



## INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

### BUILDING CIVIL SERVICE CAPACITY: POST-CONFLICT LIBERIA, 2006 - 2011

#### SYNOPSIS

Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf took office in January 2006 knowing she had much to do to rebuild her country. Liberia was one of the poorest nations in the world. A 14-year civil war had destroyed most of the country's physical infrastructure. The health-care system had collapsed. Few people had jobs. Sirleaf had ambitious plans to develop Liberia's economy, but she knew she would have to rebuild the government itself in order to move forward. Many skilled Liberians had fled during the war, and those who remained did not have access to regular schooling. Lack of training and experience at all levels of government, from ministers to office helpers, threatened the president's ability to translate plans into action. But paralysis threatened to trigger popular discontent and might even reignite conflict. Sirleaf needed to recruit highly skilled people for top leadership positions and build capacity in the middle and lower ranks. Fast action was crucial—and every option available risked increasing levels of inequality and suspicion if not managed carefully. The president persuaded three distinguished Liberians to help her attract and develop talent. Minister of Finance Antoinette Sayeh was the first to arrive, followed by C. William Allen, who became director general of the Civil Service Agency, and Harold Monger, who led the Liberia Institute of Public Administration. During the next five years, that team recruited more than 200 highly skilled professionals, trained over a thousand civil servants, and made government a more attractive place to work. Although substantial gaps remained in 2011, the Liberian government was on its way to escaping a problem that often rekindled violence in other post-conflict countries.

*Jonathan Friedman drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in Monrovia, Liberia, during December 2010 and July 2011 and on interviews conducted by Summer Lopez in Monrovia during August 2008. Case published August 2012.*

#### INTRODUCTION

C. William Allen, director general of the Civil Service Agency, recalled the early days of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's administration in post-conflict Liberia: "Two of the greatest challenges to reform were low human and

institutional capacity. The brain drain took away most if not all of the talent, and as anxious as we were to reform, we didn't have the people."

When Sirleaf took office in January 2006, Liberia had just emerged from a devastating, 14-year civil war and a rough three years under an

ineffectual transitional government. The country was fifth from the bottom in a composite ranking of countries based on living standards, health and education, according to the United Nations Human Development Index.<sup>1</sup> Political institutions and physical infrastructure were in shambles. The country's health-care system had disintegrated, unemployment stood at 85% and Liberians relied on foreign aid for basic needs. Many government services did not exist, and those that did were usually weak and unreliable.

In her January 2006 inaugural address, Sirleaf pledged to improve the delivery of basic services and rebuild the country. Her plan for progress, which formed the foundation for the 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy, the country's primary national development plan, set four priorities: consolidating peace and security, revitalizing the economy, strengthening governance and the rule of law, and rehabilitating infrastructure and delivering basic services.

The new president faced daunting obstacles as she moved to implement her ambitious reform agenda, however. Skilled and experienced civil servants were in short supply. Nearly 1 million Liberians out of a prewar population of 2.2 million had fled during the fighting, an estimated 250,000 had been killed and an entire generation had grown up without access to education. Thousands of jobless ex-combatants posed a constant threat to Liberia's fragile peace. And Liberia's transitional government, in power from 2003 through 2005, had failed to improve the situation. The country faced a serious conflict trap. If the president could not create a functioning government, the economy would not grow and public disaffection would rise, thereby increasing the risk that violence would break out again.

Staffing ministerial positions and other high posts was an immediate priority. In March 2006, Sirleaf approached the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) and the Open Society Institute (a non-governmental organization that worked to promote good governance) about the need to recruit a small group of highly skilled Liberians from the diaspora to serve mainly as Cabinet-level officials. A month later, aware of the need to move quickly, the two organizations teamed up with the Liberian government to create a US\$3.25-million fund for an endeavor called the Liberia Emergency Capacity Building Support (LECBS) project. The president would use the money to pay the salaries of overseas Liberians who returned to assume leadership positions in the public service and to support the reform projects on which they worked. Sirleaf selected the Cabinet staff positions she wanted to fill and the people she wanted based on her policy priorities.

Representatives of the UNDP, the Open Society Institute, the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs and the Liberia Reconstruction and Development Committee (a government agency that coordinated relations with the country's major donors) sat on a steering committee that monitored spending from the fund. In lieu of regular civil service pay, the people who had been recruited received either one-time payments negotiated with the committee or regular salaries, initially supported by the repatriation fund.

With that assistance, Sirleaf persuaded several highly talented Liberians to return to the country. A functioning finance ministry was essential, and the president negotiated with Antoinette Sayeh, then employed at the World Bank, to accept the job. Sayeh had earned degrees from schools in the United States: her bachelor's degree at Swarthmore College and her master's and Ph.D. at Tufts University. She had joined Liberia's Ministry of Finance after earning her doctorate, but she left for the World Bank as conflict intensified. During her 17 years at the

World Bank, she had served as country director for Benin, Niger and Togo and country economist for Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as assistant to the principal managing director. Her charge in Liberia was to organize the country's finances, kick-start growth and build a tax base; but to do so, she first had to invest in people and build a ministry.

Sirleaf appointed C. William Allen as director general of the Civil Service Agency. Allen had headed the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism in Liberia's transitional government from October 2003 to January 2006 and had been a professor of mass communications at the University of Liberia. He had trained in the United States and held a bachelor's degree in journalism from Franklin College, a master's in public administration from California State University and a Ph.D. in mass communications from Syracuse University. He had been a professor at several U.S. colleges before returning to Liberia in 2003. And he dabbled in literature on the side, writing two novels.

The third main person on the capacity-building team was Harold Monger, who had returned in 2004, after the transitional government had taken over. He headed the Liberia Institute of Public Administration (LIPA). Monger was a graduate of Cuttington University in Liberia. He had earned a master's in public administration at the University of Southern California and had been with LIPA in the 1970s and 1980s. He had also served as a policy analyst for former Liberian president William Tolbert Jr. and as director general of the Civil Service Agency. During the war, he was a consultant in Ghana. He had a thorough understanding of the makeup and shortcomings of the civil service.

In the early years of Sirleaf's administration, these three people helped recruit and train the government teams that would implement the

Poverty Reduction Strategy and improve the government's financial management. Their efforts helped strengthen human capacity in nearly every ministry and agency—at both the central and county levels.

## THE CHALLENGE

The Sirleaf administration's manpower shortage was nothing new. Brain drain, or the large-scale emigration of skilled people for better opportunities in other countries, had been under way for years. In 2000, 45% of Liberia's skilled workers (defined as those with post-secondary education), or about 21,000 people, lived outside the country, one of the highest percentages of any African nation.<sup>2</sup> Of that total, 91% were in the United States, owing to the special relationship between the two countries (the Republic of Liberia had been founded by freed American slaves in 1847).<sup>3</sup>

It was exceedingly difficult to get work done in most of the ministries. When Sayeh took charge of the Ministry of Finance, she found few people who had the knowledge and skills required for their varied responsibilities. The same person who capably handled analytic tasks also helped fix equipment. At the Civil Service Agency, Allen recalled the difficulty of finding staff to perform basic tasks such as drafting memos. "Sometimes it would take four days, and I would have forgotten that I had given a memo to be drafted," he said. "And, suddenly, it would appear, four days later, with two paragraphs and eight errors in the two paragraphs. So it was a pretty challenging situation at that point."

Many of the skilled workers who had remained in Liberia found higher wages and better working conditions in the private sector or with the many non-governmental organizations operating in the country. Civil service pay and pensions stagnated during the war and remained extremely low in 2006. According to a 2008

survey, civil servants in the top five (of 15) salary grades received compensation that amounted to half of what officials with comparable skills earned at international NGOs and just a quarter of what major donors paid.<sup>4</sup>

Following the peaceful outcome of the 2005 elections, and with 15,000 United Nations peacekeepers in the country, Liberians began to gain confidence in the security situation. Though threats remained, the safer environment lowered one obstacle to attracting Liberians from the diaspora.

For those living abroad, deciding whether to return home was still difficult. War might resume if the peace accord fractured, as previous ones had. Former warring factions were fighting over the spoils of war in the transitional government, and a tense presidential campaign in 2005 did little to allay these concerns. In addition, most returning Liberians could expect a sharply lower standard of living and a worse quality of life. Monrovia, the capital city, had few paved roads and no electricity service; private generators provided power for those who could afford them. Also, many expatriates had lived abroad for more than a decade, and their children had never lived in Liberia.

Sirleaf's administration could secure some people on loan through a program called GEMAP, the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program, which had been negotiated with the international community in 2005, before she came to office. GEMAP would provide external controllers and some senior staff for the public sector institutions most important for economic reconstruction and growth. The arrangement had drawbacks, however. GEMAP was controlled by aid donors, and personnel were temporary. "GEMAP would not remain; internationally recruited financial controllers would have to leave one day. But when that happens, who takes over?" asked Aagon

Tingba, head of a training program introduced by Sayeh. Training a successor cohort was essential.

For those who already had government jobs, training was hard to come by. The Liberia Institute of Public Administration (LIPA), the primary institution charged with building capacity in the civil service, was little more than a shell. In 2004, when Monger returned to the institute, where he had worked in the 1970s and 1980s, LIPA was moribund. "There were no training programs ongoing when I came. LIPA wasn't doing anything," he said. The institute's budget of US\$130,000, of which it received just US\$33,000 that year, went primarily to pay the salaries of its 70 employees. It operated in the basement of the Ministry of Finance, initially without a generator for electricity.

The National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL), which had held power from 2003 to 2005, had explored civil service shortcomings and needs but had not prioritized capacity building. A joint needs assessment conducted in late 2003 with the United Nations and the World Bank had concluded that the first step should be to clarify the nature and extent of the problem by conducting a census of civil servants, assessing their skills and reviewing the structures and functions of government agencies.<sup>5</sup>

Those early efforts made little progress. Although the government did create a Governance Commission (initially called the Governance Reform Commission), led by Sirleaf, to review government functions, other factors worked against the reformers. During the civil war, factions that had controlled different agencies of government had added their fighters to the civil service payroll, using state resources to reward their side. Under the NTGL, the patronage continued because the peace agreement negotiated in Accra, Ghana, put former members of warring factions in charge of government ministries and state-owned enterprises. The civil service grew

from 20,000 workers in 1980 to 44,000 in 2006. During the same period, the government's budget shrank from US\$500 million to US\$80 million.

### FRAMING A RESPONSE

Sirleaf had a keen appreciation of all of the challenges and had already thought about how to address them. As head of the Governance Commission, she had started to review the mandates and functions of government ministries, looking for ways to bring function into line with capacity.

Allen, Monger, Sayeh and other Liberian leaders looked to other countries' experiences for models of successful capacity-building programs. They drew inspiration from training and mentoring programs in the United States, such as the Presidential Management Fellowship, a program that placed gifted students at top levels of government, supported by a network of mentors. Allen looked to projects in neighboring Sierra Leone that attracted talented professionals. Monger scrutinized the training institute's partner institutions in Ghana and Kenya for ideas on raising the institution's profile in the eyes of Liberia's policy makers.

One critical factor in crafting a capacity-building strategy was the state of the education system. In countries where conflict had not damaged schooling and where a basic level of knowledge and skills already existed, domestic training programs could plausibly produce in a relatively short time enough qualified civil servants to run the affairs of government. In Liberia, however, the education system had collapsed. The U.N.'s Human Development Report from 2006 described the situation: "Following the conflict, the nation's educational system was devastated. Schools, colleges and other training institutions were closed down for a protracted period, with a few operating on an ad hoc basis. Even when some schools were available, many parents were reluctant to send their children to school."<sup>6</sup> As a

result, training programs alone likely would not propel civil service capacity in the short term.

One possible approach was to attract civil servants from the diaspora and private business. But any program that attempted to boost capacity by recruiting citizens living abroad might set off tensions between those who had stayed behind and endured hardship and those who had left. Such recruiting also could inflame ethnic or regional tensions if the people from the diaspora had different backgrounds from those who had remained in Liberia. Further, because luring citizens from overseas or from business usually meant paying higher salaries, income differences could breed suspicion and envy that would sabotage the effort.

Given Liberia's circumstances, Sirleaf urged her colleagues to move ahead on several fronts. Allen would help manage programs to attract talent from outside the government. Monger would develop training programs to try to build the skills of those who had remained behind and had some education. Sayeh would create specialized solutions for her critical ministry.

As the rebuilding efforts moved forward, the leaders gradually acquired a sharper picture of the needs they had to fill. Consultations that had begun in 2006 and eventually led to the 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) clarified the goals the government aimed to achieve by 2011. Allen said he looked to the PRS to guide decisions regarding which agencies and which skills to prioritize in his programs. Ministries that requested his help in recruiting trained professionals had to justify their requests by specifying how the recruits would contribute to the goals set by the PRS. "What tied them [capacity-building projects] together was the Poverty Reduction Strategy document," Allen said.

Allen, Monger and Sayeh coordinated their activities and approaches through steering committees established to oversee their respective

capacity-building initiatives. To ensure the overall capacity-building strategy was coherent and was being administered efficiently, the committees met at critical junctures to discuss the design and implementation of initiatives. And to bolster lean government coffers, the committees solicited funding from the World Bank, multiple U.N. agencies, the Open Society Institute founded by philanthropist George Soros and the governments of the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Greece.

Concurrently, the Ministry of Planning, the Civil Service Agency and the United Nations Development Programme began a long-term project to develop a framework for a national capacity-building strategy that would specify how to assess national needs, that would rethink the role of the public sector so as to bring function in line with capacity and that would overhaul human resources regulations. That project was completed in 2011.

In the meantime, officials at the Ministry of Finance, the Governance Commission, the Civil Service Agency and the training institute moved ahead on Liberia's pressing needs.

## GETTING DOWN TO WORK

As quickly as possible, the government had to attract highly qualified Liberians to the public sector, improve government working conditions and provide civil servants with training opportunities.

### *Tapping the diaspora and the private sector*

Liberia's diaspora community offered a deep pool of talent. "We know that there is a huge reservoir of qualified Liberians outside," said Allen. "The challenge is, how do we get them to come home and contribute their quota to the rebuilding of their motherland."<sup>7</sup> Allen knew he had to brighten the dim perception of the civil service in order to attract Liberian professionals from both the diaspora and the private sector. To

do so, he had to offer skilled workers remuneration that was competitive with what they could receive in the international labor market.

Allen helped administer three recruitment programs in 2006 and 2007, each designed to help fill policy-making and leadership positions where the needs were especially urgent. First, Allen became co-chair of the Liberia Emergency Capacity Building Support project, the initiative under which Sirleaf had recruited him. With his co-chair, the UNDP, Allen identified candidates and monitored their progress after they were appointed. From 2006 to 2009, Allen worked with Sirleaf to recruit 40 Liberians, including 10 women, from the diaspora largely through Sirleaf's personal and professional networks as part of the Cabinet staffing program. Among others, the 40 Liberians included 16 appointed as ministers, the chairman of the National Investment Commission and the head of the Liberia National Police.

The high-level appointees helped power wide-ranging programs. For example, the Ministry of Finance recruits developed a multiyear budget and introduced a voucher system to ensure on-time payments to vendors. At the Ministry of Justice, participants helped post prosecutors around the country and orchestrated awareness campaigns against mob justice and trial by ordeal, whereby innocence or guilt was determined by subjecting the accused to a treacherous experience. The Cabinet-staffing program supported various other reforms at the National Investment Commission, the Civil Service Agency and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs.

Allen said the program helped Sirleaf recruit officials who negotiated highly technical financial matters with lenders to obtain debt relief in 2010 through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries program of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. "Without the [Liberia Emergency Capacity Building Support] project, we wouldn't have been able to have the success that we had in debt reduction," Allen said. "We

were able to go out and negotiate with partners, with those we owed money. We had to be able to speak their language.”

Allen launched two other programs that were structured somewhat differently: Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) and the Senior Executive Service (SES). The programs’ common aim was to provide an immediate surge of skilled workers for the civil service while broader training programs gradually built competence in workers at lower levels. TOKTEN aimed to recruit professional expatriates for relatively short-term contracts of six to 18 months to help build systems or train replacements. Physicians on leave and teachers on sabbatical filled some of the posts. SES sought to attract 100 skilled Liberians on longer, three-year renewable contracts and retain them for the long term. Allen aimed to place those recruits in managerial posts below the ministerial level to help ensure implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Allen modeled Liberia’s TOKTEN and SES programs on parallel U.N. initiatives in other countries. TOKTEN was a U.N. program that had been used in many places during the previous 30 years. Whereas the U.N. typically recruited only expatriate nationals, Allen persuaded the U.N. to let him use the organization’s funds to recruit from within Liberia as well. Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the U.N. Alan Doss also worked with Allen to borrow Sierra Leone’s unused plans to launch a senior executive service program. “We decided not to reinvent the wheel,” Allen said. “We just looked at what had worked in other countries and decided to use it and tailor it to our own realities, political culture and otherwise. So we simply borrowed.”

Allen administered the two programs through interministerial committees, with donor participation, similar in makeup to the steering committee that managed the Cabinet-staffing

program. Allen solicited proposals from ministries and agencies for vacancies to fill through the programs and judged proposals based on their expected contribution to the goals of the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Both programs offered Liberian professionals from the diaspora and the private sector higher salaries than were available through the civil service. Under the short-term TOKTEN program, expatriates received US\$3,500 monthly plus the cost of airfare, whereas locals received US\$2,500 a month. Under the senior executive program, participants were hired under three-year performance-based contracts, with one year fixed and an option to renew for two more. They received tax-free monthly salaries ranging from US\$1,000 to US\$3,000 and health insurance but no housing allowance or other benefits.

With the help of a recruitment firm, Allen advertised positions for both programs through local newspapers and radio stations, the Civil Service Agency website and Liberian blogs. The ads called for applicants with backgrounds in the public sector, management experience and communication and teamwork skills. Networks of family and friends helped spread the call to service. For example, Shadi Baki, a Liberian information technology (IT) specialist who had worked in Ghana during Liberia’s civil war and been hired through TOKTEN, said he learned about the program from relatives who had remained in Liberia.

Allen’s ads emphasized the opportunity to help Liberia rebuild. IT recruit Baki said the message resonated with many who applied for positions. “Most recruits were looking for an opportunity to return home anyway, and this seemed to be the perfect opportunity,” he said. “The [Senior Executive Service], in terms of remuneration and benefits, provided the barest minimum, as most if not all SES professionals were making a lot more than what was being

offered. However, the program offered a good opportunity for a lot of us to finally return home after two decades of exile.”

Through the TOKTEN program, Allen recruited nearly 70 people to fill a range of positions. Participants had significant impacts in the health and education sectors in particular. During their summer breaks and sabbaticals, several university professors taught at the University of Liberia or at Cuttington University, the oldest private four-year college in sub-Saharan Africa. They also contributed to the development of new curricula and built or strengthened relationships with other universities to facilitate student exchange and joint research initiatives.

Professionals who were recruited through the program helped develop a national health policy and supported HIV/AIDS programs around the country. One participant, Robert Dennis, a medical doctor, helped drive major improvements while serving as chief medical officer at JFK Memorial Hospital in Monrovia, the only hospital in Liberia that offered specialized care. Even though many individuals and many agencies contributed, Dennis received considerable praise for rehabilitating the hospital and instituting systemic changes to its operations. He established an HIV/AIDS unit and a cancer program, and he built relationships with officials in Ghana and South Africa as a way to help train Liberian medical personnel. As the hospital’s reputation improved, the number of people seeking care surged. During the first quarter of 2007, the hospital processed 12,000 outpatient visits—more than the number of visits during all of 2006.

Allen had more difficulty recruiting for the senior executive program. Nearly 150 applied for the first 21 positions advertised. However, Benjamin Johnson, director of the program from 2008 to 2010 who had returned to Liberia after the war through the TOKTEN program, said that although the number of applicants was

encouraging, some positions attracted only one or two viable applicants. K. K. Kamaluddeen, an economic adviser with the UNDP, suggested the two-week period to submit applications was too short.

Professionals under the senior executive program served at various ministries, including Finance, Commerce, Planning and Economic Affairs, Agriculture, Public Works, Education and Health and Social Welfare. Nearly 30 participants filled positions as county development officers and statistics officers monitoring the implementation of Sirleaf’s poverty strategy in Liberia’s 15 counties. Others contributed to projects providing food security, repairing roads, and fighting sexual and gender-based violence. Allen said ministers complimented him on the quality of the professionals recruited under the program. “Not a week goes by that I don’t hear from cabinet ministers who tell me they don’t know where they’d be without their SES members,” he said.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Improving work conditions*

Although those programs contributed to the effort to upgrade the civil service, Allen knew he had to improve working conditions for rank-and-file civil servants so as to attract and retain talented workers for the long term. In 2006, he approached the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID) to enlarge the capacity-building programs he was putting in place and to get help in developing a vision that would reform the civil service. “We said to them, ‘Well, it is good to build capacity, but we want an overall strategy,’” Allen said.

During the prolonged civil war, various warring factions added their constituents to the ranks of the civil service, a practice that continued under the transitional government in power from 2003 to 2005. From 20,000 before the war, Liberia’s civil service listed 44,000 on its payroll in

2006. Rationalizing that figure was necessary in order to redirect resources toward investment in capacity-building programs and wage increases.

With a US\$2.3-million grant, the Civil Service Agency and DFID launched the Civil Service Capacity Building project in March 2007. The aim of the project, according to team leader Nellie Mayshak, a consultant hired by DFID, was “to turn the civil service around to a much more effective and efficient system, a smaller bureaucracy and much more performance-oriented and service delivery-oriented institution.” Mayshak worked with a local consulting firm, Subah-Belleh Associates, to develop a comprehensive civil service reform strategy.

After holding numerous workshops with civil servants, they produced a strategy paper, “Smaller Government, Better Service,” in June 2008. The document identified rightsizing and human resource management as key priorities in addition to pay and pension reform, development of leadership capacity and improvement in gender equality. Allen toured Liberia to explain the paper and build public support for reforms.

As a first step toward implementing the strategy, Allen instructed his human resource management deputy Alfred Drosaye and his director of human resource management information systems Baki to create a complete civil service registry. Together with other initiatives, the civil service registry program identified 8,000 ghost workers and saved the government roughly \$4 million a year. Allen also established a civil service reform directorate that collaborated with the Governance Commission to review the mandates of ministries and agencies with an eye toward identifying waste, including overlaps of functions or tasks that could be performed better by the private sector.

With the resources saved by those initiatives, Allen raised the minimum civil service wage incrementally from US\$15 a month in 2006 to

US\$100 by 2011. Ministries also began offering to shuttle employees to and from work in government vans. Drosaye helped develop a program to provide training and small loans to laid-off and pensioned workers, though that program had not launched in 2011 due to a lack of funding.

Allen introduced a series of reforms to strengthen the merit aspect of recruitment and promotion. Formerly, government managers who wanted to hire new civil service workers required only approval by the Ministry of Finance’s electronic data processing section. Allen said that this practice opened the door to abuse by officials who had friends or relatives in the unit. He instituted procedures that required his approval on special forms—listing applicants’ qualifications and personal information—before the Ministry of Finance could process any new employee. “We make sure that the person has done all they have to do and submitted all the documents they need to submit before we consider them for employment,” Allen said.

Although ministries still took the lead in recruiting and selecting applicants, the Civil Service Agency developed standard requirements for generic positions such as office helpers and drivers and created written tests for many other positions. The agency also required interviews for specialized and managerial positions. Allen reintroduced regular performance appraisals for all civil servants. Supervisors completed the reports, which were intended to be the basis of decisions regarding promotions and merit pay, though by 2011, the appraisals had not been fully integrated into the system.

Allen made progress on other fronts. Through ghost-busting exercises, as he called them, and redundancies at various ministries, the civil service reduced its headcount by 10,000, from 44,000 in 2006 to 34,000 in 2009, though by 2011, the number had increased because the

Liberian government hired thousands of teachers and health workers—and freed up resources to raise minimum civil service salaries nearly seven-fold in the same period. The agency collaborated with the Ministry of Finance to introduce a direct-deposit pay program to facilitate the delivery of salaries for many employees. Allen said civil servants felt the benefits in many ways: “They see it in their paychecks. ... They see that there are better conditions of service in terms of transportation,” he said. “Most ministries now have buses that take the employees back and forth to work. When I came into this building, this building had not had lights for two and a half years. Now you see there are computers ... there are lights. ... People can now use laptops to do their work.”

#### *Training civil servants*

Although attracting highly skilled Liberians from the diaspora and the private sector gave a boost to the civil service, more had to be done. The LECBS project, the TOKTEN program and the senior executive program brought in only 200 professionals in total, many of them on short-term contracts. The three programs were intended to provide a short-term surge in capacity while the government developed more-sustainable solutions. To generate capacity that would sustain reforms and continue to improve the quality of governance, the government had to train much larger numbers of managers in a range of subjects to support and implement the plans of policy makers.

Reviving the Liberia Institute of Public Administration was important in the creation of more training opportunities for civil servants. Caught in the collapse of public education during the war, the institute was underfunded, lacked its own facility and offered no training courses. Because of his past experience, LIPA director general Monger had a thorough understanding of the makeup and the shortfalls of the civil service,

and he knew LIPA could play an important role in efforts to improve the situation.

Monger had to kick-start the reform process, drawing on personal resources. For example, he spent US\$350 of his own money to buy stationery and lent the institute his own generator. Building a competent core staff so that training could resume was a top priority. Almost immediately, Monger laid off 40 of LIPA’s 70 employees, a move he said caused little opposition. “No one protested because some weren’t coming to work, some had second jobs. ... They were mostly hang-ons,” he said. Monger reached out to his network of friends at the University of Liberia, where he had been an associate professor, to teach initial courses on a voluntary basis. “I called professional friends and friends from the university, including one of my former professors and several former ministers. ... Even the president volunteered to help train when she was at the Governance Reform Commission” in 2005, he said. (At the time, Sirleaf had taught a seminar on women’s role in development.)

Monger had to find creative ways to expand the training institute’s operating budget so that the institute could offer classes regularly and pay teachers appropriately. “We were trying to learn from the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration and from the Kenya Institute of Administration, but we didn’t have the resources to do what they do,” he said. “We needed to be more entrepreneurial.” The Ghanaian and Kenyan institutes were their countries’ leading training, research and consultancy programs, and both had operational autonomy by law. To support effective public sector administration, including project management, financial management, policy analysis and monitoring and evaluation, they offered dozens of courses. The Kenyan institute received substantial financial support from the government, whereas the Ghanaian institute funded its programs largely through user fees.

Monger built on his consulting past and his connections. “I had connections with the U.N. system and began to get consulting contracts for LIPA and used proceeds to finance government training because we didn’t have funding,” he said. “We got contracts from UNICEF and then UNDP for civic education and covered all 13 counties [not including the two counties in the Monrovia area] with civic education training,” he said. DFID provided funding for a training facility in Monrovia, and other donors came forward to support the development of a LIPA library and other initiatives. “Where we came from to where we are now, it’s millions of miles,” he said in 2011.

With additional resources, Monger hired a small, permanent staff of trainers, but he still relied on short-term contracts with professionals and university professors because of continued funding constraints. To identify topics in demand, he conducted a national capacity-needs assessment together with the Civil Service Agency by using a questionnaire, holding focus groups and conducting one-on-one interviews with 5% of all civil servants.

Monger said he had to assess the needs of some of the ministries that were not proactive on the issue and did not ask for courses. The survey showed that ministries most needed people with skills in procurement, internal auditing, human resource management and project management. Monger and his staff developed classes that met those needs and instituted other classes on labor law and other topics. “We had to bring together the right expertise and do it,” he said. With the support of the World Bank, he sent three of his trainers to the University of Turin in Italy to earn master’s degrees in procurement and devise a training seminar on their return.

Ministry supervisors submitted the names of employees they wanted to train at the institute once the course list appeared. Classes were also available to members of the private sector and

NGOs for a fee. The course in procurement was especially popular, graduating more than a hundred people from government, NGOs and the private sector. By 2011, the training institute had graduated more than a thousand students, who had taken a range of courses. The ministries of public works, health and education were eager to gain from the institute’s courses and sent large numbers of staff for training.

In 2009, the training institute received a boost from a partnership with GEMAP, which placed donor-selected financial controllers and technical staff to implement financial controls and prevent corruption in key government operations.

In September 2009, GEMAP enlisted one of its veterans, Alex Cuffy, to develop a new capacity-building program for the civil service. Cuffy had served as financial controller at Liberia’s largest airport, Roberts International, and had earned respect for his work in training financial staff to sustain the reforms he had helped put in place. Cuffy proposed to train hundreds of government and private sector employees in a range of financial management tasks, and GEMAP assigned him to work with LIPA to develop the Financial Management Capacity Building program.

Cuffy and the training institute’s staff complemented each other. Cuffy brought practical managerial experience and knew what skills were important in the workplace, while LIPA staff had expertise in teaching methods. The first cohort of 53 trainees came mostly from the Ministry of Finance, Central Bank, Civil Service Agency and General Auditing Commission, with others from the private and nonprofit sectors. They graduated in March 2010 with certificates in financial management and information technology. The second group had 206 registrants, split roughly between government and private sector participants.

Training expanded to include internal auditing, public sector finance, public sector

management and computer skills. Courses ranging from two weeks to three months were taught in the evenings to reduce conflicts with participants' day jobs. The program incorporated some courses the training institute already offered, and it helped develop new ones involving computer skills and higher-level procurement topics. Although the GEMAP program ended in late 2010, the training institute absorbed the new courses and continued to offer them with its own trainers.

#### *Financial management training*

The need to consolidate gains under GEMAP prompted Finance Minister Sayeh to develop an additional training program focused on financial management. In 2006, Sayeh approached the World Bank for support for a ministry-centered capacity-building program, and she brought in the Civil Service Agency and the University of Liberia to collaborate on the project. Sayeh chaired the program's board of directors, and Allen served as her deputy. The Ministry of Finance provided facilities, the university recruited professors to staff the program and conferred the degrees, the Civil Service Agency placed graduates in suitable positions and LIPA monitored the quality of the program.

A former deputy finance minister, Lindsay Haines, directed the new Financial Management Training program initially. Aagon Tingba, the Liberian controller who worked closely with GEMAP officials at the Liberia Petroleum Refining Corporation, took over the leadership role in February 2009. He had studied at AME Zion University in Liberia and had two U.S. master's degrees: one in business administration/accounting from St. Joseph's University and another in public administration from Villanova University. He understood the need to consolidate the improvements in financial management that had taken place under GEMAP and the staff development that that need had

supported. The program aimed to teach 90 young Liberians in three groups and then place them into key positions as procurement officers, controllers and internal auditors in various ministries and agencies.

Tingba hired a local firm to advertise the program and process applications. The firm placed advertisements in local newspapers, at universities and on Liberian blogs and websites used by members of the diaspora. To qualify for admission, applicants had to be younger than 33 and have an undergraduate degree in a relevant field such as accounting, economics or management, with a minimum B average. Tingba explained that Sayeh had set the age restriction because "we want you to work for government for 25 to 30 years." Five hundred Liberians applied in 2007 for 30 slots in the first round of training. The firm identified applicants who met eligibility requirements, administered standardized tests and forwarded the names of the top 60 qualifiers to Tingba and the board of directors for interviews and final selection. Thirty received six-year contracts for two years of academic training and four years of civil service work. In exchange for that commitment, the program paid school fees and a monthly stipend of US\$100 and covered the costs of computers, course books and health benefits.

The program was demanding. Students had heavy workloads of courses that included public financial management, personnel management and statistics, in addition to required noncredit courses such as business communications, research methods and information technology. Students had to complete and defend a thesis before a panel of University of Liberia professors. Officials from the Ministry of Finance, the Public Procurement and Concessions Commission (the government board that oversaw major public contracts) and the General Auditing Commission gave guest lectures every two weeks to familiarize students with government functions and practices. Between

semesters, students had mandatory internships at government ministries.

University of Liberia professors, government officials and Liberian professors based in the U.S. on sabbatical staffed the program, receiving US\$250 per course. Tingba said lecturers taught despite the low salaries “because they love to teach, not for the money.”

Fong Zuagele, a senior economist at the Ministry of Commerce, taught courses in accounting and advanced accounting. He said, “Initially, I heard about [the program] when I was in the United States, and I thought it would undermine long-term programs at the University of Liberia. But when I came, I appreciated the needs of the country and the time it would take for other programs to develop. I saw that this program would help the country immediately.”

Of the first group of 30 students, 28 received master’s degrees from the University of Liberia in April 2009. From the next two batches, 54 of 60 completed their degrees by June 2011. About a third of the students were women.

The Civil Service Agency took the lead in placing graduates in key government posts such as chief accountant at the Ministries of Finance and Foreign Affairs; internal auditor at the Ministries of Internal Affairs, Information and Commerce; and director of procurement at the Ministries of Agriculture and Planning. Mutricia Sherman, director of procurement at the Ministry of Agriculture, was a member of the third cohort, which graduated in May 2011. Sherman interned at the Public Procurement and Concessions Commission (PPCC) during her summer break and said she was drawn to procurement issues as a result. She said, “If I weren’t part of the program, I wouldn’t have had the advantage of working at PPCC and the experiences I gained there. Everything I learned I’m practicing now, so the program helped a lot.”

Once in their civil service posts, the graduates enjoyed salaries that rose from US\$800

per month in their first year to US\$1,000 in their last. Tingba monitored their performance through quarterly evaluations submitted by supervisors. He met with students who received poor marks, and he managed disputes between them and their superiors when necessary. “Every few months, I call them in and we talk, and I ask those not doing well how I can help,” he said. In turn, he asked students to evaluate their teachers.

In 2011, Tingba enlisted the World Bank to fund an additional three groups of students to fill posts as controllers in the offices of county superintendents outside Monrovia. When the fourth group began in July, Tingba explored ways to improve the program. He reached out to his former professors at Villanova to discuss the possibility that Villanova professors might teach some of the courses or develop a student exchange program with the university. Villanova launched a book drive to support the program, and discussions about other possibilities were under way in 2012.

Kamaluddeen, former economic adviser and head of the Strategy and Policy Unit at UNDP, praised the program’s design, which exposed students to a range of government posts through internships. “They are consciously training people to have the expertise required for the service and for the economy as a whole,” he said. “It is cheaper in the long run. It is custom-built to the needs of the system. I think it’s a perfect example of how to respond to post-conflict capacity development needs.”

#### *Attracting young professionals*

Sirleaf facilitated two other programs that helped fill short-term gaps and provide on-the-job mentoring for promising Liberians. The first came in February 2007, when the president announced a new fellowship program initiative wherein young professionals would serve as special assistants to top government officials, including Cabinet ministers, to assist those government

officials with their daily tasks. The initiative was named after American businessman and philanthropist Edward Scott, who donated US\$1 million to the program, called Scott Family Fellows. Washington-based Center for Global Development and the John Snow Research and Training Institute Inc., an American NGO that worked primarily on issues of global health, helped administer the program. More than 30 young people, most of whom had master's degrees and one or two years of relevant experience, put their skills to work for the government. Fellows did everything, from the drafting of policy papers and speech writing to answering ministers' phones and coordinating their daily activities.

Steve Radelet, at the time a top economic adviser to Sirleaf, said the program came about because ministers were overburdened with logistical tasks. "We thought there was really a big need, and it filled a great niche in terms of supplying capacity that the minister could rely on as a special assistant," he said. "It increased the capacity of the minister himself or herself very quickly by just having someone to rely on. It increased the energy level."

Radelet played a role in selecting applicants. Although he wanted the program to include as many young Liberians as possible, he said he did not receive sufficient numbers of applications. In the end, approximately half the participants were Liberians, while others came with country-based experience from the NGO world. And all of the Liberian recruits remained in Liberia after their fellowships expired.

In 2009, Radelet helped develop a second initiative, the President's Young Professionals Program. Administered by the Civil Service Agency and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs with financial support from the John Snow Institute and other donors, the program was an extension of Scott Family Fellows. The aim was primarily to train and

develop recent college graduates for careers in civil service.

The first round of recruits, consisting of nine recent graduates selected in 2009, were placed at different ministries for two-year posts. They were assigned mentors, usually Scott Family Fellows, though some mentors were from the short-term and executive capacity-building programs. Upon completion of the program, members of the inaugural cohort elected to remain with their government agencies or pursue advanced academic degrees. The new young professionals program was modeled after the Presidential Management Fellowship, a U.S. government program. "The idea was to make it high profile, highly competitive and with the presidential seal," said Radelet. Second and third cohorts were in place in mid-2012.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

To induce people to move back to Monrovia from jobs overseas and to recruit the best, most of Liberia's capacity-building programs paid higher salaries or offered better benefits than people normally received in government jobs. Because of the urgency of the situation, there were few options, but the decision to offer that higher pay and those better benefits entailed more than a monetary cost: managers had to cope with resentment and jealousy. In describing his own graduates, Tingba said, "Some get more pay than their counterparts—some more than even some assistant ministers who have been working there for 20 years—so resentment is an issue. ... Some of our graduates are resented because they have an inflated sense of their worth. They're the elite, and they can be a bit snobbish."

The UNDP observed the problem in 2008 with the Cabinet-staffing and TOKTEN programs. Its review found "hidden animosity created by salary differentials between LECBS/TOKTEN expatriate nationals and local

professionals on one hand and other nationals not participating in the program on the other hand.” Evaluators concluded, “This situation, if not redressed, can act as a disincentive to long-term productivity.”<sup>9</sup>

Tingba and Allen responded to the unique circumstances of the programs they oversaw. For example, Tingba used the regular performance-appraisal meetings to mediate disputes. He recalled, “At one ministry, the minister was about to get rid of a graduate, and I had to make three trips there and have discussions, and things got much better.” Tingba stressed to his students the need to understand the politics of the ministries for which they worked, to anticipate the resentment they would encounter and to be proactive to prevent it. He said, “We encourage them to make personal connections, take coworkers out to lunch, show them your skills and your commitment, take time to learn the politics of the system. ... People have been working there for years, and a young guy from a World Bank program comes in and I’m supposed to train him to take my job? They can be arrogant; that’s a major issue, and we need to calm them down.”

Allen stressed the need for transparency in the selection process and the use of objective, merit-based criteria in such capacity-building programs. “If you have a fair and transparent process, then those who are not selected will accept the results,” he said. To combat a perceived bias in favor of diaspora Liberians, he opened the application process to all Liberians. “We have ensured that incumbents can apply for the SES ... so the SES doesn’t target only Liberians in the diaspora; it targets qualified Liberians wherever they are on the globe,” he added. The capacity-building programs also avoided creating tensions between Americo-Liberians (the descendants of freed American slaves who founded the country and long dominated the country’s politics and businesses) and native Liberians by maintaining objective and transparent application processes.

Sahr Nyuma, who served as deputy director general for human resource management at the Civil Service Agency, emphasized to his staff the temporary nature of the capacity-building program. “We try to let them understand this is just a temporary thing to help with the capacity gap,” he said. Nyuma explained to his workers the agency’s intention to raise general civil service salaries by 2011 to levels commensurate with SES wages. The agency failed, however, to harmonize salaries by 2011, even though it did raise salaries each year. Donors agreed to extend their support for an additional year, though the World Bank criticized the project for failing to plan adequately for the transition.

## ASSESSING RESULTS

From 2006 to 2011, the Liberian government made substantial progress in its high-priority effort to build its civil service capacity. Through initiatives such as the Liberia Emergency Capacity Building Support project, the Senior Executive Service program and the Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals program, the Civil Service Agency attracted from the diaspora and from the private sector more than 200 highly skilled professionals to assume policy-making and leadership positions. And the Liberia Institute of Public Administration and the Ministry of Finance trained more than a thousand government officials to fill mid-managerial posts across the civil service.

The World Bank’s final assessment of the SES program highlighted its appropriateness for Liberia in the wake of civil war: “The SES program proved to be an efficient and cost-effective way of attracting skilled professionals into the civil service. In an emerging post-conflict country, an alternative option would have been to hire local consultants or international advisers. Not only would that have been extremely expensive; it also would have undermined the

government's reconstruction agenda. Using Liberians to perform the critical functions of rebuilding their own country supported the emergence of a critical mass of professionals within government that might have a multiplier effect."

The midterm review of the Liberia Emergency Capacity Building Support project and the TOKTEN program similarly found that ministries benefited substantially from their recruits: "As a result of the policies and efforts made by LECBS/TOKTEN beneficiaries in various agencies and institutions, public revenues are expanding at an unprecedented rate, and there are considerable movement and interest in Liberia as investors, private foundations and donor agencies are coming back. The transformational changes under way have instilled international confidence in Liberia, and that could not have been possible without the commitment and the quality of work that has been accomplished in such a short period of time."<sup>10</sup>

Monger, director of the public administration institute, said the gains began to reverse the earlier trend of civil servants' leaving for the private sector. "In 2004 to 2005, NGO jobs were more attractive, but people found they lasted a year, not much more," he said. "Since then, people have been coming to government, and since salaries are now delivered regularly, salaries are better." Still, several flaws diminished the efficacy of the SES program and affected some ministries. While the SES supported ministries with ties to the Poverty Reduction Strategy, it largely ignored and at times undermined other government agencies. Monger said several institute trainers had been selected for SES positions in other ministries, which diminished the training institute's effectiveness. "We didn't get SES because we're not a priority, but then we lost staff to SES because of the higher salaries," he said.

Monger said the compensation offered through the program, though high compared with civil service salaries, was still insufficient to lure Liberians back from the diaspora. "For people in the diaspora, reintegration is a major challenge, housing is rare and expensive, and SES didn't support that. Rent would take away a lot of that money. They didn't think about livelihood issues," he said.

Allen, head of the Civil Service Agency, said that conditions in Liberia, especially during the programs' early years, dissuaded many Liberian expatriates with families from returning. "Those who were easiest to attract were either people who were single and didn't have the family ties that keep them back there or people where one spouse was prepared to let the other one travel," he said. "We didn't have that many instances where people brought their children immediately, because it was clear to most people with school-age children that at the time, we were not ready for that." The World Bank in its review of the SES program similarly found that the program was most successful in attracting expatriates who were at either the beginning or the end of their careers, suggesting that family ties and professional development were key inhibitors.

## REFLECTIONS

Observers noted several points about the government's capacity-building strategy that arguably weakened reform efforts. Harold Monger, director general of the Liberia Institute of Public Administration, said the government initially focused too much on reviewing ministries' mandates and on shrinking the size of the civil service and provided insufficient resources for in-service training. "We had difficulty selling ourselves at the early stage," he said. "We were at the margins; the logic was we should wait for training." Monger managed to increase the training institute's resource base through

consulting contracts with the United Nations and other agencies, but he argued that the government should have been more supportive of in-service training programs from the start.

Although many capacity-building programs had similar aims, no government agency was responsible for coordinating the programs to ensure maximum effectiveness and prevent duplication of effort. Although representatives of the Civil Service Agency, the Ministry of Finance and the Liberia Reconstruction and Development Committee served on the steering committees of multiple capacity-building programs and lent coherency to the multitude of efforts under way, gaps remained. Donors, including the United Nations Development Programme, had expected a coordinated policy to develop, as UNDP stated in its introductory paper on the Liberia Economic Capacity Building Support project: “It is expected that the LECBS project will converge with other initiatives and fold into a consolidated national capacity development programme.”<sup>11</sup>

In 2011, four years after most of the programs had started, the Liberia Institute of Public Administration published a National Civil Service Training and Development Policy, and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs finalized a National Capacity Development Strategy to create a platform that would better

coordinate future projects. Still, from 2006 to 2011, the Liberian government succeeded in (1) attracting many highly skilled Liberians from the diaspora and from the private sector at a time when the civil service was suffering from a debilitating lack of expertise, (2) expanding training opportunities for thousands of civil servants and (3) making the civil service a more attractive place to work.

Civil Service Agency director C. William Allen noted the role of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in maintaining good relations and soliciting support from donors. “The fact that the president herself was the key articulator of these programs and the fact that she came to power with a great deal of trust and a good reputation in the international community I think helped us a great deal,” he said.

Nellie Mayshak, team leader of the Civil Service Capacity Building project, similarly attributed the reform gains to strong political backing from Liberia’s top leaders. “There is a sense that we’ve got to get it done, we’ve got to get it done, we’ve got to get it done, yesterday,” she said. “It is just dedication of the political leadership. They are trusted with a major responsibility, and it is not easy, but they’re doing it.”

<sup>1</sup> “International Human Development Indicators.” United Nations Development Programme. 15 May 2011. <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/103106.html>. Accessed 15 November 2011.

<sup>2</sup> William Easterly and Yaw Nyarko. “Is the Brain Drain Good for Africa?” Brookings Global Economy and Development. March 2008. [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2008/03\\_brain\\_drain\\_easterly/03\\_brain\\_drain\\_easterly.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2008/03_brain_drain_easterly/03_brain_drain_easterly.pdf). Accessed 14 November 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Medium Term Pay and Grading Strategy. Government of Liberia. 2009. Cited in “Implementation Completion and Results Report on a Grant from the Trust Fund for Liberia in the Amount of USD 2.30 Million to the Republic of Liberia for a (sic) Emergency Senior Executive Service Project.” Public Sector Reform and Capacity Building Unit, Country Department AFCW1, Africa Region, World Bank. 29 December 2011. <http://www->

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- <sup>6</sup> “National Human Development Report 2006—Liberia: Mobilizing Capacity for Reconstruction and Development.” United Nations Development Programme. July 2006. <http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Liberia/Liberia%20HDR.pdf>. Accessed 15 November 2011.
- <sup>7</sup> “Liberia’s Capacity Undermined - Says Allen.” *The New Dawn*. 15 February 2010. [http://www.thenewdawnliberia.com/~thenewd1/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=222:liberian-capacity-undermined-says-allen&catid=25:politics&Itemid=59](http://www.thenewdawnliberia.com/~thenewd1/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=222:liberian-capacity-undermined-says-allen&catid=25:politics&Itemid=59). Accessed 5 December 2012.
- <sup>8</sup> “SES Success Stories: The Faces Behind Civil Service Reform in Liberia.” Government of Liberia Civil Service Agency. 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> “Mid-term Independent Evaluation of the Liberia Emergency Capacity Building Support (LECBS) Project and the Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) Project.” United Nations Development Programme, Open Society Institute, U.S. Agency for International Development. July 2008. Pp. 52–53.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. P. 8.
- <sup>11</sup> “Liberia Emergency Capacity Building Support (LECBS) Project.” United Nations Development Programme. 2007. <http://www.lr.undp.org/LECBS%20Sept%2013%202007.pdf>. Accessed 15 November 2011.

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