



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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Interviewer: Summer Lopez

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LOPEZ: This civil service interview is with Richard Panton, Deputy Director General for Training and Development at the Liberia Institute of Public Administration (LIPA). The interviewer is Summer Lopez.

Mr. Panton, thank you for agreeing to speak with us today. I'd like to start by just asking you to describe the role that you have played in public sector reform here in Liberia.

PANTON: *I have been involved with helping to design training programs that were in the public service. As you are aware, we are just coming from a civil crisis. The civil service system in Liberia over the years has been very bloated and the need for reform cannot be overemphasized. Once the reform has taken off, the need then is to provide training programs in those areas that are critical. However, we are doing it in an incremental fashion.*

*The incrementality of this has to do with the fact that the Civil Service Agency has just completed a major program. First we started with the issue of reviewing the government payroll to active government employees from those who are not active, those who meet retirement criteria and those who are supposed to be redeployed in other areas as well as streamlining the positions in the civil service.*

*Now, our civil service system is quite different from other civil service in West Africa in that it did not grow to be institutionalized, it was interrupted. As you know, the last 25 years we have been in political turmoil in Liberia. So we have some unusual arrangements in civil service. Our training programs in Liberia Institute of Public Administration are not really like what you do in Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, or other countries where the programs are targeting entry level areas or what have you. The lotto system is not very clear. What do I mean by that?*

*As a result of the reform we are now getting to the point where there will be a systematic approach to training programs. This will be informed by the national training needs assessment that is about to be launched by the Liberian Institute of Public Administration in collaboration with the Civil Service Agency. As a result of the national training needs assessment, the report that will come from there will now put us in the best framework to design the requisite training programs that will target specific jobs in the civil service.*

LOPEZ: So what is your particular position in all this?

PANTON: *What we are doing now, I am working alongside the department of research to design the research instrument that will be administered across the country. We are doing it in a way that we are looking for the needs to determine the gaps in the various positions or jobs that exist in the civil service. By doing the needs assessment we are actually finding the existing jobs in the civil service. Doing the existing jobs and the gaps in the training levels of the occupants, we will be able to develop relevant courses or targets.*

*What we are doing now is just general training in records management, project planning and management, managing the boss, general management, human resources management, financial management and a few other assignments that come from partners in the UN. We did the women and leadership program for 350 women across Liberia. We are about to do the local government financial management training program for the county development fund managers.*

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*These are things intended to create awareness, continue to build the skills and capacities of people who are currently on the job until a comprehensive design that will be approved by the cabinet in terms of the jobs existing and the training requirement for such positions. So we are doing these to just build the capacities of all those who are in civil service. So I am involved in all of these activities, designing and also facilitating training programs around the country.*

LOPEZ: Great. We'll come back to some of those specific programs a little bit more in just a few minutes but can I ask you how you became involved in this work? Did the government ask for your assistance or was it just a natural extension of your job?

PANTON: *I joined the Liberian Institute of Public Administration in 1998 in the capacity of a Special Assistant to the then Director-General. After a few years of work I got a scholarship from the Institute to study a Master's in Development Management at the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration. I returned home in 2003 sure of my commitment to government for this scholarship. Upon my arrival I was promoted to the position of Deputy Director-General for Training and currently in the position of Deputy Director-General for Training of the Institute.*

*My first degree is Bachelor of Economics from the University of Liberia. Before then I'd been working in public service in all areas, starting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a cadet, then moving to the Ministry of State for Presidential Affairs. Then the interruption came, I had to leave. Then in 1998 rejoined the civil service.*

LOPEZ: Great. Would you say some of those jobs that you had beforehand prepared you for some of the challenges you faced?

PANTON: *When I was a cadet. I joined government in 1985. I was then on my way to the university. I joined government as a cadet in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and I was assigned in the office of the Deputy Minister for Administration where my duties were to receive letters, letters written to the departments and follow up on issues that may be required by the minister. After a certain period of time when I reached to the level of junior in the university I was promoted to professional analyst. My job therefore was to take personnel statistics, follow up on leave and employment between the Bureau of the Budget and the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So I gained an understanding of how government bureaucracy operates by then. I also went to the executive management and that led me to understand the power play in politics at the level of the executives and the ministries where you see scarce resources being juggled by the demands from centers of power, ministries having their interests. So all of that prepared me to develop interest in public service work.*

LOPEZ: Could you talk a little bit about capacity in the public sector, perhaps both when you started and—?

PANTON: *Well, I left before the civil war. There was adequate capacity, well-trained manpower in public service. People with university degrees, second and third degrees and civil servants who were grounded in terms of understanding the bureaucracy. As a result of the war and the downward trend in the economy, no educated man would want to make sacrifice in public service then, not being able to go home. So people would have to drift toward private sector, nongovernment organizations, the United Nations. As a result of that, the public service capacity began to decline. That was coupled with the fact that the country was under very transitional arrangements and each transitional arrangement had its own*

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*requirements. Some would be required to come with their own public service workers. They don't take into consideration educational and professional experience and expertise. So this government inherited a backlog of untrained civil servants. So we have a capacity problem.*

*Another thing we need to do intensive research. When we talk about capacity, lack of capacity, before I could say sufficiently, I must have evidence. What I'm saying may be incorrect, there could be capacity but not being utilized. So capacity utilization is an issue that we must look at in the civil service, capacity utilization. You see, as I said earlier, our civil service system is arranged such that the civil servants are not protected. They have no protection, there is no guarantee that when a government comes tomorrow you remain where you are. You could be shifted. Maybe you have been trained over time but you are sitting down idle. Then we talk about lack of capacity. Are you following?*

*If you depoliticize the civil service and it is just a civil service based on professional core of efforts, where the individuals are employed through the system and then they are promoted through the system and their job is to be loyal in the distribution and delivery of social services, devoid of political considerations, then you'd be very careful to talk about lack of capacity or under-utilization of capabilities.*

LOPEZ: You've described a little bit of the history of public sector reform here. Could you just mention some of what you see as the primary current objectives and goals and who has really led the effort for public service reform?

PANTON: *Well, we were looking for a small government, lean government, government that should be effective in the delivery of social services to meet with the objective contract between the citizens and the state. So when the current government came to power, one of the major objectives was public sector reform. So a Governance Reform Commission was set up and the result is the current agreement which is now transformed into the Governance Commission (GC). Now the Governance Commission has clusters. You have the Civil Service Agency that is directly responsible to look at civil service. Then you have the Commission itself that is responsible for the entire bureaucracy. So the Civil Service Agency is looking at the payroll structure, the age structure, qualifications, systems of promotion, recruitment and selection, all of that.*

*Whereas the Liberia Institute of Public Administration is looking at, out of all of these, to design a curriculum coupled with a series of courses that will acculturate civil servants in the system.*

LOPEZ: So to some extent civil service reform and public service reform was built into the Peace Accords?

PANTON: *Yes, it started from the Peace Accords.*

LOPEZ: Do you think that there was an effort to sit down and consider which steps should come first or did key actors seize a window of opportunity?

PANTON: *As a result of the Accra Agreements that indeed the public service should be reformed to correct the errors of the past the Commission was set up. The key actors looked at that mandate and tried to conceptualize how to go about it. So a series of interventions were done. As we are now, the Governance Commission is looking into the issue of rightsizing the bureaucracy, downsizing, rightsizing the*

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*bureaucracy to make sure that there is no duplication of function between ministries and agencies of government. Whereas the Civil Service Agency is looking at the system of civil service in terms of the merit, introducing the merit-based civil service system.*

LOPEZ: Looking back at these choices do you think that different priorities should have received more attention or was the choice of priorities about right?

PANTON: *Well, we are in a slow pace. First of all, this is a report, now.*

LOPEZ: This is the Civil Service Reform Strategy.

PANTON: *Yes, there is a smaller government. There is a civil service reform strategy. The implementation is where that counts for me. I'm looking in terms of the implementation.*

LOPEZ: What has been the level of political commitment to public sector reform?

PANTON: *Well, there is, unlike before, there is a demonstrated commitment on the part of the executives. That commitment has been demonstrated by the President's support in attending meetings and workshops, geared toward streamlining civil service where the President makes inputs into the discussions of civil service reform. The international partners like DFID (United Kingdom's Department for International Development), USAID (United States Agency for International Development), and so on, I see a commitment on the part of both the government and our international partners.*

LOPEZ: Has the support been throughout the government or has it come primarily from the highest levels?

PANTON: *Throughout the government, because the policy decisions is a government decision and so there is support of the cabinet and the rank and file.*

LOPEZ: Okay, let's talk a little more specifically about training programs and capacity building. Let's sort of start from the beginning. What has been the sort of general plan for training? Has it been to create—the institute already exists. What is the plan to create a training program, can you describe that a little?

PANTON: *As you know the Liberia Institute of Public Administration started in 1969 through an effort of the United States of America, USAID mainly. It has been doing its job. But where we are currently, we are currently running short-term programs in public sector management. As I said to you we are running short-term programs. We have record management, general management, managing the polls, women in management, human resources management. The course will be closing tomorrow, it is a one-month course for personnel directors, people who deal specifically with human resource management issues course. We have strategic management. These are high-level managers and ministers, consisting of strategic thinking and planning, project planning and management. They are designed for a government coming out of war. We have resolved monitoring and evaluation. We have the PRS. How do we know that the PRS is succeeding? We have to have a monitoring mechanism. So therefore we must train public servants in monitoring, especially people who are in that area.*

LOPEZ: The PRS is the Poverty Reduction Strategy?

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- PANTON:** *Yes. And financial management which is very crucial, public sector budgeting. We have policy analysis. So these programs are first hand programs we are running anticipating the finalization of the trainees assessment, which will now determine the actual needs of the civil service. By then the implementation framework of the strategy will have also been finalized. Then we will just move into targeted areas, specialized areas by the needs that we will be informed of. But for now, in the short run, we are meeting the capacity needs of the civil service.*
- LOPEZ:** How did you determine these areas of need?
- PANTON:** *We did a quick impact assessment, a few interviews, go in there and see what is there, and look at the various jobs that exist and see what type of training you can inject into these occupants so that their capacity will be going up while we are doing a real training needs assessment.*
- LOPEZ:** Who did you interview?
- PANTON:** *Civil servants, as they come to our training program we do evaluations. We do two sets of evaluation, pre-training evaluation. Before you come we ask you what are you doing? How best have you been able to do? What are your constraints? What are the areas you think you need to improve in order to do your job best? So when you do that pre-training evaluation, then at the end of the training we found out to what extent have you been improved or what is lacking. We are about to also do follow-up to see whether they are performing in anticipation of the results from the national training needs assessment.*
- LOPEZ:** What will the follow-up involve?
- PANTON:** *It would be, we will design an instrument that we will send to both the participants and their supervisors.*
- LOPEZ:** Who is developing the instrument?
- PANTON:** *The resource department will be commissioned to do that. We are coming up with suggestions and then the resource department will take that on as necessary. We have not finalized it yet. They haven't been commissioned.*
- LOPEZ:** Aside from some of these areas you've mentioned here, would you describe what key players have perceived as the core competencies or skills that are missing and are most needed?
- PANTON:** *You have here key management skills, decision making skills, supervisory skills. Then you have financial issues. Managing money is difficult. You receive the money and you have adequate skills in reporting the utilization of the money. So those are key areas that we are looking at to build up the capacity of financial management. Strategic management, where are you taking the organization. The government objective of building a society in which there will be, the hallmark is good governance that has managers who understand the tenets of good governance? How do you go about it? So institutionally, how does the Liberia Institute of Public Administration fit within this? So we have to do strategic thinking. So strategic management for managers who come together and conceptualize the government framework and how best to know where we are, where we want to go and how can we get there.*

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LOPEZ: Who has helped to oversee these changes?

PANTON: *Who helped? The central government.*

LOPEZ: Can you describe maybe some of the training programs specifically, programs that you have helped to design or manage?

PANTON: *For example, women in management. As you are aware, as a result of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Women for full participation in government, training institutions in West Africa in the early '80s, middle '90s, met at a conference and in fulfillment of the UN mandate, Women's Conference in Nigeria, to design a course to target women's capacity in management, for women managers in the public and private sector. To give them the required skills to actually work alongside their male counterparts efficiently and effectively. Women managers, they have the talent, but they always are in the back. They're not too assertive, they may have constraints because of the male bias. How do they get out of this?*

*So yearly we run two times a women- in-management program where we bring women managers, middle and senior-level managers together to train them in the issue of management, conflict resolution, leadership, the politics of organization. Instead of giving an awareness as to their roles in society, what do they think they're supposed to do. In that course we also include a content for human rights, human rights and obligations, to know that they are equal to their male partners. So we are instructing in management issues, there are cross-cutting issues, gender issues in management, decision making, communication skills, conflict resolution and many other things. To build their capacity so that they would have the skills that would empower them sufficiently to do their jobs at the work place, to the extent that when they are working alongside their male counterparts, they have confidence.*

LOPEZ: Can you talk a little bit about what strategies you use to actually get that message across? What is the curriculum? What is the—?

PANTON: *Our strategy, the methodology we use, is I would say a multifaceted and multi-methodology. There is normal academic lecture, traditional academic lecture. Then we have case studies and we have study care groups where women get together to discuss and share knowledge and issues. More or less a participatory, coupled with participatory approaches besides the lecture, but participatory approaches, sharing experiences and views. Given case studies as to things that happen to women and men in the workplace and finally solutions to problems, problem solving techniques and all those kinds of things. It is multifaceted really.*

LOPEZ: How are the women selected to participate in the program?

PANTON: *We write to the ministries. For example, if we are talking about general management at the middle level, we write to the ministries to send directors, assistant directors, assistant ministers, section heads, unit heads and what have you to come to that program. If at the senior level minister, we talk about deputy ministers and all of that. Some of the women who have benefited from our training policing today are in the legislature. A few of them are in the legislature.*

LOPEZ: You said this program happens once a year?

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- PANTON: Yes, once a year.
- LOPEZ: How is the training provided? Do they come here?
- PANTON: Yes. We are happy today to be here as the result of the support from DFID, the British Department for International Development. They assisted us to get here. Where we were before, if you had gone there you would see that there was no training because the environment was not conducive. But we are here, they come here. We have three training rooms so three levels of training could go on simultaneously.
- LOPEZ: Are gender issues addressed in the general management training as well?
- PANTON: Yes, gender issues are addressed in the general management training policing. It is a content of itself that must be addressed. Women also, we know guys—.
- LOPEZ: What has been the response to that?
- PANTON: They are very excited to tell, look, we've got some skills, but culture meant that we be at the back, and they have been very bad to us. Now that there is this growing advocacy for women's participation—. They will tell you their feelings, their capabilities that have been denied over centuries. They have the capacity but they were brought up in a way that a man is much more the dominant figure. But they are getting more women now, and having a woman President in Liberia gave them that strength enough to come up. But it is a bit difficult anyway, they are challenged by the circumstances.
- LOPEZ: Has there been follow up on the women-in-management program?
- PANTON: We had been bogged down as a result of the budget to conduct a general follow up of our training programs.
- LOPEZ: Some of the other training programs that you have been involved with—.
- PANTON: You're talking about human resources management. We talk to personnel directors and managers and they share knowledge on the headache of recruitment and selection, staff development, settling grievances and all kinds of things. So we drill them through the bits and pieces of human resources management and the concepts, the issues. How do you go about recruiting people? What are the processes that you go through? What is your promotion system? Do you have a job description, the requirements for the job? Once those things are met, then you have a procurement system? If you are employed it's a form of procurement, it has to be advertised for everybody to compete equally.
- So all of these things are taken into consideration. In terms of finances, how do you advise on provisional resources for the benefit of the organization?  
[interruption]
- LOPEZ: This is part two with Mr. Panton. So we were talking about—?
- PANTON: The program content in human resources management. The same methodology is used—participatory, normal lectures also and case studies, problems and all of that.
- LOPEZ: Who develops the curriculum?

- PANTON: *Ourselves. We also rely on consultants to come and join us. We have a pool of consultants, training consultants outside whom we draw on from time to time based on the expertise of the areas.*
- LOPEZ: Where do most of those consultants come from?
- PANTON: *Some are university lecturers, some are in the community.*
- LOPEZ: Are there courses being offered in other parts of the country or is it primarily just in Monrovia?
- PANTON: *We have just finalized a management resolution to divide the country into three regions: the southeastern region, the western region and the central region. Now what we intend to do is, in each region we have an office and we will run training programs for those regions instead of bringing everybody to Monrovia. So what we have done for the start, we have just leased a building in the central region preferably in Bong county. We just leased a building for three years. It will be our regional training center for central Liberia. So we will bring the civil servants or public servants as you may call it generally. We will bring them to each of these training centers and run courses from there. Sometime we may have satellite training programs.*
- LOPEZ: In those cases where people have to travel a ways to get to the training is transportation provided for them?
- PANTON: *Yes, normally if they are supposed to be moving from their assignment to the training site, it is required that the nominating agency provide transportation for them. Our job is to feed them and give them training. They provide transportation and accommodation in that sense, if they are brought to the center, the regional center.*
- LOPEZ: So in general the trainings are advertised to the ministries and they nominate people and that is the procedure?
- PANTON: Yes.
- LOPEZ: If people are not nominated but interested in attending the training what can they do?
- PANTON: *Then they come as individuals, private participants.*
- LOPEZ: Then they have to pay?
- PANTON: *Of course they have to pay, based on the duration of the course.*
- LOPEZ: In developing these trainings and strategies, have the experiences of any other countries been helpful or instructive?
- PANTON: *Yes, because many of us have had training abroad and we have gone for training of trainers. I went to South Africa, Ghana. Some of my colleagues went to Nigeria to do training of trainers. So the best practices are always taken into consideration. One of the best practices that we have copied and begun to put into use is where you invite key participants, who you expect to participate in the course and then share experiences with you before you even design a course.*

LOPEZ: Are there other things that you have particularly applied that you learned from those experiences?

PANTON: *Yes, you get to know what people really want to see in the course, what content they want, that they have interest in. When they sit with you and you try to ask them what are some of the things that you think and they start to tell you, I find it difficult understanding government procedure on employment processing, the employment form. Or I don't understand the relationship between labor law and civil service regulation. The civil service is saying this and labor law is saying this. We are confused what it is. So you then know that there is a need for a content on labor and employment law. So you bring somebody who comes from civil service and somebody from the labor ministry and then they discuss the issue and you will see the different relationship in terms of what is applicable under the labor law and what is not applicable and what is applicable in a civil service procedure and what is not applicable.*

LOPEZ: Have there been other training programs in Liberia which you may or may not have been involved in?

PANTON: *Yes, ministries sometimes do their own training. We're trying to institutionalize all of the training now. We do actually specialized training. There is now all the training that we should do for them. Induction should be by them, induction training because we cannot bring the employee to our site to train them about the mandate of the institution that is in the bureaucracy now. .*

LOPEZ: So do you think that once the training policy and strategy is in place that it will be LIPA that will oversee all of that?

PANTON: *Oh yes. We're straining our capacity more because there will now be a centralized training budget as a result of the training policy. The civil servants come here not paying any money, everything is from LIPA's budget.*

LOPEZ: Reflecting on the types of trainers and the rapport between and the trainers and the trainees, the curriculum, and then you follow up all of that, would you offer some guidelines to improve on operation and performance of training?

PANTON: *Yes, first of all we have some shortcomings. Everything is not well. We have shortage of equipment, training equipment.*

LOPEZ: What kind of equipment?

PANTON: *Overhead projectors, multimedia stuff, a library. Even though modern technology now requires that you use electronic communication to sort the library, but you must have money to even access the libraries around the world. So we are also looking to that aspect, to develop a modern library to help increase the capacities of our training, because the facilitators or the lecturers need modern equipment, resource materials. The trainees also need modern equipment, modern resource materials.*

*Now, in terms of the guidelines for our trainers, one of the things we do is before we even—as soon as the course is designed, and we know that we need the facility to train them, in say project design, we have our database and we look at their qualifications, their expertise in the area. That person must have expertise in project management to teach that course and must have been through a*

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*training of trainers before, because we are doing adult learning and not just anybody can go into a classroom to teach adults. Adults normally want to hear what they think they should hear. They are not like university students, these are people who have lifetime experiences. They are not to be spoon-fed. They learn by doing. So more or less our teaching, there is limitation in terms of the content of traditional lectures. They are more into activities, assignments, group work, individual presentations and all of these kinds of work, this makes the people learn more. So we ask for things, we give guidelines.*

LOPEZ: Has it been difficult to find trainers—?

PANTON: *It has been very difficult, that is a very big shortcoming. We are now trying, through support from the Africa Capacity Building Foundation, we are trying to organize a national training of trainers for our facilitators, training facilitators who through the training of trainers really in terms of adult learning methodologies. So they will know exactly what we're talking about—that when you come from a university and you come to LIPA to train, it's different.*

*At the university it is an academic exercise. Here it is less academic exercise. There is more engagement, a back and forth thing. We are bringing people who are working already. It is about upgrading their skills to do better on the job. So they come with experiences. Those kinds of things that they discuss show where there differences are.*

LOPEZ: So currently most of the trainers come from the university?

PANTON: *Some from the university, some from the private sector, plus ourselves.*

LOPEZ: A common concern with respect to training programs is often that people who receive the benefits of the training will then leave and go to work in the private sector. Has this been an issue here and has there been anything—?

PANTON: *Sometimes it happens, yes. When your qualifications begin to accelerate your taste for more money also increases. So if you come here very often for training and you look at what you are taking home at the end of the month, you are inclined to opt out into greener pastures. So sometimes some of the beneficiaries find their way into the private sector. But as it is now, there is much improvement because government has understood the need of maintaining quality service, for quality service delivery. To deliver effectively to the population you must have trained manpower. Then in order to sustain the trained manpower, you must have the means. So government is incrementally adding some percentages to the pay for the people to have reason to remain in the system.*

LOPEZ: Has there been any sort of talk of putting in a requirement that people would have to work for the government for a certain amount of time if they received government training?

PANTON: *Yes, for example, take myself as a case. The government of Liberia spent US\$5000 in Africa for me to get my Master's in Development Management. When you look at US\$5000, it was required that I work for two years. In two years my services would have paid for the \$5000. I have been here more than two years so it is a demonstration of my own commitment. So normally when you benefit from government programs you have some—especially at the second degree level there is a requirement. Also, minimal requirement at the first degree level if you are sponsored by a ministry to go to a university for specialized*

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*training. Then they may put a caveat, that you should be doing certain things. All of those things are there to sustain government, to maintain government. There is interest in terms of keeping you.*

LOPEZ: So currently that is determined by the ministry that sends you for your first degree?

PANTON: *Yes, it is the ministry's responsibility to do that. The Civil Service Agency has not come up with those kinds of requirements yet until these things are finalized.*

LOPEZ: How have current civil servants reacted to the introduction of training? Have they objected, have they found—?

PANTON: *No. In fact I am bombarded—you see this phone had to be cut off because I sit here, even though I teach in the university also. I sit here, civil servants want to know—this program was published two months ago. By this time we would be running the program but we are constrained by the budget. The central government budget for the fiscal year has just been approved by the legislature. The approval of the budget by the legislature does not mean immediate disbursement of funding. There have to be requests and every request passes through a cash management process. It takes time and it affects the training calendar.*

*So people would call, when are we having the training. The demands are high. To be frank they are very high. It is because of the quality of facilitation that is done, the quality of the training that they can receive. They go back, they are happy to produce. So more people are coming and encourage others and they want to come here too.*

LOPEZ: What have been would you say the major obstacles to implementing these programs?

PANTON: *One of the major obstacles is the budget delay. The second one is an adequate specialist in house. Sometimes I have to do three or four things. Sometimes my boss has to take the responsibility to do—if I am jammed up with other things he has to intervene. So we need a specialist in specialized areas. We talk about human resource management. I don't have to be Deputy Director General for Training and designing programs, I don't have to develop them. A specialist is there and it is their job to develop a module and run a course. There should be a specialist in every content area. I have my own specialized area but as it is now besides my specialty I have to do general activities, so we need specialists in house.*

LOPEZ: Are there particular areas that you think are the highest needs?

PANTON: *We need specialists in human resource management. We need specialists in policy analysis; that is a critical area. I would need a specialist in financial management, budgeting and financial management.*

LOPEZ: With regard to the budget delay have you been able to work around that at all?

PANTON: *We tried to find a strategy where we report something to the table of the executive, to give us the flexibility of a quarterly allotment so that our program will have the flexibility of running for every three or six months. Say we have an allotment to make a special case to an executive. This impacts negatively on our*

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*ability to constantly—in terms of the progression of our training, there is always a stop, stop, stop.*

LOPEZ: Looking back at what has occurred so far, what would you say you have been able to accomplish?

PANTON: *You know when you are committed to what you do, no matter the constraints, you always succeed. I think we are happy that over the last three years since we've been here a lot of people were trained, more than a thousand persons have been trained so far in various levels. Now it is a job that I chose to do. When you chose to work for the public service, it is sacrificial. Yes, it is sacrificial. So with all the constraints, we are determined to move on, especially so at the time of rebuilding our country.*

LOPEZ: Great. Let's try and talk a little bit about independent public service commissions. Creating an independent public service commission is obviously not an easy thing to do. I'm interesting in your observations on this based on your experience. What is the story behind the introduction of an independent public service commission here?

PANTON: *Sometime back, in the 1960s, when the Hoover Commission wrote a report on the efficiency and the effectiveness of the public service in Liberia, the report recommended the establishment of a Liberian public service administration and the civil service agency for the purpose of recruitment and testing and all of that, and training people. So the two institutions were to be created. Also they recommended the setting up of a commission that would oversee the activities of the civil service. The Constitution of Liberia requires the setting up of Civil Service Commission, so it is a constitutional obligation of every government.*

*I feel that the need for the establishment of a civil service commission is imperative to oversee activities of public service employees and ensure the adherence to merits, standards and principles. So that is a necessity actually. In one of my occasional papers, I was suggesting that the Civil Service Commission is a policy center. The Civil Service Agency is the secretariat, is the storage house for all records of civil servants and the commission is the one that does the recruitment, the placement and assignment and ensuring that civil servants are protected under the civil service law. Governments come, governments go, you, are a civil servant.*

*Promotion should be a determinant of the level of training. That makes the Liberia Institute of Public Administration very effective because if I am not trained for a job, I will not get promotion. As it is, currently, I can get promotion without training. I can get dismissed without redress. So the reform is necessary. That is what the reform is trying to address. At the end of the day, the setting of a commission is paramount.*

LOPEZ: Is that currently part of the reform strategy?

PANTON: *There are suggestions to that and I am sure we'll get there because the Constitution requires that.*

LOPEZ: Why do you think it didn't happen in the 1960s initially?

PANTON: *Well it didn't happen in the 1960s, they only set up the Public Employment Bureau, which culminated into the formation of the civil service in 1973. The Civil*

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*Service Agency started to build capacity bit by bit and in '98 the military coup came in. Then you know the story thereafter. So since then we have not really had a sense of direction to sit and think and see where we're going. We are always running for safety. Now in the process of running for safety, you cannot think competently.*

LOPEZ: Are there obstacles to the establishment of the commission now?

PANTON: *No, I don't think so. With the good will of the executive, I don't think so.*

LOPEZ: Let me move to some kind of overarching closing questions. First of all, infrastructure problems can add challenges to this. Has infrastructure been an issue for training programs as well?

PANTON: *Yes. As I sit here this morning I have a two-year lease and in one sense the day after tomorrow I should be moving from here. Two years is not fine, I'm already one year, in the middle of one year. Next year October, this year October one year over, next year October two years finished. Where do I go? So then because of that, in 2006, 2007, 2008, fiscal budget was able to provide us with money to buy 25 acres of land on the Roberts Field Highway, to construct a campus complex for training to avoid the problem of infrastructure.*

LOPEZ: That's great. Are there any particular technologies that have helped to make your program successful?

PANTON: *We're back to technology. We have introduced the multimedia system. That is what we want to do but it is costly.*

LOPEZ: Do you provide any training in technology and IT?

PANTON: *What we do is we do projections, we do PowerPoint presentations, that's all. We are limited to PowerPoint presentations, we don't go beyond that.*

LOPEZ: But can people come here to get training on computers?

PANTON: *We wish to have computer training, we are yet to have the set of computers. There are promises that were to give us computers. The ACDF is planning to give us a few computers. DFID also was going to give us some computers and we may get some support from the World Bank. We wouldn't mind getting some support from Princeton University. That will be my last discussion.*

LOPEZ: So let me ask you a few questions actually about relationships with donors. Sometimes foreign assistance can create its own set of problems. I'm wondering if you have advice you would pass on to others with regard to improving donor and host country relationships? Are there any, maybe two or three mistakes you commonly observe in the way that donor countries or international organizations conduct their relationships with host country personnel?

PANTON: *You see one of the problems we have in donor assistance is that they do not always have their own objectives, what they want. Sometimes they want to drive you into what they want, unlike what you want. There is always a problem in donor assistance generally a global trend. What is happening in the United States of America cannot actually happen here. The American political culture is different from the Liberian political culture and much as the United States wants to help, the United States has to take into consideration that this is a different*

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*political environment that has its own constraints. While it is true that best practices can be copied, which is good, but sometimes it is best for the consumer to direct and you guide to ensure that the consumer's desires have been met through your guidance.*

*If that does not happen, there is no room for sustainability. In Africa, Liberia particularly, we have a tendency of saying, "Hey, let's accept, they will soon go." When they go they are back to square one. So then what is the essence of assistance? "Let's accept, they will soon go. Once they leave I will go back to what I wanted."*

LOPEZ: So if you could offer donors some advice about how to work more effectively with the host countries?

PANTON: *It is to always entertain the suggestions of the recipient and see how best you can refine that suggestion to something beneficial to the recipient and not beneficial to you. Because the overall benefit would be to your credit. If this room was like this and you came in this morning and said, "Can I help you?" or "What are your problems?" I'd say, "This room, I don't have this, I don't have that, I don't have that." You'd say, you need it? Yes. But suppose you turn this table this way. I have seen it yesterday because you were talking and said, if it was possible, can I try and see—no it is not good this way. I want it this way but I want something else. But if you come and say, "It must go this way," then I don't have a say. You don't know my problems. You assume you know my problems. So more or less it is better to get to know what the problems are and how best they can solve those problems and what we've done to solve that problem so they know how to solve problems.*

*If you solve it for them, they will not know how to solve problems, they will always depend on you to come and solve problems for them which is not in your interest or in global politics to be that way anyway so that you come back tomorrow we need this, we need this. That's political in donor assistance. If you want to control the world. But I feel otherwise, they must be empowered. The lesson is learned. In fact we will have more solidarity for them.*

LOPEZ: Is there anything about the context or history here in Liberia that you think means that lessons learned elsewhere maybe don't apply here or don't translate well or that lessons learned here may not work well elsewhere?

PANTON: *See, every country has its own specialized condition. Every country has its own social, cultural, political dynamics. Those are issues that one must work with. Yes, they are issues that one must critically understand, the political, social cultural, political dynamics of every society. So if it works during the Marshall Plan after the Second World War when the United States introduced the Marshall Plan for Europe, why don't you want to reproduce the Marshall Plan here for Liberia? America maintained that "it's not my backyard", but I think it is. We are your colleagues in Africa now. Yes, you are an American citizen, I want to make this point to you. We represent your interests now in Africa. We need a Marshall Plan. We need American support. For America to sit back and let us solve the problem, that talks more politics. I'm a trainer, but I'm a political economist by training.*

*During the civil war when Africans come and the Americans come, Liberians would listen to America first, then the Africans. Then the Africans would reverse and say, who are you Liberians? You listen to America and you don't listen to us.*

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*When you are dying we come first. When the Americans come in they say, hold on, what do you think. Why they are better than Africa fail to realize that as much as we are Africans, we have more experience than they do. This is the first country in Africa to gain independence. That does not make us more experienced understanding global politics and the culture of the world. So we understand America, we know what America can do. We know what you Africa cannot do.*

*So if we can get the help from the United States it is easy for you, but once America has not agreed, then we hamper our judgment, they are our best friends too and you are on the same continent, we agree. You hear what I said. Now you say permanent interests and not permanent friendship. Yes, permanent interests and not permanent friendship. But I would turn it around and say permanent friendships consolidate and sustain permanent interests. Permanent friendships consolidate and sustain permanent interest.*

*If today you say a scholarship for Ghana and you put it in the air, free scholarship, tuition, everything, you can even go with two members of your family. Send a scholarship for Princeton University in the United States, you get half a million Africans. You get less than 10,000 persons, or less than 2000 Liberians to go to Ghana. Half of this country's youth, university graduates will want to go to the United States because they grow up to know America is the bet country in the world. So through your country our country got established.*

*If you listen to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, America is always there. So why can't we have the same kind of Marshall Plan for Liberia? Ten billion bucks for reconstruction. I know it's American taxpayers' money. Anyway, we're getting there.*

LOPEZ: If you had the chance to write a handbook for people who have to manage the training aspect of civil service reform in other challenging environments, what are some of the topics you would think would be most important?

PANTON: *To write a handbook of training managers?*

LOPEZ: If you were going to.

PANTON: *One of the things I would write is that quality control would be one content, quality control. You don't just get anybody into the training room to train, a person must be knowledgeable about the subject matter. The next thing is that there should be adequate and well resourced training rooms and libraries. The third one would be you select trainers, participants based on qualification, be qualified and meet the training criteria. Set up a training criteria so people come there with qualifications.*

LOPEZ: What would some of those criteria be?

PANTON: *Firstly, you must have been a college graduate and must have been in the job for not less than two years. Now if you are doing public service training, the private sector institution where we have run training institutions, every training course we have is a requirement. For example, if you are not a university graduate, you must be not less than five years in the civil service to go to second level. It is the beginners' level. After the beginners' level, before you can go on for training, you go to set up criteria. Actually those are the few things I would be looking at.*

- LOPEZ: Excellent. So is there anything else that you would like to talk about with regard to training or other aspects of public sector reform? Any questions that I haven't asked that you think I should have?
- PANTON: *Well, one of the things that I'm looking at is the speed at which we move. I'm trying to engage the Governance Commission to make a proposal to my boss for a tripartite meeting between the Liberia Institute of Public Administration, Civil Service Agency and the Government Reform Commission so that we move on the strategy as fast as possible so that before the end of the training period we would have streamlined training activities here so that we know by next fiscal budget when we say we're training people, we should train according to grade level, from this grade to this grade you have to do this. So that we know exactly how a lot of systems function. These are the issues I'm looking at now.*
- LOPEZ: Actually can I ask you one more question. What will be the procedure for sort of going from the results of the needs assessment to developing the training policy?
- PANTON: *The training policy is different from the needs assessment. The needs assessment is just to tell us what are the jobs that the system did and what's the gap in terms of training. For the training policy, there has to be a national training policy. So we are working towards holding a conference that will lead to discussion for formulation of a national training policy. That national training policy will specify the basic training procedures in the civil service. We were talking about budget, the type of courses and then how to move people from one level to another and we culminated into terminal exit from the civil service by one level you reach before you exit from civil service. Those kinds of things will be injected into the training program. Before you move from one grade to another, you must go for training. Where do you go for training? Liberia Institute of Public Administration. So then you have a centralized budget for training, to be managed by the Civil Service Commission or the Civil Service Agency and the LIPA conducts the training on request of the Civil Service Agency.*
- So ministries and agencies just send their trainees, the nominees, the HR personnel in various administrative agencies know exactly that. Every year come this quarter, these are the people that leave from our agency to go to LIPA for training. So our job is to just put the car on the op and send it to the administrative agency. If the administrative agency nominates through the Civil Service Agency. It is the Civil Service Agency that sends the names to us, has the person who is coming from each ministry and agency for training. Once that is done, we train them, they pay the fees to LIPA.*
- PANTON: *Have you gone to the Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs? There is a need to go to the Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs. There is a need to go to the Ministry of Education. There is a need to—have you met with USAID?*
- LOPEZ: No.
- PANTON: *There is a need because they have been providing assistance for training.*
- LOPEZ: Okay, great, let's talk about that some more and I'll go ahead and stop this for now.