



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

*An initiative of  
the National Academy of Public Administration,  
and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs  
and the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice,  
Princeton University*

Oral History Program

Series: Elections  
Interview no.: H3

Interviewee: Ken Gannah-Conteh

Interviewer: Nealin Parker

Date of Interview: 5 August 2008

Location: Freetown  
Sierra Leone

Innovations for Successful Societies, Bobst Center for Peace and Justice  
Princeton University, 83 Prospect Avenue, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544, USA  
[www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties](http://www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties)

PARKER: This is Nealin Parker. I am with Ken Gannah-Conteh of the National Elections Watch (NEW), which is the domestic observer group in Sierra Leone.

If we could just begin with you telling me a little bit about your position and your job, and the role of NEW in the last elections.

GANNAH-CONTEH: *OK. Like you said, I'm Ken Gannah-Conteh from the National Elections Watch. The National Elections Watch, which is NEW, is a coalition of organizations: NGOs (non-governmental organizations), international, local, and civic groups. I happen to come from Search for Common Ground; I am the partnership coordinator for Search for Common Ground. Wherein in NEW, I'm the Vice-Chairperson in National Elections Watch.*

*The National Elections Watch was set up in 2000. We actively took part in election monitoring in the 2000 election. And at that time, the NDI (National Democratic Institute) was actually running the affairs of the National Elections Watch. After that, we decided to hold regular meetings. In 2004, NDI came and ran the affairs of NEW again. At that time there were some postponed elections that we were supposed to observe, but by then the NDI was gone, and the civil society groups had to organize by ourselves. And through contributions from some groups we were able to monitor the remaining postponed elections.*

*After that, we took steps to actually come together, have frequent meetings, and begin to think about having this election be a domestic election owned by Sierra Leoneans running their own affairs. By then, we were having regular meetings. We went nationwide to do consultations with other groups and make some sacrifices, you know, in order to ensure that this group would be independent.*

*So, by 2005-2006, we were working on that, and seeing the 2007 elections in the future, we decided to set up structures. So, we set up regional structures by having regional coordinators and secretaries. They were also charged with the responsibility to set up district coordinators and secretaries. So the regional staff they went around in their respective regions to mobilize civil society, and have structures in place. There were large meetings with district coordinators and secretaries.*

*In Freetown, we also decided to set up a strategic management committee, comprised of some groups that had more membership. For instance, the SLTU (Sierra Leone Teachers Union), the Civil Society Movement-SL (Sierra Leone); they were part of the strategic management committee for Search for Common Ground, which actually housed the Secretariat and was a strategic partner. There were a few other groups.*

*So, NEW has been decentralized. We also worked on a constitution and registered the National Elections Watch as a limited corporation. By 2006-2007, we wrote a proposal to UNDP (United Nations Development Program) for NEW to observe the local general elections. We were funded, and we actually observed and monitored the entire process, going from boundary delimitation to voter registration, the exhibition of the voter register, on to campaigning, election day monitoring, and even the bye-elections. We monitored all those processes. And for information during the August 2007 elections, we dispatched 590 or so observers to almost every polling station. We had NEW observers all over the place, you know, to actually observe the process.*

---

*As for our strategy, we had two strategies. One was to have an observer in every polling station. The second was to deploy observers in 500 polling stations that were strategically selected by a computer. As the polls closed, those 500 observers in the strategic polling stations would text in SMS (short message service) messages into a database that was set up at the Secretariat here, on Bathurst Street, at the Search for Common Ground office. In that way, by the end of the day we could query that information and have an immediate report on what election looked like across the country. We were able to do that through the assistance of NDI, because they actually provided us with a technical assistant. They sent somebody from Washington to be up here with us, assisting in the process.*

*By and large, the process was challenging but successful, I would say. Because it gave confidence to the people: to the voters, to the international observers, even to many political candidates, political parties, you know. From the start of our monitoring, whenever we observe a given stage—like I say, starting with the boundary delimitation process, we will come out with a report and a press release that we would make public. We would look at areas for improvement and talk about areas in which we thought the commission and other stakeholders did well.*

*For instance, during the voter registration, we observed that the distances between registration centers were too large. As a result, people, even some political parties, had to organize transportation to take people to register. We understood from NEC (The National Electoral Commission) that those centers were apparently going to be the voting centers. So, we brought up that concern—we took that up with NEC, The National Electoral Commission, and at the end of the day, they actually made some adjustments by having more centers, so that distances would be reduced.*

*Of course, we also observed that some registration centers were not in the right places or were not fit to be in the communities or the places that were established for them. So we also brought that up with the NEC. In some cases there were security concerns, and some of those centers were relocated. Of course, many of them were in open places. We knew that the elections would be held in the rainy season, and yet there was no shelter. So we spoke to the National Electoral Commissions about some of those things. At the end of the day, they provided an appropriate center for people to vote.*

PARKER: How would you—what recommendations would you give for someone who is trying to manage a coalition? So for different groups of domestic observers who have different resources, different goals to some extent, what recommendations would you give?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Actually, my recommendation is to find partners. You can't do these things in isolation. In the first place, observation activities of this magnitude, you know, were you deploy to every polling station and have 500 priority polling stations—Some of the stations were even difficult to identify. They were in very remote places. So unless you work in partnership with people who live in those areas, you know, who can actually go out and look and identify those stations, only then you will be able to put somebody there. So, like I said, we have these structures, our decentralized structures, our district coordinator. We have Chieftdom focal people who are actually responsible for identifying these stations all over the country. They go to difficult places, you know, even if they have to walk on foot.*

---

PARKER: Were there international and domestic observers in the 2007 and 2008 elections?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *I saw many international observers in 2007, but only a few in the 2008 local council elections.*

PARKER: Perfect. How did you work with the international observers in 2007?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *OK. We were working closely with NDI, in the sense that NDI was managing our funds. DFID (Department for International Development) provided the funds, and NDI was managing them. They also gave us technical support, and they brought—NDI brought in many international observers. So, whenever the observers come, we have a meeting session with them, discuss and give them information about how things are on the ground, what is happening, the challenges. They will ask questions, you know, and we discuss. We have dinner or lunch together and discuss the political situation in the country, the terrain, and any other things they may want to know.*

PARKER: Did you ever work with them in the field at the polling stations?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Not really. We would greet each other and talk, you know, but not about elections or observation.*

PARKER: Were there political party monitors as well?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Yes, there are usually party agents stationed at the polling booths.*

PARKER: How did you, or whoever was making the decision, determine how many monitors were needed, or how much monitoring was necessary?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Well, NEW saw that the election was going to be very competitive, and we wanted to do the most that we could given the available resources. So, when we were writing our proposal, we actually went for 100% observation, and we were actually funded. But we focused on a timeframe very close to the elections, election day monitoring activities, like the training of observers and deployment, and we forgot about the processes—the other processes leading to the polling day, like boundary delimitation, voter registration, exhibition of the register. You know, we forgot about that. However, we got funding from other agencies for those purposes—from the Canadians, for instance, and Oxfam.*

PARKER: How were you assigning different—how were you assigning observers to different stations on voting day? And who was informed in advance of where they would be?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *OK. Now, what we usually do is to have what we call National Meetings. At these National Meetings, we have all the district coordinators, all the regional coordinators, and the strategic management committee meeting at the same place. A year before the elections, we were meeting quarterly. Then as the elections drew closer, we were meeting every two months. Six months before the election we were meeting every month. We would meet in a district: if this month we met in Koinadugu, then next month we met in Bombali, Kailahun, or Kono, as the case may be, so that even the people—the civil society in those districts would feel our presence.*

*And whenever we went through a meeting, we had a radio discussion. At the district radio, the community radio station, we talked about the issues that were*

---

*discussed, and the challenges, and what we expected of the civil society in that community. And then when we came back, we did a press release. According to our proposal, the strategy was to have observers trained in their communities, so that the observers would be able to vote. Because we knew that NEC was not going to allow people to vote in a district where they had not been registered. So our observers would only be able to vote in the district where they had registered, so that if we were to move people from here to distant places to monitor, they would not be able to vote.*

*So, knowing this, we actually went to recruit. We had our methodology of recruiting people from their communities, so that the observers would not be disenfranchised. Another objective was to reduce transportation costs, because this was civil society action. It was not about money, it was about volunteerism, so there was very little money for transportation and such. So we had to do with the little we had, and have effective work done.*

PARKER: How did you overcome the problem of few resources? What strategies would you recommend to someone in those circumstances?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Well, the strategy— All of our region and district coordinators came from civil society groups. For instance, when we say that you are the regional coordinator, you must be coming from a civil society group. You must have an office space. You must have some logistic capabilities, you know, that can be used by the other groups. It was the same with district coordinators. You must have an office space. You must have some field staff that can—you must have some foot soldiers that can walk around, you know, do some of the little jobs, without relying on funding.*

*And when we held a meeting in your district, you would have to provide a space for the meeting, so that we wouldn't have to rent a space. These were some of the strategies we used to overcome the limited funds.*

PARKER: How did you maintain the neutrality and independence of your domestic observers?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Yes, we would talk about this in our meetings. And in fact, it was part of our code of conduct; it was embedded in our constitution, and we were all watching one another. We made sure that districts would have their district meetings, and that divisions would have their regional meetings, and we would have national meetings in every district. Whenever we went to a district to hold a meeting, we encouraged other civil society members to be part of that meeting. Any communal challenge would immediately come up, and we would try to deal with it and lay it to rest.*

PARKER: Can you give an example of how you dealt with that?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Yes, in Kailahun, for instance, the Secretary—the District Secretary was partisan. We were informed of that and he was dismissed. In Bo, for instance, when we were mobilizing in groups— In our district meetings, one person from the Secretariat would go and support the district team in holding meetings with civil society groups. In one of those mobilization meetings, it came out that the motor drivers union was partisan. They were supporting the SLPP (Sierra Leone People's Party). It came up in a meeting. So we did not encourage them to be part of our group.*

---

*It also happened in Bombali that one of the secretaries had an ambition to run for a party ticket, and we were informed. He was hiding it but it came out. We were told and he was dismissed. These things were coming up, and the moment we found out—everybody was working towards guaranteeing our independence.*

*And that's why we don't recruit on individual basis. NEW is an institution; we work with civil society groups. We don't work with individuals. Once you Mr. A or Miss B are recruited, they are recruited through an organization. If they are found wanting, it's that organization that will be responsible, not the individuals. Those are some of the strategies that we use, you know, to ensure that we minimize the—to ensure that we have our independence and contain partisanship.*

PARKER: What kind of support did you receive from the National Electoral Commission?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Yes, about eight to six months before the election, we usually have a stakeholders meeting where we bring all stakeholders to the NEC Secretariat, and discuss some of the issues and challenges. We discuss the way forward and we are in good terms. In fact, we exchanged contacts and telephone numbers so that we would be in constant touch. Even with accreditation, we ensured that we had our accreditation done on time, so that we could have our members in the polling stations. They were accredited and prepared to be in the polling stations.*

PARKER: Can you think of ways that the NEC could have been more supportive, or of other services they might have provided to you that would have been helpful?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Maybe before going into that, some of the support we gave before—during the registration I was in the Kailahun district. Of course, I had a vehicle; I was going around to see what was happening and found that NEC was facing some problems in the process. They had problems with cameras, distances. So, we actually provided transportation for some of their personnel. We would meet them and help them when they had problems. If their telephones were not working, I would let them use my phone because some of the guys did not even have credit cards. Or perhaps I would drive them to some location from where they would be able to call their officer in Kailahun.*

*Also when they had damaged cameras, we would come in and communicate—you know, to ensure that there was progress in the work at the different locations. So we gave all our support and assistance to NEC to ensure that we would have a clean and successful election.*

PARKER: What were the overall findings of the observers in 2007, and then in 2008?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *It's unfortunate that I don't have a report here, but there is a catalogue of our findings. Of course, we found that voter education was lacking because there were many void ballots. Then it also came out that there was over-voting in some areas. What we did at the end of the day was to collect all of the checklists, and enter them into our database in 2007, especially in cases when there were some problems. So when the polls closed we identified problems with the results. We then had to get all our checklists and enter them into the database. We queried the database and saw that indeed there was over-voting in some areas.*

*And yes, there was over-voting. Some of the problems also were—I remember there was quite a problem with over-voting. Of course, there were skirmishes in some areas, but from the checklist we realized that some of those skirmishes were immediately resolved with intervention of the police and NEC officials.*

---

*Because what we also did was to have something I mentioned: we had an incident reporter, the District Incident Reporter. The District Incident Reporter was responsible for reporting every incident that could affect the outcome to either the National Electoral Commission, the PPLC (Political Party Liaison Committee), the police, or to NEW. It was set up as a problem solving mechanism, so that in the event that there was a problem that needed police intervention, the incident reporter would call the police and the police would come to solve the problem so that it wouldn't escalate and stop the entire electoral process.*

*If it's something that concerns NEC, NEC will be there: it will be called to the site; it will be there and ensure that things are put under control. If the incident concerns NEW, we have it in our report at the end of the day. So we had this system in place and it helped a lot, you know, because in some instances the police was called in and in other cases NEC was called to correct some of the problems. Most of these minor violations were addressed by the police, you know. And the election day was generally peaceful, though tense.*

PARKER: In 2008?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *In 2007. It was peaceful, but tense.*

PARKER: And in 2008, what were your overall findings?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *In 2008 we found that—our report is not out, so I won't talk much about it. However, in our preliminary report—in our first day report, we observed that there was violence in some places, and the turnout was low. We observed voter apathy. Those were some of our observations. Like I say, our report is not out yet. We are working on it, but then, at the end of the process we'll have our report and all of these things will be catalogued there.*

PARKER: Is there any advice you would offer to others about the use and management of domestic or international monitors?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Yes, well, I think domestic observation is a very important and necessary stage in the electoral process, because civil society should be part of the governance process, and of the electoral process that precedes governance. Because whatever elections you have in a country, if they are not free and fair, the government that will be in place will not have the blessing of the people, especially of civil society. But if you allow civil society to participate in the process everybody will work together.*

*One of the most important things is that there are issues that are raised by domestic observers that would not be seen or perceived by international observers. But when nationals are observers, they understand the local language, the dialects. They know their communities; they know how their people behave. And we want local observers to be part of this process, so that they own the process. Because when you see local observers, especially if they are wearing uniforms with identifiable numbers and colors, politicians will be deterred from disrupting the process.*

*Because—and especially when the IRN (Independent Radio Network) was there, names will be called out when there are disturbances. A person, an official, can create disturbances at the polling station in his community. But then he hears his name on the air, and that will be all over the country. And the people will shame the official. So it functions as a deterrent.*

*We are working closely with IRN, you know, and in our reports we will call names of people, government officials, Paramount Chiefs, as the case may be, if they were interfering with the process.*

PARKER: Could you talk a little bit more about this? Because it's something that I haven't heard of yet in the interviews. So, you had a MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with IRN News or the UN (United Nations) News station to—?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Well, during the processes, we actually had a Memorandum of Understanding with IRN. Then, when we had our meetings, we would go to the radio stations and have discussions. There was a memorandum that would form the bases for discussion. And on election day, I mean, it's natural. These people were all colleagues who had been working together. It's only that, on that day, we would be doing the monitoring while they were doing the reporting. So they would come to our office and we would talk to some of our people who could see what was happening on the ground.*

*I mean, we do not talk. We don't engage the media at that time, because we have a system wherein we have a spokesperson that speaks on behalf of NEW when we have something to report, especially after our meetings, after we have come up with our findings report. We have a system in place, you know. But in most of our meetings we go to the IRN stations. We have airtime and we go—we pay in advance, we go there and talk about the process. It's like everybody gets to know about it. As long as you are in the district, in the community, you know about NEW. We talk about our independence, you know, our neutrality. We talk about all of these things, and about how we want to observe, the number of observers. None of this is a secret. People know about us, and, in fact, whenever they see the NEW t-shirts, the people who are interfering with the electoral process will move off. Or they won't come in the first place, so it's like a deterrent to people who would want to disrupt the process.*

PARKER: Were there any specific things put in place to keep observers from being bought off not only so that they don't come in with partisan leanings but also so that they are not tempted during the process?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Yes, we had supervisors that would go around to polling stations to ensure that, one, the observers are in their polling stations, and two, that they are doing exactly what they are supposed to do. We also had coordinators going around. For instance, in the first election round in 2007, we had our supervisors and observers going around the Kailahun district. And, you know, in times of difficulties and challenges, I will be there to help and things like that, where we'll actually reduce the likelihood that some of our guys would want to follow their own instincts. And unfortunately, in the run-off, I was not there; I was in Freetown, you know, because our boss, was not here. So I have to be here.*

*And in 2008 we also had supervisors going around, you know, and we also had training. We had our TOT (training of trainers) cascade. After that, we had district-level training. We had Chieftdom-level training. And we were talking about transparency, neutrality, non-partisanship, you know. And our selection criteria was that somebody who was seen jubilating in party colors would not be recruited.*

*We emphasize that in trainings meetings. We do not encourage partisan colors. Also if you ever were a partisan, if you had been in party colors for just one day, you should not be part of NEW. You know, because we didn't want people who*

---

*were recognizable in their communities for their partisan activities. Because we are hiring people from their communities, if community members had seen you in party colors or playing an active part in politics, the next time they see you with a NEW t-shirt as an observer, I mean, you will even be endangering your own life, you know. Because people will—the other camp can attack you, you know.*

*So this is what we have seen and we are providing advise, and we mean it. We spoke about partisanship at every meeting as something that should not be encouraged. At least we wanted to have NEW become an institution that is credible, that people can rely on, you know. We didn't want somebody to smear our good work.*

PARKER: Did you have any attacks on your observers in any of the processes?

GANNAH-CONTEH: *No. We did not hear about any attacks, not to my knowledge.*

PARKER: That's great, that's great. I want to thank you very much for your time, and if you have any questions, please feel free to contact.

GANNAH-CONTEH: *Okay, thank you.*