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Interviewer: Michael Scharff

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SCHARFF: This is Michael Scharff, the date is March 2, 2012 and I’m sitting with Dan Hymowitz and we’re discussing Liberia’s Philanthropy Secretariat. Thank you very much for agreeing to this meeting.

HYMOWITZ: No problem, glad to be here.

SCHARFF: If I could just ask if you could perhaps introduce yourself in a bit of detail and tell us how you first became involved with the Liberia Philanthropy Secretariat.

HYMOWITZ: Sure. I was already working in Liberia since January 2008. I went there as a Scott Fellow and the Scott Fellow program is unique to Liberia but basically places young professionals as special assistants to Liberian government officials. About half of those people are Liberian and about half of those young professionals are American.

I applied to this program, was accepted, and then they placed me with the then head of the Liberian Reconstruction and Development Committee (LRDC), which was basically the broader donor coordination office housed in the President’s office. So I was a Special Assistant to the head of the LRDC.

I was working there for my year through this fellowship and it was during that time that sort of thinking around how do we, the Liberian government, engage with this other group of nontraditional donors, like foundations and philanthropists as opposed to multilateral and bilaterals like the World Bank and USAID (United States Agency for International Development). That’s when that thinking and this discussion sort of evolved.

I had already been working for the Liberian government during this time and so was involved with some of the thinking around the development of the office and ended up staying on to manage the launch and manage the office for its first little over two years.

SCHARFF: That’s great. Who was most closely involved in that initial decision-making and discussions about setting up the secretariat?

HYMOWITZ: Maybe I can talk a little about what happened in 2008. Again, just from—my involvement was really circumstantial, I just happened to have been there at this time. You had foundation philanthropists that were actively involved, some of them got very involved because of President (Ellen Johnson) Sirleaf during the first few years of her presidency.

In 2008, there were a couple of key events and discussions that happened that, I think, sort of paved the way for the launch of the office. The first was a meeting; I think it was in early June of 2008 in New York I think. This was a meeting that the NoVo Foundation, which was one of the main foundations funding in Liberia convened to bring together a lot of the foundations that were funding in the country. That was, I think, in early June. That didn’t involve the Liberian government; that was a meeting in New York, amongst the foundations. That was the first time they had, as I understand it, that they had a discussion about what they were doing, and to even have the thought of coordination or what programs are you funding, what are you doing, what are your thoughts, who are your contacts in government. So that’s what that meeting was about. Again there was no government of Liberia official there.
There was the Liberia Partners Forum; it was called the Liberia Poverty Reduction Forum in late June 2008, which was a bigger meeting of all the donors and that was in Berlin. Foundations were invited to that, or a few of the foundations were and again there was initial discussion there about the role of foundations. Again that was a conversation that involved GoL (Government of Liberia) and some of the foundations there. That’s was where the idea for this bigger September meeting happened.

The September meeting was held in New York. This was to me a key turning point. It was co-convened by President Sirleaf and George Soros and hosted by George Soros’ Open Society Institute and that brought together Liberian government and foundations to sort of think through the role of foundations in the country.

SCHARFF: So Soros attended that?

HYMOWITZ: Yes. President Sirleaf and Soros were there. Bill Clinton was there. It actually turned into a very high-level event as a matter of fact. Mary Robinson was there, a number of—several other billionaire philanthropists were there. It was big, very high-level meeting. Again President Sirleaf and Soros were the sort of ‘conveners’, if you will.

SCHARFF: So this early June 2008 meeting takes place, NoVo Foundation sort of puts it together and this is one of the first steps. Do you have any idea if there was somebody sort of at the NoVo Foundation who was close with anyone in the government of Liberia at the time and may have sort of been spearheading the charge?

HYMOWITZ: I don’t think at that point that NoVo Foundation was actually thinking about the government. I think it was more for us foundations who are all thinking about—are interested in Liberia and want to support this important moment in its history; maybe we should think about coordination—at least just find out what everyone else is doing. I don’t think they were even thinking about government as a partner in that at that point necessarily. Maybe, I could be wrong, but I don’t think that meeting was about that. I think it was more sort of hey, what are we all doing.

This gets to one of the, what I think are innovations of the Philanthropy Secretariat. Foundations have not traditionally thought of themselves as partners with government. There is not a lot of—traditionally not. There is sort of back in the day the Ford Foundation used to—maybe in the ‘50s and ‘60s did—in the way that the World Bank was partnering with governments thought that okay, we’ll work with governments and they had advisors embedded in ministries. But it is not something that in recent times has been done. Certainly foundations that fund internationally don’t think of government necessarily as a partner. Occasionally, if it is a specific initiative.

So I don’t think NoVo Foundation was actually thinking about it at that point. That’s why the June meeting was different from the September meeting, which brought together the two sides if you will.

SCHARFF: Then when the September meeting happens is there somebody under President Sirleaf who is really the champion for this program?

HYMOWITZ: Yes. I think there were a number of key people involved. Natty Davis, who was the head of the LRDC, and who, at that point, was Minister of State Without Portfolio, was again heading the broader donor coordination office. I think Mr.
Davis really was the first government official outside of President Sirleaf who really felt that there was this opportunity for Liberia to begin thinking about these foundations a little differently. I think he was really the first.

Now there were also—so Steve Radelet who at that point was an economic adviser to the President was very involved in discussions with those foundations so he was also involved with setting up this meeting and coordinating with Mr. Davis. He was another person I think really saw there was an opportunity here in a special way. Within the government Mr. Davis was definitely the person who kind of “got it.”

SCHARFF: Do you know what the key take-aways or action items were that came out of that September meeting?

HYMOWITZ: Yes, I was there, which was very exciting, and took notes. My take-aways from that meeting are, the immediate key bullets—. Again there was great excitement in the room amongst the foundations supporting Liberia. It was still—for the time it was then about 2-1/2 years, a little over 2-1/2 years into President Sirleaf’s first term. So you still have a lot of early excitement and there was just an eagerness to be involved. So it was good to hear that from the donors.

You still heard, despite the June meeting, amongst those convened by the NoVo Foundation surprise in the room about the different areas that they were funding, not really aware that, “oh wow, we’re actually funding in the same sectors.” Again that does not mean that there is a necessarily a partnership that is going to emerge from that but even that sort of lack of awareness. You picture foundations must always be talking to each other but that’s not necessarily what was happening. So there was that.

Definitely you heard stories from foundations expressing how difficult it is to work in Liberia not really knowing who to contact, who the sector experts were, how to work in Liberia. So you heard that as a challenge that the foundations talked about. I think that was a key one as far as thinking about the role of the Philanthropy Secretariat later. So to me those were the big take-aways.

There was also sort of building off that, it didn’t emerge directly from that meeting but the Clinton Global Initiative, the 2008 Clinton Global Initiative was something like two days later and the first big commitment announced at that year’s meeting was a, I think it was called “Coming Together for Liberia’s Future” and it was a group of the foundations together committing a certain amount of funding in support of Liberia over the next year and a half or something like that. So that also put a little actual specific commitment behind this general enthusiasm, which was definitely there in terms of interest in the country.

SCHARFF: So when everyone returns to Liberia what then starts to happen?

HYMOWITZ: I had the opportunity to work with Mr. Davis to help come up with the idea of this office basically. Again building off that discussion from that meeting. Clearly there was excitement and interest and opportunity from Liberia’s standpoint. At that point I had been working in Liberia for nine months. It was pretty clear to me having interfaced with lots of different donors working in the country in that role during those nine months. At that point, it had started to make sense to me why a dedicated intermediary office could make sense and why it was indeed so hard to work in Liberia: just communication challenges, just knowing your way around. It is really hard as an outsider—or can be very hard to work in that country.
So yes, I think it was really emanating from the discussions at that meeting where we started to shape a little bit of a concept. Again, we worked with Steve Radelet and a few others to bounce, develop the concept for this unit that we proposed a dedicated unit housed within the presidency. It would be separate from the broader donor coordination office So yes, I was involved with Mr. Davis in shaping this concept of the office.

SCHARFF: That’s really interesting. You mentioned some of the challenges that the Philanthropy Secretariat was being designed to address. I wonder as these discussions progressed now in Liberia what sorts of challenges are you and the team sort of thinking ahead to in terms of the challenges you would actually face in setting up the unit itself?

HYMOWITZ: Well, at that point—initially it was really—in terms of starting the office; just at that moment we didn’t even have funding for the office, there was that. Even our own coordination with different ministries. So that was part of the idea for the office; if a foundation was interested in education that we would link them up to the relevant Assistant Minister who might be—depending on the area, within education—the right contact for a foundation. Sort of navigating those relationships, which seemed I guess intimidating, and that was indeed a challenge in reality too. It was a startup so you’re kind of feeling your way around a little bit. We definitely launched—as someone who was managing the office from the start, I don’t think I had a full conception of what attracting new funders would even look like. There were a lot of ways in which you’re learning as you go.

Again, because it was the first office of its kind that specifically worked with foundations, it wasn’t—again, there wasn’t, if you're looking for best practices, but it wasn’t always clear. No one was going to tell you, “You should do this.” There were lots of people saying do this and this and this. There were some ideas we tried, or never really got to try. It definitely was sort of a start-up environment in a certain way.

SCHARFF: So you had these challenges for instance as you mentioned that there was no funding, you had to sort of coordinate with the various ministries where the foundations might be interested in putting money. I’m just curious how you and Mr. Davis and Mr. Radelet perhaps thought about how you might address those challenges.

HYMOWITZ: I at that point, I always felt Mr. Davis was a great link to the—and was serving sort of a coordinating role in his LRDC, wearing his LRDC hat. I always thought sort of using him and his relationships and his abilities—sometimes it requires that initial letter from him. Then it is a conversation I can take forward from that standpoint. But really building off his credibility within the government was pretty key. I don’t think we could imagine it succeeding without his existing stature within the government, frankly.

SCHARFF: If you don’t mind me asking what gave Mr. Davis that stature and that credibility and who was it with?

HYMOWITZ: It is both his link to the President, he was one of her closest advisors and I think from the donor perspective people felt that he was someone who—when he spoke he was able to speak accurately about things she cared about and reflect her views in a way which was pretty—I won’t say was totally unique but it was definitely pretty unique given his proximity within the President’s office. So there was that.
His title was Minister of State without Portfolio, and some people didn’t always know what that title meant exactly but he was a senior adviser, cabinet level official within the presidency and I think that gave him—. When he would reach out to this ministry and that ministry, it still was coming from the President’s office. So there was that. Also in Liberia things are also very personal. He is someone who has developed those relationships and connections over the years and I think his intelligence and credibility kind of speak for themselves a little bit. He is someone who has always been good at keeping those relationships strong.

SCHARFF: That’s great. Is there thought given to then how do we prioritize what we need to do going forward? We don’t have the money. The first thing we need to do is secure funding? The second thing we need to do is perhaps write a program description, or maybe that goes before the seeking of the funding?

HYMOWITZ: Sure. So we’re talking now maybe December 2008. I think at that point the concept was done. We had a work plan we had developed and a budget and we started reaching out to some of the main foundations that funded in Liberia. I don’t want to make the funding thing sound like it was a—there was a moment where to me it wasn’t a reality until we got a commitment of funding from some of the different funders. But yes, we were able to—you need the written work plan before anyone is going to fund it. But we got a buy-in from a few of the foundations. So that part went pretty smoothly actually as far as fundraising goes. Foundations can move a little more quickly than some other types of funders. So that worked out pretty well for the office. That went smoothly.

So we had work plans that were roughly in place by February of 2009. The office was launched in April, April 1st was when we officially launched. But, I wouldn’t say we had a strategy. The work plan—it was a start but I don’t think it quite told us exactly what we needed to do. Alright, I’ll give you an example in terms of my own role. At that point the Philanthropy Secretariat was—so Mr. Davis was the head as we launch. I was the Program Manager and the plan was to hire one additional member of the team. So, to start it was just me.

Mr. Davis and I had the chance to go to the Global Philanthropy Forum in April 2009, which was a great start for us to be able to be at this major global philanthropy event. Most people there are foundations and philanthropists as opposed to—I can’t think of anyone else from a foreign government that was there that I can remember. So that was a great opportunity. I am just picturing myself there at that first conference. You’re almost—you’re trying to describe what this office is, people are interested but they don’t quite understand what you’re describing. In a way you’re still in a shaping mode and you’re getting lots of advice. You’re trying to make yourself attractive to new donors. Anyway it was a very raw time, for me at least, just in terms of trying to figure out what we were doing at that point.

SCHARFF: The actual work plan that sort of spells out this is what we envision the secretariat to look like and these are the functions we envision it will perform—. You’re sort of taking the lead if I’m not mistaken in actually drafting this work plan along with Mr. Davis?

HYMOWITZ: Yes, working with Mr. Davis.

SCHARFF: Are you seeking consultation or inputs say from the other foundations who may eventually come to fund this? Is there more of a collaborative back and forth?

HYMOWITZ: Absolutely.
SCHARFF: Things are being kicked around?

HYMOWITZ: Yes, I think we were always the drafter but yes, absolutely. We definitely, absolutely, were getting inputs from foundations. They were definitely reacting to things and other people as well. I don’t want to make it sound like we just hatched it in this quiet little room or something like that. You needed their input. Quite frankly, you need to know from the foundations whether they think this is useful. Part of the concept of the office is that you’re serving as a resource to them. So if they don’t think this concept makes sense you’re not really doing anything useful that is going to work.

Again we’re building—we had this meeting where we had just heard people kind of sound off on some of these issues in September 2008 so that gave us some of their inputs but absolutely, especially the folks who ended up funding the office. Yes, absolutely.

SCHARFF: Can you give us a little of the flavor of the feedback that you were receiving? What are they suggesting?

HYMOWITZ: I’ll give you one thing, one point of skepticism that at least and one funder, in particular, had which was the question about the idea of this office sitting within government. So for foundations that don’t see themselves—they don’t really—for a foundation that is funding another country, say a US foundation funding another country, they’re not used to liaising with that host country government unless they really want to. So there was some concern is this going to mean that you’re going to tell us what to do? That we can’t fund projects—that our priorities—that sort of fit with our own strategic funding objectives? There were concerns about that and how that role is going to play out.

I think that was instructive because it helped us to understand that we were in a delicate space. I always felt that that was an important thing to understand, that foundations—I felt that if you ever were too assertive as the government in telling them you wanted X, Y or Z, I think that would have turned them off pretty quickly. So that was a good thing, a question that we got that I think helped us thinking about how we interpersonally engage with this group.

SCHARFF: So roughly six months or so has elapsed between this September 2008 meeting in New York at which President Sirleaf and George Siros sort of come together and February of 2009 when this work plan is in place. I’m curious what the President’s role is between that September meeting and when this work plan is produced, the extent of her involvement and her input into the process.

HYMOWITZ: Obviously at the work plan level President Sirleaf had delegated the drafting of the work plan to Mr. Davis. She is leading a very complicated country. It wasn’t at that level that she was involved. But she certainly was—Mr. Davis as an adviser to her—engaged. Even just sort of the idea of, “hey what do you think of this office, here is what we’re kind of thinking.” Absolutely. So she was, from the beginning she was absolutely part of this. President Sirleaf totally, very much, understood this sort of role of foundations.

For example, I recall discussions both, I think, before but also certainly after we got going when she wanted to see more of it, just in terms of this issue. You hear it in terms of the aid effectiveness discussion; this issue of getting donors to collaborate more, harmonize their funding, not just funding one-off projects, the transaction costs to the host country of lots of scattered donor activity. So that
was something—. She saw, she definitely appreciated it from that standpoint. But absolutely, her ideas were very important during that pre-launch phase.

SCHARFF: Is there anything—just to jump ahead a bit—in the final design of the secretariat that really says the President had her hands in—or was the result of the President’s thinking? This was something that she pushed or a component of it that she wanted to really see?

HYMOWITZ: I don’t know in terms of structure itself specifically but in terms of like I said that emphasis on coordination and collaboration between foundations. I don’t know if that changed the structure but it just in terms of understanding it makes a lot of sense that that was, in her view, a very important piece of this. I think it was something that was important but I don’t think it affected the structure. At that point the structure was really—there wasn’t much of a structure. It was just—I was the only full-time staff at that starting point.

SCHARFF: From the start was the idea always to house the secretariat inside the Office of the Presidency? And why, what sorts of reasons were given for the placement of the office?

HYMOWITZ: I think people—and this was reinforced later when we had a discussion with the—with the stakeholders in April 2011, I think people felt it was important, I think for a lot of these foundations they were eager to support this leadership. I think that link to the presidency was very important to some people. I don’t want to say all of them, but I think a lot of them really wanted to feel that there was this connection to the President’s priorities and vision for the country. So I think that that placement was really key from that standpoint.

Then I think there was just sort of—there is the value to the office itself in terms of giving it some heft in terms of its interactions with other ministries. If you’re sitting within more of a line ministry, you may not be able to go to one of the other ministries as easily and explain what you’re doing. Somehow I think it, somehow it didn’t give us authority per se but it definitely helped put us in a place to better interact with the rest of the government.

SCHARFF: This is all great. So just sort of moving along in our timeline, earlier you mentioned that by about February of 2009 a draft work plan is in place. What are the next steps in the story?

HYMOWITZ: I think as funders provide some feedback I’d say by mid to late March we had basically the work plan or project document that was pretty much set in place. We launched in April 2009 like I said with not full funding, I think we nailed down the final funding shortly after that but we basically realized we’d be in fine shape at that point. So we were launched as a three-year pilot. We had our work plan. I think the first big, first big activity for us was this Global Philanthropy Forum conference and some meetings we had around that conference. So from there we were operational and that means in terms of the initial startup I guess that went somewhat smoothly. Again we’re physically sitting there in the President’s office so physically I hadn’t moved anywhere and Mr. Davis was still in his minister’s seat.

SCHARFF: So when you say “we” you’re referring to yourself and Mr. Davis?

HYMOWITZ: At that point yes.
SCHARFF: So you are, the two of you are essentially the secretariat.

HYMOWITZ: At that moment yes.

SCHARFF: Is there a thought to scaling up the size of the staff at that point?

HYMOWITZ: There was always a plan to hire a second member of the team, which we did. Jennah (Scott) joined—I’m trying to remember when exactly it was that she joined. It was maybe July she officially was brought on. I’m not Liberian. From that point forward, every hire was going to be Liberian; that was the idea. So we eventually finished that hiring in July. At that point it was more of an actual secretariat and not just Dan running around.

SCHARFF: In those first few months that you’re now this official secretariat, what steps do you take to sort of get the secretariat up and running and what are your immediate priorities and how are you thinking perhaps more long term at the same time?

HYMOWITZ: Some things—I think we were always thinking about that coordination function and how that would work exactly. How do we—what is the best way to do that. One of our first things was setting up a website and eventually collecting information from the foundations on their activities in Liberia, which we eventually were able to get launched by the time of what would turn into the annual foundations meeting in September. So that was something we immediately worked on. I think it was an important early success for us. People felt the website was a tangible product that we had put together, that even the foundations that were active in the country said it was pretty useful. Maybe it was mainly just sort of the information about each other’s activities in the country. So that was something that we worked on early that we thought was important.

We had other discussions about, and continuing discussions that we never—to varying degrees—we solved I would say but ideas around how do you coordinate. Is it a quarterly conference call? Is it a joint e-mail? Is it through the website? We had lots of discussions about how you—is there some private area on the website where the foundations themselves can interact and interface and try to plan collaboration. So that was something I think was always really hard, figuring out what the right tone was. Sometimes you felt people seemed like they were interested in something but ultimately are people going to go to the website to chat with each other as opposed to e-mail each other. I think that was and would always be, was a challenge. So there was that piece.

In terms of fundraising there had been a fundraising event in early April 2009 that we, the secretariat, didn’t organize but were sort of involved with President Sirleaf. It was hosted by Humanity United, which is one of the main foundations which funds in Liberia. She went to their foundation and they brought together a bunch of San Francisco Bay area perspective funders. So there was a lot of follow up and engagement with that group coming out of that meeting.

Again, I mean, as any fundraiser can tell you it is about building relationships and unfortunately it’s not as simple as that these folks just write a check the next day. Some of them maybe did, but more than that it is really about an ongoing process of engaging those folks. That was a good—between that group and then some of the folks that we met at the Global Philanthropy Forum in April there was that outreach component of the office.
Another piece, by that summer you’re already planning for the annual meeting which is the key coordinating gathering. In effect, we decided that that September 2008 meeting would become an annual event and would be the key convening point between the government and—the official the discussion between the government and the foundations. The previous year it wasn’t necessarily seen as more than a one-time thing, but the secretariat sort of took ownership if you will of that meeting.

SCHARFF: Is there a need for the Philanthropy Secretariat to secure the cooperation or perhaps the buy-in from ministers whose ministries, ministry activities would be enhanced or in some way affected by foundation support?

HYMOWITZ: Yes. There was. So the way we viewed the process was a little as a process of matchmaking. You try to understand what foundations’ internal funding objectives are and, again, find a match between that and the needs or focus areas within a particular ministry. So it is not as if we had a big convening with all the ministries and said, “Hey, there are all these foundations out there. They’re going to fund you.” I think we didn’t want to create an expectation that there are all these donors out there just waiting to fund because it is a little trickier than that. I mean you’re—I think we did it more on a case-by-case basis as a foundation interested in a particular area came up.

So for example one early area, we decided to focus that second foundations meeting September 2009 on the issue of agricultural development. So that was an example of—there were a few different reasons, one of them being it was an area that the President felt was extremely important. We thought it was an area that the foundations were not working in in Liberia that they had the potential to become interested in and that we knew foundations could fund. There were certain areas that foundations just aren’t likely to ever be willing to fund or able to fund. We thought agriculture had that potential. Again it was a priority area.

That was an example of the process leading up to the meeting, working very closely with the Minister of Agriculture to help plan their role at the meeting, to help them define what they really wanted to talk about with this group to help them calibrate in terms of funding size or grant size, what were the kinds of things they wanted to talk about. There were certain items that were going to be out of some foundations’ league just in terms of the price tag. So there was that sort of interface.

I think the agriculture preparation for the 2009 meeting was a good example of us working with the ministry in advance of a big event.

SCHARFF: To what extent are the President’s priorities sort of synched up with the work you’re doing in the sense that a foundation approaches you, they want to work on some sort of a health issue let’s say. Then you steer them towards the needs in the health sector. I guess the question is two-fold. First, how do you identify what those needs—how do you as a secretariat identify what those needs are in the health sector specifically and are those needs necessarily the needs that the President has identified, if she has identified them?

HYMOWITZ: In this case you have an example. Highlighting agriculture at the 2009 foundations meeting. That’s an example of taking something that was a priority of the President and certainly there was discussion before, we had a discussion with her. There was communication that we were proposing this as a focus area, what do you think. So that was a discussion that happened.
Yes, I guess there were times when foundations would—I describe it as a match but yes a foundation may come and say, “we’re interested in X.” I have to think about a time when we said, “Look, this really isn’t a good idea.” I think it was a little more soft than that a lot of the time but within a particular sector that’s a discussion with that line ministry, the Health Ministry. Frankly we, the Philanthropy Secretariat don’t have the expertise to dictate to a foundation that X is a priority.

Mr. Davis happens to have an extremely impressively broad knowledge of what is happening in different sectors so sometimes in those initial discussions like I think he was pretty helpful in pointing out a few areas of focus. But I think at the sector level the President appoints a minister to lead that ministry to define priorities and sector strategies. I think you have to view the government as, hopefully, as those priorities emanating down from her in some way but it’s not like the specific initiative is something that she has defined necessarily in some cases. It may be something she has spoken about.

SCHARFF: And for the secretariat to be able to identify those needs that’s a discussion that you and then later you and Jennah Scott are having directly with the line ministry?

HYMOWITZ: Absolutely.

SCHARFF: It’s sort of a back and forth? What does that look like? You essentially have a meeting or you pick up the phone?

HYMOWITZ: I’ll give you an example. I think the best example of where this went really well, where I think the Philanthropy Secretariat was very useful. This was later on but I’ll use it as a sort of a model. The Gates Foundation was interested in a new initiative where they would partner with five African city governments, five different African city governments. And they were considering Monrovia as one of those cities. The first conversation they had was with the Philanthropy Secretariat, “do you think this is a good idea? Would this be a fit in Monrovia?” And more specifically what are some areas of service delivery, so—sorry I left out that piece: strengthening inclusive municipal governance around some specific area of service delivery? That’s the Gates’ model that they were proposing. What would be some areas of activity within Monrovia that might be a fit for this?

That’s where Mr. Davis and his very impressively broad knowledge of different sectors was able to—and I remember that phone call very well—was able to provide a bunch of different ideas on things that the city government was working on. Again, that initial brainstorming session, have that discussion with Gates. Again I remember in follow up we shared a bunch of different documents with them of various projects that the Monrovia city government was working on.

Gates, I believe after that we had a meeting with the mayor of Monrovia. So Mr. Davis and the mayor talking about this early discussion, getting and hearing from her what she thought were priorities. Again that’s what eventually came out of this was a focus on solid waste management which was something that she listed as her top priority and was one of the things that Mr. Davis had mentioned and worked out as a fit for them. Maybe it didn’t have to go exactly like that but I think of that as a pretty good example of the Philanthropy Secretariat as a gateway discussion. “We’re there for you when you have this early discussion.” Maybe they feel it is easier to talk to us rather than get the hopes up of the potential grantee. Maybe there is a little more of a neutral discussion they’re able
to have from someone outside the sector. Again, it is some sort of gateway, a view into what is happening whether there could be a fit.

SCHARFF: That’s really fascinating. I’m just curious; had the Philanthropy Secretariat not been there, in the absence of the secretariat how would the Gates Foundation have approached this? What would that approach have looked like? How would it have been different?

HYMOWITZ: I think foundations have an interest—maybe a foundation program officer would be better to answer this. I think foundations—and this is why I think the Philanthropy Secretariat can be useful—I think it is very hard, not in every country but I can tell you it is in Liberia to——, if you don’t have contacts, if you don’t know the lay of the land but let’s say you know you want to do a project in space X, I think you spend a lot of time before you come to the country trying to dig up contacts. Hopefully you get to the right people, a few sector experts, maybe one or two government officials hopefully. Hopefully you’re able to meet with those people when you visit. That’s if it goes well. I think it can be a bit of an unstructured process during those initial phases. Maybe foundations have more of a systematic way of doing it. Certainly if you have a great on-the-ground link already, that’s great but I think in a lot of cases you’re just poking around trying to figure out who you should talk to.

Again, I think one value of the Philanthropy Secretariat is illustrated in that example where we’re a gateway of a foundation’s entry into the country.

SCHARFF: After that foundations entry and after the deal is inked to provide that financing for that particular initiative, is there a support role then for the Philanthropy Secretariat throughout the duration of that project grant?

HYMOWITZ: This has been really hard I think. This is Dan speaking. I’m not still employed by the Philanthropy Secretariat so this is just me talking. I think it has been hard to find the right point in terms of implementation how involved we can be. Again, we’re not—we can’t collect the solid waste obviously. What we found, some place where we can be useful in an ongoing way—we watched sometimes communications break down where a foundation isn’t able to get in touch with the grantee for one reason or another, e-mail is down or phone contact is difficult for one reason or another. That is where we can provide I think a good link.

I think foundations even just appreciate knowing that we are there where they can have an off-line discussion occasionally saying, “Hey, what’s happening with this project? Have you seen X around? What are you hearing, what are you seeing?” I think there is almost a communication role that we often play. Just being there to make sure those conversations and lines of communication are actually flowing smoothly, which we found they often weren’t. I think we were very useful in that in an ongoing way.

I think there were times when challenges can come during implementation. There is only so much we can do about that. With that Monrovia city government solid waste management project we were a little—at least to the extent when I was still there, the project is still going on and will for several more years—we were involved in some of the steering committee meetings that the Monrovia city government held. There were ways we were sort of involved in slight—I won’t say oversight—but partnership on the project itself. I think that has been a tricky line to walk.
SCHARFF: The Philanthropy Secretariat doesn’t technically have any responsibility to ensuring the smooth implementation of a project right? There is no agreement between you and the foundation that the Secretariat is there to monitor or evaluate or in any way to support the implementation?

HYMOWITZ: Right, no, there is no real—I can’t see how we could do that. That said, we certainly, the Philanthropy Secretariat certainly has a strong incentive to want to see that these projects are successful. Because these ultimately—there is nothing that is going to turn a foundation off more than a project that is not going well or maybe failed altogether. That’s how you get foundations walking out the door and looking elsewhere. Foundations are pretty flexible. They can fund in Liberia or they can fund in many other places. There’s no rule or obligation for them to fund in that country. There is a real incentive for us to want to make sure that these projects are going smoothly but you get stretched pretty thin if you’re thinking about how we can help with implementation.

SCHARFF: I would imagine a challenge to the Secretariat was to remain a neutral broker between the foundations and civil society organizations that were receiving support?

HYMOWITZ: Yes.

SCHARFF: In some ways you had the power to steer—to suggest where to steer money. I’m curious if there were ever certain organizations or certain ministries or ministers who raised their hand and said, “It looks like you’re steering a lot of money towards Ministry X and not towards our ministry.” Was there ever resentment in that regard?

HYMOWITZ: I can’t think—it’s a great question and it makes sense that there might have been. I can’t think of a situation where that specifically happened. Again I’m going to praise Mr. Davis here. I felt that he was very unique. All the donors, government officials, everyone’s got their sense of what is really the most important. It’s education and roads or it’s gender and agriculture. Everyone thinks they know the three things that matter most, but I feel like Mr. Davis was genuinely as good a neutral broker, if you will, as you really could find. That was really unique and when I think about how a Philanthropy Secretariat could work outside of Liberia, I always think about someone like him and how you’d need to find someone with a lot of the unique characteristics that he had like that, for example.

It’s a great question you ask, that makes perfect sense that there would be—. I don’t think that there were too many cases where we said, “Look you really should fund in this sector.” There is an example of that agriculture focus at the foundations’ meeting. That’s an example. I don’t think we got—again, maybe there are things that Mr. Davis heard from his colleague ministers that I didn’t hear about but I don’t think there were so many—. I can’t think of a case when there was a direct complaint about it, maybe I’m mistaken about that.

SCHARFF: Was there any reason for anyone in the government to actually oppose the Secretariat’s existence?

HYMOWITZ: I think there could have been. I think there was wariness, absolutely, about who are these people? A vague sense that maybe we were taking money. Just to be clear the office other than the actual financing for the operations of the office from the foundations, the office is not a financial pass through. We do not receive funding—grant funding. That would quickly become a hugely problematic issue
were the office to ever serve as an actual financial intermediary itself for grants. That would really, I think, change relationships and create a great deal of suspicion. Most of the time I think maybe the suspicion went away when they saw “you’re actually supporting our effort, helping us with the re-write of a project proposal, setting up a conference call with that foundation.”

I think a lot of the time when they—it’s not like we were interacting with every ministry on a daily basis. They’re only interacting with us when there was a new opportunity for funding or maybe an issue with an existing grant. Maybe that’s a less positive situation. Hopefully they found us helpful and facilitative. I think most of the time they did. Certainly in the cases where a grant worked out we were effusively praised by that ministry or agency. They were very appreciative when it happened.

SCHARFF: It seems that on the whole the success of the Secretariat hinged on large part the personality of Mr. Davis. Is the success attributable—is it a personality-driven success at the end of the day?

HYMOWITZ: You’ve heard me praise—.

SCHARFF: And what does that mean for the sustainability of the program?

HYMOWITZ: I think it was a great balance. At this point the Philanthropy Secretariat—I’ll speak back to my era managing the office. By the time I left in July 2011, the office—the Philanthropy Secretariat was five full time staff, including myself. That does not include Mr. Davis. On a daily basis Mr. Davis is not—he’s overseeing but he is not implementing the work of the office. There is a lot that is going on in terms of the day-to-day activities that Mr. Davis is not necessarily handling directly. I think where he is so key, in the ways I’ve highlighted are some of those really high-level discussions with let’s say a Gates Foundation. He is just a really valuable first conversation for a foundation. I think his relationships throughout government were important. I think again his neutral view of the office, of the landscape and opportunities throughout the country. I think there were lots of enabling factors that were part of his—that were strengths of Mr. Davis’ that allowed the office to be successful.

But, at the same time and I think he would agree with me on this, Mr. Davis had many other things he was working on. He wasn’t just running the Philanthropy Secretariat and nothing else. He is an adviser to the President. He later was head of the National Investment Commission. There are so many other things on his plate that I don’t think he would have the capability to just focus on this one thing. I think it was really his—I look at him as sort of a steward and a strategic, and, at key strategic moments, actively involved. That really made him key.

I think it is, again, just I think your question is does it always have to be a personality. I think the key thing is you need an analogous steward. If you were going to follow the same model where you would have the program team and then sort of a senior-level official overseeing it, you need someone I believe who has many of the analogous strengths of a Mr. Davis if you were going to do this somewhere else.

SCHARFF: If you could go back to your first few weeks as a full-time staffer, as the program manager, and you had the chance to do this over again, is there anything that you would have liked to have seen done differently perhaps in terms of the design and overall—let’s just leave it at design of the Secretariat itself. Maybe build off of that what worked best and what could have been improved and why.
HYMOWITZ: That’s a really good question. I think that something that Jennah is now, as the new program manager, working very hard on. I did not have a fundraising background. I think early on it would have been really useful to really have worked through more of a strategy on that. Maybe that was going to take time. One thing now for example, if I’m not mistaken, that the Philanthropy Secretariat is now hiring someone who is really going to be—someone who looks for, who does research on perspective foundations and really is thinking about the fundraising side full time. I was really glad to see that. I think that’s exactly the kind of thing that maybe we needed earlier on.

We did have, and I think I should mention her, we did have an outside adviser initially provided to us through funding from Humanity United who was someone we were able to talk to on a monthly basis and e-mail with and get advice from, just sort of our approach, particularly with engaging funders. She was really helpful in helping us think about how to interact with foundations. I don’t want to make it sound like we were alone trying to figure this out. We did have support and her name is Darian Swig. She was and remains an extremely valuable advisor to the office.

That said, I think that really bringing on that fundraising or prospecting capability earlier on would have been, I think that would have been useful. I think we didn’t quite get to that. I don’t want to say—we did have success in encouraging new foundations to fund in the country under our tenure or whatever. Later on—this wasn’t a first year—it was grants made to local Liberian NGOs (nongovernment organizations) as opposed to international NGOs. Maybe I didn’t highlight this. If you look at the office’s objectives it is the more foundation piece, more funding, that’s one prong. The second prong is what I sort of sometimes described as the development or aid effectiveness piece, so strengthening the work of foundations. Under that bucket, it is trying to encourage foundations to fund activities aligned with Liberia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy, aligning with government priorities, when possible, funding Liberian entities if that is either a Liberian government organization or entity or a Liberian NGO again as opposed to an international NGO. When possible, to have that direct Liberian link. Also when possible to share information on their funding, be more transparent with what they’re doing, or just information about what they’re doing. That would be under the aid effectiveness prong.

We had different deliverables in each of those areas in terms of grants made to local NGOs, to Liberian government offices. There were other specific metrics around specific events that we threw like the philanthropists’ visits, for example. Those were some of the big ones. We definitely had many deliverables in our work plan that we had to, at least try to, live up to.

SCHARFF: Did the Philanthropy Secretariat self-evaluate? Was there a way to measure your success or progress towards certain goals?

HYMOWITZ: Sure. Of course our funders insisted we have metrics. There were lots of different deliverables that we had for that first year and beyond. One of them is new funders, or funders who made first-time grants in the country under our, during our tenure or whatever. Later on—this wasn’t a first year—it was grants made to local Liberian NGOs (nongovernment organizations) as opposed to international NGOs. Maybe I didn’t highlight this. If you look at the office’s objectives it is the more foundation piece, more funding, that’s one prong. The second prong is what I sort of sometimes described as the development or aid effectiveness piece, so strengthening the work of foundations. Under that bucket, it is trying to encourage foundations to fund activities aligned with Liberia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy, aligning with government priorities, when possible, funding Liberian entities if that is either a Liberian government organization or entity or a Liberian NGO again as opposed to an international NGO. When possible, to have that direct Liberian link. Also when possible to share information on their funding, be more transparent with what they’re doing, or just information about what they’re doing. That would be under the aid effectiveness prong.

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SCHARFF: This is just more of a housekeeping type of question but who were the foundations or the funders who provided support for the operation of the Secretariat itself?
HYMOWITZ: At launch it was co-funded by five organizations: Humanity United, NoVo Foundation, McCall-MacBain Foundation, Daphne Foundation and then one anonymous donor actually.

SCHARFF: What united all of these groups together to the idea of funding this unit sort of originated in those early discussions you elaborated on at the beginning of our talk?

HYMOWITZ: These folks were already really active in Liberia. That was the obvious group that we approached about this idea.

SCHARFF: You mentioned by the time you left the Secretariat there were five full-time staff, when were the additional staff hired and why?

HYMOWITZ: In our second year we—one key additional issue that we realized was we felt that there were opportunities and situations where foundations were willing to partner with government but where government was really not used to dealing with foundations. We saw a number of different sectors where we watched government struggle with its interaction with foundations. We proposed in our second year to establish what we called the GoL liaison. That was specifically responsible for managing those relationships. For example, like those interactions between Gates Foundation and the Monrovia city government. In that case the person we eventually hired hadn’t been hired yet but that person would be responsible for those interactions. We added the GoL liaison as we called it. Then the idea was we'd also have a civil society liaison, who would be more responsible for those relationships. That was another addition.

We hired an administrative manager for the office as we found that we were expanding and there was a lot of paperwork and administrative issues. Our planning around the philanthropists' visits we found to be really quite a burden so we thought that that was an important additional hire. The final person at least in my time was a President's Young Professional so that was an externally-funded program separate from the Philanthropy Secretariat and she worked closely with the civil society, engaged with the civil society piece.

Again I think the key expansion in the second year was that administrative position and the idea that okay this GoL interaction itself is necessary to have a full time person dealing with that.

SCHARFF: Now we’re speaking the beginning of March 2012. The Secretariat is ending the, is nearing the completion of its three-year pilot phase.

HYMOWITZ: Yes, that’s true.

SCHARFF: Where does the Secretariat go from here and was there perhaps discussion at the time, around your departure, of it becoming a more permanent fixture?

HYMOWITZ: Yes. We convened in April 2011 a sort of future of the Philanthropy Secretariat retreat at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center with a number of our stakeholders and the idea was “okay, we’re about a year off from the end of our pilot phase, what has happened, what does the future look like?” So the two questions were, in terms of our financial future to date, we’ve been fully funded by foundations, is that a model that we should continue or should we look to possibly look at other revenue sources, charging for certain services. That was something that was talked about.
There was the idea we are a Government of Liberia office, should the government fund the office. That was one piece of the discussion. The other piece was the institutional future. There had been lots of talk—I think I mentioned this in response to an earlier question—does it make sense to have the Philanthropy Secretariat housed within government? Some foundations are not fully comfortable with the idea of dealing with a government office that is supposedly directing their philanthropy especially if you’re an organization that funds either human rights groups or certain types of government watchdog organizations. You might not want a secretariat that sits within government. We had that discussion, “does it make sense to continue to have it housed within the presidency?”

We brought together a number of our key foundation colleagues for this discussion. I can just give you the outcomes from that meeting. One is that interestingly the foundations did seem to think it made sense to continue funding the office, at least in the medium term. I think the view was there is a value to a certain level of added independence that the office has because it is externally funded. It is kind of a little removed from politics sometimes. It’s soft but I think there was a sense that there was some value to that.

It also codifies that it is a partnership between the host government and its partners. They endorsed that idea. A couple of the foundations pledged further support beyond the pilot phase for the office. That was really the first time that we officially realized that, yes, the Secretariat will look to continue on beyond the pilot phase. So there was that.

Institutionally interestingly, the idea, it was sort of codified that the office will stay within the presidency. That was an interesting thing for Liberia, as well as for the future of the Liberia secretariat. One additional piece was the idea to create an advisory council that would provide solidification of the office institutionally, some support for the office’s fundraising efforts. So those were some of the key outcomes.

Subsequently we met with President Sirleaf, basically took these recommendations back to her. She endorsed them, which was great. So that was—the office is planned to go on to the future. I don’t want to speak much about the era after my departure just because Jennah would probably be better to speak to that. The idea was, coming out of that meeting was the Secretariat will go on beyond the pilot phase.

SCHARFF: When you left Liberia, what percentage of the foundations giving support to the country were going through the Secretariat or were working with the Secretariat?

HYMOWITZ: That’s tough—again, we’re not receiving funding. It is a little hard to say that. I would say that most of the foundations talked to the office regularly. I always refer to that as a soft success of the office. There was one particular skeptic when we launched the office who said this isn’t going to work because foundations again don’t want government to direct what they do; they’re not going to talk to you. They’re just going to ignore you. I think a soft success has been that I think foundations do talk to the office. I think there is a self-correcting mechanism in place which is that the Secretariat is a voluntary service. If a foundation thinks you’re helpful, they’re going to talk to you. If they think you are a valuable on-the-ground interlocutor who knows great local NGOs for them to meet, knows the best sector experts, is the office to talk to before a visit and to
arrange meetings for them, has great advice on projects they may be considering, they’re going to talk to you.

If you start pushing them too hard they’re not going to talk to you. I always felt, to me that was a soft success. I feel like it is fragile. I feel like if you ever got—again I watch this. You can definitely interact with—the Government of Liberia can interact with the World Bank very differently than it can with a foundation. The World Bank cannot just get up and leave. You can be a little more pushy, you can be a little more direct sometimes. With foundations, it is a softer style of engagement.

So I think most foundations talk to the office. The number—the success number—it doesn’t answer your question but thirteen foundations made first-time grants in Liberia during the office’s first two years. That’s new foundations. It doesn’t exactly answer your question. So I don’t know how to say how many speak to the office. Most of them do. Again, some to a varying extent. Sometimes foundations that make such frequent trips to the country that they’re very well tapped in may talk to us less frequently or just talk to us about certain issues. It kind of just depends on the case.

SCHARFF: Are there certain foundations that really don’t want to talk to you or that the Secretariat perhaps doesn’t want to talk to? I can think of a faith-inspired foundation supporting say rural church-planting activities in a part of Liberia and providing social services on the side. They may just prefer to do their work. Is that a—?

HYMOWITZ: I don’t know about that specific example but I think there are funders who prefer to—again, if you’re funding certain types of civil society organizations you may be uncomfortable with it. There may be all kinds of situations that maybe I’m not even be aware of where a foundation may not talk to us, or a certain type of grant that they may not talk to us for. I can think of a few that fit in that category that I, I won’t say never spoke to us, but definitely talked to us less.

As far as the office not talking to a foundation, I think it is always worth dialogue unless they’re doing something really destructive. There is always value to try and engage a foundation that might not otherwise even bother to talk to the government.

SCHARFF: So if another country were to say tomorrow that they want to begin the process of setting up a secretariat what would be the key take-aways from your experience that you would say are most important for them to take into consideration and to get right?

HYMOWITZ: One thing I would say is they would first want to consider are you the right fit for it. So one thing I think you need to ask is, ‘is there existing donor excitement about the country?’; I don’t think you can manufacture that. So I think the country, as Liberia was fortunate to have, for whatever reason, have some level of heightened donor interest. Donors can be pretty fickle. Sometimes for one reason or another whether it is Sudan’s, South Sudan’s recent independence or—all kinds of different reasons people might be interested but I think you need to ask yourself that. I do think—maybe that’s more on the implementation side; I think that’s key.

Assuming the government wants it, I think that would be another piece I would say to the foundations, is there a receptive government. I don’t think you can do it without that.
I think there are capacity questions. You can imagine a scenario where—I don’t think a secretariat is necessary in a country where capacity may be so strong that you don’t really need an intermediary. So I think there is almost like a range where—it probably works in a country where it is difficult enough that an outside foundation feels like it needs someone on the ground to help navigate the situation, but not so chaotic that there is no way to even get involved there. I don’t know where those cutoffs are but I could definitely—I think, as the country gets—as there is greater capacity in the country, I think the office’s use actually goes down. I think it is most useful when it is really a link into an environment that is complicated and difficult and hard for an outsider.

So as far as what the country would need to find I think a Mr. Davis equivalent is critical. I think that person needs to have stature within the government, at the level of a cabinet official. Again that person needs to be a steward more than a direct day-to-day manager of the office, though you could imagine a model where they are. I think they need to be known to the donor community. I think they need to be one of those people that the donors look to meet with every time they’re in the country. So I think they need to have that credibility.

I think the government itself needs to have credibility. That gets away from that Mr. Davis equivalent. So the Mr. Davis equivalent. I think you need the government, the host government needs to have an honest discussion whether that office should be housed within government. Again we had this discussion with Liberia whether it should continue to be housed within the presidency. That link to the President was pretty important in the Liberia case. You could imagine a scenario where you might want the office to sit not in the government. I think both the donors and the government need to come to an agreement on that. Ultimately if the donors aren’t comfortable using the office because it is housed in a government that they don’t find credible then you haven’t created anything useful.

You can imagine a scenario where the donors are more comfortable with it in some sort of semi-autonomous situation. We haven’t seen it yet but could imagine that scenario. So donor interest, Mr. Davis equivalent, country, host country credibility and how you structure it.

I’ve always felt—some people said you need broad buy-in. I don’t think you need—it’s not like a mass movement. It’s not like the whole country is going to rise up and say yes we need the Gates Foundation here. I think it is always going to be—I think you need one or two people in the government who champion it and they need to be able to navigate those interactions with the government officials. So I think you need a government that is open to it. You sort of started with the premise that they are looking to set up the office so presumably embedded with that is the idea that they are open to looking to engage with external partners. That would be a key thing. The government really needs to want that, needs to feel that there is some value to working with foundations.

SCHARFF: In conclusion I just want to ask if perhaps there is anything that we haven’t had the opportunity to discuss that you think is important for the record in telling the story of the Philanthropy Secretariat?

HYMOWITZ: There’s probably a lot. I think there is a lot—I’m biased, I was working in it. So I’m not neutral exactly, but I think the office has had a lot of successes. I think we found important challenges maybe I didn’t mention like the challenge of getting donors to collaborate. Foundations always laugh when I tell them that. It’s an old
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...mantra, we want to collaborate but then it is harder to get them to do that than said. I wonder if there is a better way to make them and get them to work together. Again maybe there is just a more effective way to do it. Jennah may be having more success leading that process than I did. That’s just a challenge that I think there is still a question mark about. So there’s that.

This is just a random thought. I think of this—so my new framing of this that I keep thinking about that I’ve been talking a lot about lately: “Innovation in aid effectiveness.” There are all these discussions about international aid effectiveness, aligning with government priorities, harmonizing funding, greater transparency, the Paris Declaration Principles that have been set out. Foundations have never been part of that discussion. They’re a different group. They don’t see themselves as just foreign donors; they just see themselves in a different category and they are.

I think one contribution of the Philanthropy Secretariat is it is a soft way of engaging foundations around some of those principles: those aid effectiveness principles. You’re not going to get foundations to sign—I don’t imagine that any of them would sign the Paris Declaration and basically sort of tie their hands behind their back to a set of principles and way of operating that they don’t typically follow or even thought about in some cases. So this is a soft way to engage them that is tailored to them and tries to get them to think about some of these things. To think about the country’s national plan, the country’s priorities, to fund local projects, to work together when possible, to get them to do some of these things in a way—. With the traditional donors so to speak you can just sort of force them to do because they’ve agreed to do it; they’ve signed these documents. At this point it is pretty well known that these are the six principles of the Paris Declaration.

That’s a new way I’ve been thinking about the Philanthropy Secretariat, what the innovation is, that it is a sort of soft push towards development effectiveness for a group of funders that has operated a little differently and have different characteristics. Maybe they need to be engaged differently than through these same high-level aid discussions that traditional donors are.

SCHARFF: I want to thank you very much for your time, it has been a pleasure.

HYMOWITZ: Thank you.