

Parminder Brar: Building FM Capacity in Liberia

It was late in the evening when I first arrived in Monrovia, one of 10 World Bank staff members assigned to take part in the UN Joint Needs assessment at the end of the decade-long civil war. A line of UN Land Cruisers met us as we left the chartered plane.

The airport is around 30 km from the city. In 2003 this road was a UN Phase IV area—one of the highest security phases. The road passes through low forested hills, and it was getting dark; the entire team was anxious to get to the city as soon as possible.

I was in the Land Cruiser with the UNDP security official, and we took the lead. Around 5 km down the road the official saw two taxis parked on the side of the road. He halted the convoy. His instinct told him that if the taxis were not moving, something must be wrong. It was not good news: ex-combatants had attacked UN troops on the highway, and the road was too dangerous to travel. So we drove back to the airport. Eventually we reached Monrovia by taking a road through the Firestone rubber estate—a Phase V (the highest UN security phase) area, where active fighting is likely and UN officials are not supposed to enter.

During our first week in Monrovia there was fighting in the city, and the team leader took a vote on whether we would stay or go. We decided to stay. Some teams from other institutions took UN helicopters to leave the city, not risking the drive back to the airport. This was the beginning of my engagement with Liberia, which has now lasted five and a half years.

The Ministry of Finance had been looted, and it truly faced the challenge of building the system from the ground up. After the peace agreement many former MOF employees returned to their positions. By and large these were sincere, hardworking people who just wanted to restart their lives now that the war had ended. However, the ministerial positions had been carved up between the former warring factions, and the leadership during the NTGL period (2003-2005) was largely focused on self-aggrandizement. (The then-Minister of Finance and several of his Deputies have since spent time in jail on different charges of theft of public funds.)

In this environment, a small LICUS Trust Fund grant (\$0.45 m.) helped start the process of rebuilding the institution. The focus was on two areas: first, to control the Ministry's cash, and second, to start a sustainable and long-term capacity-building process. In the first area, a small Cash Management Unit was established with an international adviser and seven MOF officials. Getting a handle on the cash available and confronting Ministers on the misuse and leakage of funds was a really difficult and challenging task. But we did find a unique solution through very good inter agency coordination among the UN, IMF, WB, USG, and the other donors. The Liberia Governance and Economic Management Action Plan (GEMAP) that was noted by the UN Security Council in 2005 is now a template for direct fiduciary management by development partners in some of the most vulnerable institutions in a very weak governance environment.

On capacity building, a small incident helped me understand what needed to be done. I visited the University of Liberia during one of my early trips to Monrovia. The University library had been looted, and vendors were selling library books on the pavement. Students had to carry their chairs around the campus if they wanted to sit during lectures. But the hunger for knowledge was just amazing. At a lecture in basic accounting, around 80 highly attentive students were crammed into a classroom that should have held 50, and another 60 or so were peering in through the door and windows and taking notes. The professor was not a mere lecturer—he was a showman who kept the audience enthralled for the 90 minutes of the lecture. I had never seen anything like this, even though I had studied at some of the most renowned universities across the world.

I realized we needed a school that would provide the skills this knowledge-hungry country required. To help think through the process, I got a consultant from a top UK training school to travel to Liberia with me and provide advice on what needed to be done. The proposals were standard ones—but we could not afford the proposed solution, and I also felt that there was no need to do so. We needed to find a home-grown or West African solution. So we set about building the bridges that were necessary to make this school a reality.

The then-Minister of Finance Lusinee Kamara and Deputy Minister Tugbeh Doe were fully supportive. They provided 10 classrooms and a big training hall in the Ministry for the school—accommodation that had been earmarked for the Revenue Department. We worked with the University of Liberia and its distinguished Vice Chancellor, Dr. Conteh, to design a special two-year master's degree course that would train students in the skills to function effectively in public financial management: government budgeting, government accounting, auditing, and IT systems. We tied up with the Association of Accountancy Bodies of West Africa (ABWA) to train, test, and certify the students up to the Accountancy Technician Exam so that their qualifications could be recognized internationally; we tied up with the Civil Service Agency to test and recruit the students through an open competitive exam, and fixed their entry-level and civil service salary scales; and we tied up with the Liberian Institute of Public Administration to link this training initiative with broader civil service training.

The school opened in 2005 and started training existing civil servants in accounting, internal audit, external audit, budget preparation, cash management, and procurement. The first batch of 30 students was recruited in late 2006 and started their course in early 2007. A second batch was recruited last year, and the third batch was recruited in mid-2009. All students sign an agreement with the Ministry of Justice to receive a stipend during the first two years of their training and then spend at least four years in the civil service. The first batch graduated this summer and took up key positions in the MOF and other line ministries. Has the ride been easy? No. Together we have weathered many challenges and overcome them. Along the way we made many lifelong friends.

Across the board we have found support for this project. The former Minister Antoinette Sayeh and the present Minister Augustine Ngafuaan have been extremely supportive, as

has UNDP. The project would not have been possible without the active guidance and day-to-day support provided by two WB advisers, SM Kumar and Amitabh Tripathi. And there were so many others. For example, the Liberia Country Officer, Barbry Keller, went with me to the Book Project in the basement of the J building, and we selected and sent dozens of books on accounting, IT, and public administration to start building the library of this training school. Thanks, Barbry, and thanks to the Book Project. We need to do more together.

It was a pleasure for me to travel back to Monrovia in June 2009 to meet with the first batch of graduates, who are among the most computer-literate and competent government public finance professionals in the country. I am sure that they will help their country move forward and provide the skills to manage public funds better and meet the expectations of their citizens for better delivery of public services.

I draw two lessons from this story: first, stay engaged no matter how difficult the environment; and second, build appropriate, sustainable capacity—it can be done in a low-cost way. Under the program the World Bank has only financed the first three batches of graduates from this program. The program is now being taken over by the University of Liberia and being mainstreamed into its regular activities.

I have handed over my responsibilities in Liberia to my colleague Winston Cole, as I am now working on East Africa. Winston is taking our intervention to the next level, as our next project of support to MOF kicks off shortly.

I have to add that what has happened in the Ministry of Finance is not unique. There is a similar story in the Office of the Auditor General, where one individual—John Morlu III—has transformed Liberia's accountability function and has built the capacity of his office through simple old-fashioned dedicated hard work. It is another amazing story. But that is a tale for a different day.