



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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McCANTS: This is Elections interview number 5 in Sierra Leone with Gianni Brusati, United Nations Finance and Administrations Officer. It's August 1, 2008. Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in the interview. We like to begin the conversation by learning a little bit more about your personal background. Can you first describe the position that you held in the most recent 2008 elections and what the goals were in this position?

BRUSATI: *I am the Finance Administration advisor. What I do is I advise the director of Finance Administration at the National Electoral Commission (NEC) on how to perform his major functions, on how to prepare a budgetary plan for the entire operation, and then how to execute and monitor that budgetary plan. That's mainly finance; I also deal with administrative issues and human resource issues. For example, the contracts and recruitment of staff, temporary staff, and ad hoc staff, such as polling workers, registration workers, town criers, ballot issuers, all kinds of temporary positions. And finally, of course, the wrap-up of all the finances, doing the financial wrap-up at the end of the whole exercise. That's what I do.*

McCANTS: Can you tell me more about positions you held before this one and when your work in elections began?

BRUSATI: *I worked in London as a management consultant in a strategy consultancy company, and then as an investment banker. Then, I managed to pay off my student loans, and so I thought, "What's the point?" and I went to Congo to be a consultant for an NGO (nongovernmental organization) and set up their administrative and financial procedures as they were opening an office there. I did that for a couple of years. Then I came to Sierra Leone and worked for a micro-finance company, also as a consultant. I was a product and administration advisor, technical advisor. I did that for one year, in 2006. At the end of 2006, I was recruited by Eamon, the Operations Advisor for the 2007 National Elections, as a Finance Administration Advisor. I did that for eight or nine months. Then actually, I worked again here again as a consultant, but for a diamond company. I did that for three months between November and February at which point I got called again by Niall McCann, who is the current operations advisor, to come back and work on the local government elections. And here I am.*

McCANTS: What would you say were the biggest challenges that arose in the election environment?

BRUSATI: *To be honest, from my point of view everything went pretty smoothly. The biggest challenge, I guess, is trying to strike a balance between advising and doing. I imagine most people have mentioned this, or at least I think they would have. Basically, you're supposed to be an advisor and you're supposed to essentially oversee the work of the NEC and advise them on ways to improve it, and so on and so forth. Sometimes, however, due to time constraints, due to lack of capacity, it's just not practical to do that and you end up actually doing things. A good example is the budget. For instance, when I first got here the NEC had yet—and I was recruited in March, I started on March 15—the NEC had not yet prepared a budget for an election that was supposed to take place essentially in four months. There was—getting the NEC to do it and then me overseeing that process was just not an option. I basically just had to sit down and do the budget. That's absolutely fine, but then the problems start arising because the NEC feels that the money is essentially theirs. But then we manage the money. So anytime they require funding for a particular aspect of the electoral exercise, such as*

theatre groups, or a media campaign, or putting up posters, or renting cars, or anything like that, they have to write us a request and prepare a budget. I help to prepare that budget, but on the other end I also have to say no to certain requests that they make. So, you've got to try and strike that balance between being the advisor and also being the guy who basically says no—the scrooge—whatever. That's the only thing. That's the only difficulty. But apart from that, I was lucky. My counterpart—very good, much, much better than last year. He was newly recruited this year. He's a much, much, much better man, better person for the position. It was okay; it wasn't as hard as it should have been.

McCANTS: You just spoke about the UN's budget management role. Did the executive branch or the government have any budgetary authority?

BRUSATI: *Yes. Out of a 21 million dollar budget, the basket fund covered around 18 million, which left three million, and three million dollars were then covered by the government of Sierra Leone (GOSL). GOSL didn't actually—well, GOSL didn't ever have a say in the budget. They were presented with the entire budget of 21 million and then they were asked how much could they contribute and they said three million. Last year they contributed nine million, this year three. It's just the way it is. Money is much tighter for the government this year. Anyway, but they've never—and what they do is they just give quarterly disbursements. But they've never had a say in any kind of more operationally financed finance—finance things like looking at the budget or saying yes to this or no to that, or this should be reduced, or this should be increased. They've never had any say in that whatsoever. They've literally just disbursed funds and usually one or two months late. So not very helpful, actually.*

McCANTS: Does the government have the power to withhold or alter their disbursements?

BRUSATI: *Not now. They've pledged money. Well, I mean, they can do what they want. It's a government in West Africa; they could pretty much do what they want. But, they've pledged nine billion leones, and they're at—so far, they've disbursed what they should have disbursed. They should have disbursed it say, in January, and they end up doing so in mid-February. But so far, quarterly-wise, they've done okay.*

McCANTS: Was the budget subject to public debate or was it published?

BRUSATI: *No.*

McCANTS: Were members of the electoral management body required to report anything about their personal assets?

BRUSATI: *No, no. Neither were we, thankfully.*

McCANTS: How was the cash flow managed? Especially out to workers in the field. Was it dispersed in a timely manner or how was that managed?

BRUSATI: *Workers? You mean the NEC workers or the UNV's (United Nations Volunteers)?*

McCANTS: The NEC workers.

BRUSATI: *The NEC, so they—it's very simple, they basically have a petty cash, an impress system. They get 500,000 leones, which is just under 200 dollars a month, with which they pay everything except fuel for generators and cars, rent and rates, and salaries. We pay all of those things—well, the NEC pays all of those things centrally. So they literally reimburse the fuel stations in the various districts for any fuel that these guys have taken. They obviously pay the staff from here centrally. Obviously, the rent and rates also. The petty cash is literally for things like—whatever—they want to hang up a picture on the wall, they're going to buy some nails, they use the petty cash, or for something more useful, what have you, files, folders, etc.*

McCANTS: What kind of financial accountability structures were in place?

BRUSATI: *Okay, in headquarters the system is there and it works very well. They have typical accountability structures. They have three signatories for everything. The three signatories have to be either the executive secretary or one of the directors, and usually the chair as well, for anything, including per diems, including pens and paper, everything. It can get cumbersome, but it's a pretty good system. Then they just have a cashbook and they record everything, and then they put it together into a—they have a voucher system—and they put it all together in a big folder. At the end of the month they enter these into a central database, and then an accounting system produces the reports. It's all good.*

In the field, it's very different. First of all, the DEO's (District Electoral Officers) and the ADEO's (Assistant District Electoral Officers) don't have any financial training whatsoever. So, they—I mean, although, actually to be honest with you, it wouldn't be very difficult, the NEC never set up a system whereby these guys had to account. The only thing they need to do is they need to send back receipts for whatever they declare that they've spent. Then they get reimbursed up to the value of 500,000 leones a month. That would be okay, except in Sierra Leone it's very difficult. It's very easy and it's a very common practice to fake receipts, not even fake receipts, but you just go to fuel station and say "I'll give you 2,000, you write me a receipt for 15,000, or for 30,000, whatever." So, there should actually be a much tighter system, and that is one of the main things that is in the plan for any kind of post-electoral capacity-building type project that we are thinking of. We are thinking of the—but in the last four months there just wasn't the time to do that. So we just said "Hey, whatever, 500,000 a month."

McCANTS: Can you describe a little about what that new plan would look like?

BRUSATI: *The entire plan?*

McCANTS: As much as you—?

BRUSATI: *My side of it?*

McCANTS: Yes.

BRUSATI: *Yes, so the main aspect is—okay, training in financial planning, huge amounts. Training in financial planning, producing a budgetary plan, cash-flow management, and financial reporting. Right now the NEC is, sad to say, about a year behind in its accounts. It still needs to reconcile 2007 accounts. So it's 7-8 months behind, which is not great but I guess it's because—whatever—lack of capacity. In these last two years there's been very little time to do these things,*

and it's just taken a backseat. Another aspect is to actually reconcile all the accounts and get them at kind of a ground zero, on a level playing field, so that they can start looking at changing their systems. Right now they can't change any systems, administrative or financial systems, because everything is behind. That's basically the two main elements. Then a strategic review of the staffing requirements in the period between now and the next big election, because obviously they won't need as many people as they have done for the last two years. Then retraining and potentially rehiring the field staff, the DEO's and ADEO's, because right now, at least from a finance and administration point of view, they are hopeless. They are hopeless but it's not their fault. They've never been trained in it. So, that's why I'm saying that retraining is crucial, especially for out in the field.

McCANTS: What advice would you offer to other election officials who are trying to design financial accountability systems for elections?

BRUSATI: *Other election officials—?*

McCANTS: —who are designing a system for the local national elections commission?

BRUSATI: *What advice would I give them? I don't know. I mean these things—financial accountability systems are all the same. It's not difficult to structure one. The difficulty is, especially in these kinds of environments where capacity is not as high as it is in other places, in implementing those plans, or implementing those structures. To create one or to design one—you don't even need to—they come off the shelf. It's then making sure the people use them properly and don't cut corners, and don't try and take advantage of any holes that there may be. In terms of specific election accounting systems, the only thing I would say is that a decentralized system is far better than a centralized one, and right now, the NEC's financial accountability system is highly centralized. It's completely centralized and that's why the workload at headquarters is so large that the finance and administration department is falling very, very far behind in its financial reporting schedule. So, that would be my advice.*

McCANTS: Do you have any ideas on how to make the election process less costly the next time around?

BRUSATI: *Yes, I have a few ideas. I think, to be honest, as a local election, this has not been that expensive. We ended up spending about 16 million dollars. That's not that much for a local election. Okay, it's a small country, and so on and so forth. But resources, especially things like roads and the banking system and everything, are so poor that things could have been more expensive. So it wasn't that expensive. However, places where we spent too much money are the hiring of vehicles and the fueling of those vehicles, and other kind of infrastructural costs such as, laptops, stationery, fans, and whatever—desks, chairs, and a/c units. See, the problem is that we had very, very little time to set up any real—to be honest with you, we didn't actually—we didn't have a person here whose job it was to monitor, for example, vehicle usage. Not our vehicles, but the vehicles out in the field. At certain points we had over 200 vehicles rented out in the field. First of all, I believe we should have consolidated them to a degree whereby we could have maybe pooled vehicles, pooled rental cars, so on and so forth. In terms of the fuel expenditure, we spent almost a million dollars on fuel in four months—in five months, shall we say. I think that could have been slightly better managed. There were situations where cars were averaging 10 miles a gallon. In whatever*

terrain however high the a/c is, that's not realistic. So, these kinds of things basically come down to capacity—our capacity for monitoring these systems—and unfortunately, that was not something that we prioritized. The timeline was so, so tight and resources here were very tight, and we just weren't able to task a person with that to do. So, those things.

McCANTS: Moving on to the administration side of things. Can you talk a little bit about how the temporary and ad hoc staff was recruited, and how poll workers were recruited?

BRUSATI: *There are three categories of staff at the NEC. One is permanent staff who are there for the whole time. The second is additional core staff. The third type is temporary staff.*

Permanent staff is permanent staff.

Additional core staff is staff they have recruited for the period of the elections. In this case January to July inclusive. They specifically were the ward coordinators. So, we had 274 ward coordinators, basically a team of two, covering two or three wards each, distributed out in the field. How they were recruited—essentially they were recruited from the pool that worked last year. Had they not been recruited in that way, they would have been recruited by putting an advert out in the newspaper and on the radio, and they had obviously a CV (Curriculum Vitae), an interview, and a written test in which they were asked about their knowledge of elections, what would they do in this situation, what would they do in that situation, so on and so forth. That's the ward coordinators—that's the additional core staff. Other additional core staff was that for the NEC, we had a voter education officer and a logistics officer. Those two in each district office, so 28 people, basically. They were recruited in exactly the same way. They were given temporary contracts of eight months and they—whatever they had, advert in newspaper, CV, interview, written test, etc.

Then temporary staff includes the registration workers, poll workers, town criers, porters, that's basically it. A few actors for media productions and that kind of stuff. How were they recruited? They were on a daily wage, usually for a period of five to eight days—this is everybody. They were given small contracts, just contracts with terms of reference on one side and contractual details on the other, with photographs this year. This year we decided to get photographs for everybody. The reason is because last year quite a lot of electoral items mysteriously disappeared and we didn't want that to happen again. We can discourage it by getting photographs of each poll worker. Their contracts were—how much were they paid? We doubled their salaries from last year. Last year they were paid five dollars a day—yes, this is Sierra Leone. But this year, they were paid ten dollars a day. Like I said, working for five to eight days depending on their position and that's it. In the registration exercise, we had 7,000 and for polling day and a few days before that, we had 36,000.

McCANTS: Was the staff size adequate for this election?

BRUSATI: *Yes, very much so.*

McCANTS: Were there any kinds of skills that you thought were in short supply, or you didn't have enough covered in?

BRUSATI: *To be honest, last year—maybe. The thing is that this year, we basically got the same staff as last year. A lot of these guys worked before. Had that not been the case though, just general stuff really. For example, just finding the name on the electoral roll, sometimes they just don't see the name, and they say that it is not—that this voter shouldn't be at this polling station. So, the poor voter has to wander around the center trying to figure out where to go, and nobody's telling him. But having said that, they are also very resourceful. For example, on some occasions some electoral materials such as tarpaulins, barrier tape, staplers, and scissors didn't arrive, and they sorted themselves out very well. In typical West African style, they made do. So, pros and cons.*

McCANTS: How were the poll workers trained?

BRUSATI: *They were trained well. Isabel (Otero) and Florim (Purova) are the people to ask this really because that—procedures and training—but I did the budget. Basically they were trained in a kind of cascade system, or a pyramid system. So, Isabel and Florem here trained the NEC trainers, the NEC trainers then trained the ward coordinators, the ward coordinators then trained all the poll workers at central locations in each group of wards. Remember I was saying that a pair of ward coordinators looks after basically a small cluster of wards, two or three, usually. They pick a central location and that's where they train them and where they pay them. That was also a big element of the operation for me, the payment of all these 36,000 poll workers—that was fun.*

McCANTS: Is there something that you think that the local personnel in the field did particularly well on their own?

BRUSATI: *Like I said, sometimes making do with without all the right stuff. I think they were pretty good at that. Nothing springs to mind really.*

McCANTS: I'm transitioning into some questions about the relationship between donors and the UN, and then local personnel. And so, we're wondering if you think that there are ways that the—or positive or negative ways that donor countries or international organizations like the UN make with respect to local personnel?

BRUSATI: *Positive? They give lots of cash, a lot of money. Of the yearly budget of Sierra Leone, I don't know how much and I don't want to hazard a guess, but a lot of it is donor-funded. These elections are a good example. Out of 21 million, three were funded by the government. Last year, 9 million out of 24 million. So, you know, the donors have made a huge contribution. From an infrastructural point of view, the NEC is a completely different organization this year than it was last year. They've got vehicles, they've got computers, they've got telephones, they've got—it's very different and it is something that's appreciated by the local staff and by just local people in general.*

There is a complication, which is that UNDP (United Nations Development Program) operates what's called the DEX modality, which is basically direct execution, and that means that any money that UNDP spends in this country, in Sierra Leone, has to be actually spent directly by UNDP. UNDP will not, for example, give the NEC a check for a certain amount of money and then the NEC goes out and buys computers or cars, or whatever. No, if the NEC wants cars, fine, but UNDP pays, and UNDP buys them, UNDP procures them. This is something that, okay—it's basically a decision that UNDP has made in Sierra Leone, and it operates in the same way in many other countries. Eventually, it

has to change, because—well, for two reasons. First, it kind of has a tendency to irritate the local staff and the recipients because they see it as an accusation of either lack of ability in procurement, or of lack of honesty in the same. So, it kind of gets their back up a little bit. The second reason it needs to change is because even if they do really have a lack of capacity in procurement in these kind of administrative and financial systems, somebody's got to build it up, and by doing all the work for them you're not going to build it up. UNDP is talking about moving to NEX, into National Execution modality, but it's been like this for years now, years, years, years. I mean it's pretty much time to change. A lot of problems arose from it, for me anyway.

McCANTS: What do you think are the biggest challenges that the elections commission will face when Sierra Leone has to do its own elections?

BRUSATI: *Yeah, well, that's not going to happen for a while. Okay, I'll tell you what the biggest challenges are. The biggest challenge I think, at least—A) from my point of view obviously, financially planning the entire operation so that you don't run out of money at any one particular point. We had a basket fund and they had advisors in place who were able to plan it such that nobody ever went into the red. The money was always there and it was always ready, and it was always on time, and everything. The NEC really has to make sure, because, for example, if the money runs out just before you've paid polling staff, 36,000 polling staff, and then you tell all these 36,000 polling staff, who are really quite poor, that "Sorry, the money's not there, we are waiting for the government to give us another disbursement, so on and so forth, that probably won't happen for another month," that's a very serious situation. So that's a real challenge for the NEC and it's something that, like I said, is going to be a big priority in any post-electoral plan.*

The second is that Sierra Leone, and this is just a general thing that has nothing to do with finance, is that Sierra Leoneans move around a lot. There's a lot of internal migration. I don't know what you call it, but a lot of people go from Kenema to Bo to Freetown, and then even in Freetown. They move from one place to another place, and so on and so forth. Essentially you have to really be very good at keeping a very detailed—and maintaining a very detailed voters register. It's something that probably back home, either in the UK (United Kingdom) or in the United States, or in Europe, people move every two years or every three years, and that's in the big cities. In some cities, they stay there for ten years, whereas here, they literally move all the time. You ask somebody where they live and you know—oh, I've moved, I've moved, I'm not there any more, I've moved, yes, I didn't like it there, or it was too expensive, or the lease ran out, or whatever. People move the whole time. In this last election we didn't have too much of a problem because it was literally less than nine months between one and the other. But, I mean, it's something that I think is a big challenge. I think it's a big challenge.

What's also a big challenge is that there are lots and lots of people who are going to turn 18 very soon. It's a very young population in Sierra Leone. There are a lot of kids and there's going to be more and more voters. But I guess that's everywhere, so—

McCANTS: You spoke a little bit about this already in terms of the financial accountability training. Is there anything else you think can be done to prepare for meeting those challenges?

BRUSATI: I was talking about what, sovereignty?

McCANTS: You spoke a little about how to deal with some of the financial planning challenges by the training that you're planning. Do you have any other things that you think can be done to help prepare Sierra Leone for the day when they're on their own?

BRUSATI: To be honest I think if they're able to plan it, to financially plan it, to not make any huge mistakes and to fund it themselves, no, I think that should cover it. I don't see—I mean, from an operations point of view, but then the other advisors probably know about that—logistics, operations. My point of view is planning—it's administration. I think that, I mean, there's a few other things but in these general, very general Sierra Leone things, they're nothing to do with—but I mean, in Sierra Leone it is a culture where it's very, very difficult to essentially fire someone. I don't know, this is probably too general, but it's very difficult to get rid of somebody on the grounds of poor performance. People get fired in Sierra Leone for huge things, like theft or turning up at work drunk, you know, huge things. They never get fired because they just did not perform that particular year and they should be replaced. If that were to happen more, and I'm not espousing a hire-and-fire culture, but if that were to happen more the workforce would improve and people would be more motivated to perform to the maximum of their abilities. Whereas now, especially in positions like in a commission, like in a—basically a government body, although an independent one, people tend to see it as a back seat. People tend to see it as a way to relax and just let the money roll in because it's a job for life. That has very detrimental effect on motivation and performance.

McCANTS: Were there any other countries whose experiences you found useful or instructive in Sierra Leone?

BRUSATI: Yes, I guess when I was in Congo I worked a lot with—well, not a lot, but I worked a little bit with a few government ministries, and yes, there is kind of a way to approach West and Central Africans, that is something that you just have to learn, and that's probably one of the reasons I quite like it here. I think people here, as long as you know how to approach them and talk to them and so on and so forth, they're very responsive and very friendly. It's something that you have to get used to.

What else? Patience, yes. I wasn't used to patience. Especially working in an investment bank, patience is definitely not a virtue. Whereas, here it definitely is, or you go nuts if you don't have it. So those kind of things.

McCANTS: Is there any aspect of election management that you think needs further research or evaluation?

BRUSATI: Perhaps the structure of the electoral assistance team. I think it should just be looked at. I think it's a good model, I mean, I'm talking about the model where you have a project management unit and then the electoral assistant's advisors (sort of) unit, and the way they interact, and the fact that the project management unit also is responsible for donor liaison. I think it's something that should be looked at. I think it merits a little bit of research and maybe a little bit of improvement.

McCANTS: Can you just explain what you think needs to be improved about that?

BRUSATI: Okay, well just as a very brief example, the project management unit reports to the donors. The project management basically has two functions: they handle the administration of our team, literally, things like contracts, phones, laptops—you know, headache stuff—and procurement of any electoral materials on behalf of UNDP, and then the donor liaison. When it comes to donor liaison, I think the electoral assistance team, who work directly with the NEC on a daily basis, are in a better position to inform the donors. Especially when it comes to my side, things like finance, like the budget, like the position of the budget so far, status reports, and so on and so forth. I think, myself and for instance, the operations advisor, are in a better position to inform the donors of what is going on than the project management unit because the project management unit doesn't have any direct contact with the NEC. They don't have any counterparts there—they never go there. So I think that, for example, is something that should be looked at and maybe improved.

McCANTS: Is there any other area that you feel that you'd like to speak about that I haven't asked you about?

BRUSATI: No.

McCANTS: Great. Thank you so much for your time.