



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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

Series: Civil Service

Interview no.: E9

Interviewee: Samuel Kofi Woods

Interviewer: Graeme Blair

Date of Interview: 21 July, 2009

Location: Ministry of Public Works
Monrovia
Liberia

Innovations for Successful Societies, Bobst Center for Peace and Justice
Princeton University, 83 Prospect Avenue, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544, USA
www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties

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- BLAIR: So this is Graeme Blair, I'm here with Minister Samuel Kofi Woods. Just to confirm that you have agreed to the recording?
- WOODS: *Yes, my name is Samuel Kofi Woods II, Minister of Public Works.*
- BLAIR: Great. So maybe we could begin by just talking briefly about how you got into the ministry here and what your background was for a couple of years before that?
- WOODS: *Well, I started off in Liberia as a youth activist when I was 11 years old. I was involved with initiatives for improving the slums in Liberia where I grew up. Those were basically centered on clean-up campaigns and empowerment. That created an opportunity for me to begin to understand the social, economic, and political conditions in which we, as young people, found ourselves—deprived, in a state of squalor—in our country.*
- As a result of that, I got involved in the earlier political movement for change in Liberia. You may have heard that back in the 1970s, especially around 1977-78, there was a mass movement for changing the political order, where the likes of (Gabriel) Baccus Matthews (and others) came in the country and attempted to challenge more than a hundred years of political leadership of the True Whig Party. I was very young at the time, and I was working through that process as part of a mass movement. So at the age of 11, I started in the youth movement as Chairman of what is referred to as the Liberian Youth Development Association.*
- Then I became a student leader at the University of Liberia—I became President of the Student Union, elected in 1986. It was a very important election because, occurring in 1986, it was after the ban on student politics that had been placed throughout the country by the military government in 1981. So my 1986 election was important because, after the election of Samuel Doe in 1985, we decided that that election had ushered in a civilian government, and that Mr. Doe had now changed from a military leader to a civilian leader by the coming into force of the Liberian Constitution in January 1986.*
- We, as students, decided to reactivate student political activities at the University of Liberia and raise a number of issues with the government at the time. The first issue was that Article II of the Liberian Constitution had clearly articulated the need for all laws, decrees and statutes inconsistent with the Constitution to become null and void. Using that constitutional provision, we then announced the resumption of student democratic activities at the university. You know what that meant, obviously, because there was a decree in place and the military regime had still not understood that we were being transferred to a civilian regime.*
- The Justice Minister then ordered that we should stop those activities. I was threatened with arrest. We challenged that. I recall the Minister of Justice at that time, name of Jenkins Scott, said that we were treading on dangerous ground. But we challenged it, and eventually, after a lot of tension with the government and the university administration, there were elections at the university. So I was elected as President of the Student Union then to reactivate the student leadership in terms of our engagement in the national political arena and also in terms of resuming real democratic academic freedom at the University of Liberia and trying, as much as possible, to articulate the grievances, not just of university students, but of the larger society as a whole. So it was, basically, a challenge.*
- Being part of that process and the activities that followed, by 1987—I was arrested two days after my graduation, imprisoned, and then banned from*

working in Liberia, banned from traveling in Liberia. During that time, I was also the Chair of Recruitment of the National Student Union, so I traveled throughout Liberia organizing students into unions throughout the regions of the country.

Immediately after my arrest, I was actually released from prison after a lot of pressure on the government by local people, the students and others. I was released. I realized the ban on me was serious because I made an attempt to travel, and I was stopped from traveling. I was told I was blacklisted. I approached several agencies for work and was also told that I could not work. During that same year, now 1980, a journalist, who now works with the Inquirer newspaper as editor-in-chief, asked President Doe about my situation and Doe threatened that I would never get a job in Liberia as long as he was President. In fact, he said, unless hair grows in the palm of his hand, I would not get a job.

At that point, I decided to challenge the government legally. I felt that it was my constitutional right to work in my country. The ban was a deprivation that was unconstitutional. I visited several law firms. I asked lawyers to seek redress through the courts. They were afraid, they were afraid Doe could take actions against them. So nobody represented me. I then decided to go to law school. So my motivation to become a lawyer was solely based on the fact that there was some anger in me, but I thought that that anger could be transformed into something positive.

I went to law school. The commitment I made in going to law school was that I would represent indigent people, people deprived of constitutional liberties, people whose rights were violated, and I would represent them free of charge as a lawyer. So I went to law school. My problems did continue, but finally, I got a job with the YMCA, the Young Men's Christian Association. Then I continued law school. So my commitment was basically, as a lawyer, to work hard to make sure that I could represent people.

By November 1991, I was asked by the Catholic Church in Liberia to establish the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. I became the first director and I worked with Archbishop Michael Francis to set up the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. In the case of the Student Union, before I became president, there were years of the ban. My responsibility was to reactivate the union, to bring it back. That was a challenge. Then, at the YMCA, there were two years of inactivity when I became director—then, my responsibility was to develop programs. So each time, there were challenges to rebuild and reconstruct something that had suffered a degree of decay, and the challenge was to rebuild it.

So I came to the Justice and Peace Commission in November 1991, when there was no human rights commission in the church. I was asked by the Archbishop to come in and start a commission at the suggestion of members and friends from the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights and Michael Posner, who is now, I think, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor under the (Barack) Obama Administration, and a good friend of mine for years. He had visited Liberia and gotten word from the Archbishop that the Archbishop was intending to set up this commission. Mike Posner met with me in the Park Hotel and said he had just visited the Archbishop and told me that the Archbishop wanted a very good initiative. He thought that I was the best person for the job.

I did meet with the Archbishop, and the Archbishop, having supported me, and my having benefited from Catholic schooling and scholarship all my life— it was

easy for him to entrust me with this commission. So I started the commission, the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, with a shoestring budget. I had to borrow chairs. At the time, I had to borrow a typewriter to type releases and do things. Over the period of eight years, we were able to build the commission, a viable commission with all the logistics, all of the equipment, programs. We had a legal aid program, which is my passion—obviously based on my commitment to go to law school to represent indigent people free of charge, people who suffered abuses and violations of their rights. We had a documentation unit that conducted fact-finding and monitoring on human rights. We had a radio program called “Voices From the Front Line” on line—the voices of real individuals, victims of human rights abuses. We became the source of information that came out of Liberia, on human rights, for a long time.

So the commission moved from a non-commission, non-institution to something very viable. And the commission became recognized, and is even recognized now, as one of Liberia’s foremost human rights organizations. I received several awards—the Reebok Human Rights Award in 1994. Pope John Paul II awarded me the highest service award, the Benemerenti Award, back in 1999. There have been many awards that have come as a result of that work. The Commission has been recognized both locally and internationally.

Building on these things—what came after that? After several threats on my life and attempts to have me arrested, I left Liberia in 1998 for exile. In October of 1998, I was to be charged with treason, although I was not in the country—I was out in Brussels for a meeting. The Police Director had gone to my residence to have me arrested. I was not there. I got word while I was in Brussels, so my family had to leave the house. They had to move my things away from the house and I had to spend some time in the Ivory Coast, Cote-d’Ivoire, in 1998. But I was determined to come back in spite of the fact that I knew there were reports and threats of sanctions on me. I came back to the country. By November 1998, I returned to Liberia, in spite of the fact that (Charles) Taylor was here. I left in December 1998 for Holland with my family. I spent two years in the Netherlands, where I studied public international law; I got a Master’s in International Law from Leiden University. I also studied International Law and Development at the Institute for Social Studies.

It became clear that I couldn’t come back. I came back briefly in July of 1999, but I spent only three days because they were looking for me. So I left again. It was clear to me that I couldn’t come back to the country anymore, so I remained in exile. In 2000, I completed my studies and I left the Netherlands for the United States with my family. I spent two years in the Netherlands. I must be grateful to the Dutch government because they did something very interesting, which I think was very important.

As a human rights lawyer for my country who was being pursued, I didn’t go in as a refugee, I was invited as a guest of the government. That afforded me an opportunity to stay in the country as a resident and then go to school. My kids went to school, the best school in Holland—the international school, supported by the government. I received a regular stipend from the government and also did some consultancy with Dutch organizations in Africa, in Nigeria, in Sierra Leone. I traveled there and did some consulting on human rights and development in the Delta region, many places that we visited—so it afforded me the opportunity to reflect and to understand my next direction.

My desire to work in Africa, to work in Liberia, did not abate. I went to the United States, but I was determined to come back. I did some work in Sierra Leone. In

2001, I returned to the continent. I returned to Sierra Leone, working there on another important project, the Transitional Justice Project in Sierra Leone. The UN (United Nations) was supporting this project through the International Human Rights Law Group, which is now called Global Rights. I worked with them, setting up programs on transitional justice. I helped to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone as well as a Special Court. In fact, I received a formal award from the prosecutor of the Special Court for setting up the court.

I worked with them, advising them on international law on several indictments. By 2003, when Mr. Taylor had left Liberia, there was an opportunity to return to Liberia. I left after about six months with the International Human Rights Law Group, which is now Global Rights, in Washington DC, and I set up my own foundation called the Foundation for International Dignity, FIND. They're still active in Liberia. They have an office here on Johnson and Broad Street. I set up that organization.

I did time with the hope of looking at issues of refugees and displacement in the region. I felt that one group of people that had been looked upon as objects of pity were refugees and displaced people. That image and perception of refugees had to be changed. We needed intervention that would do that. So I began to work with the previous camps on capacity building issues, issues of human rights, issues of training, trying to let them know that there were international laws that protected them in this environment, that they had rights the same as any other human being. We did that until I came back in 2003 and continued work in Liberia. We set up offices in Sierra Leone. We had about two offices in Sierra Leone, one in Freetown, one in the Kenema area. We set up another office in Guinea and here, in Liberia, we set up about seven offices in different parts of the country. I think the Foundation did very well in trying to do that.

Some of the people in refugee camps in Sierra Leone that we trained are now representatives here in this government. They were elected in their counties so they're here. I believe that when you can work with people to transform the conditions of perceived pity to those that allow them to recognize their dignity and the fact that they are people—I think that is the most important tool in the development initiative. I've always told people that the center of development must be a sense of humanity, that any level of development that reduces and diminishes the human person is not development. That is why I don't respect modern economic development, where I see skyscrapers and homeless people beneath the skyscrapers sleeping and eating from the garbage. I don't think that's the right form of development.

In 2005, we had elections here. There was an argument that I would run which people still feel, but I didn't run. Elections were held. The President asked me to join her cabinet. I'm not a member of any political party. I'm purely an individual and I was asked to join the government by Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. In fact, in January 2006, my appointment was announced on the very day of the inauguration. I was one of the first ministers announced in this country. So I became Minister of Labor. I became the Minister of Labor, appointed in January 2006, and then this year I was appointed Minister of Public Works, after three years. I'm sure we'll discuss the details of my government role: labor for almost three years, then public works over the last few months.

BLAIR: Sure, maybe we can start with your work in the Labor Ministry. Maybe you could describe what you see as the greatest achievements in terms of reform and rebuilding in this first couple of years.

WOODS: *Let me give a background. When you have war—more than fourteen years of sustained violence—two things happen. One is institutionalized violence, where the attitude and behavior of people, their response, their psychology, is driven towards violence because, in an environment of chaos and anarchy, there is no forum for redress, there is no opportunity for individuals or society to deal with grievances. When society collapses and you have a failed state, all of the relevant institutions for providing redress for grievances are absent, and individuals have to respond in their own way. Communities will do the same. So then society is caught in a web of institutionalized violence—that’s what happened to this society, the breakdown of all institutions of governance.*

The second thing that happens is the criminalization of the state. State criminalization becomes part of the order because, in the absence of a legitimate government order that can have some semblance of restraint on individuals, state criminalization becomes the order of the day. But during our peace process in Liberia, in an attempt to restore peace, the international community adopted an ill-conceived model. That model was to reward crime—to allow those who fight war and kill people to have the opportunity to lead them and to assume political power.

Now, if you knew that war was fought in this country, not over ideological bases, but basically on the basis of criminality, what would you expect if these same characters assume political leadership? They will criminalize the state and they will use the state and the state machinery to legitimize crime. So instead of the state pursuing criminals, the state itself, and those who govern the state themselves, should be pursued by the law because they are criminals.

So you have a difficult mentality—and I’ve spoken to several institutions and I’ve spoken in Nigeria, I spoke in America: I said in New York, when the mob decides to undermine the state, they pursue them. They use legitimate force to pursue them and bring them to justice. In our case, when criminal gangs decided to undermine the sanctity of the nation-state, we thought to give them political power in return. That’s what we thought to do. We didn’t think that we should bring them to justice—we decided to reward them with public offices, so there was state criminalization. Now those are two important things that happened to the country.

As a result, ordinary people begin to lose their sense of dignity, their sense of independence, their sense of decision-making. This was what we inherited in 2006—people dependent on the big man, the powerful man. Money given, thrown out to people—people were given bags of rice, all kinds of things—a system of entrenched patronage. So you come to government at this time, you get appointed into a government institution. You are confronted with this evil of trying to reform the entity to one where discipline, the rudiments of civil service, work on time, and you are saying to yourself: “Do I assume the attitude of a big man? Do I perpetuate the big man syndrome? Or do I approach it from a different perspective. Can we assume the rudiments of government? What does that mean? Better planning? Better decision making? Collaboration? Inclusion and participation? Involvement of people and so forth?” I thought that was the best approach, where people are the center of decision making themselves. So in a country where people—and even in this Ministry, people are used to coming to work at 10 a.m. in the morning and leaving by 2 p.m.—you, as a leader, don’t need to impose anything, but you must come at 7 o’clock.

BLAIR: *Leading by example.*

WOODS: *You show leadership. People begin to say well, in a society where people respect a leader, a leader is doing it. So I'm bound to do it. So I don't know what is happening in the Ministry of Labor now, but I think if you go there at 7:30 you will see people there working—7:30 in the morning, 8 o'clock, people working. That is almost happening here. It probably works—over the past few weeks I've been here—I've been here a month—. You come here by 7:30, obviously you'll see people here working. So you do it in an indirect way. You transform people with your thinking; you do it indirectly, by leadership.*

Because I believe if you lead people, you must lead by setting an example as a leader. You must do what you expect them to do. Let them see you doing what you expect them to do. But if you cannot do it as an individual, then don't impose it on others. So I'm the first person who comes here myself. I'm here by 7:30. I hold meetings by 7:30, and I do other things here. That's how we proceed. So it is these little things—.

At the Ministry of Labor, I made clear that we had to come to work on time. We had to engage in activities and improve our system by accountability and transparency. I was the first minister to return unused per diem after travel officially to the government. I was also one of the first ministers who returned gifts given to me by companies—officially returned these gifts. These are just the minor aspects of ethical disposition that we showed in terms of telling our people that we have to work and we have to stop corruption. We have to stop extortion. But as a minister I must lead the way. Those traditional things that ministers would do and accept, which help to affect the society, they are things I must reject. By rejecting them, a message is sent out that I'm serious.

The second thing is that, on the bigger level, we put in place all kinds of policies that granted internal equity in the distribution of what we have: allowances, other benefits, rice, transportation, other things. We made sure that we put in place mechanisms that would make them available to all. So if there is rice distribution, should a minister receive rice? The first people who should receive rice are the people at the bottom, not the guy on the top. You have to understand why that should be done. So I believe it is those little things.

As a matter of broader policy, the Ministry of Labor, like many other ministries, was part of the perpetuation of an economic elite system. Let me explain that. Over the years, in this country, public institutions were privatized by the political and social elites. They did that to perpetuate their hold on power. Most of the government institutions around were being housed in privately owned buildings. They were owned by private individuals. If you trace the influence and authority of the ownership, it was traced to the entrenched political leadership of Liberia. They owned those buildings and they put people in those buildings and they got rent every month, every year. So we got poor. Those of us who grew up in economically challenged and deprived neighborhoods could not see ourselves moving up the ladder because we had poor education. But these people afforded—and because our taxes were paying for them. I felt that it would be an important policy decision for government to deviate from that trend.

I know that the late Samuel Doe attempted to do it. So one of my first missions was to move the Ministry of Labor from a rented building, a building that was leased, where the government was paying more than \$50,000 every year, to its own premises—we did that using government money, but also by raising my own resources from the Dutch government, who supported us. They got us some vehicles, they got us some motorcycles, and they were able to support us in

getting a new building. So we have a Ministry of Labor that is housed in its own building today, and I'm happy for that.

We made the ministry from one with hardly a computer in 2006 to one where employees not only have their computers, but are trained to use computers. I didn't have three persons out of a force of more than 250 persons who could use computers, who could use the internet or e-mail. If you go there today, you have a VSAT (Very Small Aperture Terminal). You have everybody—all directors and assistant directors can use the internet and use e-mail. They were trained to do so.

BLAIR: In-house?

WOODS: *In the Labor Ministry. We were able to send out senior staff minutes by e-mail to each other. We have a meeting every Monday at 9 o'clock. We look at tax, we look at responsibility, and so forth. Now you have a ministry that has a VSAT; you have more than 77 computers, 22 laptops. We had about two vehicles that didn't work, now we have more than fifteen vehicles. In fact, the various counties have been divided into regions and they have brand new vehicles, the regional offices. We launched an emergency employment program that addressed emergency employment. It is still functioning—to be able to get committed to own the community but also to work on a voluntary basis with more support from government. It is an emergency program that I've been working very hard on. We have a labor force now that has experienced a degree of reform.*

We set up a five-year strategic plan through a retreat where everyone participated. That plan was able to redefine the mission, the vision of the ministry. We looked at the human capacity needs of the ministry and the institutional framework. So from five assistant ministers, we are down to three assistant ministers and hopefully, in the next five years, we will have no assistant ministers. We'll change them into directors, senior directors, who will become civil servants. As a result of that, we will have less political influence on the Ministry—a more technical outfit than a political outfit. These are some of the challenges we have. So we have a very active labor force.

Looking back, I always say to people that I'm very proud because I'm one of the first ministers who had to turn over our office and I was escorted by employees of our ministry. They were very happy and they thought it would never work. So I think it is important. We also led a reform, a labor law reform, as part of our agenda. What I did initially, in the ministry, was that I came up with a vision to humanize and restore the dignity of the Liberian labor force. That vision was anchored on four important pillars: institutional capacity development, labor standards and reform, and improved manpower development.

BLAIR: Manpower in government or manpower—?

WOODS: *In the country, generally. Finally, we're looking at restoring our international relationships because they have been soured. On the last front, we were able to restore our relationship with a regional organization, Regional African Labor Center—and the ILO (International Labor Organization) as well. Right now, we are up to date on our due payments to both organizations. We owe not a penny. So we've restored ourselves. We're able to bring the ILO—we have a representative here and we're working on programs together. A lot of programs have been supported. In fact, a three million dollar program was developed with the Ministry of Labor in terms of building our capacity. So they are here, and*

hopefully, in the next one year, we will have a representative in the Ministry of Labor itself, at the Ministry of Labor building.

So we've done very well. The President addressed the International Labor Conference in 2007. I went with her to that meeting, and she addressed the conference, which was very important for us—as a sitting President, for her to address the International Labor Conference—.

Being able to essentially deal with our international reputation and integrity—we've been able to restore that. We've been able to build partnerships with various organizations. Mary Robinson, the former High Commissioner of the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva, has had a partnership with the Ministry of Labor, and we've been able to run a lot of programs and do some work. For us, that is important. If we can build that kind of relationship, it shows a commitment to human rights and labor rights.

On manpower development, I talked about the emergency program, and other programs we were running throughout the country. On labor law and standards, we were able to repeal decree 12, which prohibited strikes in Liberia. After more than thirty years, this government, under the Ministry of Labor, repealed that law because we felt it was a draconian law and no law that prohibited strikes should exist in this country. We repealed it. We amended various laws and there's a labor law reform process that is going on now. We've had more than three different consultations that involve the various organizations, labor unions, etc.

We have a national tripartite committee set up. On that committee we have three members of the labor union represented, three members of the employers association represented, and the Ministry of Labor through the government representative. So it is a tripartite committee that allows for social dialogue.

My approach at the ministry was to reduce the incidents of litigation and to push more dialogue. Coming out of war, what you needed to do was to approach social dialogue and increase social dialogue. So my strategy was to invest more in social dialogue. So we supported the merger of organizations, the labor unions. We have one labor union now, the Liberia Labor Congress. When I took office, we had several unions. We have one National Federation Union in place now.

We also have the employers association represented through the Liberian Chamber of Commerce, and so we have a tripartite system. And I think I have led reforms. We have been able to set up the Child Labor Commission at the Ministry, established an Anti-Human Traffic in the Secretariat. We have a program now at the Ministry of Labor that distributes information to combat HIV in the workplace. These are entities we've put in place. We set up a Minimum Wage Board for the first time in more than twenty years, and that is looking at the minimum wage in the country. I think that is important for us. So we've made substantial gains and progressed over the past few years, and I'm content that we've done the right thing.

Finally, we've been able to restore a semblance of harmony in the workplace now. In 2006, January, we had a lot of strikes throughout the country. Firestone lasted for two years. Against all the odds, I conducted the first major union election, the first free and fair election ever in more than eighty years of Firestone history. It was contested in the court. The court said we were right in what we did. Now, since that election, we have had industrial peace and harmony. We have the first independent union at Firestone and negotiation.

The first time in Liberian history, they received the first important international human rights award from the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations). I was the first labor minister in Liberian history to go with them to receive the award, I was honored and I addressed the United Steel Workers' convention in Nevada last year. They were surprised because it was the first time they were having a labor minister—they thought that, they were saying that the Secretary of Labor probably wanted to address them from America. It was the first time for a labor minister to be addressing the convention. More than 4000 workers and I were there.

So for me it has been a career of challenges, but strong innovation, getting to places, overwhelmed by a legacy of decay and decadence, but yet prepared to surmount those difficulties and challenges by new initiatives and innovations. I think that is why, after my years in the Labor Ministry, I was asked by the President to come to Public Works. I'm not an engineer, but I'm breaking tradition, where people feel that an engineer issue, such as running public works—breaking the tradition, breaking new ground. To come in here and spend some time now to change things around. I think it's my challenge and I think, given my history, I'm up to the task.

Already we're trying to do what we need to do: bring the reforms here, get an assistant, reorganize our program and our projects, improve our outreach to the communities, get out there and work with communities directly—to own the communities, to protect infrastructures. The integrity of our infrastructure must be protected by the citizens themselves. They pay taxes, and I think we have a responsibility to secure our infrastructure and to maintain it. So, working a whole new strategy to get the job done and to accelerate government infrastructure around the country and to improve them—I think it is very important. It's a real challenge, but I think it is work that can be done. I think it is possible.

I've always said to people—I say what guides me is that I believe that things are possible in this world. We need to discover them. So I always say to people, why not? That's my theme: why not? Because I believe it is possible. I believe we can change this society. We can turn it around. There were times when people felt that things were impossible in Liberia, and now they're possible.

When I was working with the human rights organization, people believed that you could not take a government to court. We took the government to court, several times, and we prevailed. People did not believe it. We set records. We set our cases of precedent in Liberia. I took the government of Liberia to court when I was in exile to the African Commission for human rights, the first time. We taught them a lesson. I think we must dare to conquer. I think we must break new ground, open new frontiers. No one can succeed without their conviction being tested. The greatest test of your conviction, if you succeed, can allow people to be converted to your conviction. They will believe. There is something about you, some belief, which allows you to confront all of the world's evil and be prepared to even put your life on the line because, ultimately, you are prepared to stand by what you believe. I'm convinced about that. So I tell people around this place: "I came from the slums of Liberia. I went to school all my life on assistance and on scholarship. If I can make it here, anybody can make it here."

I believe that. And I tell people if your daughter or your son gets up in the morning and says, mom or dad, "I want to be President of Liberia", don't ask them why, say why not. Because I believe that if you encourage that child, that child will be able to turn obstacles into stepping-stones of success and progress.

That is what we need in Liberia now. Because this country needs to understand that if you work hard, the change, the progress we are making will be irreversible. Liberia can be the greatest nation in this world. It can be, it is possible. We have the resources here. We have the human capacity. We have a deficit of leadership, but with better leadership, it is possible.

That is why I think Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has done a great job. I don't expect her to do everything. I expect us to work and put in place the foundation for the new generation to stand on our shoulders, to look beyond the horizon and understand that it is possible to get there. I think that is what we should do: stand up tall and solid enough for others to stand on our shoulders and see what is possible. That is the challenge, because we may not get there. We may not be able to take Liberia where it should go. But I know that Liberia can get there and Liberia will get there because we will work very hard.

I don't come to work at 7 a.m. for nothing. I don't leave this office at 11 p.m. for nothing, and sometimes at midnight, for nothing. I'm working because I believe it is an investment that will make it possible. I believe the gains we've made so far will be irreversible. It is the first time in Liberian history that concession agreements can be discussed, even in the legislature. As a kid, I did not know when concession agreements were being ratified or signed by this government. I did not know when this government was making national commitments.

I did not know a budget was being debated. In fact, the budget was never debated. A national budget was never debated. Now it is being debated in our legislature and we can talk about it. Ministers can be called now to be questioned about the budgets. They can be discussed, all on the streets. We can now receive some acknowledgement for press freedom from Freedom House after more than thirty years. We can say press freedom has improved in Liberia. The government can lose cases. The government can take people to trial on treason and the government can lose the case. Any attempt to alter the government, taking it to court—this never happened in Liberia before. You understand that now, we sit down and say the government cannot win these cases. For me, it's progress. People believe that it is a bad sign for the government, that the government is losing. I don't believe that. What it symbolizes is that there is a new dispensation in Liberia—that the government is not all-powerful, not so dictatorial, that they can allow for due process to prevail. I think that gain has been made. So I think that working very hard, things will change in Liberia for the better. Like my Archbishop, the man who was my mentor, I am an incurable optimist, because I believe that a lot of things are now possible in Liberia.

BLAIR: Maybe we could talk a little bit about—we've talked about a couple of the programs and reforms that you began at the Labor Ministry, some of the challenges in building the political coalitions needed to get some of these things through. Business interests in Liberia are a big thing. You talked about the early days of beginning those reforms and getting the emergency employment program up and running and the labor law reform that you initiated. What were the challenges to building that political coalition, and getting other parts of the government behind you to get it through?

WOODS: *Firstly, you have the entrenched political class in our history. A political class, an economic class, which you have to confront on various levels. My background did not offer incentive for me to be seen as one that should take on this kind of responsibility. We were not part of the social elite. Who is he to become Minister of Public Works? Where is he coming from? Who is his father, who is the mother? Things like that. There is an entrenched elite class that believes that*

some of us who come from certain backgrounds should not be part of certain institutional leadership. And we have to challenge that, this perception that treats us with some degree of disdain. We had a challenge to deal with that.

BLAIR: What did you do?

WOODS: *I knew them—I didn't allow myself to be distracted. But their perception, and the weakness that allow people to discriminate against others, to believe that others do not merit inclusion in a society that belongs to all of us—I ignore them. I only had to work to prove myself and let the world see that those of us who come from nowhere can be somebody. I had to focus on my work; so I focused on that. Yet, in that process, especially in a place like the Ministry of Labor, there are entrenched business and economic elite who feel threatened by the approach and the law that you put into place.*

BLAIR: Right.

WOODS: *There was a law on our books that allowed an employer to hire and fire without cause. I amended that law. It was one major law that I amended. No employer must have the right to hire or fire without cause. It is an element of the slave and plantation mentality that we have to deal with. Most of these plantation companies dismiss people without cause. People work fifteen years, twenty years, reach retirement—we fought to change that law, much to the disagreement of business people and some of the big interests. They did everything to circumvent the process, but we changed the law. We sent a clear message out that coming where I come from, the government becomes a tool and a vehicle for the social change of our lives. So we changed the law.*

I know that building coalitions has been difficult. The reason for that is—we have come from a fratricidal civil war—a divided nation, a nation divided on factional lines, on ethnic lines, all kinds of suspicion, all kinds of conspiracy theories. So it has been difficult. There has also been a clash of ambition and ego, a perception of ambition. Everybody wants to be President and everybody will see each other wanting to be President. People want to see me as somebody who wants to be President. I see them—.

So like I said once to someone—I said the government, the cabinet, is a bundle of egos. Everybody there wants to be President or something. It makes it difficult for us to work together because everybody wants to claim the glory. Everybody wants to be perceived as the person who succeeded. It is a work in progress, and it is a difficult work in progress. But one thing we have to focus on to succeed is our simplicity—our humanity that success cannot come by arrogance, success will not come by complexity, but by simplicity. Humanity, that goes along with it. I think the less of a threat you pose this environment where people think that everybody wants to be President, the better it is for you.

So in order to build this constituency, one has to come across as someone who is not seeking or pursuing the egotistic design, but someone who is willing to allow the national agenda to supersede one's personal interest. I think that is the reality. It is still a work in progress. We have not reached there yet. Those suspicions still exist. There are obviously suspicions about me wanting to be President and everybody will say this and say that, but what can I do? I happen to be born in Liberia, not by my own choice. You can't choose your brother or your mother or where you are born. Obviously, you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your birthplace.

So if you are cursed because you are born in your particular place, well so be it. It's not a matter of choice. God destined and imposed that burden on you to defend. So here I am. But I think it is still a work in progress. We've been able to build some coalition. On the business front, we were able to get a team of commerce together to represent the employers. Through the Chamber of Commerce, we've been able to articulate our issues on the labor front. On the workers' front, being able to get one Labor Congress in place, we had a uniform institution that we could talk to. That was our strategy. Being able to build that kind of coalition—work has been going fairly well so far. So I am happy. We still need to do that at the Ministry of Public Works.

The Ministry of Public Works is a different environment. It is contractors, engineers—it is a different environment since the people we deal with are different. The kind of constituency we deal with will be different also. The interest of these constituencies—everybody wants to have infrastructure, everybody wants a road in their district. The budget is not adequate to deal with that. So you have the challenge of trying to convince people and persuade them that what is not possible this year could be possible next year, but you have to do what is possible this year in such an effective and efficient manner that it will convince the next person that it is possible for you to do that for them next year. These are the challenges. I think with a group or committee, with professional Liberians, there's a lot that can be achieved.

My challenge now is to first build an internal team, a team that works, a team that understands where we want to go and that to get to where we want to go, we have to do it together. So in the next few months, we are planning a retreat, a retreat that will include most of our senior staff. We're going to discuss the vision. Some of our international partners will be there to observe. So all of us can look at a vision together: where we want to go, where the challenge is, how we link those challenges to addressing the poverty in this country—together, we'll do it, so together, we'll own it. If we do it together, then we'll see where we want to go together. I don't want to do it alone.

In my view, that inclusive approach, that participatory approach, will help all of us to own the process, to own the success and to own the failures. I think, for me, that is important, that is building this coalition. It will be difficult in Liberia over the next five years to build a national political coalition because it is a stampede, a stampede around ambition, a stampede that we inherited out of the war, where everybody felt they could be anybody. Now the 13 year-old kid could be a general, or the 19 year-old could be a general, and humiliate somebody as old as the father or the grandfather. In the political process, we had people who never went to school who became government officials overnight.

So people thought that to crash the way forward, you didn't have to do it on the basis of merit. These little tendencies still remain in Liberian society and we must address them. We have to address them by creating the conditions for people to understand that government is more complex than what they think. Leadership, the call to leadership, is more challenging than what they think. As one of my friends said to me, don't give boys men's jobs.

BLAIR: Maybe we could talk a little bit about the—you spoke about depoliticizing the top leadership and the Labor Ministry. That must have been a somewhat controversial thing to be doing, to be taking away the political appointments. What were the steps that you took to get that through and convince people that this was the right thing to do?

WOODS: *It's still a challenge in government. I think, already, the civil service is attempting to adopt that approach on civil service reform. It is difficult and remains difficult because, in a society like this, where people get used to the perks of offices with all kinds of amenities and benefits—as a political appointee, you obviously think you have the eye of the President and the support of the President—you are really full of it. So you need an executive chair and an executive desk and all kinds of benefits that go along. It is the cosmetic form of the office that gets people carried away. If it is not efficiency, quality and merit, it is more—so to break that will take some time. And the civil service reform process will take some time. But what do we do?*

We first had to prepare people in our leadership to fully participate in the transformation, the reform process. So I was not driving the process alone. We also had to offer an opportunity for people to understand that without being an assistant minister or political appointee, there are still better benefits for you that can be offered. You still have a vehicle. Your skills will be developed. You have the resources and logistical support in your office. But more than that, you have a formal job security because you're a civil servant. You're not just a political appointee. Political appointment is based on the will and pleasure of the President. Now why would you want your life and your career to depend solely on the will and pleasure of one person, the President?

We're in the process of trying to break the cult of the presidency, to diminish the sophistication of the all-powerful President. We have to start from civil service. If the President has to appoint more than 5000 persons in this country, we're in trouble. The less the better, you know?

BLAIR: Yes.

WOODS: *The other thing has to do with performance and productivity. If you have all of these people—political appointees who have authority, you undermine the technical output of our institution. So we are still doing well—there must have been about 19 or 17 directors in labor. I think they have been reduced now to about 12. By the time we get through, there will be only six directors—in the next five years—because they're short term and long-term plans. So since we had about five assistant ministers, we had about four people called director-generals who were the equivalent of a deputy minister. We dissolved the entire thing about director-generals: no more director-generals. We removed two assistant minister positions and reduced it to three. So we hope that that process will go on.*

BLAIR: So is that a process just internal to the ministry? I assume there had to be wider acceptance from the highest level, from the President.

WOODS: *We presented the President with our five-year plan. We articulated the issue to the President. We worked with the civil service agency. We worked with the Governance Commission, the governance reform commission. We met with them, we had the discussions. As a result, they incorporated most of our ideas into the reform. In fact, the consultant who worked for us, who did our retreat and worked for us was also contracted by the Civil Service Agency to help them with the reform agendas.*

BLAIR: This is earlier, the other ministries have not—.

WOODS: *Yes, by 2007, we were moving in that direction already. We had our five-year plan, we had articulated that. Better yet, we were on course. We were one of the*

first ministries—in fact, we presented our document to the Civil Service Agency and the government and they were shocked. They're using it as a model.

BLAIR: So what do you think it was, the key to the success of your being able to get this through at the Labor Ministry while others weren't? Was it just that you and your team thought of this before other people did or—?

WOODS: *That's one. We had a clear vision to articulate, but under my leadership, we were decisive on pushing it forward and that decisiveness led to clear firmness in decision making. Because, in our part of the world, there's a lot of patronage and nepotism and all kinds of things that undermine the civil service, that undermine the ethics of government, discipline and so on. I don't get carried away by those things. I believe in objective standards, standards that allow everyone to be treated equally. Once you begin to patronize, once you begin to engage in nepotism, then you undermine your office, you undermine your leadership. Then you become discriminatory in what you do and I think that is wrong.*

BLAIR: Were there steps that you took to move the ministry away from the patronage system that existed before you arrived?

WOODS: *Yes. Various steps, steps that were unique. One, when I walked in the ministry I saw different factions and different groups in place. No communication around the lines. I started off by having meetings, literally every morning, with all the senior staff and my assistant director. We had those meetings every morning. Gradually, people began to adjust themselves to a work attitude of collaboration—of working together, talking with each other, sharing information.*

Out of those meetings, we had various departments make a presentation on their work, the tax every week. You did the presentation and as the director, I would question you. Everybody wanted to participate and ask questions. Why are you doing this? So other directors in the department were questioning and they were being— they had reports, updates on the work. In this way, people were compelled to share information on everything, including workshops that had been conducted.

So we began to build a group of people that were communicating all of a sudden, sharing information, setting up committees that were working together across— so a committee would go and do some work and they had to work together before then to come up with reports. People began, psychologically, to think about what we do. So out of that process, we moved to another—.

BLAIR: In the beginning, in some ministries, finding the talent to get the job that you want to get done is a challenge. How did you go about finding the right staff to be on your team at the labor ministry, or perhaps here?

WOODS: *The right team?*

BLAIR: The right people with the right talents to get your strategic plan done.

WOODS: *We got some people; some of them were already at the ministry and some of them were new people. So when you had old people, already at the ministry, you had to interact with them and talk to them. There were others who came in from different backgrounds and we had to—.*

BLAIR: That you recruited.

- WOODS: *Yes, we recruited, based on merit, based on the qualifications they came in to join us.*
- BLAIR: Could you talk a little bit about the capacity-building programs that you had? You started to talk a little bit about this, there was computer training and—?
- WOODS: *Yes, what happened is that we did our own computer training, but the ILO also came in. The ILO has the Turin Institute that deals with labor training and so forth. So we used the Turin Institute and we trained a number of our inspectors, we trained some people. But then I decided that they should come to Liberia, because I believed that there were few people who were being trained by that process. So we now had the Turin Institute here working with our people—now, a lot of people were being trained. What we said was that since there were only a few people who were being trained going to Italy, we needed to bring the whole program to Liberia. And so we brought the program to Liberia.*
- BLAIR: We've talked about sort of changing the attitudes in the civil service. In the ministry, were there—other than leading by example, were there incentives that you used or other management strategies to get people to have the right attitude and to get them to work hard towards the goals of the ministry?
- WOODS: *Yes, it took some time. You know people are used to saying things. What happened—this country, for instance, agreed that there are certain benefits that government gives, transportation and the like. But then under the system of patronage, there were other benefits that people gave which were not normally part of the government budget—or where appointment was out of corruption. People felt a sense of entitlement. Most political leaders will use something like rice; they give it to people so they get happy and stuff like that. Those were all things that we had to put into context and we had to address them. But you have to go through a number of dialogues and all for this kind of initiative.*
- Besides the senior staff meetings, you had general meetings on a quarterly basis: you met with all the staff, everybody. On a regular basis, you were able to engage what they knew—because in this society, there is a lot of misinformation. People give all kinds of information, percentages etc. These are things that the government is doing, things that the ministry is doing. So unless you can engage people directly, you can't go anywhere.*
- BLAIR: Maybe we can move to talking about the beginning of the work here at the public works ministry, and what some of the early challenges were to turning around this ministry?
- WOODS: *Well, the work here is quite challenging because one of the government activities that attracts major attention is infrastructure. Infrastructure is a visible achievement, so visible you can lay your hands on—you can do certain things with it. So it is political. It is basically a major challenge on the highest level because, if the President of this country wants to go for reelection, she has to fulfill certain visible initiatives, so it brings pressure.*
- The second thing is that given our civil service—there are certain things that happen and certain things that I have to get used to. This is one ministry where employees are spoiled with several things. I mean, allowances are distributed on the basis of the discussion with an individual—there is no objective policy that says who receives allowances, gas slips etc. People just get—even if you don't have a vehicle, you can get a gas slip and you sell it. People don't realize that that is taxpayers' money. All kinds of things happen. So those are attitudes that*

remain here, and they have been part of the civil service for a long time, they are not new. So one minute, you hear people saying, "Oh, we are entitled to gas slips, we are entitled to rights", but there is no policy on it. There are no resources in your budget for it, but they want you to do it. And if you don't do it, you get to see when they're corrupt, because they submit to the desire.

So sometimes, leaders must lead and leaders must be willing to take responsibility when there are problems. Unless you do that, you will be led. And when leaders reach a point where they are led, then there's a problem. Especially where they are led by people who are filled with their own desperation, traumatized and looking for hope. If you are led by those kinds of people, who are in need, you can't be a leader any more. So yes, you have a spoils system; a lot of them are used to selling benefits. That's what they enjoy. So when you say no, you can't do it, you have to set a standard. You have to have the resources to do it. You have to do this and do that. Then people feel that you're not treating them right, but that's the challenge. So it is a work in progress. One has to withstand that. Like the larger society.

It took some time for people to fall in a queue to get on the bus. Everybody was fighting to get on the bus at the same time—now people stand in queues. It takes time for people to get used to a new way; they're used to the old ways. So if you have that happening, you have problems. I don't expect, coming here, that everybody will appreciate me in two months. In fact, I expect them to resist me. I expect them to play politics with me. I expect those things, so I don't have a problem with that. I think that's the challenge. You should come to work and do the right thing and do what is right, all the time. Other than that—.

BLAIR: So your plan to change the attitudes is not to take gas slips yourself and—.

WOODS: *Not to be doing those kinds of things. There must be a rule and policy that says who is entitled to it and why. Then it is clearly defined. That way, everybody knows why this person is receiving it and why I'm not receiving it. But if you just say this person is not receiving it and you have no reason, then they have reason to think otherwise.*

BLAIR: So is there internal communication strategy about this?

WOODS: *Policy memos are sent out.*

BLAIR: This is who is entitled?

WOODS: *Staff meetings, senior staff meetings—next to these, we have our budget and finance committee meetings. Then we have our procurement meetings. All these meetings are intended to make decisions, critical decisions. To get people involved. This new year, there is a ministry, I don't know if they have these register meetings, budget and finance meetings—I don't know if they had this structure in place before, but they're going to. On Thursday, we're having our first major budget and finance meeting now that the budget has been passed. So what do we do with the budget? The Assistant Minister and other people come around the table and give advice, and we make some decisions. That is the way of including people at the different levels. That's the challenge.*

BLAIR: When you were at the Labor Ministry—I think one of the real challenges in some developing countries is that when a reformer comes in, they have a vision, they get things done when they're in office and when the next man comes around,

when the next woman comes around, things sort of begin to slide backwards. What was your plan to have these initiatives at the Labor Ministry continue?

WOODS: *Sustained.*

BLAIR: Sustained, right.

WOODS: *Well you know that's a bit of the beast. Government is its own beast and it's good to learn that. One of the reasons why it will take some time in Liberia is because we need to develop institutions, not individuals. But how long can one stay in a political office to truly carry out reform? I mean, three years is not enough time. You spend three years, and you have to move on. Then another person comes with a political agenda, or the leadership has a political agenda for that office, so it shifts direction. Unless you have a national vision around which people want to go, you have real difficulties.*

So what we tried to do was to put in place certain kinds of policies and make sure that people get used to those kinds of policies, making it difficult to change them. If you put in certain laws or certain policies that are well known and transparent, it is difficult for someone to come and change them because it is a written policy. In the absence of a written policy on certain issues, you get affected by changing whims and pressures.

BLAIR: What are some of the important examples of those policies?

WOODS: *Well, procurement procedures, clear procurement procedures, building a procurement frame in terms of a procedure for procurement. Financial policy and procedure on how people—a policy on allowances that is clear on who benefits from it. Clear personnel guidelines as to what people do. Distributing the civil service regulations to the staff and letting them have access to it, to know that they have rights too—that they can have redress for what they do. If the minister dismisses them, there is redress available from the Civil Service Agency. All these things are to be put in place.*

BLAIR: One of the challenges in Liberia and other sort of post conflict states is this issue of spoilers, conflict spoilers, people who you've talked about who are in government, who have been brought into government so they will not fight the government. Have you dealt with that in your work here?

WOODS: *You have different kinds of people for different reasons. Different issues, different kinds of concerns that people have. But I am ready to deal with them because they will exist. You have this situation all around in every new institution, how you deal with some of these challenges—it's a challenge, it's difficult.*

BLAIR: I'm cognizant of your time. What do you think were a couple of the keys to the successes of the reforms in the labor ministry?

WOODS: *Well, one is the support of the government.*

BLAIR: From the President?

WOODS: *From the President. The overall support from the President and the kinds of things that happened—the President is one, there is also the support of the citizens, support of the constituencies, the workers' union, the chamber of commerce—all those people. Those are the kinds of things that helped.*

BLAIR: When you were beginning your work here in Public Works—one of the things we're interested in is where you get your advice and information about what the best practices are and what other ministers are doing. Where do you get your advice?

WOODS: *Well, basically, it is difficult in an environment like this because when you move from one place and come to another place, it's quite a different environment. You meet different you meet and the kind of work you have to do is different—and all these challenges are in place. The sense of entitlement, the amount of employees you have to deal with—all these kinds of issues are issues that come about in different ways. So it is part of the challenge that we have to contend with.*

BLAIR: Thank you very much for your time, I really appreciate that. This has been an enlightening conversation.

WOODS: *Thank you very much, I appreciate it.*