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MCCANTS: This is civil service reform interview number two with Mr. Edward Kamara, the head of governance at UNDP (United Nations Development Program) in Sierra Leone. It is August 5th and this is Ashley McCants interviewing.

I would like to begin the conversation by talking about the roles you have played in public sector reform, whether here or in other places. So can you briefly describe your current position or any related positions that you have had over the past several years?

KAMARA: *Thank you very much. Well my current position is governance advisor in other words, I am the head of the Governance Unit. I am also the program specialist for democratic governors in UNDP since 2005. Prior to that I worked in Bangladesh, basically as a technical advisor for disaster management and conflict preventions. I proceeded to Afghanistan where I actually last worked before I came back to Sierra Leone. I worked for the UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees). I was mostly involved, not in civil service or public service reform, but my role there was basically to help, well, one: to head the UNHCR sub-office and what that means was to help the returning refugees and IDPs - internally displaced persons - to settle down and start feeling at home after about 23 years in the diaspora. [End of file 1]*

MCCANTS: So.

KAMARA: *So basically that has been my job until finally I came back to Sierra Leone in 2004 and I started working here for UNDP in 2005 initially as a program specialist and then later on I was promoted to serve in my current capacity as head of the governance team. That is it.*

MCCANTS: How would you describe your specialties?

KAMARA: *I would describe them as mixed in the sense that I started my career as an agriculturist; I actually had my first degree specializing in agriculture education. So meaning that I am a teacher by profession. I did that for a couple of years and I went in for further studies. I did business administration, postgraduate studies in business administration and management. Finally the most recent studies, which I did in 2000 was in economic development, specializing in conflict management, poverty reduction and post-conflict reconstruction. Which is why I said I described my professional background as mixed because I am in the pure sciences. I am also a business person and I am a development economist. So I can fit everywhere.*

MCCANTS: I would like to begin with some general questions about civil service reform here and then move to some specific types of changes. Would you talk a little bit about capacity in the public sector in Sierra Leone and when you began to work on reform?

KAMARA: *Well, I think it is a natural phenomenon that in most countries that have experienced civil strife there is every potential for a lack of capacity within particularly the public service, not necessarily in the civil service. I don't want to limit it to civil service because it cuts across a wide horizon of public service institutions. Here in Sierra Leone when we talk about public service, we are talking about civil service, we talk about the judicial service, we talk about the new organization which is the local government service and then of course the security service. So these are all components that put together form the public service in Sierra Leone. All of these four institutions I have mentioned,*

immediately after the war it was very clearly observed that capacity within the middle structures was very, very weak because there had been, during the ten years of war, a huge exodus of professionals from the country either in search of jobs or for security reasons.

When eventually the war ended in 2002, it was very obvious that the country- we experienced a problem of capacity within all of those branches I just mentioned. But then it was very, very much serious within the middle civil service because I call them the front-line guys because they are the ones responsible for the provision of services. If that sector is not functioning, you can imagine what that would mean. Even prior to the war there was already a sense of disintegration in the civil service for a number of reasons. Corruption was one of the major issues within the public sector which, from all analyses it has been attributed as one of the major causes of the conflict in Sierra Leone because people felt that basic services were not provided for them even though they were in a way fulfilling their own obligations to the country as nationals.

Those institutions, government institutions that were charged with the responsibility to provide services were not meeting their immediate obligations. So I would say the issue of capacity had been in existence even before the war. However, it became even more serious during the war as a result, as I mentioned, I mean the exodus of people. When the war ended, it became a major challenge for the government in its reform process because it became more pronounced that we needed- the country needed- expertise in various areas across the board including the health sector, education, the legal sector, judicial services I know was very poor. Right across the board there was a need everywhere to help service delivery but then the capacity was not there because the human component had left the country. Or some of them had taken jobs with international institutions like NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), who were paying them better salaries. The morale within the civil service actually dropped very drastically, before and even during the war because of the very, very poor remuneration.

MCCANTS: How would you describe capacity in the public sector now?

KAMARA: *I would say weak. I would be very careful to say lacking because otherwise there is like a missing—it is nonfunctional. It is still very weak for a number of reasons. Maybe if I can attribute it to four major reasons. First of all, there had been a lack of training provision for the civil service for the longest time. Sometime back in this country we had a civil service training institute, a college so to speak, which died naturally. It has not been in existence for the longest time. The university—I don't know how much you have read about Sierra Leone. There was a time this country was referred to as the Athens of Africa. The only reason why they referred to it that way was because of the existence of the most renowned university in Africa, Fourah Bay College where people from within the African continent and Europe were coming to study. That one is living in past glory. The whole education system has degenerated, the infrastructure is very weakened meaning that the product from that university these days is not up to speed to meet the demands of the reform processes. That is one factor.*

Then also even the changing technical requirement that is taking place every day. In those days you talked about typewriters, these days we have gone beyond the age of typewriting: we now talk about computers. This is the 21st century. If you go and speak to most of our civil servants today, how many of them know how to even switch on the computer? That is a big kind of problem there. So if you cannot switch on a computer, how can you even network with

your colleagues using the basic tool, the Internet facility? These are all of the things that are handicapping the performance of the civil servants in this part of the world. You know, that in itself undermines their ability to research because you want to connect yourself to the world.

You can go to any search engine and source information, but where that capacity is lacking there is no way, you continue to live in the dream world, the world of the '60s or the '50s meaning that you are still thinking of things in the, I call it in the Paleozoic era that are no longer really material for this kind of modern world. If we still have such people in the civil service then there is a problem. And why? Maybe we ask ourselves, why are we stuck with these people? Why are we not able to attract young folks?

Again, I told you that the morale within the civil service is very weak. Unfortunately the country, I mean, again because of massive corruption, one of the factors that we attributed – analysts attributed to the war. What that particular thing has done is to destroy the domestic revenue base. Sierra Leone as you may have heard or read, we rely wholly and solely very much on the international financial support. Some commentators rate it as 60%, sometimes some say it is about 65 or 70% - meaning that the country is unable to attract professionals, people that have the caliber to perform or that have all these skills, the technical skills.

So the young folks, including myself here, cannot afford to go into the public service because it is not attractive enough for me to serve there. So we are all either in the diaspora or working for NGOs, international institutions. So that in itself is not helping the situation. So I don't know whether that suffices for your question.

MCCANTS: Very briefly it would be helpful to hear your own description of the history of public sector reform here, the goals and the current objectives. What kind of motivated this civil service reform effort and which organizations championed reform?

KAMARA: *I would start from the latter, which organizations championed. I don't really want to talk about championing here. When we talk about championing in civil service reform, particularly from the UNDP perspective, I think we are here to help the national government in every reform agenda. Meaning then that if we talk about the champion, or who champions the process, it is the government of Sierra Leone of course. So whatever we are doing, we are only supporting the government of Sierra Leone's effort.*

However, in terms of who are the players providing that support, I would say, given the experience I have, I can only account for four institutions, the UNDP for which I work, the World Bank, DFID (Department for International Development) and IMF (International Monetary Fund). These are the four key players that have been involved and are very much in the reform of public service, like our civil service. There are various contributions they have made. Even though the ADB (African Development Bank) for instance, they have been part of the discussion of processes, so has the European Union. But those four institutions I mentioned are actually the ones that have been involved practically in terms of putting financial resources, in terms of being involved programmatic effort.

MCCANTS: Do you think that the demand for these kinds of reforms came mainly from within the government or was it more a response to donor interests?

KAMARA: *Well I'd like to speak very much from the UNDP perspective. Whilst we advise government when we sense that there are needs to go into certain areas, we very much leave it to the national government to initiate or to kick start the reform agenda. Not only in the public sector, but also in all other sectors that would provide support. Yes, because of our experience in other parts of the world, because of certain indicators that we can use to undertake assessments that would inform the needs of particular countries, that doesn't mean that we should take the lead in actually telling government as to what to do. We can only advise government.*

So having said that - it was very clear that even the most popular document, policy document in this country, the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) Report highlighted a number of issues that were the main causes of the war ranging from poor governance, poor service delivery. When we talk about poor service delivery we attribute it to the public sector because that is the major instrument for government. Therefore it is natural that any programmatic support should venture into such an area to see what best they can do.

In terms of how you do it, what you do, has to be within the framework of the government agenda and basically that is what we have been doing. So it is not per se a kind of donor-driven or international areas-driven. It was very much government-led programs that we are supporting with technical advice for most.

MCCANTS: Would you describe the core competencies that the government wants to build here in Sierra Leone and the thinking behind those choices?

KAMARA: *Within the public sector or civil service?*

MCCANTS: Yes, within the public sector.

KAMARA: *There are a number of, again, maybe probably I was very generic when I said there is a huge lack of capacity. If I have to narrow that down and that will probably respond to your question in terms of how many core competencies our government might want to address. What I see in Sierra Leone within the civil service as the fundamental capacities lacking ranges from – one: the issue of leadership and managerial competency - that is hugely lacking. That one I would say, that competency can range from lack of planning skills, budgeting, policy formulation, ability to analyze issues, and even monitor and evaluate their own programs that are designed. These are all areas that within the deficiency in managerial competency, I want to devote my response on. If government wants to see this country forward, particularly boosting the performance of the civil service, those areas should be areas of focus. Those competencies can take into consideration developing skills in planning, developing the civil service servants skills in budgeting, developing their skills in monitoring and evaluation and also of course developing their skills in computer literacy because with all of those, if they lack that basic skill, performance will still be undermined.*

MCCANTS: Was there any effort to sit down and consider the steps that should come first or were there certain actors that just seized a window of opportunity to achieve something?

KAMARA: *A very interesting question. I think that has been the biggest factor. Like I said earlier on you see, this country has and still continues to heavily rely on foreign support. If you follow the saying that says, "he who blows the piper blows the tune." I mean if you don't have your own income, if you rely on other people to support you, then you can only say solely to determine your own welfare. One of*

the toughest debates we have always had in terms of really assisting the reform of the civil service, is where to start.

While the past government and now the current government may have their own agenda, naturally it is not possible to really execute it fully because of the lack of resources, home resources so to speak. As I told you earlier on, that when we want to define public sector in Sierra Leone, it is not only limited to the civil service. There are other sectors, including the judiciary, the security, and the local government. Now, some players in the game had felt that a holistic approach should be taken, a comprehensive approach. But then the question has been does the government the capacity financially to embark on such an ambitious program to reform the public sector holistically? Of course the natural answer is no, because there are other areas that government has to attend to.

Now, if you would think the civil service, it is a very big sector. If government says it is willing to reform the civil service, the civil service has categories of staff, personnel, ranging from grade one to grade fourteen in Sierra Leone. Now the question is where do you start the shot. You want to start on the lower grid, the reform? Do you want to start on the middle grid or do you want to start on the upper grid? Where would you want to start that you can make optimal impact? That has been the biggest challenge.

At first, as UNDP approach, after having a series of discussions with the then government, we agreed that it was better to start with the top management, the higher cadre, that is those within grades 11 and 14. These are the permanent secretaries, the provisional secretaries, X, Y, Z or the directors in the ministries and departments and agencies. But then some other partners, like DFID, they were of the view that no, government should take a comprehensive approach. So we assisted government in coming up with a policy framework to establish a senior executive service. We went farther, to even establish a unit within the presidency to assist government in the establishment of that unit.

But as you would know, given what you know about UNDP, we do not have as much money as the World Bank for instance or the bilaterals and therefore most of the government initiatives we only support through provision of catalytic type of funding, hoping that we will get the other big players to come in and assist the government. We started a program, the creation of the SES (Senior Executive Service) program in 2004. This was targeting the top cadre, which is just about, call it maximum 76 in the entire country's civil service. We wanted to reform that, and provide all the basic paraphernalia that would help them perform.

There were a series of studies done up to the point that we even had to provide technical support that drew a road map, an implementation strategy to actually have the whole process implemented. Unfortunately, that even was overtaken by the elections processes. It was very difficult to really get the buy-in of other partners because of the variance in opinions. They said they wanted a holistic operable government. They insistently said, "We don't think we have the capacity financially to actually take the comprehensive approach because if we do—take for instance the question of severance benefits. We would have to give severance benefit to those that might have to drop out of the equation. Can government have—the budget, the money to pay that severance benefit? Can government have the money to pay the terminal benefit to those that are going to drop out of the equation?"

So therefore we will want to start something small, handle this smaller number. Even that amount was way too big to be done in sequence, cascaded it within a period of five years.

But then, as I said, it was overtaken by events, political events, and up to this moment we have not been able to actually move on that. However, they had also been a comprehensive approach by DFID. For instance looking at the entire public service reform. They've done a number of studies. They are on a number of reforms. But mostly I mean they are still very much on paper. Certain reforms have taken place in some ministries. But it's still, very, very much in a pilot phase. So that is not enough I mean to really start showing any kind of result that we have a global effect on the country as a whole.

MCCANTS: Looking back on those choices, would you suggest that different priorities should have received more attention or do you think that the choice of priorities was about right in your opinion?

KAMARA: Sorry, do you want to say that again?

MCCANTS: Looking back at kind of the choices that were made in terms of where to focus your attention, would you suggest that you should have focused on other priorities or do you think that you focused on the right things?

KAMARA: *Is it the question of right depends on for whom you are providing the services. Like I said, I mean, UNDP is basically a service provider. The priorities of UNDP are only priorities if they are priorities of the country, of the government. We think all of the areas that we attempted to intervene were priority areas for government—they fall within the national policy framework. Those were the issues, the areas that we were supporting. So even up to this moment, I won't say they were mismatched. I mean our priorities, as long as I meet those priorities, they matched the government priorities.*

MCCANTS: What was the level of political commitment to these reform efforts at the time that it started? Did it have the support at the highest levels of government or was it more just at the middle level managers?

KAMARA: *Again, if you reflect on what I mentioned earlier which regards the establishment of the SES unit. The SES unit was established within the office of the presidency. So that means it was received at the highest political echelon so there is no doubt that the political will was there. What was missing that was very, very fundamental was the basic tool: money. The funding was not there because having put all the processes in place, they got to the point that government required a certain amount of money to kick start the implementation of the program vis-à-vis the recruitment process, the payment of incentives or severance benefit to those who were willing to voluntarily retire and government did not have that amount of money. So it came back to our doorstep, it came back to the doorstep of donors.*

So while the commitment, the political will was there, the support, the funding, the availability of funds was just not there. There were other priority areas because as government I don't think it would have been proper for them to put all their resources on one project which was going to take time anyway for them to start seeing the result at the expense of the—services to the military, to the security, to the people, the health services, which would have put them in a very dangerous position. So yes, the answer is there was political will, but the political

will was not supported with the requisite resources to support the project implementation.

MCCANTS: My next questions pertain to specific types of reform in which you may have played a role. I would like to talk about each project or program separately so that those who listen to this can understand the story behind each. But you can also make links between activities. Often a goal is to reduce the degree to which employment and service depend on political ties. I understand that this is a goal here and the country is interested in revising its recruitment and promotion procedures. Can you describe these goals or what changes may be in the works for this area?

KAMARA: *It would be pretty difficult to make a very concrete statement at this point with regards to the issue of recruitment, whether it is being politically motivated or influenced by political issues or interest. Because, as I said, we have still yet to actually fully implement the reform programs. However the few areas, the few attempts that we have made to recruit people in certain positions, yes it is natural that some of those recruitment processes may have been, or there may have been tendencies to be politically influenced. But, again, it depends on how we have approached the process, our involvement. Because the point is—this is part of the negotiation process. It is not your own for you to put your cards on the table — but you are not the only individual in this whole business, and the donors so to speak. You are the recipient of the services that are provided. You have your own perception, you have your own view, you have your own way, and how you want to approach it. This is where we sit down and negotiate.*

Then we have the responsibility to also tell you the dangers that the approach you might want to take will have on the end result of your program. While politics can influence, we have always tried as much as possible to have a balance wherein, yes, a political component is there, but at least we end up having people, because at the end of the day there's people that you can put in place that can deliver, otherwise it won't be even in your own interest. I don't know. Now there is a program, now BBC, CNN keep talking about it, and it is coming up soon. People who formed politicians, political campaigns for political gains, appointment to ambassadorial positions and that kind of thing. This thing happens everywhere in the world.

Some people see it as a payoff game. I support you, I fund you, to reward me in a way. But then, for a developing country like Sierra Leone I think we always have to be very careful. First of all the capacity is very limited and those few people who can really provide the top notch services, I think they should be given priority amidst all political influences.

MCCANTS: Would you talk about the options entertained here for attracting talented people to the civil service? Again, I understand that no reforms have actually gone through, but what options have been considered for attracting and retaining good people?

KAMARA: *The fundamental—in fact, right now that is one of the projects. If you saw my colleagues, the other lady that was sitting in the next room in there, she has just been hired I mean actually to do exactly that. Soon we'll be having on board an advisor for the capacity building or public sector reform. There will be two of them, they will actually be doing that kind of thing under the governance unit. In terms of options—?*

MCCANTS: For example some leaders decide that the best way to create an effective civil service is to create an elite corps, like the senior executive—.

KAMARA: *That's what I'm saying. I mean the options that we had considered before was the creation of the SES which was very much received by the previous government. But then we have to understand that there had been a major change of government, meaning that in itself would influence some policy changes. Some changes are made in the pattern of things; however, that is not to be thrown aside. It is still very much on course although it is not kick started yet which is why, I mean, as a way of encouraging that to happen nowadays, the diaspora project that has been put in place to attract Sierra Leoneans who are living abroad but have an expertise in key areas that the country will require to come back home and provide such services because there are various positions in the reform process that are going to exist, like for instance the SPU (Strategy and Policy Unit) that we have established in the current presidency. We need advisory positions in that SPU. Those advisory positions could be filled by people coming from the diaspora and are well paid. That is another strategy. And these guys are actually a way to assist the government and the public sector reform unit to come over with all of these strategies that the government has now.*

So there are various intentions, various approaches that the government wanted to take but I think it requires also the donor support.

MCCANTS: So I'm very interested to understand why you decided on the Senior Executive Service as a way to create an attractive civil service. Other countries have implemented other options like feeder schools, which is based on the French model. Some like Singapore and Botswana offer scholarships in return for commitment to a certain number of years in civil service employment. A more general strategy might be to rely on market competition providing compensation, benefits and other due process protections within the private sector. Some might employ all these strategies at one time. So can you describe the steps taken in order to decide upon the Senior Executive Service as the way that you would take this?

KAMARA: *Again, going back to what I said earlier, the decision to use the creation of the Senior Executive Service was not UNDP's decision, it was a decision based on the views and policy decision by government of the day there. Now, what we did once—I mean that pronouncement, that policy decision was made, was to support the government in putting together the right framework, providing the technical support. The reason behind government using, seeing that particular approach as the right approach, as opposed to the others that you have mentioned was the concern—I mean, mostly for, the other concerns over the availability of funds. I mean to take a comprehensive approach that government would not necessarily have had. I mean it required funding sources.*

As I said, if you look at it, the civil service in the country is a huge number of people ranging from grid one to fourteen. At that time and up to now, the government was, and is not in position to say they would undertake a comprehensive civil service reform of all those categories of staff. Therefore they thought it was wise I mean to start from the top. So that the top—if you have a—it was all about the influence leadership will have on the performance of personnel. If you have good leaders, committed, highly professional, whether that is a fact or is just a kind of hypothetical thinking, it is something else. But it is generally believed that good leadership with good team skills, good professional skills will go a long way. A strategist will go a long way to influence the performance of the lower cadre. So that was, I think, the thinking of the government, why they

wanted to start the reform from the top. By creating the Senior Executive Service, pay them well, train them well, because there was a whole range of training programs that was going to be provided for them once the recruitment was finished. That would have enhanced their performance.

So I think it was based on that belief, that government thought that starting from that point was a better way. Also the funding concern since they could not have afforded the amount of money to really undertake a comprehensive reform program.

MCCANTS: The idea behind a Senior Executive Service or an elite unit is that its members may be moved between ministries or agencies as the need arises. Often there is resistance on the part of ministries who want to reward their own people, move them up through the ministry. Do you have any advice about how to deal with this resistance?

KAMARA: *Well, unfortunately I would not because if we had, I wouldn't want to give advice on the basis of what I have read on paper because they are theories. I would have loved if we had had the experience of actually creating this SES in Sierra Leone and then see it up to this moment and then on the basis of lessons learned to give more concrete advice. But if I do now I will be only giving you it on the basis of what I've read on paper, which may not be very helpful for this kind of discussion.*

MCCANTS: How would you describe the reaction of sitting civil servants to the efforts to introduce the SES reform? Did they object or did they think it was helpful?

KAMARA: *Well, for a start it was met with mixed reactions definitely because given the categories that the reform was meant to target initially thought that it was a way of government getting rid of them because when those, such reform was mentioned, naturally the first reaction is "I'm going to lose my job". Because if we have to collapse all the positions and then do fresh job classification and job matching and do a job fair, advertise, naturally you expect that maybe those who have been in the system for too long, that have not upgraded their standards by way of learning and now here is a situation where one of the prerequisites for the recruitment into that position was a Master's Degree. Another one was going to be you must be computer literate. Like I mentioned earlier on, most of the current folks occupying those positions do not have such qualifications, most of them are just first degree holders that have no computer skills. The only way they are performing on those jobs is based on experience because they have served in those positions for so many years. So naturally at the pronouncement of such reform it was obvious that they would react for fear of losing their job.*

Secondly those that are below their level were also very worried or concerned. "If they are going to create this cadre and pay them so much, why should we continue to receive our mediocre salary?" I mean, come on, the disparity, the salary disparity was also a major concern. "How can these people be paid higher and then we are paid so little?" That was also the downside of it for them. For a lot of them they saw it as a demotivating approach. However, it was all based on perception because the concept itself I know was not properly explained to them.

For those in the higher cadre that the system, the reform was going to actually affect they didn't know that there were provisions for severance benefit. Then they would be entitled to their natural terminal benefits until all those details were explained to them. Then also those in the middle category, once you had the qualifications you were also entitled to apply - which means you are not going to

go through the process of promotional rank and file, after every year you are taking one step. You could wake up tomorrow, as long as you are short-listed and then you go through the interview process and you find yourself competent, you can assume the SES position.

So once those things were explained to them, then we started seeing the momentum rising. They would now even say, "when are we going to actually put this thing into effect?" So that is why I say it was initially met with a mixed reaction, but then after a certain point. Once the whole process was understood, it was received and everybody was now looking forward to it actually happening.

MCCANTS: So if you were going to offer another reformer advice about how to deal with sitting civil servants who are apprehensive about this kind of reform, what would you say?

KAMARA: *I think the first approach should be first of all information sharing on the process. I think that is very important. Of course that cuts across everything, every project that you undertake. Information is power. When you don't communicate on issues, even though it may be to the advantage of the target beneficiaries, oftentimes some will see it—will look at it with some amount of disdain. So communicating it to the people that will be affected by the reform process is the most important thing.*

Then they are also getting, they may improve in the process. So they don't see themselves as being led by the reform but they are part of the process, the discussion, right from the word "go." That is also very important. What I mean here is the issue of participation is very, very key. I think those are the things. If we have to get involved in any future reform, I think they are very, very key. But then also, of most importance, is the government leadership and the process is very key. That leadership, a lot of times you talk about ownership, ownership, we talk leadership is like telling me you own this car but it has been driven by somebody else. So those two things should be combined. The funders, that is the donors are behind, to push the train. The head of the train should be the government.

MCCANTS: Was there a broad base of support for this reform in society as a whole or was it controversial more broadly beyond the civil service itself?

KAMARA: *It comes back to my earlier response to the first question you asked. If the very group of people that the reformers are to target had initially mixed reactions, then naturally it is fair to say that reaction within the broad base was also mixed. But then, that is where the issue of communication became very relevant. The issue of sharing information became very important. Even the public—because you have to understand that self-reform has a number of undertones, political undertones, it has social undertone because it has to do with the question of livelihood.*

You're my mother, let's put it this way. You know that I depend on you for my livelihood and if there is going to come a reform, that you come and tell me, "Edward, when the reform comes in it is unlikely that I will maintain my job." Naturally as a child my first reaction is, "if mommy loses her job, what is going to be my position, or what will happen to my livelihood, my education?" Those concerns are there. Then of course this is the kind of country where we talk about extended family system, it is not nuclear. So the family system setup is not only limited to mother, child and father. It goes beyond that. You have uncles, you have aunts, X, Y, Z and it goes on. So meaning that all of those people that

are depending on that one person—and there are families here, the fact of the matter is that you have large families that only one person is educated and that person is the figurehead. If anything happens to that figurehead, naturally the rest are affected. So those worries were there initially.

There were also worries, I mean concerns, even the donor community because some of them did not think that the approach government wanted to take was the right approach. It was very difficult to get their buy-in. But then it took time. That is why I said I mean, for me, nothing is impossible. It depends on how you approach it. It is not what you say but how you say it. It is not what you do but how you do it.

Once those things were gradually tabled for discussions and the views of other partners, the views of other players, were respected and factored into the bigger equation, then gradually we started getting concurrence. For instance, one of the biggest opposition initially was DFID. DFID was not very comfortable with that reform agenda initially. But then when we got to the point that DFID actually understood, they concurred to be with us, to be with UNDP and the government and they even offered technical assistance.

I remember the very last consultancy we put together. DFID sent representation from partnership. We had from MSI (Management Systems International) to put a team together that actually came up with this big implementation strategy that would have actually seen through the implementation of the SES. So yes, if I have to come back to respond to your question, initially there was a whole mixed reaction, I mean globally, again, which I mean, clear understanding, clear sharing of information, communicating the processes, giving the rationale for this approach vis-à-vis the country concern. There was a kind of concurrence in terms of a view on the reform.

MCCANTS: You've spoken about the financial obstacles in implementing the reform and also some of the political obstacles in terms of the change in government. Can you talk a little about what were the more practical obstacles or difficulties encountered in implementing the reform and how did you try to work through those obstacles?

KAMARA: *As I said, apart from the financial obstacle, which was of course very important there was also a problem of capacity even within the country to take on, lead the process of the reform. There was heavy reliance on technical support, external technical support because if we don't put a team together within the office of the President to lead the process, unless you understand how the process works you're handicapped. So we kept going back and forth to international expertise to come in to provide the required assistance, to carry forward with the process. That was one - a very practical obstacle or hindrance to the implementation of the reform process.*

The other major one was also the divergence of opinions amongst the various stakeholders. That was another very, very practical hindrance. Of course the third one was the fear within the government of losing the grip of their constituencies because such reform, naturally, will be seen as - with a lot of suspicion. Politics is about following, and unfortunately the reform process dragged very close to the elections. If anybody had pushed a kind of agenda, it would have, of course, affected the outcome of the elections probably. That is one of the reasons maybe they guys that were in power, that lost power, would say, "blame it on that. This reform was not in the interests, in our political

interests and therefore we lost most of our constituencies to the opposition.” So that hesitation was there. In fact it got to a point, it no longer became a very serious concern to government to really push the process because it was not going to be very much in the interest of the government of that day. Therefore it could be a mix of issues shoved aside until after the election.

So practically these were the issues. Then putting together even the institutional framework was also—because there is no way that kind of reform was going to fit within the current institutional framework. The Establishment Secretary, already there was the intention to establish a human resources management department that would have actually managed this process, but that required, I mean also some amount of capacity altogether. So that institutional arrangement was also another practical hindrance. That was really not readily available to push the process forward.

MCCANTS: So you just mentioned that you often had to go back to the international community, ex-pats and so on, to carry forward the process because of the lack of government capacity. So would you say that most of the implementation, the attempts for implementation came from the international organizations or from the diaspora, or were there also people vested within the government that were able to implement the process?

KAMARA: *First of all the process was not implemented, not implemented in the sense that SES was never created. However, the process leading to the creation of the SES was very much supported, or very much relied on external technical assistance because the capacity was not found within. That was why we had to contract firms like Management Systems International, MSI, or the Partnership International, PIA they call it. Or PAI, I don't know the right acronym. But these were institutions, consultancy, firms that we hired to provide the right expertise towards the reform.*

MCCANTS: Can you describe how the leaders and personnel who were working on reform collaborated and how well you think that collaboration worked?

KAMARA: *I think the collaboration was very, very good in the sense that there was a steering committee set up that constituted various stakeholders including—that was led by the office of the President. That steering committee was chaired by the Secretary to the President. The Secretary to the President is the head of the civil service in this country. So you can imagine the weight, the political weight that was behind the whole process. We had also the development secretary there. We had the financial secretary from the Ministry of Finance because these were all key policy decision makers. In that meeting all the donors were represented, that steering committee all the donors were represented. So it was a broad-based steering committee kind of that actually was responsible for the process.*

MCCANTS: Based on that collaboration, how often did the steering committee meet together?

KAMARA: *We had agreed initially to be meeting twice every month but then it got to the point that we were meeting more often than the two monthly—depending on what we had on hand at that particular moment to handle. There were also some ad hoc meetings that were called now and again. So while there was a time to meet twice a month, we were also meeting maybe two or three times or four times as the case may be in one month depending on what was required to be done during a particular period.*

MCCANTS: Could you offer any recommendations to others who might use this type of model based on your experience with the collaboration?

KAMARA: *My first, very first recommendation, as I mentioned, is that it should be national driven, it should be a government-led process. That is the very first recommendation. The second one would be, once it is national owned, then there must be efforts to initially mobilize enough resources to drive the process because without the resource base you will get to a point where you will get stuck with implementation. That is exactly what we experienced in this country. Then of course, the issue of sharing information, communicating the details of the reform process is something that you cannot under, at any given point, underestimate. That is very key. Right from the word "go," all the stakeholders must be fully brought on board so that everybody knows what is happening at every given time, that is very key.*

So I think those are the recommendations that I would like to make. Without any of those the chances of having the reform process succeed would be very, very slim.

MCCANTS: Were there any other reform efforts that were put in place, that were being attempted to be put in place at the same time that this was going on?

KAMARA: *Yes, there were a couple of reform processes that both UNDP and other partners had been made part of. It would interest you to know that now Sierra Leone has the very first procurement policy. That was very much done with the involvement of UNDP and the other players that came on board later on. That is one. All the SES thing we have been talking about, that one really did more to the public sector reform and the creation of the SES under the human resource management.*

There has also been restructuring of certain units that UNDP has been very much involved in, such as the financial management unit, the MTF, which has been introduced into the whole, relating plans to budget in the planning process in the country. This is another big area that we have been very much involved in - the issue of ensuring, promoting transparency and accountability. We have been involved in that. We have a media ombudsman, we have the Anti-Corruption Commission in existence in Sierra Leone. The World Bank has also been involved in a number of training programs. DFID has been involved in functional review programs. So there are a couple of other reform agendas that we have been involved in.

Then of course slightly outside that, but again it also has to do with institutional reform, again the only reason I can see why the elections in Sierra Leone had such a big success was as a result of—. You know we started from, first of all, reforming the institution, the electoral institution. In fact when I came to this country, my very first assignment actually was to do that program, to develop that project for UNDP which actually saw the restructuring of the entire National Electoral Commission and the coming into existence, the first political party registration commission which had been only in writing. Constitutionally that political registration commission should be there but it never existed actually until when we embarked on that ambitious program. So those are various reforms we have been involved in.

Of course the justice sector, there has been a huge involvement in that area and we are still there anyway. This country started after war with only five

magistrates, and five magistrate courts. Today we can boast of seventeen magistrates and over 27 magistrate courts functioning across the country. That is as a result of UNDP support in reforming that particular sector. We are also in the parliamentary support. That is also a big reform there. These are the three branches of government, the judiciary, the legislative and of course the executive, I mentioned the SPU.

So we are involved in all of these reform processes. Which one or the other have the ultimate goal of maximizing service delivery in the country.

MCCANTS: Are there any reforms that would be helpful but are not being initiated currently?

KAMARA: *Basically yes. We have been involved in almost every reform, but the one area that I see, I see a gray area that is really, really very important is the marine sector. The marine. That is unfortunately an area that, given the fact that this country has the largest ocean there, the Atlantic Ocean, with all the endowed resources, unfortunately it's not being really tapped into very well to the benefit of this country. I feel that is an area that you know, if possible, this government should be assisted to really reform that sector, to benefit this country. I feel if the barrier resources are properly tapped into it will go a long way in really reducing the poverty level in this country.*

MCCANTS: A common problem in many countries that have experienced conflict or other difficulties is that civil servants have long been paid unreliably. People who work for the government may receive their checks only irregularly or unpredictably and they often have to travel long distances to receive pay if there is a poor banking infrastructure or the roads are poor. Would you describe the situation with respect to the reliability of civil service pay before you implemented any of your efforts at reform?

KAMARA: *Again, you remember I mentioned as one of the fundamental challenges to the whole civil service reform has been the issue of low morale within the civil service and you've just exactly mentioned that, the issue of low salaries which are not commensurate to living conditions of the people and, in fact, even before the war one of the things you just mentioned that clicked in my mind was everything was centralized in Freetown. There were times civil servants based in the country would go for months without salaries and the accountants had to travel to Freetown to the treasury here to come and receive their money. They would come, they would be here for days if not weeks. They would get money, maybe if they have arrears like for two, three months, they would get paid for only one or two months while they continued to handle the area.*

So up to the time we got involved in this the situation had even worsened as a result of the war. At that time the whole infrastructure was degenerated – was completely destroyed. So we started again from scratch to build everything gradually. So it has been a biggest challenge to the process and up to now it is a challenge. I believe those things need to be addressed if any positive reform has to take place. The issue of salary—I mean I know most times we try to shy away from it, but there is no shortcut to that because even those that we now encourage to come from the diaspora, there is now way they are coming and they are given pittance and you expect them to perform. Those things have to go hand-in-hand. So yes.

MCCANTS: Are any reformers kind of now taking steps to address the payroll issue?

KAMARA: *Yes, quite well, but the question that we have all asked ourselves is the sustainability of some of the approaches we are taking because while we have instituted things like top up salaries. I mean, for instance, UNDP has been paying top up to the magistrates in this country since 2003.*

MCCANTS: Can you explain what top up is?

KAMARA: *These guys are very much low paid and most of them were not motivated, especially the lawyers, to sit on the bench as magistrates. To attract them to serve as magistrates, in addition to what government gives them as salaries, UNDP opted to give them top up in the form of a certain amount of money which became a little bit an attractive package. This is how, I mean, they decided to take up the jobs. The same goes for some professionals. Within the Ministry of Finance for instance, most of these guys are either on the IMF (International Monetary Fund) or World Bank payroll and they are paid decent salaries. Now the question is, these are only short-term measures. Unless the overall reform process that is taking place really addresses those salary issues, otherwise what will happen if the donors pull out tomorrow their support.*

One way we have been addressing that, for instance UNDP is, when we decided to embark on the top up payment of salaries to judiciary, we went into a kind of Memorandum of Understanding, an agreement with government for a gradual phasing out of the process while government takes over. That has started happening fortunately. The agreement calls for the implementation to take effect from 2007. So in 2007 the first percentage, about 30% top up, was assumed by government. So the government is now paying 30% of the top up that UNDP has been paying. At the end of this year again government would have taken over another 40%, which will bring it to 70%. So UNDP will only pay in 2009 30% of the top up while government pays 70% including the normal salary that it is paying to the judiciary, the magistrates in particular. Then towards the end of 2009 government would have taken over 100%. So meaning that, between now, from 2007, government is gradually making sure that it is all part of the budgetary plan to ensure that these people are paid without reversing back to the old salary scale. That falls within the bigger reform agenda within the public or civil service.

MCCANTS: Will any other changes, for example in the budgeting system or the financial management system or in the banking system or infrastructure, will any of those types of changes be necessary to address the payroll problem?

KAMARA: *I am not very much grounded in that area and therefore I would not very much want to comment on how that has improved. I mean the payroll system. However, I think one thing that has helped the situation is the introduction of the MTF, the Midterm Expenditure Framework. That has now helped to relate budget to plans because that was not part of the planning process before. So I think that has improved. Even the payroll system, I think—the banking system, the question was not actually the disbursement, the question has been the immediate availability of the funds. So even if you have all the systems in place, if the funding is not available, you cannot disburse. So that, I think what is important at this moment is to help put in place all mechanisms to support government in actually beefing up the domestic revenue base, be able to collect as much money as possible locally so that maybe the current state of affairs wherein 60/40 will change, will be the reverse. So that government will take over 60% while the donors will contribute 40%. Until that happens I don't think any sophisticated banking system is going to really change very much the situation.*

MCCANTS: So thank you for the time and thought you have invested in this conversation. I just have a couple of more questions about relationships between host countries and donors and about issues that you think merit further attention. Sometimes relationships within international organizations or between donors affect the ability of people like you to do their jobs well. Sometimes foreign assistance creates its own set of problems. So we'd like to hear if you have any advice that you'd like to pass along about how to improve donor-host country relationships. Are there two or three mistakes that you commonly observe in the way that donor countries or international organizations make with respect to their relationship with host country personnel?

KAMARA: *Yes. I think based on my observation, if I have to really say one of the downsides of this whole process, even before we entered the relationship is the fact that there had been a huge dependency kind of developed within the national structure on foreign support, which is very frustrating. I think that in itself is not good in the sense that it has made the country so much reliant so that even key government institutions in this country you want to do business with, to the betterment of the country, they ask you, for a fee. We need a fee, we want to train you, we need certain fee. That in itself is ridiculous. So that is the downside of the support, the international support to countries. I don't think, I mean that is not limited to just Sierra Leone. In most places I have worked, in Bangladesh, in Afghanistan, in Sierra Leone, it is a common phenomenon, that creation of dependency syndrome.*

In terms of relationship between donors and the host country, there is a saying, where there is inequality in the effort that you put in everything, the possibility of being listened to—equally if given the opportunity to make equal input or balanced input into any process is always, the scale is always unbalanced. That is exactly what happens in countries like Sierra Leone where most of the support comes from the international community or from donors because they do not have much to contribute financially. There is always the potential for donors to take the shots, that's fact, which is why we talk about all these conditionalities. We give you the money but then these are the conditions that you have to adhere to or you don't get it. So to a point that it makes people, the government, the country, more or less like a mendicant, very, very much handicapped. Even if they have their own ideas they have their own ways of doing things, but a lot of times those ways are being influenced one way or another are being detected by the donor communities. I think that is a very serious thing that donors mostly in the world are guilty of. Unless there is some amount of equal balance in the share of responsibilities it is going to continue like that. So I think that is the biggest downside of this whole business. I don't know how that is going to change.

MCCANTS: If you could offer others here or elsewhere some advice about how to work effectively with personnel from a host country, what recommendations would be at the top?

KAMARA: *The personnel?*

MCCANTS: Yes.

KAMARA: *You mean within UNDP or within the country?*

MCCANTS: Within the country.

KAMARA: *Again, like I said, I think we have to stop feeling that we own the money, we have the money, we provide the money and therefore we take the shot. Once we stop thinking that way and we think, we rethink that we're here to help and in helping people you have to speak the language of the people, you have to speak the language of the people, you have to make them be part of the process, you have to give them the opportunity to decide as to what best fits them without you necessarily coming with a kind of tailor-made programs and impose on them. The moment we stop doing that and let the people will be participatory, not lip service participatory, and get them really involved, because honest participatory process wherein I mean they take the lead and then they take the ownership of the programs themselves, the better for our support. Then also, it is also good that sometimes we check and review ourselves because one of the things that saddens me is from 2002 until now, donors have been providing support to the government, to this country with the object of building the capacity. We are six years down the line and still we say that there is no capacity.*

I think instead of these teachers blaming the students for being failures, let the teachers also stop for a while and check. Why are the students so weak? Why has there been no improvement in the lives of the students, because as a teacher, if I teach a class of ten and I examine them and only two pass, I think instead of blaming the entire class, let me also ask myself what is wrong with me. Has my approach been right? Did I really succeed in sending my message and teaching these children properly? Where did I go wrong? Where did I go right?

Unless I am able to really identify those areas and take corrective measures, it is going to continue to be like that. So I think reviewing the process of support constantly is one of the biggest recommendations I would make so that we don't always blame the country for lack of capacity. I think, for Sierra Leone, after six years we have done so much, we have put in so much resources, for us to sit back now and say, oh, we have moved this country from this step to that step, but every now and then we are so scared to entrust responsibilities to nationals because we don't think they have the capacity. And the reason why they don't have the capacity, they still have not been able to get the right capacity, is something I think we need to examine and that is very important and that can only happen through a review of our programs, approaches. That is not only limited to UNDP, but all the agencies across the board.

MCCANTS: Ok, and final question. If you had the chance to write a handbook for people who have to manage public sector reform in challenging environments, can you name the top four topics that you would consider the most important?

KAMARA: *Unfortunately I'm not an expert in public sector reform. As head of governance, I'm more under - if you had to ask me to talk about justice sector reform, to talk about parliamentary service reform, to talk about election support, I would have given you a broader view because I'm not a technocrat specialized in any specific area. However, if I am to, based on my little knowledge, advise in terms of the broader topic that my handbook will entail, I think the first one would be the issue of assessment of capacity. That is the bottom; that is the very first one. That capacity assessment must be related to the needs of the country because one of the mistakes we have often made as development practitioners is we tend to rate development of one country to development in another country. For goodness sake, what is perceived as development for America or England cannot be development for Sierra Leone. It is like comparing oranges and apples. So let us look at that on our agenda. That is number one. So assessment should focus on that.*

Then there is also need during that assessment to look at existing capacity that will respond to the needs that we have identified. Again, the reason why I emphasize existing capacity is based on the fact that we don't want to bring a lot of foreign ideas that we hijack, the tradition and culture that exist in that society. One of the examples I will give you here that I have always argued against is the issue of the local government, the decentralization that we have introduced which we perceive as a way of democratizing. Yes it is good, but have we stopped to reason that we have created a barrier structure to traditional structures that have been in existence before, and have we stopped to question the implications? Look at this recent election. Look at the May election. We mobilized 24 million dollars and of the 24 million dollars I'm sure we spent up to 15 million dollars just to conduct local council elections whereas if we had built on the existing structure, the traditional structure and built their capacity instead of creating another layer that we call local council, we would have utilized—instead of using that 15 million, which is big money for a small country like Sierra Leone, would have made a huge difference in improving service delivery at the local level which is what this whole idea of promoting local government is about. So therefore the local capacity is very important to lead the process in the reform. Yes you will need a mission, external technical assistance so as to compare notes because it is always important to think outside the box, not to always think inside the box. There is always need; I mean, we are in a global village, you need to get the experience of other people, but that doesn't mean that you should let it take precedence over the existing structure, so that is another area. I don't know whether I answered your question.

MCCANTS: That was fantastic, thank you so much.

KAMARA: You're very welcome.