2 thousand employees on the civil service payroll. So now we can boast of 16-1/2 thousand files, for each of the employee files.

The second aspect of it was to look at those files, whether they were complete. And completeness means whether you came into the civil service by going through the process of recruitment and which procedures detailed that you must have an application form, which is a Public Service Commission form 8, which you have to complete at the Public Service Commission. Then you will be invited for an interview, and you will be recommended for appointment into the public service. The human resource department, which is in the Establishment Secretary's Office, would then issue an appointment letter and they will refer you to take a medical certificate of fitness. After the medical they would require you to complete an acceptance letter that you have accepted the job. You would also be required to supply educational certificates if your appointment was based on certain grades that required educational certificates.

So, five essential documents were determined to be in a complete file. Those were the (a) Public Service Commission form 8, PSC form 8, (b) Letter of First Appointment, that you have been appointed (c) the acceptance letter, that you accepted the appointment (d) your medical certificate of fitness, you should bring a medical certificate. A medical doctor will have to certify you are fit, you are not mentally deranged to come to work, and (e) educational certificate if your appointment was based on educational qualification. Then you are supported by essential documents.

There were other documents that were also required. Those would be like your birth certificate, your photograph. But much premium was not put on the birth certificate on the basis that when you complete the Public Service Commission form, there is a field that you complete which requires you to put your date of birth in there. So once you put that, that was a contractual document which you have completed because you would have to sign that all information on that form was true and correct.

Once you completed that form and if you don't have a birth certificate to support that, that one can pass because you have contracted, you have agreed that that was an authentic date. So we went through that exercise. We tried as much as possible to complete some of the files. Some of them got complete files. Some did not. Some had only two or three documents in their files.

The process became much more excited and excited. The funders felt that, wait a minute, how could somebody enter public service without the necessary documents? How in the first place did that happen? Let us look at those anomalies that are in the files and see how we can address the situation.

So we sat down again with the help of the IT guru, Howard, and we identified each file out of the 16-1/2 thousand. What anomalies are in those files. We were able to get huge numbers of documents. At the end of this interview, I would like to give you a report on what we did. So we identified a huge number of anomalies and then DFID contracted to continue to fund the project. They asked us to see how we can resolve those anomalies in the files, not only that, but go out in the field and then try to match each personnel file against the physical individual. That was a pilot project that we did. We were able to identify 250 ghost workers on the payroll.

The stage at which it got so involved with government and donors was that we were funded to do physical verification exercise based on the evidence in the files that we had collected. Once we had all the information collected from the hard copy files, we uploaded them in our database here through worksheets that we had completed. Who has what, who did not have what. We uploaded all the information and we verified the information in the database against the hard copy files. We then took the verified information, went into the field and they funded us to just test the interview software developed by the IT Specialist.

On the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Health is one of, in fact the largest ministry in government. It has over 6-1/2 thousand employees. The stakeholders wanted us to look at the entire ministry. They asked "how can you do 6-1/2 thousand, and for how long will you do it". We said, "that will be a Herculean task. Let us do a random sampling of the 6-1/2 thousand in one month".

So we drew a random sampling of 2000 employees out of 6-1/2 thousand. The 2000 employees ranged from grades 2 through 14 in the civil service. So then we went out to physically verify those 2000 employees; that's one-third of the 6-1/2 thousand in the Ministry of Health. The methodology for the physical verification included the employee would appear for an interview, we had the information, the evidence in front of us, all that we had gathered from individual personnel files. The employee was asked a series of questions about the missing gaps, the gaps that were missing in the file. If copies of the documents you have kept over the years were presented, these were photocopied, information captured in the database and hard copy placed on the file. Where there no copies of documents, then the gap would continue and the government would take a decision on resolving the issue later of missing documents on file.

It also involved not only answering questions but also obtaining biometrics. That is we scanned thumb prints, we took photographs. We uploaded that on the database that we have created. The other thing that we did on our physical verification was that we asked employees, because we had all the photographs, or most of the photographs of the 16-1/2 thousand whether they recognised any colleagues or seniors. The methodology was developed on the basis that the employee should be able to identify colleagues or seniors in their work places, or responsibility centers. Most people were not able to identify colleagues in their responsibility centers and that is how we were able to tie them out. That is, if an employee appeared and was not able to identify his colleagues it is possible that the employee was recruited but had left the service and was working with an NGO and government was paying him for sweet nothing.

For those who were not able to catch by the net because we were not working in their places, they slipped through the net. They would come for the interview but we got intelligence reports—wait a minute, that person has not come to work for the past three years. He or she is not working here. So those intelligence reports

we also captured and we submitted to the human resource department, which the Establishment Secretary's Office would have to manage.

Then, those who missed the interview, and that's the most exciting part of it, were a total of 243. I would have to give you the report and you would see the figure. That number was recommended as ghost workers and these were removed from the payroll, from that month's payroll. As I speak, we have put in a procedure in place that was an appeal procedure. If we mistakenly took you out of the payroll or if you missed the interview because you were on leave, you were sick, an appeal procedure was put in place. The affected employee completes the appeal procedure and the head of department or responsibility center manager would have to endorse legitimacy in order to reinstate on the payroll. At ESO, the human resource manager would validate that this person was authentically out of the country or was on leave or sick. The employee would then be reinstated, based on the evidence-based verification at a later date.

As I speak now up to 20 or 30 people have appealed. But the bottom line is we were able to save for government some 90 million leones just for one month on the 234 people that we deleted from the payroll. So that was just a small percentage. Now the donors and government said wow, wait a minute. If you can just take a sample of 2000 names and then remove 234 off the payroll, how about if you do the entire civil service? So then we were funded to extend the physical verification nationwide across the country. That is why you have been seeing us running around the place trying to get the equipment ready. We are heading out Sunday and Monday across the nation to do the physical verification based on the methodology that we had developed.

So to come back to the point, the whole essence of records management is just to underpin government's efficiency, how efficient will government be able to manage not only personnel, but also manage the meager resources in terms of the finances that they have. Records will be the only evidence that will do so. You can window dress the civil service in whatever form. You can train them. You can increase salary for them to make them efficient, but as long as the records that they use are not managed properly it is a waste of resources—this is not yet an electronic world. Sierra Leone is thriving to be electronically prepared. Sierra Leone is still a country where most transactions are all on paper records.

So if the transactions are as yet on paper records, then those paper records have to be managed until they are captured electronically. If I speak to you again there will be recommendations to the government to be taken to the next stage. As soon as we have all the personnel records managed and physically verify the employees, then we can automate those records that are in the personnel files into computers.

LOPEZ: Just to clarify. What you're working on now is still going to be paper-based and then it will all be transferred?

KAWA: *Exactly. Once we get all the files and anomalies resolved in each of the employee files, then we can migrate that information into automated systems.*

LOPEZ: You said that if there was something missing in somebody's file, then that it would be sort of set aside for the government to deal with.

KAWA: *Right.*

LOPEZ: What would that process look like?

KAWA: *The process will involve an interview with the Establishment Secretary where they would have to look at first the nature of this person's recruitment and the nature of recruitment in the civil service were at two angles. First it was done by the Public Service Commission, and that is where all recruitment should be made anyway. But ten years back there was a mandate given to ministries and departments to recruit and put on the payroll any number of staff they needed. So a minister would just have names on a piece of paper and give it to his permanent secretary, "here, put these on the payroll". So that is how the payroll got bloated.*

People did not get on the payroll through the proper recruitment procedures. So somebody would be put on the payroll without proper education, without the necessary grade and you would have somebody who would be a grade 5 but without the required education to back that grade. The pilot project that we did was able to reveal all that. There were people who never went to school who were put on a grade 5 or 6 level and were receiving money on that grade because the secret is, they would have them at that grade, they collect the money and then give under the table, what is actually the rate—you're getting the point.

Say for instance the person was a watchman, a security officer. They would put him on a grade 6. They get the money. Then they give him the watchman's salary. So that is the kind of thing, because the records were so chaotic. There was no evidence to say that this is a watchman, these are the documents that support his grade. There was nothing.

LOPEZ: So he might not know what he was even supposed to be paid.

KAWA: *Exactly. And one of the employees who came for an interview, he was the laundry man. He said, "Oh I am a laundry man, grade 5." We said, "No, a laundry man is not a grade 5, a laundry man is not even up to a grade 1." He said, "What are you telling me? I get 150,000 leones," which is less than \$40. You see, this is not your right grade sir and this is not even your appointment letter. Your appointment letter says you are a laundry man. But he was taking a salary of a grade 5 and getting under the table what is actually expected for him to have.*

Neglect was one of the words that I used as a result of the poor records keeping system. It was neglect because they wanted the situation to be like that. Once the record situation is poor and then corruption will thrive. Corruption only thrives in chaos. When it is properly organized then the tendency for you to be corrupt is very, very slim. So neglect is one of the reasons. Then lack of accountability would also be the result.

As a result of the fact that they would not want to support good practices in record management, neglect and then destroy the evidence would be a strategy. I give you an instance. When the junta entered Freetown in 1997, I was still in this country. One of the places that was targeted for destruction was the Treasury Building. The Treasury Building housed all the financial records in the entire government. So once they went there, they set that entire building, the building now that you see under construction, just opposite the relocated Ministry of Finance was the Treasury Building. Everything was burned down. All the records went.

The intention was to burn down the evidence and then there would be more corruption to perpetrate. So neglect and lack of accountability and lack of

knowledge of the importance of records management were all factors that contributed to a chaotic records management situation in this country. But thank God we are trying. There is a team of 25 that has been trained from the basic, rudimentary records management practices to access database, Excel and that kind of thing. I think they are proficient enough now to be able to collect data, analyze data and produce reports.

LOPEZ: And you will be going out to each district.

KAWA: *We will be going out to each of the twelve districts in the country. We have identified 17 locations in the country. Six of the interview locations will be in the south and the east. That is how we have divided the country because we will not be able to cross the river and go to Bunce Island. So we divided the country into three zones. One zone will be in the western area. There will be two interview locations, one at Ministerial Building on George Street and the other at Youyibuilding. That is for the entire civil service population in Freetown, which is about 65 to 70%.*

The rest of the country will just be like 30-35%. That number we have tried to divide into two different regions. The south and the east will be one region and the north will be another region. So in each of those regions, like in the south and the east, we have six interview locations and in the north as well we have another six interview locations. So we will be visiting all of those locations within the next four months and then analyze the reports and produce a recommendation for government. We might be able to save another billion leones for government.

LOPEZ: I'm sure the government is very excited about that. How do the current civil servants feel about this process with the people who are being removed from the payroll as a result of it, what is their response?

KAWA: *We expect very lukewarm response. There is nothing you can do when the wind of change blows. When the wind of change blows towards a very positive direction, there is very little you can do to sabotage that plan. We have not really seen any evidence of sabotage so far, because we are not really government employees. We are independent contractors who are doing government service. What people are saying all over the place is that that was the best approach that was ever adopted. If they had to employ government workers, civil servants to verify themselves, it would have been very flawed. It is like being the judge and player at the same time. But since it is an independent group that is contracted to do the verification and collect data, that is where the credibility lies.*

I think a very good number of people are very happy about it because they think that their rights have been abused. Most of them can retire from the civil service and not even get their retirement benefits because their papers, their documents were not in place. They could never be assessed. But this is an approach that will facilitate gathering and collecting essential documents on each employee. So when they retire, there will be a very good resource to look at and then assess what they would benefit at the end of their service in the civil service. So they would tell us, "Oh, thank you, thank you. This is a good job you are doing. Perhaps if you remove the ghost workers government will increase our salary from the savings that you'll make." Some of them are very much delighted that we are there. They have been happy and supportive.

Those who have benefited from the corruption will look at it lukewarm, will think that we will not succeed. But they have failed. It is a very dynamic team, very

hard working. We don't see ourselves compromising the type of profile that we have built so much to destroy it.

LOPEZ: And have you prepared any sort of strategies to deal with people who might try to sabotage or might be unhappy with the program?

KAWA: *That is why we have identified the Anti-Corruption Commission as a way of involving them in our exercise. We did not involve them in the pilot but that is a strategy we have looked at. This time we will be moving around with an anti-corruption team in each of the locations that we are traveling. We are also collaborating with the Social Security agency for those who were not privileged to be registered in the Social Security department. So the Anti-Corruption Commission will deal with those who will be identified as saboteurs of our practice.*

LOPEZ: I know we're running short on time but I can just ask you who makes up the team? Where were these people recruited from?

KAWA: *The team members are all graduates from the University of Sierra Leone. They all hold a bachelor's degree in records management, every one of them. You would not be appointed staff if you don't hold a degree in records management. It is a kind of discriminatory service, but it is essential.*

LOPEZ: Can you just briefly describe your own professional background and how you came to be here?

KAWA: *I studied at Fourah Bay College myself. It was a general degree, liberal arts. I got a job in the national archives situated at Fourah Bay College premises. I worked at the national archives as Director of the National Archives for three years. I got a scholarship to study in London. Once I returned in the country I saw it as a vision, I saw it as a dream that the only way for government to have an efficient civil service was managing the resource, that is records that they do create. The only way that we can look back, on posterity and say this is what this person did, was to have and save the evidence.*

I studied Records Management and Archive Administration at University of London, I got a master's degree in London and on my return to Sierra Leone organized an international workshop sponsored by Commonwealth Secretariat which invited 16 Commonwealth countries to help Sierra Leone and create awareness in government on the importance of records management. That is where I started making the profile on records management. Then we were working in the ministries, the respective ministries, creating the records. We were removing the inactive records that were clogging the government offices, then processing those that were good enough for evidence, and transferring them to the National Archives.

When the civil war reached Freetown in 1998 incidentally, I got an opportunity to migrate to the United States. Then I was in the United States, but my dream was to get back and help that country. The resources are there. There are young and dynamic people who want to work and help their country but they lack the leadership. Then DFID who was then helping Sierra Leone immediately after the war contracted records management to a firm in London. The firm is called International Records Management Trust. That firm was able to identify me in Philadelphia and that is how they asked for my resume and I sent my resume and they contracted me. That is how I came in 2005.

But I have just been on a short-term contract. In 2005 it was two weeks there. I came back the same year, in August, for about eight weeks, that was summer time. Then in 2006. So it has only been two weeks here, three weeks there. So I felt it was disturbing my permanent job in the United States. Then I said well, if you want me to come back and work in my country I can, but you have to let it be on a long-term basis. So last year, April, for the first time I got a four month contract and that is how we did the completion of files for four months, from April to August. Then I went back for two weeks and then I came back and they said, "Oh, we can have you back here for another four months." So it has been short-term contracts, four months there, four months here. Even this time around it is for four months.

LOPEZ: Thank you so much, Mr. Kawa. This has been excellent.