



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

THE WOODROW WILSON SCHOOL OF
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Interviewee: Gbovadeh Gbilie

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SCHREIBER: If we can start with a bit of personal background, your own backstory before we get into the details.

GBILIA: *I am GG, Gbovadeh Gbilias. My current capacity is Deputy Minister for Planning, Research and Development at the Ministry of Education, the Republic of Liberia. My former role was the Assistant Minister for Fiscal Affairs in Human Resource Development. I served in that post for one and a half years before I was nominated by the President to serve as the Deputy Minister. It was a promotion internally within the Ministry of Education.*

I successfully went through confirmation through the honorable Liberian Senate. Since December 2016 I have served in this post in this official capacity. Within my role I also serve as the chair for the Education Sector Development Committee. It is pretty much the local education group, comprised of the government of Liberia, donor partners, NGOs (nongovernment organizations) as well as civil society organizations that are specifically focused in the education sector.

Prior to coming to the Ministry of Education, my other public service experience was at the Civil Service Agency where I served as Senior Technical Adviser to the Director General and worked on civil service reforms across the government's ministries, agencies and commissions. I worked across all government sectors. I also worked for state-owned enterprises. I also did a little bit of work with the Liberian legislature.

SCHREIBER: Okay.

GBILIA: *I've been around*

SCHREIBER: Right, and I think that is actually a good place for us to begin. My understanding is that your time with the Civil Service Agency also involved a cleanup of the payroll more broadly than just one area.

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: Do you want to talk a bit about that experience and maybe one or two key lessons that you learned there that have become useful here in the subsequent project.

GBILIA: *When we transitioned from—I say we because Minister (George) Werner at that time was the Director-General.*

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: *I was senior technical adviser.*

SCHREIBER: He wasn't the minister at that time.

GBILIA: *He was the Director-General. It is just a different nomenclature because the civil service is an agency so you have Director-Generals instead.*

SCHREIBER: I see.

GBILIA: *Within that capacity, we were working on a governmental initiative called the Public Sector Modernization Project. It was funded by the World Bank—they gave us a credit of two million dollars, CETA (Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement) and USAID (United States Agency for International Development). It was blended funding and the government had to put in the [Indecipherable] credit to be able to reach the rest of the funds.*

SCHREIBER: Okay.

GBILIA: *They had several initiatives—professionalization of the workforce and pay and pension reform. Within that capacity, we launched this payroll cleanup. But the Civil Service Agency works across the different maps so that work we did there was much more complicated than what we were doing at the Ministry of Education but it directly ties into the Ministry of Education work because the Ministry of Education is the biggest stakeholder, is the biggest elephant in the room as we say.*

SCHREIBER: It has the most employees?

GBILIA: *It has the most employees in the government of Liberia. You're talking about—I want to say maybe 40 to 45% of all employees are at the Ministry of Education, because in the government of Liberia scheme, teachers are civil servants. A lot of countries don't have that type of schematic. Because they are civil servants, teachers are the biggest workforce in the country followed then by health employees so the Ministry of Health is second. But the Ministry of Education is the biggest elephant.*

Because we have that experience working with trying to clean up ghosts through a biometric exercise, taking out ghosts from government, from Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Minister Werner's, his leadership, along with me, worked on trying to revamp the system that they had at the Ministry of Education when we came onboard.

LTPP, the Liberia Teacher Training Program, that had FHI 360 as the implementing partner. This was a USAID-funded program. They had money to do several reforms, one was this payroll exercise.

SCHREIBER: This was even prior to you joining?

GBILIA: *This was prior to us joining. But the traction had not gone the distance that the government originally anticipated. Within the exercise they were supposed to complete all fifteen counties as far as vetting the teachers. The testing came later. That was something that we threw in there as far as our innovations but they had only done Montserrado [county]. We came when they were in Montserrado, they were like half-way done. Then we moved on to Bong and then they completed Nimba before the contract ended December 2016. But we came with the institutional knowledge of how to do it and the willingness to learn. And we understood that the CSA is pretty much the motherboard, it is the house for all civil servants, teachers are one, so we included all the work we did with civil service and we co-planned.*

As a matter of fact, a Civil Service Agency professional is part of the team. Every county we go, to do the vetting, the civil service sends one or two persons to be part of the team throughout the exercise because we understand all this work

has to be shared. We have a problem in government, sometimes we work in silos.

SCHREIBER: Exactly. I was just going to ask: the relationships that you surely built working with the CSA, is that something that helped to get that buy in when you tried to ramp up this project, to get that buy-in from their side?

GBILIA: *Yes, it totally helped. It is a gift and a curse. At the Civil Service Agency, I was not a civil servant, so I was pretty much a consultant, in a pseudo-consulting role. I was on a specially designed program, it was called the TOKTEN, Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals. It was meant to bring in professionals from the diaspora to help with the brain drain, to help to bring high-quality professionals from the diaspora to be able to help the developmental efforts. I wasn't a civil servant but I had to work with civil servants. I understood from a different vantage point how the professionals that are meant to drive service delivery work and move.*

I understood who the lazy ones were, who were the hard-working ones, who had a history of malfeasance. You understand, who are the champions of reform, as they say.

SCHREIBER: Exactly right, within the CSA.

GBILIA: *Within the CSA. But then I also understood—because I was directly under the Director-General, how policy is made; the decision makers who sign off on the final documents. I understood who does the work and who executes the work.*

SCHREIBER: This is key.

GBILIA: *This is key to the reform implementation. So now moving to the Ministry of Education and now moving up to a policy-making capacity, because I was a presidential appointee, I understood who to work with within the system to be able to drive the reforms. It helped change the whole dynamic of what we were trying to execute.*

I also understood the pitfalls because we had done the exercise and you learn from your mistakes, you learn the successes. When we revamped the new program—at that time LTTP put out a lot of people on account of disenfranchised at the ministry because not only technical assistance was leaving but the money as well.

I sat down with some of the technical advisors and consultants to be able to redesign the program. We understood that within a very, very short window bigger donors would not be able to fund the project. You're talking about six-to nine-month procurement windows of all the different processes. We made sure that we had a ceiling around one million because that is usually the sweet spot for philanthropists and charitable institutions.

SCHREIBER: Oh.

GBILIA: *We also looked at how to do pretty much a leaner program and using local staffers, which was the key, because a lot of times we need international technical assistance and the price was a little bit too high and we wouldn't be able to afford. Then working with Big Win philanthropy, talking to Hon. Dr. Pate, he gave a strategy of how to help with the governance because that was the*

problem with direct budget support. We didn't have any legitimate and sustainable government structures.

SCHREIBER: Okay.

GBILIA: *You're talking about internal controls and you're talking about a governance team, leadership that can actually drive the reforms, working with local civil servants. He talked about the delivery unit he set up when he was the Minister of Health during the (Goodluck) Jonathan administration in Nigeria.*

SCHREIBER: I see.

GBILIA: *So how he established it—the biggest thing I learned from the discussions with him and his team and Jamie Cooper and the professionals at Big Win was that after he left his post, a lot of those professionals were absorbed into the civil service or continued to work in the government in the health center. They continued—after his departure they still continued to effect change. That's some of the problems we have.*

SCHREIBER: Can I ask—around what time was this? It sounds like a brainstorming that you had with Jamie Cooper and Dr. Pate you mentioned. Around what time was this?

GBILIA: *This was last fall. They visited Liberia. We had initial talks around last fall and then early in 2016—I'm sorry i said last fall, it was fall 2015 [**this interview was recorded in August of 2017].*

SCHREIBER: And then also early in 2016.

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: They came, yes.

GBILIA: *We had started the discussions with the minister with e-mail. We would go back and forth with the technical team and then they had some visitations. I don't know the exact dates but they came on several occasions. One of the visits Dr. Pate was there, Jamie was there. . . Then Arcos came, different professionals from Big Win came over the time and we co-developed the program.*

SCHREIBER: Just to link it sort of to your previous experience, would you say that the focus on getting the internal governance right was something that you learned from your time with the CSA? I'm just looking for a concrete example of one of the things that may have previously been a bit of a problem that was addressed immediately in this case.

GBILIA: *One of the things that was a problem—.*

SCHREIBER: Or a challenge let's say.

GBILIA: *Or a challenge, we solve the problems anyways. It was that—we're getting better—was that the databases that we had, HR MIS is the CSA database for the entire government. Education has its own, just for education professionals, administration staff and teachers. Our systems did not link. You have two different databases. Many of the numbers were the same but for some things, it was a lot of gray areas. Gray areas are problematic in public sector because gray areas could either lead to corruption, mismanagement of resources, or waste.*

We understood that we had to make sure that CSA was part of the team, that our data was agreed upon by different stakeholders, CSA professionals and Ministry of Education professionals and that it was shared and presented collaboratively. If not then the data that we have for pensioners, the CSA would have a different number set. There were numbers that were sent [from the CSA] to the Ministry of Finance that were giving different figures on who needs to be pensioned, who needs to be removed.

For example: what teachers need to be erased, what teachers need to be placed on movement, things of that nature. Those were some of the problems that happened because once CSA sent the list to Finance, they execute. If our list doesn't match up then that's how you have so much grey matter.

SCHREIBER: That's a great example. I guess the implicit assumption in your solution of having this collaboration is that creating one central database for everyone would have been way too big of a challenge from your position to take on. Instead of creating one database you make sure that okay, if there are two databases you make sure at least that they run parallel to each other with the same information.

GBILIA: *Exactly, but it is a means to an end. Now we just had a brilliant professional that just graduated from one of the universities in China, a Master's degree in IT. I think he has a double Masters. He was at the CSA under Minister Werner's influence, he got a scholarship. Then he came back. In government when you have a bilateral scholarship with one of our partner nations you have to serve the government for two years.*

He came back and coincidentally became the director for HR MIS. Now his new task—

SCHREIBER: That's the database.

GBILIA: *The database at the Civil Service Agency, for the entire civil service.*

SCHREIBER: HR?

GBILIA: *HR MIS – Human Resource Management Information System.*

SCHREIBER: Right, there we go.

GBILIA: *Now one of his biggest tasks is linking everybody's data. The idea is to start with education because we're the biggest stakeholder. So, he is working diligently with his team to collate all the data, put it together. Then there would be lots of checks and balances. We would be able to have the visibility of what we're doing in the education and they would be able to see the entire government. Then he would be able to give us access to see certain things and back and forth.*

He is incorporating all the data that we have into the entire system. It wouldn't have been as easy if we didn't have a CSA professional crosschecking the data.

SCHREIBER: Exactly right.

GBILIA: *At the grassroots level.*

SCHREIBER: Was this an explicit plan at the beginning or was it sort of fortuitous that it played out in this way?

GBILIA: *No, I planned it from the first. Our team planned it but I led the team.*

KENYAH: Part of the reason why the two databases were sort of to check each other because if there is just one a single person could easily slip in there but if there are two then you can always cross check.

SCHREIBER: Since the Education ministry is 40% of that database, you already have a huge chunk you could make progress on.

GBILIA: *Yes, knowledge is half the battle.*

SCHREIBER: Exactly right. That's all very, very fascinating. I want to move a bit forward to the implementation side, sort of getting down to work as we would term it. If you want to just walk us through generally how the process actually works. I would imagine once it is decided we have some money, this is the plan, one of the key challenges for example would be coordinating with the counties and the districts. So how do you actually initiate such a—if you decide we're going to go to this county, how does that actually work in practice?

GBILIA: *I can take you back to the beginning.*

SCHREIBER: Sure.

GBILIA: *We sat down and planned and planned and had plan B's and had plan B's for our plan B's. The team did an extremely good job working with the technical team from Big Win Philanthropy to make sure we kind of really thought out the strategy. The good thing is we had institutional knowledge. We had an exercise that was run by LTTP at the Ministry of Education. Then we also had our experience from those who came from the Civil Service Agency and then the technocrats here. We weren't reinventing the wheel. We were looking at the program and trying to contextualize it to the Liberian system and make sure that we had it at a budget that was realistic and palatable.*

Because we wanted to make sure that if we weren't able to get donor funding in a very short window then we could do some kind of emergency stimulus and use government resources to be able to execute. One million is always the sweet spot, particularly for this government. So that—we had hindsight of that.

Now in implementation there are several things. The first thing has to do with communication strategy. We make sure we budget for communications. We have to let people know that we're coming to the counties. The administrative offices—because you're taking teachers out of classrooms and we have to be sensitive that a student without a teacher in the classroom for a long period of time would be disastrous for a learning situation.

It is about coordinating with the education officers who are frontline soldiers at the grassroots levels. They talk to the principals and they make sure that they're well informed but we also do radio and media. We're in the newspaper and we're also on the radio explaining that the vetting team is coming and we're giving clear understanding of what they're looking for. Bring your WAEC [West African Exam Council] certificate, bring your different credentials. We'll be checking for this. Be there at this time, at this place, at this location.

Then we wanted to make sure it was a devolution or decentralization type of approach to where counties are big and we're going to the most populated areas, central locations, what I call rally points. Then we'll stay there for several days before moving to the next because you can't imagine, you can't want teachers to come huge distances to be able to come to the exercise. One that is time out of class, two you're talking about transportation, lodging and feeding.

We had central hubs and teachers do travel though in some cases they still had to travel from far because some of these counties are very big and bigger schools are in rough areas.

SCHREIBER: Are they paying for their own transport?

GBILIA: *Sometimes you work something out but most of the time they pay for their own transport. When they get there, we take care of feeding and things of that nature.*

SCHREIBER: I see.

GBILIA: *In certain cases, when they come we go through the exercise. Now we're still going through implementation, right? Now that's communication. When we were planning the program, we knew that a huge percentage of teachers that were in the classrooms were volunteer teachers; that's a serious problem because civil service does not recognize a volunteer teacher. You're either a bona fide civil servant or you're not or you're a supplementary teacher or something.*

KENYAH: Are supplementary teachers also civil servants?

GBILIA: *They have a pay line so they're getting paid but they're not at the bona fide civil servant rate so they're getting paid a little bit less than their qualifications.*

SCHREIBER: They also have their own separate payroll, right?

GBILIA: *Their own separate payroll. The idea is the collapse of supplementary and transition [payrolls] as bona fide civil servants. They don't have rights as civil servants. For example, you get your pension after you serve a certain amount of time. You have insurance and you have death benefits and things of that nature that go to your family. You have insurance, medical insurance. Civil servants have those rights and you also are protected by the law. You can't just be fired. There has to be a procedure to discipline, supplementary don't have those inalienable rights. So as a result, they all want to be moved over along with the pay increase. There are many benefits but you have a lot of volunteers.*

We had a route and a strategy for supplementary. That strategy has come from the CSA and they're trying to implement it: collapse and then transition when money is available—no strategy was for volunteers. We designed the testing portion in order to find a career route for volunteer teachers. Many volunteer teachers have the requisite credentials and are quality, some are some of the best teachers in the school but they're just not recognized and they're not on the payroll.

Communities sometimes put money together to pay these young people over time but it is not sustainable and you can't depend on a community, especially in rural and poor areas to pay the amount. It is not going to be consistent, right? Somebody that is very passionate and is trying to teach may be discouraged and leave the classroom. That hurts our children.

SCHREIBER: That's right.

GBILIA: *The teaching portion came in with the hindsight that the volunteers, how do you legitimately put somebody on? This tests for the capacity. Once you test them you know where they're at. Then you also check their credentials. The testing comes first. When we implement, we do testing and we don't just test the civil servants that are on our payroll we test all. We test the volunteers, we test the civil servants, we test supplementary as well as administrative personnel in the schools—principals, vice principals, vice principals of instruction, administration, et cetera. We are testing the staff that has to do with instruction.*

KENYAH: You test all the staff that has to do with instruction?

GBILIA: *Principals, vice principals, teachers and volunteer teachers. So now we have the list. You have some teachers that fell in the 50s, some teachers 100, some teachers got 95. You see where the volunteers are at. You say this person, he scored 20 as a volunteer, though he's a volunteer and he's passionate but he doesn't have the capacity. He may have the passion but not the capacity to teach. But this person scored 85, that's a high passing on our scale.*

Let's find out a way, given that he has the requisite credentials to work with the CSA to transition him onto the payroll, looking for spaces.

SCHREIBER: When you say credentials you would also mean like certificates?

GBILIA: *Yes, credentials. Does he have a BSE, does he have an A, or B, or C certificate. Some people have A's and B's from other of our neighboring countries, in other countries they may have gone to school at during a crisis, now coming back to Liberia to serve our people. They have these credentials but they just haven't found a way onto the payroll. It has been very rigorous. We haven't been able to hire because of what, the bottlenecks from ghosts. Ghost employees take up government resources. It is a complete waste; it is actually corruption. We haven't been able to legitimately hire the teachers and the personnel we need because those spaces on the payroll were captured by ghosts.*

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: *We didn't know that John Brown was not in the school. The money is being paid to an account, some of it is withdrawn, the person who is withdrawing it is a teacher in another school and is actually collecting four or five checks.*

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: *But we have that space in our system as we see from central that somebody is in a class teaching our children but actually that class is empty or it is taught by a special assistant or something, low-level college student who is just trying to help out, but he doesn't come consistently. It damages the system.*

SCHREIBER: Yes.

GBILIA: *Being that we remove those, now we have space to put in volunteers, to transition some of the supplementary, to do this exercise of putting TTI graduates from the rural teacher-training institute. We have graduates that weren't able to*

be placed on for the same reason. So as the space opens up, we start filling in the holes. That is how the gap analysis was done.

You test first, get the capacity, then you vet. Vetting is just pretty much rolling out your certification, your credentials and figuring out who you really are. You go through biometric—biodata and information and we're logging it into the database. Now we're putting all this into one collated database. The innovation that David Baysah and his team came up with that wasn't part of the original plan was to make sure we photocopy all the documents so we have the soft copies of their actual credentials.

That was a problem that we'd seen when we went to the counties the first trip that many of the professionals did not have documents because during the war your house is on fire, the rebels are coming, you flee. You'd lose a lot of these very hard to retrieve documents. Because government institutions pretty much deteriorated and many people were unfortunately killed, to go retrieve those from the archives and from the original WAEC office is very difficult. The database only goes back so many years.

SCHREIBER: That's right.

GBILIA: *They had no record of them having these actual, legitimate credentials.*

SCHREIBER: By photocopying you actually protect those documents.

GBILIA: *We protect them.*

SCHREIBER: Is that what it means?

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: If that person loses it again—.

GBILIA: *Exactly.*

SCHREIBER: They can come to you and say, "Can I get a copy?"

GBILIA: *To retrieve, exactly. So those documents, that discussion we had with WAEC, those documents will be turned over. WAEC is one of the most important documents you can have as far as teaching.*

SCHREIBER: What is that? I missed that.

KENYAH: West African Exam Council, they organize tests for high school leavers.

SCHREIBER: I see. Do a lot of people have those certificates?

GBILIA: *A lot of people have those and that is the prerequisite document you have to have before you get a C-certificate or B-certificate or A-certificate.*

KENYAH: And A, B and C certificates are teacher-training certificates?

GBILIA: *Yes, teacher-training certificates in A being the highest and C being the entry level where you teach at higher grades as you go up.*

SCHREIBER: Okay.

GBILIA: *So that WAEC and other credentials—some people have a degree from other countries or they may have a degree at the University of Liberia Teacher College or these places, those are now copied and shared with the Civil Service Agency. They have all these in a soft database. Now we have real requisite information on who is teaching and do they have the capacity to teach as well as being able to design training programs in the future because now you know somebody's capacity based on the test. Somebody who scores 41% which is a conditional pass because 40 and below is fail.*

SCHREIBER: 40% is the cut-off point.

GBILIA: *Yes, 40% is the cut-off point, 41-69 is conditional pass. I mean you passed but you did so poorly that you have to have training. Those professionals will have a different training set as a person who scored 85 and above because they're at different levels and the levels say everything. Now we can strategically design training programs and cluster people based on their level as opposed to giving blanket training. That is how we used to work with the donors in the past.*

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: *We covered training for everybody.*

SCHREIBER: One person might be bored out of their mind because they know this and the next person can't keep up because it is too complicated.

GBILIA: *Exactly, it wasn't strategic training. It was training as far as blanket training across the board. You gave certificates to people—the value is not in the certificate—it is not about the certification it is about what did you learn in the coursework.*

KENYAH: So those who scored 40-69 are going to receive training and those below 40 are going to be—?

BGILIA: *Two things. We have a level that is so low, it is 20 and below, that we deem them as untrainable. So those persons—we have had several stakeholder discussions with the National Teacher Association which is as you know—.*

SCHREIBER: I want to ask you about them separately.

GBILIA: *As well as other stakeholders, other donors, other education civil society organizations, legislature and the cabinet, across all levels because this is a very sensitive issue. You're talking about somebody's means to feed their family.*

SCHREIBER: Of course.

GBILIA: *But at a certain level, that person is mis-educating our children. Some of the tests we've read, some people—specifically from the language arts and English section, they cannot do the basics! We're testing in math, language arts and pedagogy. In the language arts section people have done better in math, a hard subject, but language arts—.*

SCHREIBER: That's interesting.

GBILIA: *People have done very poorly. You see that certain people can't spell the name of the school that they're teaching in; certain people can't spell Liberia. Certain people will misspell their name though you know names are kind of weird. You spell your name the way your parents told you. But you would think that Steven is Steven, but it depends.*

The idea is we should know how to spell Liberia and the school. We know the name of the school, based on what the name of the school is and you misspelled it when you were filling out your form. The fundamental skills—a lot of people do not have.

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: *They have to be made redundant as per CSA law. CSA has given us their assurance from the level of the Director-General that if the Ministry of Education as the institution that has the statutory mandate to educate the Liberian public deems a test as legitimate, then the grading scale that we set, CSA backs it as far as these people should be removed, these people should get training, these people should—. Training is also part of CSA's mandate.*

SCHREIBER: What you're saying is that, legally, those people who are deemed untrainable, legally, should be removed?

GBILIA: *Yes. We have a portion of the test that was included that is called [functional literacy]. So certain questions—if they don't answer this body of questions right we know that they don't have the skill sets to be able to teach. They can do other things. You can be an entrepreneur, you can find other fields of work, but teaching in a classroom, you're mis-educating Liberian children which is exacerbating the problem.*

SCHREIBER: Yes.

GBILIA: *We want to remove these people legally working with the CSA because they're civil servants. A lot of them have gone through the rigors of becoming a civil servant and we will use the CSA formula to redundant and give a severance package.*

SCHREIBER: That was my key question. My understanding is that as you say these discussions seem to be still ongoing.

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: For us, for the purpose of writing up this case, it is too early to say this is the decision. What we should be saying is—.

GBILIA: *It is the decision.*

SCHREIBER: But the key is for let's say this 20% untrainable teachers, they will all get severance packages, this is not being fired without anything.

GBILIA: *No, it is not being fired; we cannot legally fire without anything because they're civil servants. Now if it is a volunteer teacher who fell to that level we can remove them out of the classroom clearly, they cannot teach in a public school. But if it is a civil servant then we have to follow—the same thing with supplementary because supplementary are bona fide civil servants. But the civil servants are*

protected by the law. We have to give them the severance package as per redundancy. It is a formula that has years plus tenure, something like that. I can give you the exact number later. Then we multiply by a year's salary and then you have an amount that you have to give.

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: *We work with civil service to get that money together. We actually budgeted for that within our GPE (Global Project for Education) project. We have a GPE grant that we're going to receive and the money will be available by January or February next year and we already earmarked a good amount of money for severance packages. Besides the money that government usually gives is very small so we're adding some extra money. We can legally do that as per the institution. You can give money on top of the severance package as far as a "thank-you" package for their work and sacrifice.*

SCHREIBER: Okay, that's really important.

KENYAH: But supplementary teachers won't get any severance package?

GBILIA: *It is at the discretion of the Minister of Education but they're not entitled to it. The minister can say as for good will or thank you for your sacrifice or whatever, but the CSA by law you are entitled to a severance package based on the formula.*

KENYAH: As per the minister's discretion, have you decided to give them severance package or is that yet to be discussed?

GBILIA: *We're still discussing it.*

KENYAH: And for the volunteer teachers?

GBILIA: *Volunteer teachers, they are not getting anything.*

KENYAH: If you don't qualify as a volunteer teacher, you do not get one.

GBILIA: *CSA does not recognize volunteer teachers.*

SCHREIBER: I just want to check. The severance side, for the regular teachers they get the severance money from CSA via the finance department. Then you said there is this additional grant that will be able to top up that amount or that would also be used as sort of a discretionary thank you for supplementary teachers?

GBILIA: *No, we would top up the amount.*

SCHREIBER: You would just top up the amount.

GBILIA: *For those who we put into this category when we get our final list of those who fell below this range, that would be decided by the ministry.*

SCHREIBER: I see.

GBILIA: *We had 40%, 39 and below or be it 20 and below, the decision we make—once we have that number we have a certain amount of money that is earmarked and set aside and we will spread it across based on the person. Now everybody won't*

get the same because the severance package has to do with years and tenure, right?

SCHREIBER: Yes.

GBILIA: *But the top up will be the same across the board.*

SCHREIBER: Interesting.

GBILIA: *Being that I have ten years, this brother has fifteen years, he will get more from the severance but then the top up will be the same. He has 1000 for example from his severance, I have 750 but then we all get an extra 500 dollars. It is still respectful of the years we served.*

SCHREIBER: That's right.

GBILIA: *You understand.*

SCHREIBER: And that's just for the regular, not for supplementary?

GBILIA: *Supplementary is still deciding.*

SCHREIBER: Still deciding.

GBILIA: *But for the regular guaranteed, those decisions have already been made. Is this helpful?*

SCHREIBER: Hugely helpful; I can't keep up. Let's go back to the union and let's call it stakeholder engagement.

GBILIA: *Let's call it the National Teachers Association of Liberia.*

SCHREIBER: NTAL.

GBILIA: *By law you can't unionize in the Republic of Liberia according to the CSA so it is the association.*

KENYAH: They are not a union?

GBILIA: *It is not a union.*

KENYAH: They seem to—

GBILIA: *They operate like a union. The law says you can't unionize, but, you know. . .*

KENYAH: They don't have union rights?

GBILIA: *They pay fees, they do different things. . .*

SCHREIBER: They're a union in everything but name.

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: That's interesting. You mentioned this council that you are the chair of with NGOs and with the association.

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: Since when have you been the chair of that?

GBILIA: *Since it is a position that is entitled to the deputy minister for planning so since I became deputy minister. The appointment was I think October and confirmation was the next month and then I got my green letter, the letter from the President saying congratulations you made it. I got that in December.*

SCHREIBER: The reason I ask, I don't know if it is really relevant, but it seems that that would be a good forum to engage with the association and with NGOs that may have other views on this.

GBILIA: *Of course.*

SCHREIBER: Could you talk a little bit about how you've managed to handle what seems like there should be some pushback because people don't like losing money. How have you handled that when there has been pushback and when there have been disagreements and whatever?

GBILIA: *It has been a beautiful struggle; it has been interesting. The National Teacher Association of Liberia is the strongest union/association or whatever you want to call it. They have the biggest membership. The teachers who are part of the association pay fees so we know they're funded somewhat well. We know they have a strong voice because if you have the biggest working class—for example during this election season, you have people who can influence communities at the grassroots levels. The votes that they can bring in are very significant.*

For those who represent constituencies, I'm talking about the national legislature, they have to listen to what the Teachers Association says. I agree with that; I'm all about democracy, but that does put reform and change—things that are very difficult to swallow for any public—it is very, very difficult to do as far as execution.

Now, Partnerships for Liberia.

SCHREIBER: Yes. A separate but conflated issue.

GBILIA: *Exactly. There have been so many misconceptions about the reform that we're trying to initiate. We're in the pilot phase, it is three years and we have just completed year one. Before we even got a little bit of steam the Teachers Association met with the minister and different stakeholders and told him that we don't want to privatize, it is against all we stand for. It is a private/public partnership, it is not privatization. The private providers have some leverage to do certain things. The ministry and government have leverage to do certain things. We've tried to operate. Now it is not a perfect program, but I believe in the Partnership Schools for Liberia and I believe that—I feel it is the future, it is the way forward.*

We need the National Teachers Association's buy-in and support in how to perfect the system. But they have outside influences from different international institutions that are anti-privatization and don't like certain providers that are within our scheme, that come from overseas. They have programs in other

countries and they're against them. So that beef has trickled down into what we are trying to do in the teacher vetting and testing.

SCHREIBER: Yes.

GBILIA: Because these reforms were coming at the same time—we've only been here two years but we've done a huge body of work. The reforms crisscrossed, and they all are going into our overall mandate to increase the learning outcomes. Some people in the Teachers Association misconstrued the vetting and testing with the testing that was done in partnership schools because the private providers test the teachers to find a baseline and then they design training before school starts, and then they have continuous training throughout the school year.

KENYAH: But no teachers are fired in PSL (Partnership Schools for Liberia) right?

GBILIA: Not fired, they transfer. The PSL teachers have to follow the civil service standing orders route of firing and the code of conduct from the Ministry of Education. If a teacher abandons the post and is gone for fourteen days, if they abuse a student, if they do things—steal money—that are against the law, then you can write to the ministry and we fire, they don't fire.

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: They do the recommendation and say this person—we gave them three warnings, they've done this. According to the CSA law, they broke the law, this is reason. We do our investigation and if so we remove. Many teachers are transferred based on lack of capacity.

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: They took the test that we approved as government and failed at a miserable rate. We said, because this person falls, we have to remove them from this class—.

SCHREIBER: We're talking about the PSL test now?

GBILIA: Yes, the PSL tests are the government tests. They're giving the test that we designed.

SCHREIBER: Sure, sure.

GBILIA: All the schools, I mean all the providers except one.

SCHREIBER: Those tests—was the content different from the tests you used for the vetting project?

GBILIA: It was the same in seven providers, we have eight. One of the providers has their own test that was approved by the ministry.

SCHREIBER: Okay.

GBILIA: All the others give the test that we give.

SCHREIBER: You use the same test that you used for the separate project.

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- GBILIA: Yes.
- SCHREIBER: That's really interesting.
- GBILIA: *Except for one.*
- KENYAH: Which one is this?
- GBILIA: *Bridge International*
- KENYAH: I guess maybe one big difference would be that—.
- GBILIA: *Let me just say the reason is because Bridge had an MOU and they started first. They had already gone far; the test had been approved and they were already like first entrants.*
- SCHREIBER: Right.
- GBILIA: *When the other ones came the test had been fully designed.*
- SCHREIBER: It seems to me like the key issue here would be since those tests for the other providers and for the vetting projects, since those tests are exactly the same, you can easily see a union rep saying, but look it's the same tests and that's how you conflate the two, right? You say, PSL is using this test, the vetting project is using the same test.
- GBILIA: *I never thought about that that way.*
- SCHREIBER: That makes it easy to say, "Look, they want to fire you because of ghosts and whatever if you write this test".
- GBILIA: *Exactly. That is very much true and they protested. They had several protests. in Nimba county; they had protests in Cape Mount—I was at one of the protests. I don't like to be around protestors. I know a lot of the guys. They sometimes surround you and make you talk. I believe in the constitution and freedom of protest—we have a very similar constitution to the United States. But sometimes—I don't like contentious situations that may turn to violence; we're not here for that. Voice your opinion, you can lead the protest. But I like—if you stand up for your rights let the message be clear and relevant to the point. PSL is one reform out of many. I don't think it is worth trying to collapse a system or trying to remove a leadership of a certain ministry because you disagree with one reform initiative, specifically during a pilot year.*
- Specifically, if you are against sitting down at the table and having certain discussions because you feel it has gone far without your direct influence. It came to a point—we're not discussing it. It is either this way or—nobody is bigger than the people. You can't impose your will on government.*
- KENYAH: Is part of it because—I imagine the PSL schools are far more closely managed and so these sorts of issues, like writing letters, making sure that teachers come to school on time and stuff are far more—are watched far more closely in the PSL schools because they have the capacity for those things as compared to the general Liberian education. Is that part of why they are pushing back because maybe laws are more strictly enforced in those places? It is not that teachers are

being fired deliberately in those places but teachers do things that they would have done in other schools and are fired in PSL schools.

SCHREIBER: They can get away with it in the other school but—.

GBILIA: *Some of the biggest learning lessons, cause the idea of PSL is to be able to give learning lessons within models at low cost that can trickle into the wider education sector. It's a learning exercise, like most pilots are, and we're being able to grasp certain things; some things we cannot do because of cost implications or because they don't work for the Liberian system. School management is the biggest.*

School management at the local level, monitoring supervision specifically with PTAs, principal involvement, community involvement in what we're trying to do. So, in trying to hold DEOs more accountable it appears that we've done that quite well. Now, not all providers are perfect but getting the documentation, having the data, understanding the student needs, understanding the learning outcomes and being able to track is something that PSL has done very well and we're being able to learn from that and being able to figure out ways to spread it out to the wider system.

SCHREIBER: Yes.

GBILIA: *There are teachers who are part of the corruption and malfeasance. Now the National Teachers Association of Liberia is an honorable body, well respected. The former President is in the Teachers Education Bureau. I know the President, I know the leadership, I know the Secretary-General really well. He sits on the Education Secretary Development Committee (ESDC) with me that I chair. I understand their grievances but combining two reforms and protesting and boycotting a reform that we all agreed on together—the Teachers Association was part of the planning at one point because they're part of the ESDC.*

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: *They were at the meetings where we had discussed moving forward; they were for it. They also were part of the agreement to remove teachers that were functionally illiterate. They're not looking at the bar because they feel—.*

SCHREIBER: This is key.

GBILIA: *A teacher that is not qualified, that is illiterate, diminishes the stature of the National Teachers Association. They want competent, qualified teachers. They want the TTI (Teacher Training and Professional Development Institute) graduates to come on board so we can teach at a high level and better the children. They didn't want the teachers that we found that were in the system and don't have the capacity, they don't have the passion.*

SCHREIBER: Yes.

GBILIA: *That all changed because they said oh, this is for PSL, we're going to be moving—.*

KENYAH: And the testing?

GBILIA: *The testing—.*

KENYAH: They were okay with the testing?

GBILIA: *They were okay with the testing. They are still okay with the testing. But if it involves PSL that's where they get—.*

SCHREIBER: If I have it clear, before PSL was an acronym that anyone knew you had these negotiations about the vetting project. It obviously started even before you came here. That was an agreed upon set; I'm sure there were some disagreements but towards the end there was buy-in from the Teachers Association.

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: Then PSL comes along and suddenly the two are conflated and that means that now the buy-in that existed for the vetting project also starts diminishing.

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: So how did/are you addressing that? Are you trying to get it untangled again? Is that how you're trying to message? If you say we know you have a problem with PSL but can we continue with the vetting, how are you trying to handle that?

KENHAH: Hinging on that question, just hinging on that question, do you think that the National Association of Teachers is—are they really conflating the two things or are they using it as political ammunition?

GBILIA: *I think it is a little bit of both. I think it depends on who—the leadership has thousands of members.*

SCHREIBER: That's right.

GBILIA: *Not leadership but the body has thousands of members. They have the leadership but you don't know which direction some people are going in. I do know that some of the leadership know the difference. They know the difference between—they were involved, not with PSL, they were involved—they were briefed on PSL, they started discussion but they started to push away. But from the teacher vetting and testing they were definitely involved. The former President of the National Teachers Association was on the vetting team in one of the countries.*

SCHREIBER: He—.

GBILIA: *She.*

SCHREIBER: She is working for the Education Ministry?

GBILIA: *She is still a member but they removed her from President; she was the President.*

SCHREIBER: They removed her because she was seen as supporting this?

GBILIA: *They removed her.*

KENYAH: Is this Mary Mulbah?

GBILIA: *She is in a teacher education group, I can call her if you want to and you can talk to her later.*

SCHREIBER: Okay.

GBILIA: *She was removed from her president post. She let her team know—went to the field and explained to them what was happening and the testing and the vetting. It was well communicated and then PSL, the idea of privatization—maybe they felt we were trying to sneak something under the rug or something. But the idea, the dialog needs to continue. They had a machine now, Education International—they get a lot of international support. They [Education International] are anti-PSL. They are anti-Bridge International. They don't really care about PSL, they just don't like Bridge for some reason. I think Bridge is great.*

KENYAH: Is this because—there was a lot of news about Bridge in Kenya and Uganda.

GBILIA: *This is Liberia; I've never been to Uganda. I've been to Kenya, it was a great country but things are different there. We tried to contextualize the program for Liberia. That is why it's called Partnership Schools for Liberia. They have their own programs and their own challenges. We have our own and our own challenges. You can't say—that's like saying Real Madrid lost against Barcelona so they're just a terrible team.*

SCHREIBER: I do want to ask you though—let me just tell you that in South Africa we could use a project like this, but we would never, ever get to the point of actually taking the tests. Our constitution may be more liberal than yours and the unions are very strong. I would still like to ask you, despite all of the challenges that we've discussed it sounds like the vast majority of teachers in Liberia have actually sat for the tests and have gone through this process.

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: What has been the key to actually getting that far despite the challenges?

GBILIA: *It is this one very wise and strong elder lady, her name is President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, our iron lady and our international superstar who has done so well for our country, historically. Nobel peace laureate. She is extremely passionate about education. At the level of cabinet she has given the shot around the world and she let the teachers know that the Ministry of Education has set their policy and she fully supports that any teacher that does not go along with the teacher testing process so they can be identified through vetting and we can now the capacity so we can try and fix the system, the CSA has the authority to remove them from the payroll.*

If you want to boycott the tests, if you do not want to go through the process, you will be removed. The President said that.

SCHREIBER: There we go.

GBILIA: *In support of education. When the teachers heard that protests stopped immediately. But it is not just she said in this dictatorship, no. She had several meetings with the national Teachers Association. She brought in the minister and they all sat around the table and had discussions. Though they disagreed on*

many things, the agreement to take the test was final. We haven't had protests in I think the last two quarters, just the first quarter really, we had a protest.

SCHREIBER: I see.

GBILIA: *The pilot quarter with the first two counties, Montserrado and Bong and Nimba, was the protest throughout. Then the first quarter when they were in Cape Mount there were protests. Since then, since that discussion, they've been docile.*

SCHREIBER: I want to just see how close we can get as to when this intervention came from the President. Would this have been late 2015?

GBILIA: *It was the first quarter which was—it was like last year, August, September, October, around that time. It was first quarter.*

SCHREIBER: That's 2016?

GBILIA: *Yes, because school was starting and teachers were like, "We're not going to do it", and that's when the pressure started mounting and the President got up and was like "Nah"*

SCHREIBER: The schools open around August, that's your first quarter.

GBILIA: *The schools open end of August or September, this year it opens September 4th, last year I don't remember but it is around that same time. So last week or first week of September.*

SCHREIBER: Of 2016, that is when this sort of came to a head and the President had to intervene.

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: Excellent. We've clearly picked up that there is resistance but I've been wondering, if there was real resistance, there are a lot of people—not real resistance, if there was really intense resistance there would have been a lot of people who simply wouldn't sit the test.

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: There was something missing and usually it comes down to political will from up top.

GBILIA: *Yes, you said South Africa—we can send Madam Sirleaf there, she can have a talk.*

SCHREIBER: You know she is there today. I hope she has a talk—I think she needs to talk to the person at the top so that he can talk to the teachers. [lots of laughter]

KENYAH: The program began with USAID, right?

GBILIA: *Yes, funding. FHI360 was the partner.*

KENYAH: FHI360 didn't stay on when Big Win came in.

- GBILIA:** *No. LTTP 1 was I don't know how many years, five years or something like that, a project. They were looking for the contract to be renewed. So LTTP 2 was the second phase of the project. They did the three counties; they were supposed to do fifteen, but they had a lot of things undone. When they got the new contract, LTTP 2 which would go into 2016, they had the remaining counties on the list—like deliverables that they wanted to complete. I'm sure they would have added new ones but USAID did not renew the contract.*
- SCHREIBER:** Okay, the three counties are also interesting because as I understand it they did the vetting process there but actually the tests came later as you said. That was something that you added.
- GBILIA:** Yes.
- SCHREIBER:** So maybe two questions, why add the tests—I think I can guess why. Then going back to three counties that had completed the process must have been a bit difficult, can you talk to that a bit?
- GBILIA:** *Okay. The first question—I've got to get the second question again but let's start with why we had the tests. At that time, I was Assistant Minister for Fiscal Affairs in Human Resource Development. The reason why I worked with the teacher education bureau head which is the Assistant Minister for Teacher Education, Honorable Minister (Advertus) Wright. It was because we realized there was a huge teacher gap.*
- We knew that we had these volunteers in the system that were like "undocumented", but we didn't know how to help—to say workforce transitional plan to get this huge number of teachers that didn't have any kind of credentialing or anything in the system onto the payroll. So how do you put a person who is volunteering, that you don't know what they're doing, onto an official program as a government employee? You can do a test.*
- The idea is this person may have the skills and credentials but they may not be put on a payroll for various reasons when they are trying to get on the payroll because of the ghosts. The test came about looking at the teacher gap and identifying the volunteers as a way to fill that gap.*
- SCHREIBER:** And that is something that USAID and FHI 360 did not include in their scope?
- GBILIA:** *They didn't include testing at all, no. I mean they might have done testing but it wasn't like the comprehensive math, pedagogy, language arts like these core skills that you have to have.*
- SCHREIBER:** Right. The test has three sections, right? It is pedagogy, language arts and math?
- GBILIA:** *Yes. The reasons why it was the math and the language arts are because that matches what is taking on the WAEC.*
- SCHREIBER:** Okay, I understand.
- GBILIA:** *Because WAEC is the fundamental credential you have to have to get a certification, a teacher education certification, C, B or A. We knew that if you had the skill sets for WAEC, then the test was like the equivalent.*

SCHREIBER: Do you need to complete this WAEC before you start studying to become a teacher?

GBILIA: Yes.

SCHREIBER: It is like an entry requirement.

GBILIA: Yes, an entry requirement.

SCHREIBER: My second question was going back to three counties where the teachers had been told oh you're finished, we finished the vetting and then obviously six months or a year later you go back and say okay, but now you also have to do tests.

GBILIA: Right.

SCHREIBER: It sounds like that could have been an issue.

GBILIA: *They protested. When we went at that time there was a huge protest. It almost got violent. I think that the governor who was the president of Nimba County Community College, they were in the county Nimba at that time, the county I'm from. I was there at a school speaking engagement event in a different city. In Sanniquellie, the capital city at Nimba County Community College is where they did the first test.*

I got a call that teachers were protesting, they were threatening violence. After my speaking engagement I drove up there. By the time I got there, there was complete quiet. The teachers were taking the test and some were outside under the trees laughing and talking about how they thought the test was going to be more difficult and they can't wait to take the second portion of the test.

When I walked around the campus and talked to some of the administrators, Minister Wright was there and Dr. (Yar Doniah Gonway) Gono, she talked to them. She explained that if you do not feel like taking the test please leave peacefully; we're not here for that. We have young people around and you have to think about the students. If you don't agree with the policy leave but don't try to disrupt the teachers that want to take it. Because teachers were there to take the test, they came prepared. People had studied somehow. Then another group came and tried to disrupt.

So she is the one who actually went on the front line, talked to them and then they left.

KENYAH: Did you talk to them again?

GBILIA: *It was the President of Nimba County Community College, Dr. Gono.*

SCHREIBER: It seems like it would have been constantly communicating why we are now adding the tests when we've already completed the vetting.

GBILIA: *We got—let me say I—I don't know how many people in the ministry—a few of us got intelligence that the Teachers Association was planning a protest even before we went to Nimba. We knew that this may be a possibility and we tried our best with our communication strategy. We went on the radio. We had the EOs [Education Officers] talk. We did our due diligence but still you have some people*

that were not satisfied and came to protest. Some of them were threatening violence.

I'd never want to say the actions of a few reflect the greater institution. Like I said the National Teachers Association is an honorable body, but you do have some that were there that day that tried to disrupt. She had to come and several people—it was several occasions, it happened two or three times but she was able to squash the problems. She and Minister Wright and some of the other education professionals that were there. Some of the teachers got involved and that's how the angry crowd left and left the rest of them to take the test.

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: *Even some from the angry crowd that left came back and eventually took the test after a while.*

KENYAH: Back to the USAID-Big Win thing. It seems that USAID and FHI 360 left and Big Win came in. What was the transition like, how smooth was it because you have two very different—

GBILIA: Yes.

KENYAH: Basically, you are the binding glue now. How was it for you, what role did you play and how easy was it transitioning between two different—?

GBILIA: *That's an excellent question. I don't want to make it seem like I'm pitting USAID versus Big Win because this is not a competition. They both did well to help us serve the Liberian students and the education sector. Now USAID was the funder so FHI was the implementing partner. This project was much bigger than just the vetting exercise. But the vetting exercise in my view, maybe because I'm bias because I was the head of it, was the most important initiative we had at the time because we could not put teachers on a payroll.*

Education is about teaching; that's the biggest stakeholder. Now the student and the family of course from a societal point of view but our number one employee is the teacher because the teacher will help steer the direction of the students. We wanted to put our investment into the teachers.

SCHREIBER: Yes.

GBILIA: *We had difficulties because we couldn't hire qualified people because we had thousands of ghosts in the system absorbing a scarce government resources. Then we had mismanagement and we had waste. I wanted to make sure this program is completed; that's one of the promises the minister made at the national legislature during his confirmation. I had to make the same promise because that is directly my responsibility, that we remove all ghosts off of the system before we leave our tenure.*

Now the smoothness of the transition—I feel it was rough being that we were writing a program without an idea of who could fund. Just understanding funding tables and donor schedules, we knew that USAID would take about nine months before they find another implementing partner, finish all the procurement and documentation and award a contract. By that time, it would be the end of 2016, we had only a few more weeks left—listen we had a few more months left before

we went to election. You're talking about a controversial vetting exercise and we were already starting to think about testing.

We knew that it would be kind of contentious. You want to try to stay away from elections for any kind of reform because you're talking about change and you don't want political actors or aspirants to derail your plan; that's unacceptable. We said okay, we have to have a very lean budget because if no donor comes we want to make sure that the national budget through some kind of emergency stimulus can help us with this amount of money.

KENYAH: This was when USAID was the funding partner?

GBILIA: *This was when they pulled out; this is when we got word that LTTP would not be continued for year two. We got that about two months or something before 2016.*

SCHREIBER: What is very briefly the reason for that? Why just pull out when you still have—?

GBILIA: *I don't know. FHI 360, they wanted to do part two of the program. I guess that's above my paygrade, I don't know. I just got an email one day and they said we will be leaving.*

SCHREIBER: Wow.

GBILIA: *It was like a month or maybe two months—two or three months—I don't want to make it seem like we were totally in the dark. I, as a lower level technician at that time knew minimally, but I just knew that at one point we were thinking about extending the counties and challenges with the rainy season in Nimba and all of a sudden they're leaving and certain assets that they had committed to were no longer coming so they had to be sent back to the US because the procurement hadn't been completed at that time. It is like if money is not spent it has to be sent back to the United States. We had—other things we had planned we had to cancel. It was unfortunate for us at the time.*

SCHREIBER: It sounds difficult. I will try to speak to someone from USAID.

GBILIA: *That was a roughness about it.*

KENYAH: That was a few months before?

GBILIA: *The end of 2016; the contract ended December 31st. You're talking about—for example, this is like October and they said—so we're like, okay, we only have three counties out of fifteen. This is my exact job. I remember the promises I made to the legislature. A lot of those guys are kind of [indecipherable] so I said, I don't want to get summoned and asked, "Why did you lie to us?" and they hold me under contempt.*

I said, okay, I got my team together, two or three persons who are very, very technical and we started to tear down the project. The good thing is some professionals and FHI 360 turned over some of the documents. It took very long to do the report for the three months because it is like 80-something pages. But once we got that document and some other technical strategy work plan documents type of stuff we sat down and reconstructed it. Then we started adding pieces to make sure it is something that government can run without their help.

Once we completed it, we gave it to the minister and in his travels, he shopped around and on one fateful day in London he met Jamie Cooper who said this is a very good plan; I think I can support you with this.

KENYAH: All of this happened before December 31st?

GBILIA: Yes, before.

KENYAH: Incredible.

GBILIA: *I think he met with them in November. We did that plan pretty quickly, as soon as we got the documents we needed, it went pretty quickly.*

SCHREIBER: We're saying December 31st 2015?

GBILIA: 2015. I've been saying 2016, sorry.

SCHREIBER: I think a crucial point here is that you say that you actually planned it for a contingency where if the Liberian government would have to do this themselves.

GBILIA: Yes, that was the plan.

SCHREIBER: If Big Win didn't come in, there was a hope there would be money from the government to make it work?

GBILIA: *Yes. We wanted to make it at a level that we can do it. We broke it down. I was in charge of the finance division too. I used to always go back and forth between the Ministry of Finance. Just understanding government, fiscal budget, donor cycles, those types of things you learn with experience. I said okay, this is what could be done, one million is not a lot as far as adage, it is for a strategic purpose that can free up money that we can do things that we're not able to do because the idea was understanding the efficiency savings. It is almost like an investment if you're a business person.*

You put in one million, you get out like four million. That sounds good. So that's how we were going to pitch it to the Minister of Finance cabinet.

SCHREIBER: But luckily you didn't have to in the end.

GBILIA: *We didn't have to. Then the other idea was to break it into quarters so you have three tranches for quarters. I was also thinking about the national legislature. If I know a senator or representative for County A, say for example, Senator for Grand Gedeh and I know we have these goals and our teachers and our school system is one of the worst in the country. If the education ministry is going to bring this high-class reform, remove the ghosts, and put in quality TTI young people, and the schools are starting to get lively again and the students do better on the WAEC, then that is political currency going into election.*

SCHREIBER: Yes.

GBILIA: *I can say I worked with another branch of government to bring this reform to you people and as a result you see WAEC just increased. It went up this year, the first time in so many years it actually went up slightly so the reforms are taking a little bit of win. Now I can stand up in front of my people and say—.*

SCHREIBER: Sell it politically.

GBILIA: *You can sell it, it is political currency. I was thinking in that line, so I said break it up into sections so once we do this if we can't get the full meeting to say quarter one and quarter two it would be 350,000.*

SCHREIBER: Yes.

GBILIA: *We can do this this year and then next year do quarter 3 and 4.*

SCHREIBER: So specific counties for each quarter, break down the country so that you can—if you only get 350 you know you can do these counties.

GBILIA: *Exactly.*

SCHREIBER: Then we can wait until we get more and then we do this.

GBILIA: *Then you'll be working with the legislature to say this money is needed because the money that is released in our national budget is Ministry of Finance with the planning, then it comes to the national legislature to approve the budget. It was contemplated—.*

SCHREIBER: Do you feel that the level of detail that went into this planning—even though you didn't end up—you ended up not needing the government budget, did this actually help the program even with donor funding?

GBILIA: *Yes, I think so because it was a good plan. The idea was that the government funding was actually the contingency.*

SCHREIBER: Exactly.

GBILIA: *The government was plan B.*

KENYAH You're holding on and hoping that donor funding will come.

GBILIA: *Yes. That was the contingency. We were hoping that donor funding would come. The idea was I was telling my team it has to be around this amount, say one million dollars. It's not too much but it's not too small. I do understand that if an amount is too small you put in the same work to get \$50,000 as you do one million. You've got to make sure it's not too small or it is not a project that is going to impact. But if it is a project that is past a certain level for this country at least, it is going to be accepted by our board.*

The efficiency setting is saying how much we can get back. I have a business background so I knew that people think of it as an investment and you can reap so much from a very small investment. One million for big institutions is not a lot.

SCHREIBER: Yes.

GBILIA: *So that's what it was.*

KENYAH Any time you mention dollars, just to be clear, you mean US dollars?

GBILIA: *Yes, United States dollars.*

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- KENYAH: Just on the timeline again, as of December 2015 you have already done Montserrado, Nimba and Bong.
- GBILIA: Yes.
- SCHREIBER: The vetting, not the testing.
- KENYAH: The vetting. There are fifteen counties in Liberia so if you had divided them into quarters and you had already done three, it would be done by the end of 2016, right?
- GBILIA: *Yes, but the approval and the release of the money were things that were held up. There were a few things like the board had to approve. Once work is approved the financial—.*
- KENYAH: What board?
- SCHREIBER: Big Win board.
- GBILIA: *The Big Win board had to approve. Then after that there were several transactional things that needed to be done and the request from Big Win. I told you about the discussion I had with Honorable Dr. Pate about setting up a delivery unit.*
- I changed the name to Implementation Unit because they will be hands on with implementing the project. That unit was a requirement. Also, we had to make sure that internal controls were set up and we had an auditor come. So they wanted to do—Big Win did it independently to find an auditor to make sure they could do two types of audits. I thought it was very innovative. One was financial audit, one was a technical audit to make sure the program is—now the technical team from Big Win and the ministry team I was heading at the time co-planned this. These are things that we—working with each other we came up and agreed upon. They would do the bidding for auditing firm; PWC ended up winning that bid. They put it out, put out tenders and all that stuff. PWC ended up winning which is great, one of the top four accounting firms. On this type of project, it gives a lot of credibility.*
- Then the second thing was they wanted to make sure that—so the PIU [project Implementation Unit] was established and then the auditor and then also we had to have a dedicated accountant because most donors don't—at that time, because our integrity bar was very low from past administrations' mismanagement of resources. That is what the donor community would say. Nobody was giving direct budget support to Ministry of Education. They usually go through another partner.*
- For example, USAID would have an 18 million dollar project; they would give the money to UNICEF, UNICEF takes their percentage, UNICEF finds their consultants, UNICEF works with the ministry to implement and then UNICEF then sends an auditor to audit from the little bit of money that may have somehow passed through the Ministry of Education's coffers. Big Win gave money, direct budget support.*
- We had to set up a dedicated account, have the signatories, things of that nature. Those administrative processes seem easy in other places, in Liberia it takes months before you can even transfer money. The percentage and the fees and*

then also because they wanted—we wanted a PIU unit, a Project Implementation Unit set up. There were originally two positions but the minister said he wanted two support staff positions. We had to do merit-based recruitment for four positions.

Working with the CSA, we have a merit-based recruitment manual that we follow. It takes time. For each position you have to advertise it in the local dailies, on line for a certain amount of time so you could get requisite talent. Then you go through the recruitment process and after that you vet et cetera, et cetera and you make your final selection.

SCHREIBER: These are the four people that went into the implementation unit.

GBILIA: *I think you talked to them yesterday, David Baysah, Veekie Wilson, Younger—Younger wasn't there, she came later. Varney*

SCHREIBER: Varney, that's the finance guy—.

GBILIA: *Yes, finance. It was those three and then Younger came later.*

SCHREIBER: The total staff complement in the Implementation Unit was four or five people?

GBILIA: *Yes, four or five people.*

SCHREIBER: Are they all—so everyone in the Implementation Unit here in the ministry, were they all recruited specifically for this project or are some of them permanent employees?

GBILIA: *They were all recruited for the project. Now I see you had a host of people you met with; those are my employees in the planning department. But we help support other projects. I think you met two other young ladies who were there and maybe one or two other persons. They work in the Department of Planning, in the Planning Bureau in different positions so we're providing support staff across the ministry to support, for technical assistance. They're supporting the PIU. That was the original plan.*

The PIU was supposed to work with professionals across the government and help to build capacity. Varney, as a finance person, is supposed to work with the comptroller and her team to help build up the capacity because these are consultants. Baysah is supposed to work with different professionals to help build capacity.

SCHREIBER: But once this project is over, they will—David will not continue working for the ministry? I mean according—.

GBILIA: *Not in that capacity.*

SCHREIBER: Not in that capacity.

GBILIA: *David was never—he was working on the GPE project, it was GPE, Global Partnership for Education—granting them funding, I believe that World Bank may have been a former grant agent so they picked together a project support team, PST. David was the coordinator on a former GPE project. That contract ended earlier this year. I mean earlier last year. It ended and he went to working on this right after. Hhe wasn't a civil servant.*

SCHREIBER: That's the question.

GBILIA: *He was not a civil servant, neither was Younger, neither was Varney and Veekie came from outside.*

SCHREIBER: Okay.

GBILIA: *They were recruited externally and brought in.*

SCHREIBER: Right, so they are contractors.

GBILIA: *Yes, contractors. They were on contracts before except for Varney and Veekie.*

SCHREIBER: Right. We have taken a lot of your time here. I don't know if you have one or two very quick final questions.

KENYAH: Yes, very quickly. Just two things. Thing one—how long did this take? When exactly did you start going back? Since your—after December 31st, you have to go through all of this planning process and stuff like that and that took time. When did you get back on the ground? When did the team get ready to go out?

GBILIA: *That's a good question. I can get you the exact dates but I want to say around June, July. June or July. We knew that the execution or implementation was vetting and testing, they are both equally important. In my view, not in everybody's view. We wanted—when they start quarter one, the team goes out together, because you're talking about limited manpower. The testing team has certain persons, the vetting team has certain persons. The teams were to move out together.*

We knew that three counties had been vetted but not tested. We sent—it was like an advance team, a vanguard. They went out first while the vetting team stayed behind. They went out I think it was June, something like that, to do the three counties. Then they came back. Now by July, August, I believe is when they started the vetting. I can get you exact dates.

SCHREIBER: That would be great.

GBILIA: *I can get exact dates, just talk to Baysah and his team. They can say we went out, this is the day we went and then they have the time they stayed and everything. We have the exact schedule of the days and the quarters.*

SCHREIBER: I guess there are reports like that so we can definitely be in touch and see what you can share.

GBILIA: *No problem. Just know that the testing team went out, completed the three counties, came back and then they all went together.*

SCHREIBER: They went together.

KENYAH: Then the final question is, you mentioned something really interesting but you didn't elaborate it much. There were two types of audits, financial audits and technical audits.

GBILIA: *Yes, financial and technical audit.*

KENYAH: We know what a financial audit is, what is a technical audit?

GBILIA: *A technical audit is, to me, equally important if not more important. The technical audit is what do you plan and saying you said you're going to do this; this is this. So, it is matching the baseline versus the actuality. We had a plan saying that according to our EMIS data we have this number of teachers. But we have an idea that in this country—for example, Grand Cape Mount, probably about 15% are ghosts.*

SCHREIBER: Right.

GBILIA: *As a baseline we've seen out of 100, 15 are ghosts. When we go into the counties our EMIS said 100 teachers, we only find 75. You know what I mean? It's this and that.*

We said, because of the fifteen who were moved off from the payroll, we thought it was going to be this amount of money, but it will be this amount, just to make sure we're on track.

Now we have the snapshot, the baseline versus the actual and to make sure we follow the path. We say we're going to go to Cape Mount, Bomi and then back down to Grand Gedeh. Why did you go to Grand Gedeh, Sinoe and this one? Why did you switch it? Because in our planning we had to switch around and there can be justifiable reasons.

For example, we're supposed to go to the rainy season or dry. The difficult counties with our roads during the dry season, and in the rainy season you'd be in the counties with better road access. They switched for various reasons. What's the explanation? Why are you in Sinoe in the heat of the rainy season when you know the road is not good, the bridge fell down last week, dah, dah, dah. The bridge didn't really fall down...so why are you in that region now?

There are reasons why we had to move it around strategically. We have to justify that to PWC.

KENYAH This has been great, thank you.

GBILIA: *Thank you.*

SCHREIBER: Great. Thanks.