



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

GRADUATES TO GOVERNMENT: THE PRESIDENT'S YOUNG PROFESSIONALS PROGRAM IN LIBERIA, 2009 – 2016

SYNOPSIS

In 2005, when Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became Liberia's first democratically elected post-conflict president, she found her country's government in shambles. Years of cronyism under military rule and a 14-year civil war had left behind a bloated civil service corps riddled with unqualified employees, most of whom did not have a university education and some of whom could not read or write. The president needed more-capable employees at every level of government. Externally supported capacity-building programs helped fill top and middle management roles with Liberians who had fled abroad during the war, but Sirleaf also wanted to attract the most-talented and most-ambitious young graduates from Liberian universities to work in the public service. With assistance from international donors, Saah N'Tow, a Liberian working at an international consulting firm, set up a fair and transparent recruitment process and coupled it with strong training and mentorship to create the President's Young Professionals Program. Beginning in 2009 and annually thereafter, the program placed 10 to 20 Liberian youth into government ministries for two-year fellowships. By 2016, 72 young professionals had completed their fellowships and about 75% were still working for the government. Many stood out as some of the top performers in the civil service and several had been promoted to positions as divisional directors and assistant ministers.

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INTRODUCTION

“When I walked into the Civil Service Agency in March of 2006, they had two manual typewriters. That was all the equipment they had,” recalled C. William Allen, describing his first day in charge of managing Liberia's civil service. “There were few qualified staff to work with, and there

had been no electricity in the building for two years.”

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who appointed Allen to the post, had taken office two months earlier, committed to transforming the war-ravaged West African country. But she lacked one critical component for reform: a capable public service corps.

The capacity of Liberia’s government had declined over nearly three decades, since a military coup in 1980 had set up a patronage system that brought thousands of drastically underqualified Liberians into the civil service. A guerrilla group led by Charles Taylor sparked a civil war in 1989, and a separate faction toppled the military government a year later. More than 270,000 Liberians lost their lives, about a million fled the country, and over 350,000 were internally displaced before a peace agreement in 2003.¹ A transitional government ruled until Sirleaf took office in 2006 as the first democratically elected woman to lead an African country.

Because many of the most-qualified Liberians had fled during the civil war, Sirleaf turned to the Liberian diaspora and foreign technical assistants to fill capacity gaps in the civil service. The United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, foreign governments, and philanthropic organizations provided financial support for fixed-term projects that procured the personnel the government required. By 2009, Liberia had recruited more than 100 government workers—mostly Liberians—from overseas.²

At that time, Sirleaf turned her attention to attracting young graduates of Liberian universities—many of whom had not fled during the war—to work for the government. With the help of the president’s advisers and international philanthropies, a new program to boost the capacity of Liberia’s civil service took shape. In 2009, the Hess Foundation, a small US-based philanthropy, gave US\$250,000 to launch the President’s Young Professionals Program (PYPP), a two-year fellowship to bring young and talented Liberians into key ministries and agencies and groom them to become future leaders.

THE CHALLENGE

During the country’s brutal civil war, which lasted from 1989 to 2003, almost all Liberians who could fled to the United States, Europe, or other parts of West Africa. Both the factions that gained power during the war and the transitional

government that led the country from 2003 to 2005 appointed friends and allies to civil service positions, regardless of whether they had the right qualifications, or they simply added them to the government payroll without assigning corresponding duties. From 1980 to 2006, the civil service grew from 20,000 to 44,000 workers.³ Most civil servants did not have university degrees, and many were illiterate. Physical resources such as computers and vehicles were nearly nonexistent.

From 2006 to 2009, programs to attract qualified Liberians from abroad helped fill cabinet positions and provided qualified staff to run key government offices. The Liberia Fellows (initially known as the Scott Family Fellows) program, for example, brought in Liberian expatriates and foreign nationals as special assistants to government ministers. JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc., the nonprofit arm of Boston-based public health consulting firm John Snow, Inc., managed the program. Liberia Fellows were paid by JSI and usually served for one or two years to help the ministries implement the president’s reform agenda. But there were still very few capable people below the top levels in ministries and agencies.

With weak staff capacity to implement decisions, ministers and agency directors often found they had to do everything themselves. The President’s Young Professionals Program (PYPP) was supposed to fill that void. “We had done the first intervention, which was at the top, at the ministerial level,” said Natty B. Davis, minister of state without portfolio, who helped the president manage her biggest priorities. “We then designed the next intervention, which was at the middle level; and then we wanted to develop an intervention that would support the junior level.”

Betsy Williams, JSI’s Liberia country representative, was the strongest early supporter of the new, junior-level program. Granddaughter of Leon Hess—who built the multinational oil and gas company Hess Oil and Chemical, now known as Hess Corporation—Williams persuaded her family’s foundation to grant JSI US\$250,000 to launch the program.

In early 2009, Williams wrote the first concept document for the program with support from Davis; Dan Hymowitz, a Liberia Fellow working in Davis's office; Steve Radelet, an economic adviser to President Sirleaf; and staff in JSI's Washington, D.C., office. "The idea was to identify the top undergraduate students, create a cohort wherein they would learn from one another, acquire some basic training, and place them in government ministries with a mentor," Radelet said. "The PYPP was meant to create incentives for the best and brightest Liberian-trained students to want to join the public service and to give them opportunities where they could really use their skills and excel."

JSI hired Saah N'Tow, a former student leader who had recently returned to Liberia after working and studying in Europe and the United States since the outset of the civil war, as the Liberia-based program director of both the Liberia Fellows program and the PYPP. While Williams and other JSI staff began searching for additional funding to ensure the sustainability of the program, N'Tow focused on implementation.

N'Tow had to confront several challenges to get the PYPP up and running. First, he had to identify the talented university graduates that Sirleaf was looking for and attract them to the program. Then he had to ensure that those individuals, who were called the President's Young Professionals (PYPs), received the training and mentorship necessary to shape them into high-performing civil servants.

An unanswered question in designing the program was whether an untapped pool of capable young graduates existed in Liberia. Allen, head of the Civil Service Agency, said most people on his roster did not have basic numeracy and literacy skills and that he feared that Liberian youth would also lack critical capabilities. N'Tow, too, was worried that "the quality of learning had eroded" after years of school and university closures. In such an environment, he said, he was not sure it was possible to find Liberians with the strong academic backgrounds he sought. Nevertheless, Liberia's two public and four private universities

were graduating more students than they had for many years, and N'Tow said he wanted to attract "the best and the brightest" of those students to apply to be PYPs.

Persuading talented young Liberians to apply to work in the government was potentially even more difficult than finding them. Years of nepotism and patronage-dominated hiring practices had left a legacy, and most Liberians felt they had little chance of getting jobs in the public sector unless they knew someone in a powerful position or provided favors for whoever was hiring. "No matter how hard you try to avoid it, in Liberia you're always getting a phone call from some politician or a family member of a friend who will tell you about their nephew or niece," said Allen, underscoring how common it was for outsiders to undermine attempts at a meritocratic hiring process. N'Tow had to design merit-based selection criteria, fend off political interference, and convince potential applicants that the program really did give everyone a fair chance of getting a fellowship.

The PYPs' stipends had to be high enough to attract the best-qualified candidates but also comparable to existing civil service salaries, so as not to create conflict or tension between the program participants and existing staff. From the outset of the Sirleaf administration, Allen had begun reforming civil service pay grades, which had been stagnant for decades. Entry-level positions on the lowest grade paid just US\$15 per month in 2006.⁴ Clearly, the PYPs had to be paid enough to afford the cost of living in Monrovia, the capital city, but the underperforming economy and the dearth of jobs meant the program could attract candidates while offering significantly less than the approximately US\$3,500 monthly salaries paid to the Liberia Fellows, who were placed in senior-level positions. Fellows were paid far more than the average Liberian income of around US\$35 per month, but much less than what most of them had been earning previously in countries like the United States.

Because the PYPs had little or no work experience, it was essential to place them in offices

where they could receive mentorship, supervision, and on-the-job training. At the time, however, most government agencies were filled with underqualified employees who lacked the knowledge, skills, and training to execute even the most basic tasks, let alone provide effective mentoring and supervision.

The post-conflict situation complicated efforts to staff ministries with more-competent people because “there were just too many variables,” according to Allen. “What, for example, do you do with a 40-year-old man who has been a director for 10 years during the conflict because his uncle was a warlord?” he said. “Do you tell him that as of tomorrow, he is not a director? You could not dismiss him . . . because the sociopolitical consequences of such an action would not have been expedient for the government.”

Without effective training and support, the PYPs could exacerbate the government’s problem. In the wrong situations, bright young employees could be as unproductive as others. There was also a risk that the civil servants might see the incoming young professionals as threats and create obstacles to their integration into government offices. N’Tow had to create a solid support network for the PYPs and work with existing staff in ministries and agencies to ensure that staff would counsel and assist the new workers rather than sideline them.

Last, the program had to be sustainable. Sirleaf, Williams, and N’Tow wanted the PYPP to have a long-term impact, not just give ministries a short-term boost the way the Liberia Fellows program had done. The program design called for PYPs to continue working for the government after completing their two years in the program. “From the get-go, that was part of the vision,” said Allen. “We were not recruiting people for a two-year program; we were offering them permanent career opportunities in the civil service. . . . The president was very clear on that, because we were trying to build capacity in the public service.”

But setting the program up as permanent employment for those accepted had the potential to create problems down the road. The PYPs

“were supposed to be absorbed into the civil service, but I was always concerned—when the time came for the government to put up its share of the program—whether this would happen,” said Allen. The government had made no formal commitment to put the PYPs on the government payroll at the end of their fellowships. However, Sirleaf indicated to the Civil Service Agency that the government would allocate funding to transition the PYPs into the civil service after their two years in the program.

Finally, the leadership team had to find a way to sustain financial support for the program itself. Although the initial Hess Foundation grant paid start-up costs and salaries for the first PYPs, the financial plan for the future was uncertain. Liberia was one of the world’s poorest countries, with per-capita gross domestic product of about US\$300, and other priorities made it unlikely that the government would have the money to support the program once the grant money ran out. To continue the PYPP beyond its first year, as Sirleaf and other supporters wanted, Williams had to either convince her family to increase its support or attract new program donors.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

As he began working out the details of program implementation, N’Tow reached out to his networks for the skills, knowledge, and manpower he needed to get the program off the ground. He drew on the Liberia Fellows, who worked in government ministries but were employees of JSI, and many fellows volunteered to help recruit and train the PYPs. N’Tow also envisaged that the PYPs would be placed in the same ministries and agencies the fellows were working in and that the fellows would mentor them.

As well as having Liberia Fellows as mentors, N’Tow wanted to ensure the PYPs were placed in offices where supportive supervisors would provide significant workplace training. With both helpful supervisors and mentors to whom they could reach out for informal advice, the PYPs

would find it easier to navigate the new and challenging office environments they were placed in.

To ensure that the PYPs brought real skills to their jobs, N’Tow also began to design a pre-placement training program and a strategy for continuing training. N’Tow planned to hold monthly meetings, called “responsive trainings,” to create an atmosphere that encouraged program participants to reach out to one another for help and advice and to share experiences and lessons learned in the workplace. “In those shared experiences are perhaps the lessons and skills we could not teach,” N’Tow said. “They could learn from one another and draw strength from one another.”

JSI staff in Washington took on the financial management of the program, as they had done for the Liberia Fellows.

The program designers—Williams, Radelet, and others—settled on a salary of US\$350 per month for PYPs—slightly higher than the standard salary for a university graduate entering the civil service. “We didn’t want to pay them too much because that would create a real problem two years later when they transferred from the PYPP to a government salary,” Radelet said. JSI budgeted to accept an initial class of ten participants in 2009.

Individual ministries and agencies would decide participants’ salaries and positions after the two-year fellowship ended. Although Allen expected many to move up the pay scale quickly because of the training program N’Tow was planning to implement, he said PYPs would face “a sink-or-swim situation” after their fellowships.

After playing a lead role in designing the program, Williams returned to the United States and began looking to attract new donors to the program so that it did not rely solely on her family’s foundation. Getting the program running fell on N’Tow’s shoulders. “My focus was to make sure the program worked on the ground,” he said. “Betsy and others supported us and made sure we didn’t want for anything.”

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

In the space of a few months, from August to November 2009, N’Tow had to publicize the program and recruit for it, select 10 PYPs for initial placement in ministries and agencies, and train the new fellows while they transitioned into their new roles. He hired a driver, an accountant, a security guard, a volunteer intern, and a program assistant to help run the program from JSI’s Liberia office in downtown Monrovia. He maintained daily contact with JSI staff in Washington who managed the program’s finances and assisted him with other tasks such as drafting press releases.

Recruiting young professionals

To publicize the new program, N’Tow placed advertisements in the country’s major newspapers and spoke on radio stations in Monrovia and other cities. As in many developing countries where Internet access was relatively scarce, word of mouth was the most effective means of communication. Liberians aged 18 to 35 years who held bachelor’s degrees were eligible for consideration. They could apply in person at the program office in Monrovia by submitting résumés, university transcripts, and application letters describing why they wanted to be part of the program, along with separate letters of recommendation from their universities, from professionals, and from members of their local communities. N’Tow wanted to attract candidates from around the country, but he found that most of the qualified candidates lived in Monrovia, the country’s economic hub, where around one-third of the total population lived.

The program was open to applicants from a wide age range—partly because 18 to 35 was the government’s definition of youth and partly because many young Liberians had been unable to attend school consistently during the civil war and were therefore older when they received their degrees. “Coming out of 30 years of civil unrest, people were 28 or 30 years old when they graduated college simply because there hadn’t been peace for long enough to get their four years of

education,” said Gyude Moore, a Liberia Fellow in the Ministry of State for Presidential Affairs at the time.

To attract applicants, N’Tow had to persuade college graduates that the selection process was meritocratic and that applicants did not need support in high places in order to be successful. “We had this mentality that if you don’t know someone, it is difficult to enter government,” said Rebecca Kwabo, a sociology and public administration graduate of Cuttington University, a private university about 170 kilometers northeast of Monrovia. “Most people did not bother applying [for government jobs]. For me, that is how I felt at the time, and I think many others felt the same way,” said Kwabo, who was accepted into the program. “But the PYPP offered that chance, and you did not have to know anyone. Based on your own merits, you could enter the government.”

Because Liberian universities were still recovering from years of closure during the war, N’Tow organized support sessions to provide potential applicants with guidance on how to write their applications. “We did not assume everyone knew how to write a résumé or an essay or how to conduct themselves in an interview,” he said. Support sessions on résumé writing, essay writing, and interviewing were announced on radio and in local newspapers.

The workshops also helped spread the word about the PYPP. N’Tow opened each workshop by introducing the program and encouraging attendees to apply. He reached out to his contacts in the Liberian government and to Liberia Fellows to run the workshops. Because most university graduates were already located in Monrovia, N’Tow decided it was not necessary to hold sessions in less-populated areas of the country.

Selecting PYPs

N’Tow invited Liberia Fellows and other contacts from government, civil society, and the private sector to assess applications. He organized the graders into two groups, both of which assessed each application. N’Tow averaged the two

grades received, ranked the applicants accordingly, and then called applicants to let them know whether they had advanced to the next stage of the process.

At that point, N’Tow removed the names of applicants from their submissions. “We did not want anyone to see the application of someone they knew,” N’Tow said. “So, that is when the applicants became numbers, and we used a legend to trace them back.” N’Tow said he took great care in ensuring that candidates remained anonymous during the selection process because he worried that Liberians with political or economic connections would try to sway selection decisions.

Other program supporters shared N’Tow’s desire to protect the process from outside influence. “I was very much aware—and almost frightened—that this sort of influence would be attempted, which it was,” said Allen. “I was approached by people. I just referred them to N’Tow, knowing that he would take care of the problem. But I warned them that there was a transparent recruitment process and that there was nothing I could do. If their niece or nephew applied and didn’t make the cut, then so be it.”

N’Tow said he also received calls from people who tried to pressure him to select certain candidates. He told them that candidates would be chosen only on the basis of qualifications, and he tried to publicize the meritocratic recruitment process in order to minimize the number of people trying to influence decision making. “So many people would come and try to twist my arm,” he said. “All I could do was go on the radio and talk and explain the program to people.”

Attempted interference in the selection process was particularly difficult to deal with when it involved candidates who were clearly qualified. N’Tow said he received a phone call from a powerful Liberian who tried to pressure him into selecting “one of the very best applicants” who had already “pierced through the recruitment process like a hot knife through butter.” N’Tow wanted the PYPP to garner a reputation for fairness, and he pleaded with the caller “to not lead

this young man into believing that the call was the reason he got in.”

The next stage in the application process involved a computer test, a writing exercise, and the Civil Service Agency entrance examination, which had fallen into disuse during the civil war and the post-war transitional government. Two university professors separately graded the first two tests, and N’Tow averaged the grades to rank the candidates. The Civil Service Agency graded the entrance examination and reported the results to N’Tow at a later stage.

After averaging scores on the application materials and the tests, N’Tow called in approximately 50 applicants for interviews. Again, he set up two separate groups to conduct the interviews and grade each interviewee. The three-person interview panels, made up mostly of Liberia Fellows, also observed a group activity, wherein N’Tow gave groups of 10 to 20 applicants a list of policy priorities for the Liberian government and told the groups to rank the priorities from the most important to the least important.

Because most of the interviewers were from the Liberian diaspora and had spent much of their lives in countries with far stronger education systems than Liberia’s, the interviewers had to adjust their expectations accordingly. “We were not looking for superstars,” said N’Tow. “But we were looking for young people willing to become superstars.”

Moore recalled the broad spread of applicants he interviewed, ranging from those “who just jumped off the page” to some “who you knew would make it with time,” to “many who just applied because they wanted a job.” He said he looked for applicants with strong backgrounds in community service and leadership, and he tried to gauge each applicant’s potential to excel.

The applicants themselves said the selection process was demanding. Herdain Jallah, who was later accepted into the program, already had four years’ work experience when he applied, and he said the process was “rigorous” and far more difficult than the hiring process for his previous job at an international nongovernmental

organization. N’Tow said he purposely made the process tough because it would “break down any egos” and ensure that all applicants who made it through were focused and committed to the program.

Placing PYPs in government agencies

N’Tow and JSI staffers worked together to prepare a dossier for the president with the profiles and résumés of the top candidates, ranked according to their interview scores. The document named 15 candidates in case any of the 10 highest-ranked candidates did not fit what the president was looking for. Initially, Sirleaf decided where to place the PYPs, generally choosing the top candidates from the dossier. The names of applicants not placed by the president remained on a waiting list in case any of those selected did not accept their postings.

The program design called for PYPs to be placed in various ministries and agencies across the government so that their impact could be felt as widely as possible. Sirleaf placed particular importance on allocating PYPs to the ministries where the most-challenging reforms were taking place. “Depending on the roles that particular agencies or ministries played in driving the overall reforms, certain special considerations were given to them,” said Allen. “But the idea was to spread the PYPs across the public service.”

Another key factor the president took into consideration when deciding where to place PYPs was whether she thought that existing staff in a ministry would support the PYP and help the PYP improve their knowledge and skills. Radelet said the idea was to place PYPs in ministries “where their skills would be put to the best use” and that a key question in deciding placements was whether there were both strong leadership and strong opportunities for mentorship. As a result of that consideration, many PYPs were placed in ministries with Liberia Fellows who could provide mentorship and guidance.

Training PYPs

Before the PYPs began work, N’Tow brought them together for a mandatory two-week orientation program. In the first week, information technology instructors taught basic computer skills and the use of common office software. In the second week, N’Tow invited Liberia Fellows to provide training in other skills he thought the PYPs would find useful in their placements. Although the orientation training never developed into a specific curriculum, workshops typically involved office communication, note taking, public speaking, and stress management.

The two-week orientation included team-building exercises that encouraged camaraderie among the 10 PYPs, and N’Tow also invited government ministers and high-performing public servants to give motivational speeches. “We tried to drill into them that they were the nation’s hope,” said N’Tow. “We wanted them to know that after they went through the process, they were going to go into places where they would learn more about the country and would use everything they knew to help move this country to another level.”

A few days after the orientation, the PYPs began work at their assigned ministries and agencies. N’Tow informed ministers, agency directors, and director supervisors of the PYPs’ arrivals. He provided PYPs with their supervisors’ phone numbers and encouraged them to call their supervisors the weekend before they arrived.

On the last Saturday of every month, PYPs attended a responsive-training meeting, which N’Tow said was “a space for shared and peer learning.” At the meetings, the participants would “share their experiences, the challenges, and the successes they were having,” he said, and he would organize professionals working in government—often Liberia Fellows—to run workshops that addressed particular challenges the PYPs had informed him they were having in the workplace. When some participants said they found report writing challenging, N’Tow organized a training session that further developed the skills covered during the orientation period. “We did the basics during the orientation workshops, but we had to

request further training for report writing, including how to read and summarize reports,” said Hh Zaizay, a PYP placed in the Ministry of Gender & Development (later, the Ministry of Gender, Children & Social Protection).

In some cases, N’Tow asked JSI staff in Washington for help with training sessions. “I would figure out whom I could connect Mr. N’Tow with to obtain the information he needed in support of the trainings,” said Frank DeSarbo, deputy director of JSI’s Washington office. “If a PYP was working in the Ministry of Agriculture and wanted to talk to a nutrition specialist, I would go to our nutrition project and say, ‘Hey, could you spend an hour or two to speak with this PYP in Liberia?’”

The monthly training meetings helped build PYPs’ skills, which some supervisors initially complained were insufficient. “Some of the kids weren’t good at [Microsoft spreadsheet program] Excel, and some couldn’t draft a memo,” said Moore, who supervised four PYPs at the President’s Delivery Unit, a small office charged with following up on and ensuring execution of the president’s biggest priorities. “The PYPs definitely did not have concise communication skills. There was nothing wrong with them; they had simply come through a system that had not required that of them. But they did get better with training.”

A few months into the program, N’Tow organized a half-day retreat for PYPs, their supervisors, and the ministers and agency directors who had PYPs working for them. The main goal was to encourage interaction outside the work environment for those involved in the program, but the retreat fulfilled another need. Davis, the minister of state without portfolio, said the retreat provided an opportunity for ministers to learn more about the program and hopefully commit more resources to training and mentoring their PYPs. Because ministers usually had to focus on immediate requirements, they sometimes neglected to think about the long-term advantages of nurturing young talent within their ministries. “You come in as a minister, and you are seized

with having to deal with the day-to-day issues,” said Davis. “There is the significant challenge of an overabundance of staff and personnel, many of whom are not the right people for the positions they are holding. You have all of that you are dealing with as a minister, and at the same time whatever interactions that occur with the [PYPs].” Davis said the retreat “allowed the leadership of the agencies to be able to put in perspective what this program was trying to achieve.”

N’Tow also organized a retreat for PYPs only. The “immersion excursion” aimed to get PYPs out of the capital city and introduce them to the workings of local government. Many PYPs had roots in other parts of Liberia, but most had spent much of their lives working and studying in Monrovia. PYP Zaizay said the first immersion excursion was a five-day trip to Nimba County, a region in the north of Liberia that bordered both Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire. The visit “was the first time I got to understand what local government is,” he recalled.

In Nimba County, N’Tow split the PYPs into smaller groups and organized meetings between them and local government officials, traditional chiefs, religious and youth groups, the business community, and civil society organizations. He assigned all of them to write reports on what they learned in the meetings. Zaizay recalled learning about how customs duties were paid at border posts and about the challenges that women who engaged in cross-border trade faced when dealing with border authorities. He said one group of PYPs wrote a report with recommendations to improve the situation, such as providing receipts for customs duties paid, and N’Tow presented the report to the Ministry of Finance.

Moore said the PYPs in his office came back more motivated than ever after the immersion excursion. “Some of them had been born in Monrovia and had always lived here,” he said. “When they came back, they seemed changed—and way more committed. That trip enabled them to see their place in the government and the government’s responsibility for improving the lives of the people.”

Integrating into the ministries

In some cases, PYPs quickly adjusted to their new jobs. Zaizay said his mentor, a member of the Liberia Fellows program, was awaiting his arrival on his first day at the office and took him immediately to meet the minister. There the minister assigned him his first task: to develop a strategy for mainstreaming gender and HIV programming throughout the ministry’s operations. Zaizay said he felt overwhelmed and had little idea where to begin but was guided by his mentor to conduct research on mainstreaming strategies and to devise a plan to present to the minister. He said that receiving a daunting task at the outset was intimidating but that the task set the tone for the rest of his time at the ministry and “made all the following days easier.”

Not all PYPs received such a welcome to their new positions despite the added value they offered. Difficulties arose mainly because of poor preparation by staff and supervisors at their assigned workplaces—especially if the staff knew little about the program, its intent, and its importance. Sometimes N’Tow or Allen stepped in to persuade unreceptive managers to accept and foster their assigned PYPs. In other cases, PYPs had to build relationships and find their own niches in the work flow, and some just kept showing up at the office until they were assigned something to do.

Abdoul Derrick Duanna, a PYP who had studied biology and chemistry and was placed as an assistant to the chief medical officer at John F. Kennedy Medical Center, a public hospital in Monrovia, said he showed up the first day “with a high zeal to work,” but his supervisor said he did not need assistance and sent Duanna home. N’Tow had to persuade the chief medical officer to work with Duanna and also had to work with Duanna to boost his confidence. Duanna said it took many meetings between N’Tow and his supervisor over the course of several weeks before the situation improved. After that, his supervisor assigned him to conduct research on a medical project, had him assist on the supervisor’s daily

rounds, and taught him about the medical profession and the hospital's operations.

Some PYPs said they had to find support and mentorship outside of the offices they were placed in. Tendra Tenwah, who was placed at the Ministry of Health & Social Welfare, said she encountered friction when she first arrived and found herself sidelined by her assigned supervisor and mentor. In response, she worked on building relationships elsewhere in the ministry. "Mr. N"tow always told us that obstacles were something you saw when you took your eyes off the goal," Tenwah said. "So I did not see it [the difficult office environment] as an obstacle, it was only something there to make me stronger." Eventually, she found the mentorship she sought from Bernice Dahn, the ministry's chief medical officer at the time (Dahn was later appointed as minister). Dahn became Tenwah's supervisor and mentor and gave her a promotion. "From then on, it was wonderful," said Tenwah. "I was never told that Dr. Dahn was my mentor, it just sort of happened."

PYPs assigned to work with Liberia Fellows generally had an easier time settling in. "Some government people, when they don't understand the program, they see it as a threat," said Kwabo. "They don't want to help you, and you don't learn things the way you are supposed to. For me it was different, but only because of Robtel." Robtel Pailey, a Liberia Fellow in the president's office, was Kwabo's mentor. She said Pailey "gradually eased" her into her job, and Pailey "would help and explain how to move forward" whenever she made mistakes.

Transitioning from PYPs to civil servants

The original plan for the PYPP, as indicated by the president when the program was designed, was that after two years of receiving their US\$350 monthly stipends, the young professionals would be absorbed by their respective ministries or agencies either by being promoted or by continuing to serve in the roles they occupied during their fellowships. The ministries or agencies where PYPs were placed would become responsible for paying their salaries.

Zaizay was the first to receive a ministry salary when he transitioned to a new role in the Ministry of Gender & Development just six months after he started. After helping design a project in collaboration with the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), Zaizay became national coordinator for gender and HIV. In his new role, a position funded by UNAIDS, Zaizay was paid US\$1,200 per month. Although he continued participating in PYPP activities, he no longer received a stipend from the program.

In other cases, ministries or agencies were reluctant to take on the added costs of adding PYPs to their payroll. If the ministry or agency where a PYP worked did not pay them a salary after the fellowship ended, the Civil Service Agency paid the PYP US\$600 a month to continue in the same position, using a special funding allocation from the government to help transition PYPs into the civil service. Wanneh Clarke-Reeves, Civil Service Agency director of career management and training at the time, said the agency informed ministries they could lose their PYPs if they did not take over payment of their salaries, but was "not that forceful" in demanding that ministries pay PYPs. As a result, Clarke-Reeves said, some ministries and agencies claimed they had no budget to pay extra salaries, and the Civil Service Agency ended up paying salaries for many of the program participants after their two-year fellowships.

Expanding the program

In 2010, the Hess Foundation contributed a further US\$250,000 to JSI for the program. Williams left the firm in 2010, but continued to raise funds for the PYPP by networking with program supporters and international donors. Initially, Williams and JSI focused on foundations and individuals who were contributing funds to the Liberia Fellows program. Williams said that on Sirleaf's recommendation, they marketed the program as a package deal. DeSarbo of JSI said the package was "a three-for-one deal . . . a one-year fellow and two PYPs for two years." The proposal was attractive for donors, he said, because the

salaries paid to the PYPs were one-tenth of those paid to fellows—meaning, only a slightly higher donation was required to fund the extra two people. Williams said that coupling the two programs increased the return on a donor’s investment “by leveraging the experience and education of the Liberia Fellow to build the capacity of a PYP who could ultimately continue the work the fellow started.”

Several other United States–based foundations committed to funding two or more PYPs. N’Tow put out a call for applications for the second class of PYPs, and because of the extra funding, the program was able to recruit 20 participants—double the number recruited in the first year.

In subsequent years, the program also recruited several PYPs whom ministries agreed to support directly. In 2012, after President Sirleaf was reelected to a second term, Moore, a former Liberia Fellow working in the president’s office, was promoted to be the president’s deputy chief of staff and head of the President’s Delivery Unit. “I was trying to expand the President’s Delivery Unit,” said Moore. “But the PYPs had already been recruited for that year, so we put up money and asked the PYP program to recruit for us.”

N’Tow organized a special midyear recruitment drive for the four PYPs Moore requested. “We got six kids who definitely fit, but we could take only four,” said Moore. Instead of letting two go, Moore talked to the executive director of the Public Procurement and Concessions Commission (PPCC). “I was very close to the executive director of the PPCC, so I told her we have these two extra kids that I would take if we had the money.” The director of the PPCC paid for the extra two PYPs to join her office. Because the recruitment had taken place midyear, the new PYPs missed orientation. N’Tow organized extra training sessions so they could catch up, and the new PYPs joined that year’s class in the monthly training sessions.

As time passed, international donors began to pull out of Liberia, and the PYPP lost some of its early funders. “Donor interest was drying up for

Liberia,” Moore recalled. “The more stable the country became and the further away from the war years the country got, the more donors seemed to focus on other countries that were in the same state we had been years back.”

The program’s reputation was growing, however, and word about the extra capacity that PYPs were bringing to their ministries and agencies began to spread around government and the international development community in Liberia. In 2012, the United States Agency for International Development Liberia Governance and Economic Management Support Program (USAID-GEMS)—implemented by development consultancy IBI International—was looking to help the government improve medium-term budgeting in 15 government ministries. Project staff wanted to promote youth development by recruiting interns to help the Ministry of Finance implement the new budgeting framework. Victoria Cooper-Enchia, the program’s deputy chief of party at the time, said that when she and her colleagues began asking partner organizations in Liberia for advice on how to find skilled young people in Liberia, everyone told them to look at the PYPP. Cooper-Enchia said the program’s approach was “a perfect match” for what they were looking to achieve.

After observing the PYP recruitment and selection process, which Cooper-Enchia said “could rival any highly competitive internship program anywhere in the world,” USAID-GEMS agreed to fund places for 20 PYPs. All were to be placed in the Ministry of Finance for the first year of the program. “The idea was that they would be trained to use the framework to learn about a specific ministry in year one and then go and implement it in that ministry in year two,” she said. One USAID-GEMS staff member was on the interview panel during the selection process, and the PYPs also were assigned USAID-GEMS staff members as mentors.

USAID-GEMS was the only outside funder of PYP fellowships in 2012. As a result, most of the PYPs recruited that year had finance or accounting degrees and were placed in the Ministry

of Finance. Four other government organizations—the national housing authority, the maritime authority, the investment commission, and the Ministry of Gender, Children & Social Protection—requested PYPs and offered to pay their stipends.

The contract with USAID made the program’s Liberia office more reliant on JSI because staff in Liberia did not have the capacity to manage the especially complex reporting obligations required under US government regulations. JSI had to devote more time to donor management, and the program’s operating costs increased.

The 2012 PYPs also faced some new challenges. “The rumor went around that the PYPs were going in to replace the existing staff,” N’Tow said. Some PYPs were sidelined because staff members worried that they would lose their jobs if they taught the PYPs the office’s inner workings. USAID-GEMS planned to rotate the PYPs through different offices at the Ministry of Finance, so the problems generally lasted only a month or two before PYPs were transferred to new offices.

Even though Cooper-Enchia described PYPs as “outstanding” and said that USAID-GEMS would not have been successful without their input, other foundations that had previously contributed to the program and certain program supporters within the government expressed concerns that the new partnership resulted in the program deviating from its original goal of creating a cadre of future leaders across government ministries. All USAID-GEMS-funded PYPs were initially placed in the Ministry of Finance, and for two years, the program had no other funding for recruitment of PYPs to be placed in different ministries and agencies.

Transitioning to a new program director

As the number of PYPs increased, N’Tow’s workload grew. He turned to the first class of PYP graduates for help. “He asked us to help out with immersion excursions, responsive trainings, and recruitment,” recalled Zaizay. In September 2013, JSI hired Zaizay—who had recently returned to

Liberia after completing a master’s degree in Ghana—as the program’s deputy director. “I was to support Saah with day-to-day activities and oversee the program assistant and other staff,” Zaizay recalled.

Just two months after Zaizay started work, his role grew dramatically. In November, Sirleaf appointed N’Tow as deputy minister for youth and sports, and Zaizay had to assume the director’s duties. “I struggled for the first four to six months,” said Zaizay, noting the challenge of communicating with the president and building rapport with government ministers. Zaizay said he relied heavily on staff at JSI for support.

JSI officially hired Zaizay as the program’s Executive Director in April 2014. Zaizay had to address many challenges in his new role and said that every week he got more than 10 calls from PYPs. “There were different issues: employment, their advisers, their computers, their tax responsibilities, and feelings that they were underused,” he said. He also assisted PYPs transition back into the civil service after studying abroad, and he helped PYPs who wanted to study abroad find scholarships.

One major issue Zaizay wanted to resolve was the inconsistency in how much a PYP earned after completing the fellowship. In some cases, PYPs who were on a ministry’s payroll were paid less than the US\$600 the Civil Service Agency paid to those who were not, which created an incentive for PYPs to avoid being absorbed by the ministries or agencies they worked in. Others were earning more than US\$1,000 per month.

Zaizay collated information on what all former PYPs were earning and presented it to the Civil Service Agency. George Werner, who had taken over from Allen as agency director, reviewed the information and then instituted a new policy at the Civil Service Agency to top up the salaries of any PYPs who were paid less than US\$1,000 a month by the ministry or agency where they worked. “The government had already provided some money for the program under the Civil Service Agency, so money was available,” Zaizay said. “Werner had been passionate about the program,

and he could see that the low salaries some of the ministries were paying were beginning to push PYPs into considering the private sector.”

In 2015, when the program recruited its sixth class, Zaizay introduced a new policy that called for ministries and agencies to make written requests for PYPs, and he required ministries and agencies to identify supervisors and mentors for those PYPs. Zaizay said he thought the new policy would “give PYPs the opportunity to be absorbed more easily because the ministries and agencies requested them.” The new requirement that ministries identify PYP mentors arose partly because the Liberia Fellows program, whose participants had mentored the first PYPs, had come to an end.

Zaizay said the best supervisors took time to learn about the program and were interested in transferring their knowledge to PYPs. With others, Zaizay said, he “had to make a couple of visits to let them know exactly why the PYP was assigned to the ministry and what the expectations are.”

Without Liberia Fellows to call on, Zaizay relied on former PYPs and supportive government officials as well as people from civil society and the private sector to help out with the selection process, orientation, and responsive trainings. “The program has friends,” he said. “They are people who are highly interested in the program and willing to assist and support the program from time to time. They have skills and expertise in various areas, so I just call them to see who is available to conduct the trainings.” Zaizay said the training sessions became more and more thorough each year the program was in operation and that in 2016, he was working to create a formal curriculum.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

When the PYPP began, JSI managed the program in tandem with the Liberia Fellows. DeSarbo said the consultancy never intended to make a profit on the program but continued to manage it because he and others were passionate about the impact the program was having in

Liberia. JSI did not plan to manage the PYPP long-term, however, and by 2012, the firm and donor organizations wanted the program director to formulate a plan to manage the program locally.

To devise a plan for the future, N’Tow and Williams called together a group of about 20 people who had been involved in managing and advising the program during its first three years. The group, known as the Transition Advisory Committee, selected December 2015 as the transition month because USAID-GEMS wound down in September of that year, and the existing program staff were not ready to take on the reporting requirements USAID demanded.

After meeting several times in 2012 and 2013, the committee decided the Civil Service Agency should take over the program from JSI. However, in 2014, a public health crisis threw the transition off course. An outbreak of the Ebola virus spread rapidly through West Africa, killing almost 5,000 Liberians. Schools, hospitals, and many government agencies closed temporarily. “Ebola threw a wrench in the program,” DeSarbo said. “There were periods that no one was at work.” No PYPs were recruited during the Ebola epidemic, although some fellows played roles in the response.

After the economic impact of the epidemic became clear, the Transition Advisory Committee realized the government lacked the financial resources to take over the program. Reeves of the Civil Service Agency said that post-Ebola discussions about the transition yielded the idea of a “public-private partnership.” For the committee, the partnership meant incorporating the program as a nonprofit organization with a Liberian governing board and an international advisory board. The local board was chaired by the head of the Civil Service Agency and included several other members of the cabinet as well as a civil society representative and a representative from the business community. The international advisory board comprised program funders and supporters who would assist with fund-raising and advise the local board.

Committee members mostly agreed that the partnership was the best alternative. Reeves said the agreed-upon model would provide continuity during the uncertain presidential transition in 2017, when Sirleaf would step down after serving two terms. But she added that eventually, the Civil Service Agency should take over the program.

In 2015, JSI began closing bank accounts and providing final reports for donor organizations. The Hess Foundation hired Global Development Incubator (GDI), a United States–based nonprofit, to assist the local program office with the transition process to becoming a Liberian nonprofit organization. GDI staff took over financial management of the program from JSI, which allowed the program to continue receiving tax-deductible charitable donations from United States–based individuals and organizations, and provided training to Zaizay and other program staff to take a more hands-on role in budgeting and expense reporting.

ASSESSING RESULTS

In 2015, the fifth class of PYPs graduated from the program. As with previous classes, the graduation ceremony culminated with the head of the Civil Service Agency inducting PYPs into the civil service in the presence of President Sirleaf. A sixth class of PYPs was recruited in late 2015 and early 2016. The 20 PYPs selected for fellowships, funded mostly by the Open Society Foundations, were placed in 10 different government ministries and agencies.

Davis, the minister of state without portfolio when the program was launched, said he would have considered the PYPP a success if “by 2015, 2016, or 2017, we would have people with real experience within the ministries who had gone and gotten post-graduate degrees . . . and were returning as assistant directors and directors.”

As of April 2016, the program had exceeded Davis’s expectations. Eighty percent of PYPP alumni surveyed by ISS had completed or were completing post-graduate education, and several PYPs had been promoted to roles at the level of

director, the highest position within the civil service.⁵

In evaluating the program, other metrics also mattered—in particular, whether the PYPs made useful contributions to the offices where they worked, whether the PYPs remained in government, whether PYPs continued to develop their skills and networks, and whether the program was able to choose candidates on the basis of merit and select people who could succeed.

In interviews conducted with 25 PYP supervisors and mentors, all but one could point to notable contributions that PYPs had made to the ministry or agency where they worked. Specific examples were a PYP in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who had cut passport processing times from one month to three days and a group of PYPs in the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning that had created a web-based budget-reporting system.

Many supervisors and colleagues of PYPs commented that PYPs were known around their respective ministries for being among the first to arrive in the office and last to leave every day. Most civil servants “are always watching the clock, and at 4 or 5 o’clock, they go,” said Puchu Bernard, who was appointed head of the Civil Service Agency in 2015 when Werner became minister of education. “But the PYPs stay. As long as the boss is there, they stay . . . asking their bosses what they can do to help.”

Ministers and agency directors lauded the success of the program and the capacity boost the PYPs had delivered to their ministries. “The PYP program was a massive, massive success,” said Moore, former head of the President’s Delivery Unit who became minister of public works in 2014. “If the program can be scaled up so that you’d walk into the Ministry of Public Works or the Ministry of Finance and a good number of the people you would deal with are people who have come through the PYP program, that would improve the quality of government in terms of ethics, how people work, and how people see public service.”

Retention rates were high. Of the 72 PYPs who had completed their two-year fellowships in 2016, 55 were working in government—most for the same ministry or agency where they had been placed originally. Almost 80% had been promoted since first entering their ministries. Three former PYPs were working for nongovernmental organizations or the private sector, 13 were completing post-graduate education abroad on government scholarships, and one had immigrated to the United States.

Despite most PYPs continuing in public service, Zaizay said one of his major concerns was that PYPs might begin moving to jobs in the private sector. Zaizay said he worked to motivate PYPs to continue to serve in the government, but that the task became difficult when ministries and agencies were unwilling to put former PYPs on their payrolls and when salaries were delayed. “The institutions are happy to take on PYPs because they work hard,” said Bernard, but she acknowledged the funding uncertainties that afflicted ministries and agencies. “It’s not that they don’t want them; it’s just that they don’t want to pay them,” she said. Reeves said that in 2016, Bernard began taking a more forceful approach in demanding that ministries and agencies pay PYP salaries at the end of their fellowships.

The PYPP graduates founded an alumni association and began meeting monthly in late 2015. The alumni network provided a potential vehicle for problem solving and coordination across government ministries, and several PYPs noted they regularly reached out to fellow program alumni in other ministries or agencies to share information. Some alumni actively contributed to the program by assisting Zaizay with recruitment and selection and by providing training for the new classes of PYPs. The head of the alumni association, Julius Saye Keh-nel, said alumni planned to start contributing financially to the program through payment of annual dues.

In terms of internal operations, the program continued to stress merit and to resist outside influence in selecting participants. Allen, former head of the civil service agency who in 2014 was

appointed Liberia’s ambassador to France, said the recruitment of PYPs had been transparent and fair and provided a model that the Civil Service Agency could work toward. “Those who made it were the very best, which I guess should be the way the civil service operates,” he said. “But when you’re in a post-conflict situation, it’s not always that simple.”

N’Tow attributed the program’s success to the PYPs themselves. “They raised the profile of the program,” he said. “They rose to the challenge and sold themselves. . . . All we did was help the young people see what they had.” He added that as the early classes of PYPs continued to excel, incoming PYPs faced the burden of meeting raised expectations.

The big remaining problem was sustainability. In the aftermath of the Ebola crisis, as the country’s economy stagnated and government revenue shrank, the government instituted a hiring freeze across all ministries and agencies. Ministries were unable or reluctant to pay salaries to PYPs after their fellowships ended, and the Civil Service Agency was responsible for the shortfall; but the agency’s budget allocation did not increase enough to fund the salaries of the growing number of PYPs, and in 2016, paychecks became delayed regularly.

Radelet, an economist, said the country’s economic woes were due to a decline in private investment and business activity, which had been caused by the Ebola epidemic, coupled with a drop in commodity prices. “That has channeled through to a reduction in government revenues of 15 to 20%, which is huge, and just at a time when, because of Ebola, the needs are vast,” he said. Radelet added that, given the circumstances, the government’s decision to institute a hiring freeze in the civil service was “sensible,” even though it created difficulties for PYPs transitioning to the civil service.

As of June 2016, the program did not have sufficient funds to pay for a new class of PYPs, but Zaizay, the local board, and GDI were approaching foundations and private organizations for donations to recruit a seventh class that would

begin fellowships in 2017. “We don’t want the program to die, because it is so good,” said Bernard, chair of the local board. “It is worth keeping.”

Political sustainability was also an issue in the lead-up to the 2017 presidential election, when President Sirleaf would step down after serving the maximum two terms. Some program supporters worried that the PYPP was too strongly aligned with Sirleaf and therefore at risk of being shut down when a new president took over. But Gyude Moore, minister of public works, said the PYPP was at no greater risk of being discontinued than were any of Sirleaf’s other reforms. “You can always get a president who comes in and says all this is stupid, or there could be benign neglect,” he said. “Most of the gains of this administration, while impressive, are still reversible, and the PYP program is just one of those.”

REFLECTIONS

From 2009 to 2016, the President’s Young Professionals Program (PYPP) grew to become a highly respected initiative that provided much-needed young talent for Liberia’s ministries and agencies while the Civil Service Agency worked to reinstate a merit-based recruitment system after years of cronyism. But at the end of that period, the program’s future was uncertain.

Former Civil Service Agency director C. William Allen said the program likely would become obsolete after the agency implemented its hiring and performance management reforms. “It has to be eventually phased out, once the rest of the civil service recruitment system catches up with the PYPP in terms of restoring the merit system of selection and promotion,” he said.

Still, full implementation of the broader reforms could take several years. In 2015, the Civil Service Agency began a pilot performance management system that aimed to institute merit-based promotion across the Liberian government, but the effort met with limited success. Rebecca Kwabo, a former PYP who became director of performance management at the Civil Service

Agency in August 2015, said most employees at the ministries and agencies involved did not accept the concept of performance management. Civil servants “thought the government was trying to find a way to take their jobs from them,” she said.

Despite plans for the PYPP to be run independently from its Monrovia office, Hh Zaizay, the program’s executive director, still relied heavily on support from abroad. Staff at Global Development Incubator (GDI) assumed much of the work that JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. had done in the early years of the program, and the local program office relied on GDI to help manage donors, write reports, and organize budgets. Program staff in Liberia did not have the capacity to manage large grants from organizations like the United States Agency for International Development, nor the connections to fund-raise from smaller international foundations. The program’s board of directors and international advisory board could provide those connections, but as of mid-2016, continued funding for the program was unclear.

Even though the program designers had considered broadening the scope of the PYPP to other levels of Liberian government as early as 2009, as of 2016 the program was still placing PYPs into only national government ministries or agencies in Monrovia. Allen said that the time had come to place PYPs in local government roles because the national government had begun to decentralize administration. “PYPs should be deployed at the county level,” he said. “There is a great need for them at that level. Monrovia benefited initially, so now maybe we should send a whole batch into rural areas.” However, government offices in Liberia’s counties suffered even more serious issues with underqualified staff than the ministries in Monrovia did, and it was questionable whether the program could still provide sufficient training and mentorship of PYPs if the program expanded regionally.

Moore said the program’s future likely would hinge on its strong reputation and the strength and influence of PYP alumni. “It has the potential to survive because it is prestigious,” he said. “It is an

exclusive club. Not everyone can get into the President's Young Professionals. Some of the people in it will probably be in positions of authority in the next administration and can say, "This thing is how I got into government, and it needs to be there."

Despite the challenges the program continued to face, it served as an example of how fragile

states can attract young graduates into government jobs to fill critical capacity gaps. Allen said he hoped the PYPP "could serve as a model for other post-conflict countries as one way to build capacity in the civil service."

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