



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

MATCHING GOODWILL WITH NATIONAL PRIORITIES: LIBERIA'S PHILANTHROPY SECRETARIAT, 2008 – 2012

SYNOPSIS

After a protracted civil war ended in 2003, Liberia's government began the costly and complex task of rebuilding. During the early years, philanthropies and foundations stepped forward to help but often worked on isolated projects that had little to do with Liberia's broader needs. In addition, some donors duplicated the efforts of others or, worse, worked at cross-purposes. At the same time, government capacity was severely strained. Many experienced and skilled civil servants had died in the war or fled the country, and those who remained were swamped with work. When she took office in 2006, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf knew philanthropies and private foundations could help her achieve ambitious development goals. But although she had a strategic plan and concrete funding priorities, Sirleaf lacked the time and organizational means required to integrate private donors' resources into the overall effort. After struggling with the problem early in her first term, Sirleaf assigned one of her most trusted advisers, Natty Davis, to work directly with private donors, enlist new contributors and channel philanthropic investments toward government priorities without burdening her office or ministers with repeated information requests and meetings. Davis created the Philanthropy Secretariat within the Office of the President to match donors with local nongovernmental organizations or government ministries on projects of mutual interest. By 2012 and despite shortcomings, the new unit had succeeded in linking more than a dozen new foundations and philanthropies with local organizations and government institutions. The funders gave more than US\$16 million in grants, admittedly a small sum compared with annual contributions by multilateral and bilateral donors but still significant in helping the country move forward.

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2008, Natty Davis, Liberia's minister of state without portfolio, accompanied President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to a meeting of

foundations and philanthropies in New York. Timed to coincide with the annual gathering of the United Nations General Assembly, the

meeting was an opportunity for senior Liberian government officials to have a formal conversation with representatives of foundations and philanthropies that were eager to help Liberia rebuild after its lengthy civil war.

Representatives of the donor organizations said they wanted to contribute to the president's vision and asked for guidance in aligning their efforts with Sirleaf's priorities. They also wanted a specific contact point within the Liberian government through which to channel their ideas and proposals. "One of the things they said was, 'We don't know who to contact or touch base with when we arrive,'" recalled Steve Radelet, who attended the meeting in his role as Sirleaf's chief economic adviser.

Outside contributions already were flowing into Liberia, mostly from traditional multilateral and bilateral donors funded by other nations and multicountry organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. But Sirleaf's government had trouble ensuring that traditional donors' money went to priority projects, raising concerns that donor-funded work might compete with—and complicate rather than complement—the government's rebuilding agenda. In 2006, in an attempt to steer donor contributions to government priorities, Sirleaf's administration had created the Liberia Reconstruction and Development Committee (LRDC) to manage and coordinate aid inflows. Sirleaf had appointed Davis to head the LRDC's secretariat, which made Davis the top government official in charge of coordinating aid.

Davis said he quickly recognized "that there was this great swell of interest in supporting Ellen Sirleaf" coming increasingly from a new quarter: private foundations and philanthropies. "She was this icon, and so many people wanted to relate to her and wanted to see how they could help her," Davis said.

At least part of the groundswell of support stemmed from Sirleaf's high profile in the global community as Africa's first democratically elected female head of state. Sirleaf had taken office in January 2006, less than three years after the end of a bloody 14-year civil war that had killed more than 250,000 and left the country's economy and institutions reeling. She had served in the Liberian government before the war, including as finance minister, and had held high-level positions in international organizations, most notably the World Bank, where she had cultivated international contacts. Many in the international arena saw her as the best hope for elevating the country's position, which was at the bottom of global development indexes. With few viable institutions and little human capacity, Sirleaf faced a stern challenge in attempting to rebuild her country.

Liberia's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, devised with civic group participation and published in July 2008, articulated Sirleaf's vision for the country's development and set a three-year deadline to achieve a series of ambitious goals built around four pillars: peace and security, the economy, governance and the rule of law, and infrastructure and basic services. Each pillar had its own broad set of goals. For example, under the economy pillar, the strategy paper set targets for increases in agricultural production, commercial forestry and mining. The strategy paper, available on the Internet, offered action plans and metrics and totaled more than 180 pages. (Liberia was not unique in having defined its priorities. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund had made country-driven strategy papers a condition for grants and loans.)

Although Liberia already received tens of millions of dollars of support every year from bilateral and multilateral donors, Sirleaf and Davis recognized the value of developing other aid

sources like foundations and philanthropies and folding them into Liberia's action plan.

THE CHALLENGE

Davis knew that Sirleaf needed to tap all possible support in order to meet her ambitious goals. But enlisting private philanthropies and foundations to her cause carried risks as well as rewards.

First, foundations whittled away at officials' already scarce time. The postwar government suffered from a dearth of skilled public servants, and each of those who had remained or had returned since the fighting ended had to shoulder the responsibilities of several people. As head of the LRDC, Davis was the government's point person for aid coordination. Although a handful of other skilled people could provide help on an ad hoc basis, managing overseas assistance was typically a secondary priority for officials who were struggling to build and run effective government programs. Davis recalled that following Sirleaf's inauguration, constant requests from foundations "were starting to eat up some of the time of the LRDC staff."

Tarek Ghani, who at the time managed the Liberian portfolio for California-based foundation Humanity United, recalled that representatives of most foundations "would visit very rarely, which placed a high burden on the government." The infrequency of the visits meant that those representatives, unsure of which government officials to speak with, would therefore try to talk with as many people as possible. The resulting confusion wasted officials' time and diverted their focus from other important matters.

Second, projects funded by foundations and philanthropies already working in Liberia often failed to align with the government's priorities. That failure resulted in part from historical roles. Globally, private donors usually supported the

aims of civic groups or other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rather than government objectives. In addition, Sirleaf's staff did not always clarify its priorities to funders and advise them exactly how best to help. Further, most private donors had their own internal mandates or charters that restricted their support to selected sectors like health and education.

Another hazard was lack of sustainability: the possibility that foundations might fund an organization or initiative for only a specific length of time and then leave the government to pay continuing costs. The sustainability challenge was especially acute in the case of donor work that did not fit with government priorities. For example, an outside group might build a school and then demand that the public treasury pay for teachers, when the need for those teachers in another area or the need for the funds for other purposes ranked higher in planning and budgeting.

Such outcomes could deal a serious blow to a government like Liberia's, which was already thinly spread in terms of time and resources. Sirleaf risked missing crucial development targets in her bold development plan if limited funds were to be used to pay for low-priority programs.

Third, foundations and philanthropies too often failed to coordinate with one another, which increased the risk of duplication and wasted the opportunity for cooperative efforts that might address greater and more important objectives. The lack of coordination also hampered shared learning about many aspects of government, including figuring out who were the appropriate public servants to contact for clearances and information.

Given the challenges his government faced in dealing with foundations and the wave of outside help that appeared on the horizon, Davis realized his government needed a new way to address such concerns. He said the benefits of investing in a

new mechanism for engagement outweighed the risks of letting foundations operate as they had been doing.

Davis said the September 2008 meeting was a critical juncture in the story of what he was about to do. “It was just then evident that you needed to have some type of vehicle that allows you then to be able to explore the opportunities that were associated with all of that goodwill and all of that interest that existed in that environment,” he said.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

Davis returned from the September meeting and engaged his colleagues at the Ministry of State in thinking about how to take advantage of this unique moment.

“I think Mr. Davis was really the first government official outside of President Sirleaf who really understood that there was this opportunity for Liberia to begin thinking about these foundations a little differently,” said Dan Hymowitz, who in 2008 served as Davis’ special assistant at the Ministry of State. Hymowitz was from the United States, and he was in Liberia on a Scott Family Fellowship, which placed young professionals in positions as assistants to senior government leaders to boost capacity at the top levels of government. (Philanthropist Edward Scott Jr. had pledged the initial US\$1 million for the first round of fellowships. Other donors, including the Open Society Institute, provided subsequent funding.)

With an eye to the challenges his government faced and with Sirleaf’s endorsement, Davis asked Hymowitz and Radelet, the president’s economic adviser, to help him craft a proposal for a new office that would work specifically with private foundations and philanthropies. There were few places they could look for inspiration. Albania and Indonesia had created government-run units to help manage donor contributions in the wake of conflict and

natural disaster, respectively, yet those countries’ units had more in common with the Liberia Reconstruction and Development Committee, because they had broad responsibilities for all kinds of donors.

Davis decided to design the unit in a way that was sensitive to the unique needs and expectations of foundations and how those considerations fit into the challenges the Liberian government faced. Davis spent the next few months talking with people at some of the foundations that had been represented at the September meeting. “There were a couple of things that we recognized early on,” Davis said. “When high-net-worth folks make a decision that they want to write a check or support a program, they want to do it quickly. ... To then subject them to the bureaucracies of government, after a while that can quickly become a turnoff, because of course this person now has to sit with a minister, understand what the program is and all of that.”

Davis also knew that many funders worried the recipients of their grants might not have the proper financial safeguards in place or might be unable to fulfill basic requirements such as writing status reports.

In early 2009, well aware of the challenges the government faced and with an appreciation for foundations’ own needs, Sirleaf and Davis settled on the idea of creating outside the existing LRDC structure a new office that would deal exclusively with foundations and philanthropies.

Sirleaf decided that the unit, to be called the Philanthropy Secretariat, would be part of her office. The unit would link foundations and philanthropies with local NGOs and government institutions that were tackling presidential priorities.

Davis said that positioning the office at the center of government had a number of advantages. First, the decision signaled to the philanthropic community that Sirleaf set a high priority on

engagement with them. Second, members of the philanthropic community had been saying all along that they wanted to help the president develop her country. But those same organizations usually worked through private channels rather than through the government. Davis said Sirleaf's direct link to the new office would encourage philanthropies and foundations to work with the secretariat to advance common priorities.

A third advantage of having the secretariat within the presidency was to coordinate funding both to and between different ministries. "If you're sitting within a line ministry, you may not be able to go to one of the other ministries as easily and explain what you're doing," Hymowitz said. "It definitely helped put us in a place to better interact with the rest of the government." From the funders' perspective, being able to go to a central office that could work across various levels of government to answer questions would cut down on bureaucratic hurdles.

In addition to housing the Philanthropy Secretariat in the Office of the President, Davis also decided the unit should have a full-time staff. Davis said that having a dedicated staff would reduce the burden on him and other government officials. He picked Hymowitz, who was set to complete his yearlong Scott Family Fellowship in the spring of 2009, to manage the day-to-day operations of the office. Davis, in his capacity as minister of state without portfolio, would have oversight of the office, as he had for all offices and suboffices that fell under the Ministry of State.

Although this strategy risked infringing on Davis' scarce time, Hymowitz, in the role of program manager, would handle all administrative chores. Davis planned to add more staff after the office was up and running.

In considering the key functions of the new office, Davis and Hymowitz (who was still based at the Ministry of State) decided information sharing was crucial. Davis said the best way to get funders to support government priorities was to

make sure the secretariat conveyed those goals in clear terms. "We wanted first and foremost, then, to allow this person who wants to support Ellen Sirleaf to quickly understand what her agenda is, quickly understand what her priorities are, so that they can then see which one of those areas or which one of her priorities is better suited to the areas that they would like to support," Davis said.

Staff would also have the job of linking potential funders with local organizations and government ministries that had projects either under way or in the planning stage. Davis and Hymowitz knew they could do little to persuade a funder whose mission involved a particular sector, like education, to support, say, a health-related priority, but they could try to ensure that any education-focused grant filled a priority need. They also said foundations were more likely to coordinate their Liberian activities if they had complete, up-to-date information on what others were doing.

Finally, to address foundations' concerns that local organizations and government institutions lacked the means and skills to comply with grantees' requirements, secretariat staff would be prepared to intervene at any time to resolve differences or to facilitate planning and implementation. Such intervention might include reminding a grantee of a looming reporting deadline or providing a conduit for communications between grantees and funders.

The Liberian government was strapped for cash, and Davis knew that operating costs for the office, including salaries for staff, would have to come from external partners. Davis and Hymowitz next sought to attract funding for the secretariat. They set down their plans in a concept note to the foundations whose representatives had attended the September 2008 meeting.

Humanity United, the NoVo Foundation, the McCall MacBain Foundation, the Daphne Foundation and one anonymous donor agreed to fund the secretariat as a three-year pilot project.

But before cutting their checks, they cautioned Davis to be aware of the risks that might concern other grant providers, especially because of the secretariat's position in the presidency. What if the government used the funders' gifts as a way to reward supporters by selectively choosing which organizations to recommend for funding? What if the government's priorities did not make sense? What if the secretariat became just another bureaucratic hurdle? Should the government really be part of an equation in which money was going to nongovernmental organizations, which by design and function were supposed to be outside government control?

Hymowitz said the questions raised by the foundations were instructive because "it helped us to understand that we were in a delicate space." Davis and Hymowitz would have to tread carefully, developing solutions as challenges arose.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

The government officially launched the Philanthropy Secretariat in April 2009. With Dan Hymowitz as the sole full-time staff member, the office felt more like an entrepreneurial incubator than an institution of the presidency. "It was a start-up, so you're kind of feeling your way around a little bit," said Hymowitz, describing the first few months in his new role. "There were a lot of ways in which you're learning as you go."

Hymowitz and his boss, Davis, who checked in regularly, were bursting with ideas but decided to take a step-by-step approach in the early going. After studying Sirleaf's top priorities, they identified the local NGOs working in Liberia, the projects those organizations had under way and how those projects fit with the president's goals. Then they worked with foundations and philanthropies that wanted to play roles in Liberia's resurgence, helping those organizations develop plans in line with the government's long-term goals and most-important needs.

Collecting and sharing information

Davis and Hymowitz prioritized the matching of foundations and philanthropies with local organizations whose work helped meet the goals set forth in the 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. Hymowitz's next tasks were to come up with a list of foundations that were funding projects in Liberia and to collect information about the projects the foundations were working on.

Hymowitz leaned heavily on current donors for information about who was already contributing aid to the country, although that approach had its limits because foundations did not necessarily know the extent of each other's work. Hymowitz also searched for foundation investment information online, and he spoke with some of the more established local organizations in and around the capital city, Monrovia, to identify their donors. With a list of foundations in hand, he contacted each to find out which sectors they typically funded and which organizations they were supporting in Liberia.

A volunteer summer intern skilled in Web development then built a website that listed the foundations that Hymowitz had identified. The website also contained brief descriptions of the foundations' missions and the projects they were funding in Liberia. In addition, the intern designed the site so that information could be updated easily in the future. Secretariat staff added to the site as they learned of new foundations in Liberia, but the unit never developed a formal system to keep the information up-to-date. "I think it was an important early success for us," Hymowitz said of the website. "People felt the website was a tangible product that we had put together."

Reaching out

Also during the summer of 2009, Davis devised a plan to gather together once again with

interested foundations in New York that September. The meeting would focus on the agriculture sector, which Sirleaf had set as one of her top priorities.

This early move by the new secretariat was at once a success and a failure and provided important lessons for the future: During the civil war, hundreds of thousands of rural Liberians had moved to Monrovia to escape the fighting, while hundreds of thousands more had fled to neighboring countries. The government grew concerned that the resulting reduction in farming could cause widespread food shortages. When she took office, Sirleaf had urged Liberian farmers to return home to their fields. Now, the Ministry of Agriculture wanted to help support those who had decided to resume farming. In preparation for the meeting, the donors to the secretariat, including Humanity United and the NoVo Foundation, contacted foundations and philanthropies in their networks that might be interested in funding agriculture-related projects.

The September meeting was the secretariat's first big push to get a commitment of resources to a government priority project from both new and existing donors to Liberia. Minister of Agriculture Florence Chenoweth accompanied Davis and Hymowitz to New York, and in front of a roomful of foundation and philanthropies, she described in detail the projects her ministry needed help financing. By the time the meeting concluded, the minister had received US\$300,000 in commitments to fund an initiative to clean rice fields of a waterborne parasite that had sickened farmers.

Not every potential partnership was so successful, however. Liberian ministries sometimes had too little internal capacity to comply with donor requirements. Yvonne Moore, executive director of the Daphne Foundation (cofounded by Abigail Disney, Walt Disney's grandniece), attended the September meeting and had shared in the US\$300,000 agriculture pledge.

Moore recalled that challenges began shortly after the ministry submitted its formal grant proposal to the donors. "I don't think they understood that the information they gave us in their proposal wasn't thorough and complete—at the very least what we, as private donors, usually expect from a proposal," Moore said. The donors said the proposal contained major gaps such as the location of targeted areas and how many people would benefit.

Because the Ministry of Agriculture's handful of skilled staffers were already swamped with other work, they struggled to find the information the donors were calling for. Finally, the minister had to do it personally.

"I believe one of the most frustrating things for both parties was that it shouldn't have been the minister of agriculture herself dealing with the clarification of a grant proposal," said Moore, who corresponded with the minister frequently by phone and email. "It should have been her researchers or her director of research. I asked myself, 'Why am I talking to the minister of agriculture of a *country*?' While honored, I always wondered, 'Where is her support staff? Where are the people who help her carry out the ministry's efforts?'"

Although the foundations turned to the Philanthropy Secretariat for help, the office could do little more than urge the ministry to do everything it could to fill the holes in the grant proposal. After nearly a year, the funders withdrew their commitments.

Making introductions

Returning from the September 2009 meeting, Davis and Hymowitz were pleased that foundations had chosen to fund the Ministry of Agriculture. But both of them realized that in order to attract the substantial investments Liberia needed to meet its development goals, they had to find a way to persuade more foundations to fund local grassroots groups. They decided direct

communication might work best, and Hymowitz took responsibility for figuring out how to get funders and potential grantees to talk.

In February 2010, the Philanthropy Secretariat hosted the first of two visits to Liberia by a select group of funders. In advance of the visit, Hymowitz, together with Jennah Scott, a Liberian American whom the secretariat had just hired as its program assistant, developed a list of criteria for selecting organizations to introduce to funders.

Hymowitz and Scott considered a number of factors when selecting the local groups that would be represented at the meeting. For example, because the visiting funders had a limited amount of time and because poor roads hampered travel outside Monrovia, the secretariat looked for organizations that worked in and around the capital. Aware that funders had varied and specific areas of concentration, Hymowitz and Scott tried to choose programs in a variety of fields. After drawing up the criteria, the duo then spent several months meeting with the programs' leaders to determine which of the organizations should be included on the master list of investment prospects.

Another issue Hymowitz and Scott encountered early on was figuring out how local Liberian organizations would actually receive funds from U.S.-based donors. Because none of the local organizations were registered as American 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations, potential funders were unable to take advantage of significant benefits in U.S. tax laws. To get around that problem, Hymowitz and Scott identified two U.S.-based groups to serve as financial intermediaries. Funders transferred their contributions to the GlobalGiving Foundation and the Arabella Advisors New Venture Fund (both of which had 501(c)(3) status), which then distributed the money to the local Liberian

organizations. The intermediaries charged modest fees based on the sizes of the contributions.

Twenty funder representatives, recruited mostly by the secretariat's donors, made the first trip. The secretariat took care of all of the logistical arrangements, including booking flights, reserving hotel rooms and renting vehicles. Organizations like THINK (Touching Humanity in Need of Kindness), which worked with former female child soldiers and survivors of gender-based violence, received grants as a direct result of the donors' visit. Pleased with the outcome of the 2010 trip, the secretariat hosted a second visit of philanthropists and foundations in March 2011.

Making it work

In the fall of 2010, Hymowitz and Scott began planning the 2011 foundation visit. They were aware that many of the local organizations had little capacity for meeting grantees' requirements, such as formulating budgets and grant writing, and that the secretariat did not have the capacity to provide detailed technical assistance. Even ministries had troubles developing required data and information, as shown by the difficulties that attended the initial US\$300,000 pledge for agricultural grants.

Lacking the authority and resources to address such deficiencies directly, the secretariat did what it could and helped when possible. In advance of the funders' 2011 visit, secretariat staff held a workshop that provided local organizations with tips on how to prepare for a site visit by funders and how to respond to the types of questions visitors typically asked. Hymowitz and Scott were careful to select local organizations that had reasonably strong chances of meeting the funders' expectations. The secretariat required organizations to complete written applications that demonstrated whether they had the capacity to handle the required paperwork.

The 2010 and 2011 visits were not the only times foundations and philanthropies came to Liberia. Some chose to visit on an individual basis. Those that reached out to the secretariat received assistance.

Working with the Gates Foundation

In late 2009, Sam Sternin, a program officer at the Gates Foundation, called the secretariat to ask about service-delivery problems in Monrovia and which donors were already helping address the city's challenges. He said the Gates Foundation was looking to partner with five African city governments to promote joint projects between city administrators and organized groups representing the urban poor.

Davis solicited ideas from Monrovia's mayor, Mary Broh, and passed them along to the Gates Foundation. Based on its own set of priorities, the foundation expressed interest in helping clean up solid waste around the capital. But after visiting the capital, Sternin became concerned that the city did not have the financial-management capability to handle the proposed multimillion-dollar grant.

Sternin turned to the Philanthropy Secretariat for help. He recalled that "the Philanthropy Secretariat showed me the various mechanisms donors had used to support Liberian government institutions. They helped me get meetings with some of those people who had used those different channels, so that I could figure out what the pluses and minuses were."

After evaluating various possibilities with the secretariat's help, the Gates Foundation decided to funnel its grant through the Project Financial Management Unit at the Ministry of Finance. Created in 2007 and having no formal relationship with the secretariat, the unit held the purse strings for a number of projects in Liberia, where donors wanted Liberians to be in charge but felt that tighter financial controls were needed. "It's an agency that is there that can keep

an eye on things and help with financial reporting," Sternin said. "There is no way the city of Monrovia could have handled a multimillion-dollar project when it was starting out."

The secretariat continued to play an important role as the Gates project moved forward. In April 2010, Frank Krah, a Liberian whom Mayor Broh had put in charge of managing the project, submitted a draft proposal to the Gates Foundation. The foundation replied with a host of questions and comments, some of which asked for detailed facts and figures that were not readily available. Krah struggled to come up with the required information. On the day before the second draft deadline in mid-May, the foundation emailed Krah to remind him of the deadline and warned that a late submission could jeopardize Monrovia's chance of receiving the grant. Krah explained his dilemma: "I was working on the proposal as an individual, and the kind of data needed for the proposal was not readily available or forthcoming."

Aware that Krah needed assistance, the Gates Foundation reached out to the secretariat, which moved quickly to hire a Liberian consultant who would help revise the grant proposal. Krah managed to submit the final proposal by the May 26 deadline. "It was definitely a sort of intervention where, as the donor, we were saying we really want to do this, but the city of Monrovia was kind of stuck, and we were running out of time," said Sternin. "They [the secretariat] were able to go in and assist the city to finalize the proposal. So that was the critical intervention without which the project may not have happened."

The Gates Foundation approved the project in June 2010, and the Philanthropy Secretariat helped city hall organize a press conference to announce the award. The media gathering provided the secretariat an opportunity to publicize its tight links to President Sirleaf as well as its readiness to help foundations and

philanthropies become involved in Liberia’s development. Krah recalled that Davis delivered remarks that “reflected the president’s own knowledge and endorsement of the project. That kind of support was very important.” Krah said that Davis “thanked the president and asked for additional private donors to help the reconstruction effort.”

Helping smaller donors

Foundations much smaller than Gates also benefited from the secretariat’s assistance, especially from introductions the secretariat facilitated. Moore of the Daphne Foundation recalled the events surrounding her visit in late 2011. “We had been anxious to work in the rural counties, and the office helped me access some of those areas of interest,” Moore said. Ahead of Moore’s visit, staff from the secretariat, which by now had grown to three people, including Hymowitz and program assistant Scott, made a 20-hour round-trip drive to a remote area of Liberia and identified several organizations that fit within the foundation’s mission of supporting alternative energy, microenterprise and women’s empowerment.

During the single week that she was in Liberia, Moore was able to meet with representatives of five local organizations that were active in Daphne’s targeted areas. “The reality is that we’re not going to have staff in Liberia anytime soon,” Moore said. “So when I’m there, I’m trying to maximize every visit.” In 2012, Moore was still deciding whether Daphne would make grants to any of the organizations she visited.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

By design, the secretariat matched foundations and philanthropists with local organizations whose projects advanced government priorities. But that matching function ran the risk of partisan manipulation. Some civil

society leaders in Liberia expressed concern that the secretariat could influence donors’ decisions about which nongovernmental organizations to support.

James Yarsiah, who cofounded civil rights organization the Rights and Rice Foundation and was a member of the New African Research and Development Agency, raised concerns about the extent to which civil society organizations should align their work with government priorities. “At some point, I kept hearing from our donors, ‘How is this aligned with government priorities?’” said Yarsiah, who questioned what the term *alignment* meant. “Yes, we want to be moving in the general direction of macropolicy of government, but certain things will not be aligned, and they’re not supposed to be.”

Relocating the secretariat out of the presidency might have dampened concerns about partisan influence, but Davis suggested the office’s location was a key reason for its success and that neither he nor the president ever favored locating the unit elsewhere. “It [the secretariat] needed always to continue to have that relationship with the head of state,” said Davis. “It needed to always project what are the priorities of the head of state and how foundations can plug into that.”

To lessen the risk of partisanship, Hymowitz said he took pains to introduce foundations to a broad range of groups. He said that ultimately, the decision about which organizations to feature on the foundation visits in 2010 and 2011 and throughout the year, when individual representatives visited Liberia, was based strictly on the types of projects the organizations in question worked on and whether the organizations had the capacity to absorb grants.

ASSESSING RESULTS

When Davis launched the Philanthropy Secretariat in April 2009, he did so with a set of metrics for the first year of operation that would allow him to measure the agency’s work. For

example, one target was attracting at least five new foundations or philanthropies to Liberia. When the secretariat missed its target of attracting five new foundations or philanthropies in its first year of operation, the agency retained the same goal for its second year. Every year the secretariat staff, in conjunction with the donors who funded the agency's activities, reviewed progress and updated targets, if necessary. By April 2011, the secretariat had succeeded in enticing 13 new foundations and philanthropies to make first-time grants, but a more recent total was not available.

Davis said that as of May 2012, the secretariat helped bring US\$16 million in funding to Liberia. The secretariat considered any level of interaction with a donor that resulted in a gift being made, even a phone call or email exchange, as an example of attracting money.

Davis further noted that total philanthropic contributions to Liberia over the same three-year period, including what the secretariat had brought in, totaled about US\$50 million. The \$34-million difference suggested that for roughly every dollar the secretariat helped facilitate, an additional two dollars flowed into the country without coming into contact with the secretariat.

Davis, who left the Ministry of State in December 2010 to become chairman of the National Investment Commission, another presidentially appointed position, had set a secretariat goal of drawing philanthropic and foundation money to Liberia. But even more important goals were to ensure (1) that the money was aligned with government priorities and (2) that the process of soliciting and facilitating gifts to priority areas did not infringe on government officials' already scarce time. Creating a separate office in the presidency with its own dedicated staff gradually freed up Davis to focus on more important tasks in his roles as minister of state without portfolio and chairman of the LRDC secretariat. Hymowitz had nearly completed his yearlong fellowship as a Scott Family Fellow

attached to Davis when Davis tapped him to become program manager of the secretariat.

Hymowitz said one of the secretariat's innovations was to spur funders to think about engaging with the government. "Foundations have often traditionally not thought of themselves as partners with government," he said. "So this was a soft way to engage them that was tailored to them and tried to get them to think about some of those things. To think about the country's national plan, the country's priorities, to fund local projects and to work together when possible."

The prevailing view of representatives from foundations and local organizations who had come into contact with the secretariat was that the secretariat served a useful role in opening doors and matching donors with needs. "I think for us—because we are a small family foundation and our capacity is not that high and because this was our first foray into international giving—to have its support and access to questions and resources and data, it was pretty incredible and remains so," said Moore of the Daphne Foundation. "For us, it was a way to maximize our capacity."

Yet both funders and local organizations stressed the need for sustained support from the secretariat throughout the grant process. For example, by assisting organizations with grant report writing, the secretariat might have increased the chances that foundations would continue to fund the organizations. By helping organizations think strategically about their work plans, the office could have helped organization leaders work more effectively.

Support for the secretariat was in question as the unit reached the end of its startup phase. In an effort to plan for the future, the secretariat staff met with contributors in April 2011. By then, Davis was with the National Investment Commission, but because his job was to promote investment opportunities for Liberia and because he had strong relationships with the secretariat's donors, Sirleaf asked him to attend the meeting.

“We received strong affirmation from our partners of the relevance of the secretariat, the role that it had played and the need for a secretariat of this nature to continue,” Davis said. Not only did all of the existing donors agree to fund the office past the pilot phase, but new donors like the Rockefeller Foundation and the Natembea Foundation—a small, Delaware-based family foundation—pledged money as well.

REFLECTIONS

Pondering the Philanthropy Secretariat’s design and function, program manager Dan Hymowitz said the first reason for success was that the office filled a demand from both the government and foundations. Government officials wanted to be strategic about attracting funding to priority areas in government in a way that did not put additional strain on their time, and foundations wanted to help President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf advance her vision for developing Liberia.

Hymowitz also noted that having a strong leader like Natty Davis, minister of state without portfolio, was crucial to the secretariat’s success. Hymowitz said government officials respected Davis and knew he had the ear of the president, as did donors who viewed Davis as a capable leader familiar with the reconstruction effort and well versed in dealing with international funders. “When I think about how a Philanthropy

Secretariat could work outside Liberia, I always think about someone like him [Davis] and how you’d need to find someone with a lot of the unique characteristics that he had,” said Hymowitz. “I think that person needs to have stature within the government, at the level of a Cabinet official. I think they need to be known to the donor community. I think they need to be one of those people that the donors look to meet with every time they’re in the country. So I think they need to have that credibility.”

Davis recognized early in the reconstruction phase that to attain its development goals, Liberia needed contributions from foundations and philanthropies. Speaking to a group of philanthropists just months after the secretariat launched in 2009, Davis noted how many different moving parts there are in a postconflict country. “You have your multilateral partnerships, your bilateral partnerships, which bring about a certain kind of assistance,” Davis told the audience. “But equally so you also need your NGO partnerships and also your philanthropic and your foundation partnerships, because it allows you then to put those different components and pieces together and probably get a better whole. ... That’s why it has been so critical for us to put in place a mechanism that we can try to exploit in terms of managing those relationships with philanthropists and being able to achieve our goals.”¹

CORRECTION: A previous version of the case study incorrectly stated the goals Natty Davis set when he launched the Philanthropy Secretariat.

Endnotes

¹ Transcript of Proceedings at the 8th Annual Conference, 2009 Global Philanthropy Forum. (2010): 342 <http://www.philanthropyforum.org/conferences/2009/agenda/2009-GPF-Conf-Transcript-Final.pdf>.

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