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## CHAPTER 4

# A partnership of unequal partners: rebuilding education sector governance in post-conflict Liberia

*James Emmanuel Roberts*

Given the unequal relationship between weak governments and international development organizations, especially in post-conflict countries, can there ever be a real partnership of equals in the dynamics of international development?

## The work environment at the Ministry of Education in 2006

In February 2006, I took up my appointment as Liberia's deputy minister of education for planning, research, and development. Walking into the Ministry of Education (MoE) in early February 2006 was like entering a dungeon. I felt like I was walking in a minefield, hastily planted by retreating rebel forces. There was no road map, no warning signs. We had to discover them, or make the maps ourselves. And there was no one to ask for information or directions. By the time I struggled in the dark hallways to reach my office on the fourth

floor, my lofty ideas and dreams had been considerably downsized. Locating a generator to supply electricity and water to clean up the stultifying stench that pervaded the building appeared to be a great accomplishment.

Dirt and filth greeted entrants to the building from the ground floor foyer, where the garbage was stockpiled at the bottom of the staircase and left to rot. How could anybody be expected to work in these conditions? The first task was to rehabilitate the spirits of the workforce and raise morale before tackling skills and building capacity.

There was no electricity in the MoE building. When I visited it before my appointment, the only light came from candles strewn at each level of the staircase. There was no furniture, no office equipment, and no stationery. The MoE's budget for that year was around U.S.\$5 million. But by the time we assumed office, it had been depleted, or budgetary transfers made to support government services deemed more important. Consequently, employees did nothing but sit around all day. The more assertive ones went to work at other establishments and returned to sign out at the end of the day.

## The workforce inherited from the war years

To improve the nation's education system, good education leaders, trained and experienced manpower, and robust funding would certainly be required. But even more importantly, the lethargic, demoralized staff would have to be reinvigorated and revitalized. They needed respect and recognition for their contributions and accomplishments like any other professionals, with self-confidence and belief that their work as teachers was as important as the work of doctors. Reconstructing a relevant, effective, efficient and sustainable school system demanded trained, experienced, and dedicated personnel at all levels of the system; confident people, committed to the cause of educating the youth of the nation. This would mean shifting the paradigm from leaving decision making entirely up to the donors and their agents to totally involving Liberian professionals at all levels of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

We began work in the MoE before the senate confirmed us. The administration was in a hurry to get its team started. I suggested to the new minister that we should request an orderly transition and jointly plan one with the outgoing minister and her team. We could use the interval between the confirmation and formal handover ceremony. I really did not expect him to take this advice. In the euphoria of the moment, not many people wanted to be engaged in that sort of serious exercise. Besides, this was not the practice at the national level and really was not a realistic expectation for our ministry. Had we done it, however, it might have given us a firm start to our daunting challenge.

The outgoing minister organized the turnover ceremony in early February 2006. Both sides delivered the expected perfunctory speeches, and made the obligatory promises to request advice and to give it whenever called upon. Everybody stared at each other during the first meeting of the new Executive Management Team (EMT), which comprised the minister and his three deputies.

I needed the following:

1. Information and data on the education system, especially data on school enrolment, lists of school infrastructure, numbers of teachers and principals and their qualifications, length of service, and deployment;
2. Information and data on the manpower of other MoE civil servants, apart from teachers and principals, their strengths, qualifications, experience, length of service, assignments and places of assignment;
3. Current or past plans of the ministry, ongoing projects, etc.

I wanted to highlight my vision that it was the primary responsibility of Liberians to identify the challenges that faced them at the beginning of the journey and to encourage them to assume their responsibilities and be accountable. Our international friends would give their support. The wartime habit of complacency and abdication of responsibility could be seen at all levels of the ministry. This resulted in the international community occupying the leadership role, further eroding confidence on both sides.

The MoE lacked the organizational capacity to undertake effective rebuilding of the education system. With few exceptions, most personnel at the national and regional levels were unqualified for the positions they held. Very few senior staff members of the MoE had actually specialized in education. Many who completed college majored in theology, law or business administration. Almost all learned on the job under unqualified and inexperienced political appointees. The political factions were “given” ministries or agencies of government as war booty. Thus, in the MoE most of the senior staff had been self-taught, and those in management positions had gained their assignment because of their political affiliations. Coupled with a weak system that turned out poorly educated graduates or dropouts, Liberia had a very disabled system run by an equally disabled staff.

There were virtually no educational leaders at any level. Those assigned to leadership roles did not seem to care about the responsibility they were given. There was rampant absenteeism and desertion of duties. Few trained staff from the “normal” times remained and those who did remain were marginalized and frustrated. Powerless, with no assignment and nothing to make them feel a part of anything significant, they languished in obscurity until, occasionally, their skills and experience were needed. They adapted to the situation

and found ways to provide for their families. Meager education resources were diverted for personal gains. Many bought teacher positions, irrespective of their lack of qualification. Others paid to be selected for participation in numerous “teacher training workshops” even though they were not teachers, and did not intend to become teachers. The Liberian workforce was uncommitted, demoralized, and did not seem to work toward a common goal. Many of the workers, especially the section heads, dropped in at the beginning of the day and then disappeared until closing hours. Assessment reports by Knight and Marcos (2007) and Mulkeen (2008) confirmed this crippling state of affairs in the MoE and its teacher corps.

It became most urgent to change the situation, as I knew I could not do anything with the prevailing belief that Liberians could not be trusted, and with the Liberian staff at MoE feeling that “people” would not allow us to handle the money. I requested that the minister convene a meeting of the EMT to discuss how we could deal with this situation. In the first place, planning was not highly regarded. The most important deputy in the structure was the deputy minister for administration. And it was considered normal that the deputy minister for administration would guide the education sector’s recovery. I demurred, arguing that the planning, research, and development deputy should coordinate the recovery, and all deputies, section heads, and specialists should be part of the structure. Besides, I was the only member of the EMT who had formal training and experience in educational planning. I also requested that the minister organize a meeting, lasting perhaps a week, for the outgoing deputies to brief the new team, especially since most of them were still working in the MoE. While the minister was communicating with the executive mansion and other places, I organized a number of briefing sessions with the planning department and its senior staff.

I did not go into the ministry with the intention of dismissing employees in the department of planning. My intention was to get to know them, all of them, and assess their strengths and weaknesses, and willingness and capacities to acquire new skills. The willingness of employees to change their attitudes toward work in the MoE was important. The first meeting was revealing. I was called out into the hall to speak to the minister and had to leave the meeting. The door was open and the attendees did not realize that I could hear what they were saying. I was amazed when they began to plot to frustrate me: “He comes with his Harvard degree? Okay. We will show him something. We shouldn’t give him any cooperation.” One of the voices I heard was that of the assistant minister for planning, who had worked in the ministry since the 1980s. Returning to the meeting, I informed them I had heard the discussion and could even identify voices in the conversation. However, I would not hold it against anyone. I realized I was an outsider and an unknown quantity for them. I wanted to give them a chance because I firmly believed we could make a good team once we learned to work together. We needed time to do that.

# The “150-day deliverables”

In a major post-inaugural speech in February 2006, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf challenged each ministry or agency to select projects that it could implement in the first 150 days of her administration. The Government of Liberia (GoL) would provide funding. The exercise would demonstrate the new government’s intentions, and garner public support for it. Without assured funding, the EMT of the MoE established guidelines and approved the four projects listed in Table 4.1.

**TABLE 4.1**  
**Ministry of Education 150-day deliverables guidelines and projects**

Guidelines	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Address access and gender equity issues</li> <li>2. Completion in 150 days</li> <li>3. Measurable outputs</li> <li>4. Modest budget requirements</li> <li>5. Relevance and complementarities to the larger education reconstruction</li> </ol>	
Projects	MoE Implementers
1. Establishment of nine pilot computer centers in nine counties	Department of Instruction
2. National School Census 2006/2007	Department of Planning
3. Payroll harmonization	Department of Administration
4. Renovation of three high schools: Tubman High, C. H. Dewey High and Gbarpolu Central High School	Department of Planning

I proposed we request funding from the international community, as it was the only immediately available funding source. This group included UN agencies, bilateral and multilateral organizations such as USAID and the European Commission, and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). As designated planner for this meeting, I called for hosting a meeting at the MoE, with Dr. Joseph Korto, minister of education, chairing it. In chairing the meeting, the minister would project a dynamic new role for the minister of education: champion of the education recovery. Additionally, hosting it at the MoE would

provide an opportunity for participants to experience the MoE work environment in post-conflict Liberia. Minister Korto disapproved of the MoE venue on the grounds that the building was too hot, too dirty, and lacked electricity for this high profile meeting. Even entering the building, which is surrounded by a bustling street market, would be too challenging, he argued. He proposed the Monrovia UNICEF headquarters as the appropriate venue. However, he consented to chair the meeting. Korto presiding over this important gathering would mark the new era in education. It would be a powerful symbol.

This first meeting of education partners was memorable because it foreshadowed the major characteristics and challenges that would confront the partnership during this period: (1) mistrust of the MoE leadership and reluctance to give up control of decision making in the sector; (2) flag waving or planting; and (3) education minister Korto's style of leadership. Minister Korto made a brief opening statement and then surprisingly deferred the chair to UNICEF Resident Representative Rozanne Chorlton. Dr. Jordan Ryan, second-in-command in the United Nations Mission to Liberia (UNMIL) spoke first, pledging UNMIL's continued support to education in Liberia. Heads of other agencies and NGOs also pledged their support. How could any speaker announce he or she would not support this new government?

Minister Korto requested funds to implement MoE's 150-day deliverable projects, and asked UNDP to donate one generator for MoE's central office. Responding to the specific request for a generator, Dr. Ryan regretted that UNDP could not donate a generator because it did not have a mandate to support education. Its mandate was to support democracy, governance, and the rule of law: army, police, immigration, and security apparatus. No one responded to Dr. Ryan's remarks, not even Minister Korto. With the minister's permission to respond, I said, "There are very few countries in the world where the military guarantees democracy. In Africa, they usually attack and destroy developing democracies. Besides, the ultimate guarantee for democracy in Liberia is an educated and informed citizenry. This is MoE's mandate, and it supports the UNDP's." I ended by saying, "If we are not careful, this very army being trained will overthrow this government." Everyone, including the minister, ignored my politically insensitive rejoinder. I felt like telling Dr. Korto that if the meeting had been held in our hot, dark MoE conference room, we would have secured their support without the long debate. UNICEF turned over four 10-KWA units purchased for county education offices to the MoE for use at its central office. Two days after the meeting, Dr. Ryan's office informed me that UNDP would lend the MoE a 60-KWA generator for three months. The generator stayed until we bought our own, six months later.

With the exception of UNESCO, no organization expressed support for a national school census. They wanted to continue doing what they had been doing for the past 20 years: teacher training, purchase of instructional materials, and distribution of free food. These were projects that brought direct benefits to students, they insisted. UNESCO endorsed the school census project, and pledged U.S.\$30,000 toward its budget. When no other

organization contributed, Minister Korto boldly announced that the census project would be conducted, even if the partners did not fund it. He also announced that the MoE would provide U.S.\$15,000 for the school census budget. I was elated over Minister Korto's surprising decisiveness at this critical moment. We had no idea where we would get the money.

I visited all heads of organizations present at the meeting to solicit support for the 150-day deliverables. The strategy was simple: find out which projects our partners had budgeted for and persuade them to reallocate the funds to our 150-day deliverables. If a partner budgeted for teacher training, I would ask how many teachers would be trained, for which schools and locations. If the project was school infrastructure, or instructional materials development, my questions were, "How many classrooms? For how many students? In which communities? How were the communities selected?" No partner could answer these questions because there were no credible answers at the time. The war completely destroyed about 33 percent of school buildings, and almost 39 percent had been rendered unusable without major repairs. The war had also contributed to a shift of population from rural to urban communities (RoL/MoE, 2007b).

Partners were concerned that MoE did not have the "specialists" to conduct a credible census, and they did not trust the internal MoE financial management structure. No one had attempted to conduct a national school census since the early 1980s. The census project objectives were modest and clear: "The overall aim was to: (i) capture quality baseline data which future performance in the sector could be measured; (ii) establish a solid foundation for an Education Management Information System (EMIS); and, (iii) provide accurate and current data to develop the LPERP" (Liberia Primary Education Recovery Program: LPERP, 2007).

My answer was simple and direct: this was a new breed of MoE leaders committed to honesty, transparency, mutual accountability, productivity, and quality. Our very hardworking data processing staff had worked with UNICEF during several data collection exercises, including UNICEF's rapid assessment of learning spaces. They were not novices, although not highly skilled either. My planning department staff and I welcomed this challenge as one opportunity to prove our skills, commitment, and passion for the task. The fact that we had not taken a school census in almost 20 years was a motivation, not a deterrent. With support from the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, we believed we could conduct a successful census. We certainly did not feel it had to be perfect to be successful. Besides, we knew no data collection is ever 100 percent error-free. If we did not conduct a census now when we needed it most, when would we?

After weeks of negotiations and resource mobilization, organizations began to make contributions. UNICEF donated U.S.\$75,000 and the European Commission lent the MoE three project vehicles in lieu of funding. There were other in-kind contributions such as stationery. The actual school census was completed on time although analysis and interpretation were not finalized until well after the 150-day deliverable deadline.

Going ahead with the census in the face of donor resistance signaled a new MoE. Before the next census planning began, organizations were lining up to fund it. Our modest but determined effort laid the basis for three highly successful censuses between 2007 and 2010. The 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 censuses were better managed and better financed, and the results published in beautiful glossy pamphlets (RoL/MoE, 2009a and 2010). In introducing the 2007/2008 school census, President Sirleaf declared that the MoE school census would henceforth be the official school data for Liberia. UNICEF budgeted for three successive school censuses, while USAID financed the renovation of the EMIS facility and equipment. When the long awaited European Commission-funded European Commission Support to Education in Liberia began in early 2009, it augmented the EMIS capacity with a specialist in data rationalization, and utilization by schools, educators, and MoE authorities. I felt a certain satisfaction when the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, considered then by many as the best financed and managed ministry, requested technical assistance from our EMIS staff for their health census. What a turn for a census project that no one wanted to support in 2006.

I learned several very useful lessons from this experience that helped me navigate the ambiguities of relying on international aid for national development. Mobilizing resources from education development partners (EDPs) would not be easy. But if one was confident, insistent and committed to the project, partners could be persuaded to commit funds. Although the 150-day deliverables provided some understanding of the challenges in forging the education partnership, it could not truly test the complicated process and uncharted course of coordinating international support to education reconstruction in Liberia. It exposed the arrogance of some of the partners, the weaknesses of the GoL, my own bold but risky gambles and over-confidence, and the collective strengths and various manifestations of the partnership paradox. It raised the question we would be confronted with throughout our work with development partners: Given the unequal relationship between weak governments and international development organizations, especially in post-conflict countries, can there ever be a real partnership of equals in the dynamics of international development? One thing was abundantly clear. If the MoE had the confidence to insist on implementing a justified project, the partners would support it even if it was not their priority. We thought we should build on this successful strategy.

## The local education development partnership: How it was constructed, how it worked

UNICEF was the *de facto* Ministry of Education for the Republic of Liberia in 2006. UNICEF spoke for education, not the MoE. UNICEF gathered and controlled information and data on education; Rapid Assessment of Learning Spaces is a good example. Anyone who wanted



information on education obtained it from UNICEF, not the MoE. There was a disproportionate emphasis on basic literacy and numeracy. While the health services received diverse funding, the education sector, along with the school system, languished in mediocrity and obscurity. Total school system (pre-primary to senior secondary) enrolment in 2005/2006 was 730,135. The proposed 2006/2007 budget (see Table 4.2) reflected operational costs with little or no long-term investments in human resource development targeting critical areas like early childhood and primary education, teacher training, school-based management, school construction, curriculum and textbooks, planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

Of the U.S.\$10,326,535 budgeted for education, U.S.\$2,555,535 was allocated to subsidize institutions of higher education, primary, junior and secondary schools, and the GoL Scholarship Program. The actual MoE budget was only U.S.\$8,555,535, most of which went to salaries. To put it differently, the GoL was spending only U.S.\$11.00 annually to educate each student enrolled in its school system (kindergarten to high schools).

**TABLE 4.2**

**Ministry of Education budget summary, 2006/2007 (in U.S.\$)**

Program	Recurrent			Capital		Total
	Salaries	Goods and services	Subsidy, transfers and scholarships	Cars	Others	
Instruction	2,492,071	1,687,920	593,495	175,000	266,930	5,215,416
Planning	213,623	207,150		45,000		465,773
Subsidies & Scholarships			1,129,003			1,129,003
University of Liberia			1,173,329			1,173,329
Tubman Technical College			50,000			50,000
Commission for Higher Education			174,817			174,817
Administration	535,188	1,327,925		30,084	225,000	2,118,197
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,240,882</b>	<b>3,222,995</b>	<b>3,120,644</b>	<b>250,084</b>	<b>491,930</b>	<b>10,326,535</b>
<b>% share</b>	<b>31.4</b>	<b>31.4</b>	<b>30.2</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>4.7</b>	

Source: RoL/MoE, 2007a: 7.

Immediate post-conflict Liberia witnessed increasing demand for education. With parents demanding schooling for their children, the government was under pressure to keep its promise to provide quality education for all. School enrolment for academic year 2007/2008 skyrocketed when the government declared free basic education for all. Rural youth, who had fled the war and settled in urban communities, competed with urban youth for very limited classroom space and severely limited employment opportunities. The expected economic revival of post-civil war Liberia would create an escalating demand for a trained workforce for projected employment opportunities in the manufacturing, agricultural, and mining industries.

The international development community immediately responded with support to the newly elected government of President Sirleaf. However, this support would still be channeled through the INGOs and UN agencies. INGOs, experts in following funding trails, mushroomed all over Liberia.

**MAP 3**  
**International NGOs in Liberia, 2008**



Source: Management Steering Group, 2008.

At one point, there were over 100 newly registered INGOs, many with no record of previous experience in education work. Savvy individuals who enriched themselves by feeding off the misery of others also visited the country with NGOs that existed on paper and in their briefcases only. Many had little formal training, and fewer still had significant work experience planning and delivering education service in post-conflict countries. However, they were experienced and successful grant writers.

I remember two cases that demonstrate the urgency for coordinating the MoE and the education aid community. A Norwegian INGO informed me it had secured U.S.\$210,000 in donor funding to construct three high schools in three counties: one in Bomi County, another in Gbarpolu County, and the third in Grand Cape Mount County. They were surprised when told that the MoE would not approve the construction of additional schools until the 2006/2007 School Census was completed. I explained that the prolonged war had shifted the population and pointed out that their budget was inadequate to construct to the high quality mandated by our plan. Instead of constructing new schools, I suggested they support existing high schools in the targeted counties. They appealed to Minister Korto, who advised they negotiate a compromise. My compromise was that they fund the schools (construction, academic facilities, and administrative and teaching staffs) for three years, giving the government time to budget for it. They went to consider the offer and never returned.

In the second example, Visions in Action requested approval for an “emergency teacher training program” long after the MoE had ended its “emergency” program. Visions in Action appealed to Minister Korto, claiming it had a grant of over U.S.\$1 million that had to be spent immediately or returned. Rather than return it, I suggested joining the Liberia Teacher Training Program (LTP) consortium, which was responsible for establishing a national teacher-training program. Minister Korto overruled my decision, and approved the training. Visions in Action implemented a poorly planned three-week training workshop that took over five weeks. Stipends were not paid on time and the venue was inappropriate. More disturbingly, the MoE was not only excluded, it also did not receive any reports.

My concern, in both instances, was that these ad hoc interventions were outside the LPERP framework (which is further described below), specifically violated decisions regarding ending random planting of schools, and countered the developing teacher policy. In the new dispensation, school construction would be based on the school census and school mapping; and the teacher-training program based on long-term interests and the successful pre-service and in-service training strategy to be implemented by the Regional Teacher Training Institutes (RTTIs). Visions in Action’s “emergency” centralized training project called for gathering hundreds of teachers at a central training venue, removing teachers from their classrooms, and depriving students of valuable learning hours. The Norwegian-funded high school construction would have increased the number of mediocre schools that lacked trai-

ned teachers and administrators, science laboratories, and libraries. These schools would be off-loaded on an unprepared and poorly funded MoE. Such projects would disrupt and retard our planned education reforms. They highlighted, once again, the need for an effective aid coordination mechanism and policy compliance.

Inheriting a grossly under-funded system—the meager U.S.\$5,000,000 budgeted for the 2005/2006 academic year had been depleted or diverted to support services the GoL considered more important—we were faced with three options: (1) Allow the UN agencies and INGOs to continue their domination of decision making and control of education development funds; (2) Fight for complete GoL control of donor grants; or (3) Establish a partnership with joint GoL/UN-INGO responsibilities for policies and programs. Our lack of organizational capacity, reputation for corruption and UN-INGO self-interests in maintaining their role as trusted conduits for international aid were critical to our decision to choose the third option.

## The international aid tapestry in 2006

No one was prepared for the army of international development organizations and experts that descended on Liberia. Unlike the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, which was better organized and had sustained robust international support throughout the war, the MoE was an ugly stepchild.

The pronouncements of commitment to good governance, transparency, accountability, and equal opportunity persuaded the international community to pour substantial funding into the education of children, war-affected youth, women, and virtually anybody who wanted to acquire an education, it seemed. Since the MoE did not have the capacity to manage the recovery program, the NGOs, widely believed to have full capacities, would continue to play their wartime role of delivering education services until sufficient government capacity was built. That was the theory, reasoning, and expectation. It would turn out to be wrong, with disastrous consequences for capacity development itself, and the nature, quality, and sustainability of education recovery. It would magnify the paradox of the partnership: parachuting in capacities from a different environment rather than developing capacities specifically for Liberia.

Although NGOs were the direct service providers, they were at the secondary level of the international development community. They received grants to deliver services to targeted communities. Ideally, the communities should have been their clients. But it did not always seem that way. When necessary, these service providers promoted the idea that they were answerable only to their donors, not to the communities they were contracted to serve.

One such case was USAID-funded Creative Associates, which, in my view, behaved as if it were the final decision maker in the disagreement over the establishment of learning resource centers. Creative Associates negotiated and signed short-term three-year agreements with various entities and individuals for buildings to house learning resource centers, without MoE participation. One of the leases was with the Monrovia City Corporation, for a government building. The MoE could have negotiated permanent free occupancy agreements for GoL-owned structures. I frequently wondered if this happened because of ignorance of government's obligations to support activities of this nature, or selfish manipulations for ulterior motives.

## Donors

In the Liberian environment in 2006–07, donors were organizations or governments that funded national development through grants to NGOs. Each donor nation had its own conditions for making these grants. Donors to Liberia supported specific issues such as gender equality, equality for marginalized populations, democracy or primary education. Because of the breakdown of governance in Liberia, donors did not make direct grants to the Liberian government, fearing improper use of funds, and lack of transparency and accountability. Consequently, there was always an intermediary with fiduciary responsibilities. These fiduciary agents were sometimes international agencies such as UNICEF, UNMIL, the World Bank, and the World Health Organization, and sometimes INGOs such as the Carter Center, the International Rescue Committee, and Save the Children (RoL/MoF, 2008). Table 4.3 indicates the pledges made by donors for the years indicated. Up to mid-2014, some donors still had not fulfilled their pledges.

TABLE 4.3

## Donor pledges to the Government of Liberia, 2004–07

No	Donor	Year & Amount in U.S.\$				
		2004	2005	2006	2007	Total
1	ADB	500,000	0	145,000	3,600,000	4,245,000
2	Canada	0	739,552	0	0	739,552
3	Denmark	2,100,000	1,800,000	1,600,000	1,500,000	7,000,000
4	Echo	15,941,497	23,595,908	21,180,000	0	60,717,405
5	Germany	4,480,000	12,960,000	7,790,000	4,900,000	30,130,000
6	GFATM	5,061,000	9,160,511	8,970,588	0	23,192,099
7	Irish Aid	2,251,587	3,674,977	5,623,958	3,600,000	15,150,522
8	Japan	11,940,000	8,850,000	0	0	20,790,000
9	OSI			1,000,000		1,000,000
10	OTI	10,500,000	1,500,000	4,500,000	7,000,000	23,500,000
11	Spain	0	145,985	0	0	145,985
12	Sweden	12,703,804	14,500,000	14,000,000		41,203,804
13	Switzerland	2,950,000	2,850,000	5,500,000	5,500,000	16,800,000
14	U.S.A.	236,118,000	130,761,000	199,212,500	89,945,000	656,036,500
15	UNDP	6,602,463	3,224,124	4,700,000	0	14,526,587
16	UNEP	200,000	200,000	300,000	300,000	1,000,000
17	UNESCO	0	1,050,000	0	0	1,050,000
18	UNFAO	307,900	0	801,000	0	1,108,900
19	UNHCR	11,474,204	16,610,800	11,854,952	0	39,939,956
20	WFP	35,000,000	45,400,000	50,000,000	33,000,000	163,400,000
21	WHO	4,500,000	3,271,488	2,715,000	2,715,000	13,201,488
22	World Bank	1,900,000	15,500,000	67,800,000	0	85,200,000
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>364,530,455</b>	<b>295,794,345</b>	<b>407,692,998</b>	<b>152,060,000</b>	<b>1,220,077,798</b>

Source: UNDP and RoL/MPEA, 2006.

# The Government of Liberia

Having impressed the powerful countries of the world by winning a hotly contested election with 17 presidential candidates, President Sirleaf enhanced her reputation with her promise to improve the sociopolitical climate of the country through good governance, transparency, accountability, and national reconciliation. The improvements would be manifested in better employment, better schools, a better health system, and improvement in other basic conditions of life. The donors repaid her with immediate financial support for her programs, and eventually forgave Liberia's debts. Heightened popular expectations for instant results escalated an unreasonable and unrealistic demand on government. Thus, the government was eager to secure the aid money (and lots of it immediately), indiscriminate about what money it received, and less concerned about capacity to properly spend it. Liberia was deluged with projects, many dubious and often contradictory. The few MoE personnel who questioned the value, relevance, and priority of questionable projects were considered unsupportive of government, or harboring hidden agendas.

To bring some order to this cluttered landscape, I invited all NGOs working in education to an MoE/NGO information sharing forum held on December 13–14, 2006. The two-day meeting, funded by IRC, was structured on thematic working groups: curriculum, parent teacher associations, teacher training, and accelerated learning programs, with NGO representatives participating in working groups relevant to their program areas. Implementing partners (IPs) retained the working group format as a permanent feature of their bi-weekly coordination meetings. The report of the information sharing forum (GoL/MoE, 2006) was widely circulated among NGOs and donors, and the first meeting held during the holidays in mid-January 2007.

The donors were already loosely organized. A meeting held in Washington in February 2007 began the formalization of the mechanism and procedures that eventually placed the MoE at the center of the decision-making process. Very early in the formation of this structure, donors expressed their preference for meeting as a separate group, rather than joint meetings with IPs. They believed IPs' participation in the Education Sector Development Committee (ESDC) Executive Board could present conflicts of interest when decisions about evaluating IP performance or awarding grants were taken. On the other hand, IPs felt that their insights and grassroots operational experience were invaluable to policymaking, and that therefore there should be only one large group. By the time we completed the LPERP, a clear framework for the partnership had emerged. The NGOs would be grouped into the IPs, and donors into the education development partners (EDPs). The donors would meet monthly and would discuss and give input to policy in collaboration with the EMT (MoE's senior policy and management team), and the NGOs would meet bi-weekly. Once the par-

tnership began to function relatively well, the NGO schedule was adjusted to monthly meetings. When the Education Pooled Fund was established, the EDPs merged with the EMT, becoming the ESDC. At the apex of the complicated Education Pooled Fund mechanism, the ESDC with representatives from the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs (MPEA), and the Liberia Development and Reconstruction Committee became the ESDC Executive Board. In the end, we devised a two-tiered coordination structure (RoL/MoE, 2009c; RoL/MPEA, 2009).

This structure allowed us to achieve a number of objectives: (1) Learn about the field-level education delivery system; (2) Inform IPs about the government's developing education recovery plan and strategies; (3) Share "bottom up/top down" information and experiences; (4) Facilitate coordination and synchronization of international aid with the government's development plan; and (5) Help ease the process of formulating the 10-Year National Education Plan.

At first, NGOs seemed excited about the opportunities for regular dialogues with the MoE and their colleagues. But as the mechanism matured and the MoE increased its demands for more substantive reports and discussions, it seemed IPs' enthusiasm began to subside. I was now asking for active and substantial roles for MoE specialists in the working groups. I wanted accountability for unachieved objectives. I demanded MoE representation on field monitoring and evaluation teams, and asked the IPs to defray their expenses from the project budget, since the MoE had no budget for monitoring and evaluation. We requested to see the project documents, implementation plans, and budget for each IP. We were moving too fast for organizations, which for almost 20 years had answered to no one but themselves. Soon, the top decision makers began to skip the monthly meetings, sending junior staff members whose input was limited to reading reports.

It would be unfair to say all IPs opposed this change. In fact, a few, like Save the Children-UK, Plan International, and the Norwegian Refugee Council, began negotiating a memorandum of understanding when the initial request was made. But it was revealing how organizations that normally proclaimed the virtues of transparency, accountability, and proper fiscal management resisted sharing the same type of information they demanded from the MoE. Full and timely disclosure was generally a one-sided demand, and came from the international side. Mutual accountability was hardly ever mentioned in those early days. Yet, it is one of five fundamental principles of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD, 2005). We never missed an opportunity to invoke the declaration in support of our demand.

When these repeated requests went unheeded, we informed the IPs that they would be required to sign a memorandum of understanding with the MoE as a condition for continuing to provide education services in Liberia. The compliance deadline was set for March



31, 2007. The IPs challenged this decision, arguing that MPEA authorization rendered the MoE's request superfluous. They also complained that the process was cumbersome and would obstruct their operations. This was hardly the case. We requested a small adjustment, which required relevant sector ministries' or agencies' endorsement before Planning Ministry authorization. Sector endorsement would be based on the following criteria: (1) capacity and experience of the applicant, (2) quality of operational staff, (3) previous achievements in comparable situations, and (4) present and future funding.

We argued successfully that even if the MPEA did have the expertise to determine an NGO's qualification to provide service in a particular sector, it made absolutely no sense to exclude sector ministries or agencies. The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare joined the MoE in the request for changes in authorization procedures; and we found a supportive ally in the assistant minister for International Cooperation at the MPEA. After several months of this debate, the MPEA contracted a consultant to write a policy. We had won; but we also lost. Consistent with prevailing lack of both national confidence and self-confidence, the consultant hired was an expatriate "expert." It took two expensive consultants to complete a discussion draft. In the end, Liberians and NGO representatives produced the draft submitted for national consultation. This was yet another sad example of how dependency on expatriate experts, even for very simple tasks, and the willingness of the donors to search for expatriate experts rather than local specialists, continued to undermine the grand capacity building pronouncements of the GoL and its international partners.

## Formulation of the LPERP

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's 150-day deliverables were equivalent to the Quick Impact Projects advanced by UNMIL's Special Representative of the [UN] Secretary General, Jack Klein: short-term projects designed to buy time from the demanding public while government planned medium- and long-term projects. As long as government was restricted from negotiating for investment in its own resources, mobilizing the development finance agenda would continue to be insurmountable. Powerful international and traditional donors like the World Bank discouraged our overtures because the Liberian government had not requested that they fund education. On the advice of World Bank Education Specialist Peter Darvas, I asked then Minister of Finance Antoinette Sayeh if she would support an application for the Education for All–Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) Catalytic Fund. She was receptive and suggested that Minister Korto secure President Sirleaf's support.

The first challenge for the partnership was to secure funds for education reconstruction. A meeting held in Washington, D.C., in February 2007 seemed an opportunity to

make a case for education support. But that meeting did not focus on education reconstruction. There were no passionate education advocates on the podium, confirming what I had suspected and feared all along. Education, Health, Agriculture, and Infrastructure shared the Social Services Breakout Session. The “star” sector was health and social welfare, with infrastructure a close second. The education segment of the breakout session was poorly attended, prompting the MoE and its partners to move forward with a backup post-D.C. meeting briefly discussed before departing Monrovia. By the end of the Washington meeting, we received word from the EFA-FTI that they would accept an application from Liberia for either the March 31, 2007, or October 15, 2007, deadline. The news stimulated much enthusiasm and UNICEF agreed to support and host the follow-up meeting at its New York headquarters. That meeting took place on February 16, 2007, with relevant UN agencies, major INGOs, philanthropic institutions, academics, and researchers participating. The meeting viewed the LPERP plan (RoL/MoE, 2007a) favorably, but many participants questioned whether its U.S.\$70 million budget would be adequate.

Our application would be based on the MoE’s 15-page short-term program, *Priorities for the Post-Conflict Recovery of the Liberia Education Sector* (RoL/MoE, 2007c). The development of that document showed a commitment of the MoE and its partners to spare no efforts in mobilizing resources. K. Dormu Farwenee, Anthony Nimely, UNICEF Education Officer John Sumo, and Onu Richards joined me on the core MoE team. The team was supported by UNICEF consultant Jonathan Causley, backstopped by World Bank Education Specialist Peter Darvas, and Ahmed Ferej, officer-in-charge at the UNESCO Monrovia Office, and Keith Wright, deputy UNICEF country representative. When the MoE did not have electricity, the planning sessions moved to UNICEF or UNESCO offices. Other EDPs and IPs read and critiqued the drafts. Academics, teachers’ associations, and parent teacher representatives provided very useful input, though within a very short time frame. Time limitations restricted the process to a highly select group, limited in number and by geography.

A number of education partners had misgivings about the decision. Even the consultants felt we were overly ambitious. We knew our application would not fully meet the requirements of the EFA-FTI Catalytic Fund. We lacked many pre-requisites for the application: a 10-year national education plan, sufficiently reliable school data, and many critical studies that would have informed the plan. But we decided to focus on our positives: a small but dedicated planning staff and a small but supportive donor group. We had Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president and the first woman elected to head an African government. She was a flag-bearer and willing advocate for Liberia’s cause with leaders of the world’s powerful nations. It was difficult to see how these nations would deny an impoverished country U.S.\$70 million to educate its children when it was spending around U.S.\$700 million annually to keep UNMIL troops in Liberia. Could the international community ignore the 500,000 youths who had never completed primary school, or even entered school? What would the adoring

world press say about the denial of Liberia’s application? We did not think they could deny assistance without appearing to be hypocrites and meaningless speechmakers.

Out of this rushed process emerged Liberia’s application to the EFA-FTI Catalytic Fund. An abridged national consultative conference was planned during the second week of March. Over 200 participants were invited from various segments of the population including students, teachers, women, war-affected youths, representatives from the public and private sectors, community leaders, civic society activists, and members of the press. Unfortunately, only about 70 persons participated; most of them were teachers, school administrators, and academics. The plan was finalized and the application delivered to the EFA-FTI Catalytic Fund through UNICEF, on the March 31, 2007 deadline.

## The Education Pooled Fund

The second major challenge was the establishment of the EPF, which took almost a year of intense and exhausting negotiations. The decision to set up a pooled fund was made before the formal announcement of grants from UNICEF/The Netherlands, and the Open Society Foundations. Burdened by multiple, complicated and time-consuming reporting formats, we were attracted by the flexibility of pooled funding for a program rather than restrictive funding for specific projects—a nightmare for financing programs. USAID declined to participate because of U.S. government restrictions against comingling its funds, and the European Commission deferred a decision until it could conduct an audit to verify compliance with its standards. The World Bank, widely accepted as the most credible agent for managing such funds, considered a pooled fund mechanism superfluous. I believe this was self-serving because a successful pooled fund would have undermined the World Bank’s traditional role.

UNICEF and Open Society were unwilling to place their funds into World Bank custody because its complicated procedures have proved stifling in post-conflict countries where conflict continues to impact the environment long after it has ended. Hugh McLean of Open Society’s London Office joined his colleague Aleesha Taylor at critical moments in the pooled fund negotiations. Together they advocated for even greater control for the MoE. Although UNICEF Liberia was supportive of a central role for the MoE, there were objections, resistance, and delays emanating from financial managers at UNICEF’s New York headquarters. If the Open Society team had not insisted on the MoE leading the process, the EPF would not have had the innovative governing instruments and structures that made national ownership and empowerment its hallmark.

As for the MoE, we wanted a mechanism that allowed us to participate actively in all decisions regarding our national education recovery. We were apprehensive about a World

Bank arrangement designed for a fully functioning environment transplanted and reassembled in Liberia, a society barely out of crisis, although the actual war had ended. It took nearly a year of negotiations before the pooled fund mechanism was finally agreed on. The Liberia Education Pooled Fund's governing arrangements and instruments placed Dr. Korto, the minister of education, at the center of all major decision points. If Dr. Korto had been the decisive confident leader envisioned in the EPF instruments, it might have developed into a truly unique model. President Sirleaf presided over a grand EPF launching ceremony at the C. Cecil Dennis Auditorium of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on May 22, 2008. Partnership members and representatives from the judiciary, the legislature, the full Cabinet, and the private sector, as well as parents, students, and teachers attended the ceremony, which received national and international media coverage.

## Teacher training

The third major challenge for the education partnership was formal teacher training. Teacher issues are the most contentious issues in Liberian education today. Everything about teachers is challenging: training, deployment, salaries, qualifications, certification, and incentives. The problems existed before the civil war but the conflict exacerbated them. During the war, NGOs were conducting many “teacher-training workshops,” even groups not otherwise active in the education sector. That was where the money was, and there was virtually no accountability requirement for content relevance, standards or the qualifications and experience of presenters and trainers, and few questions were asked about outputs and outcomes. When such questions arose, it was easy to state broad figures like number of teachers attending courses. Very few could describe course content, or the qualifications and experience gained. The important thing was that the nation needed teachers.

Later, this mass short-term teacher-training scheme would result in problems for the MoE. However, during and immediately after the first civil war, in 1990–95, teacher training was a manner of survival because teaching was one of the few available employment opportunities. Thus, by 2006, it was important to tackle the syndicate that ran the training schemes: the district and county education officers, and their immediate supervisors at the MoE Central Office.

High demand virtually guaranteed employment to any barely literate person. Trained to no specific competencies, in 2006 a teaching staff estimated at around 25,000 was demanding salaries on par with RTTI-trained teachers. The vast majority were products of unregulated mass short-term teacher-trainings; they had hardly any teaching skills and barely any familiarity with subject content. Due to poor teacher assignment, many schools

had 10:1 pupil to teacher ratios, while some, especially urban schools, had 100:1. So when USAID offered to fund a national training program based on the RTTI pre-service/in-service model, the MoE readily accepted the offer, convinced that the proposed teacher training system would provide the solution to this appallingly vexing educational problem.

The LTTP Project had the advantage of guaranteed USAID funding over an initial three-year period. A highly respected education consulting NGO, the Academy for Educational Development (AED) would be implementing it. Other major partners, especially UNICEF, expressed serious misgivings about abruptly ending the ongoing teacher trainings. UNICEF, which funded most of the wartime teacher training programs, wanted to upgrade and continue the existing training schemes in view of the dire need for teachers, the sheer numbers to be trained, and the time it would take to train them in the new program. With all three RTTIs operating at full capacity, a maximum of only 1,000 teachers could be trained annually. Satellite in-service training schemes by contracted agents, principally the University of Liberia and Cuttington University, could potentially train an additional 1,000 teachers annually. Old fault lines began to reappear in the partnership. The divisive competition to take credit for successful projects, manifested by planting flags and insignia, which was not so noticeable during the formulation of the LPERP and establishment of the pooled fund, began to rise again.

My own view was that, as the LTTP was a major LPERP component, it should be a project of the GoL, so that it could be eligible for financing from the pooled fund. However, if branded a USAID project, replete with the famous handshake logo and flag, it would be very difficult to persuade other donors to fund it. Apparently, my argument was unconvincing. I was committed to this idea because I likened our education recovery journey to a long train journey in which passengers would board and alight at various stations. Donors, for many reasons, might temporarily or permanently end funding. We could use the EPF to fund many of these strategic interventions, if they were not stamped with the insignia of specific nations. Competing to plant flags and logos, rather than striving for impact and outcomes, was detrimental to the partnership. At one time, in 2009, three of our important partners publicly competed for community approval to build learning resource centers in Buchanan and Zwedru.

The LTTP would run into several problems. AED announced it would prepare only sample sets of teacher training materials, and had no funds to finance furniture, computers or libraries. Matters became even worse when AED informed the MoE that rehabilitation and re-establishment of the teacher training system meant construction of the physical structures and installation of electrical outlets only. It did not mean provision of electricity, fuel, feeding, teachers or salaries. In fact, AED suggested the Planning Department source funds from other ESDC agencies. ESDC executive board members Stella Kaabwe (UNICEF)

and Aleesha Taylor (Open Society) endorsed recommendations that EPF funds be used to procure these necessary services, averting a major setback for a strategic component of the LPERP. When donors and NGOs hang banners stamping projects as their own and not Liberian government-owned, they undermine the very government they support. Yet, we do recognize the need to give credit to donors and their contracted agents. The question is how do we balance the two? One solution that worked was to label all the projects “Government of Liberia Project, funded / supported by [name(s) of donor(s)] and implemented by [name of partner].”

## Conclusions

As I look back on my tenure at the MoE, I learned some valuable lessons. These reflect my own analysis and understanding of my experience as deputy minister for planning, research, and development in the Ministry of Education, Republic of Liberia; they are not the views of the minister at the time or since, the Ministry of Education, or the Government of Liberia.

1. Culture plays an astounding role in national recovery. It is not on the government agenda, neither is it on that of the partners. It is whispered about, even though reconnecting people to positives of their communities is fundamental to rebuilding individual lives and communities that the war destroyed. Culture is the essential building block for values, understanding relationships, self-identity, self-confidence, shared experiences, and shared destiny. Donors and their agents cannot argue that their failure is the result of not wanting to interfere with or change the culture. We see their collective and robust opposition to traditional practices that they consider bad. Too often “cultural sensitivity” is substituted for “cultural understanding.” There is a significant difference between those two concepts that must be understood and factored into reforms. People working in development must understand the culture enough to discuss sensitive issues without being insulting and disrespectful. This is a difficult balance that requires a multiplicity of skills. It takes trust building; and building trust takes time. So a consultant who drops in with a mandate for instant delivery is at a disadvantage the moment he or she signs that contract.
2. There needs to be greater funding for education throughout a crisis, not only when the war ends. If education were treated the same as health and innocuous “peace building” programs, better results would be attained. From 2004 to 2006, only U.S.\$31,883,902 was allocated to the education sector in Liberia compared to U.S.\$553,577,004 for

“peace building” (see Table 4.4). UNMIL’s budget was funded separately, so it is fair to ask what activities were covered by that “peace building” budget. If all funding for “education” interventions had been harmonized and integrated into the school system budget, it would have supported an aggressive and robust integrated skills and employment program that would have changed individual lives and communities, and significantly impacted real national development.

**TABLE 4.4**  
**Total funding breakdown by sector, 2004–06 (in U.S.\$)**

No.	Sector	Amount	Donor
1	Agriculture & Food Sec	18,393,233	Irish Aid, UNFAO, UNHCR, USA, WFP
2	Economic Recovery	9,129,860	Irish Aid, Japan, UNDP, World Bank
3	Education	31,883,902	UNESCO, Irish Aid, WB, USA, UNHCR, WFP
4	Gov. & Rule of Law	66,019,819	ADB, Denmark, IFES, Irish Aid, OSI, UNDP, USA, WFP
5	Health	83,736,158	ADB, Canada, ECHO, GFATM, Irish Aid, UNDP, UNHCR, USA, WB, WFP, WHO
6	Infrastructure	58,053,389	Irish Aid, UNDP, UNHCR, USA, WB, WFP
7	Nutrition	17,655,615	ECHO, IFES, UNHCR, USA, WFP, WHO, Irish Aid
8	Water and Sanitation	15,063,303	ECHO, UNHCR, USA,
9	Emerg Shelter & NFIs	1,454,687	Irish Aid, USA
10	Protection	83,266,064	ECHO, UNDP, UNHCR, USA, WFP, Irish Aid, Japan, Spain
11	Multi-sectoral Activities	83,988,499	Irish Aid, UNDP, UNEP, UNHCR, USA, WB, WFP
12	Peace building	553,577,004	Irish Aid, Japan, UNDP, USA, WFP
13	Coordination	3,726,819	Canada, ECHO, UNDP, USA, WB
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,025,948,352</b>	

Source: UNDP and RoL/MPEA, 2006.

3. “Capacity development” has become empty rhetoric in contemporary Liberia. If it were a priority, we would put more thought and resources into it. We need to postpone, or at least balance, the desire for instant “success” of short-term results with the benefits of targeted medium- to long-term capacity building. As one Japanese prime minister noted when addressing a conference on African development over 20 years ago, Africa’s capacity problem could be solved if African governments did not allow their educated workforce to be driven overseas by starvation wages at home. Incredibly, the same governments that pay lucrative salaries to expatriates have no problems paying their own nationals rock-bottom salaries that drive them abroad or corrupt them at home.
4. Donors need to rethink their opposition to funding salaries for government employees. It is simply less expensive to recruit and train competent Liberians and pay them attractive salaries than to pay short-term expatriates who have no long-term commitment to the country. They are parachuted in, with their laptops full of generic assessment and evaluation templates, and disappear with little impact from their work. Most reports do not even reflect Liberia-specific realities. The lesson is clear: quick-impact consultants made no substantial impact. In fact, they jeopardized real capacity development. A more sensible approach would be to bring in medium- to long-term consultants with mandates to build specific capacities of their national counterparts. The consultants should be selected through a careful and meticulous process, factoring in previous experience in building the capacities of their counterparts. Their contracts should specify “capacity-building” as a major responsibility for which the consultant will be evaluated. One high-priced consultant with whom I dealt made it clear that he was disdainful of MoE personnel, and actually hated to be in the building. He gained his insights about Liberia from his fellow expatriate hotel residents and foreign businessmen. The businessmen knew two categories of Liberians: servants and workers in their businesses, and the government officials they helped to corrupt and keep corrupt. On the MoE side, we need to identify assertive, self-directed, and confident employees or recruit young college graduates with similar characteristics as counterparts to the consultants.
5. Donors must structure their support so that it compels recipient nations to provide competent, assertive candidates for counterpart positions to consultants, rather than encourage unqualified partisans who see the positions as temporary employment before they are given political appointments or contest legislative seats. The process of preparing to submit the MoE’s application to the EFA-FTI Catalytic Fund is an example of a sponsor-centered process that needs to be changed. UNICEF was an excellent sponsor; without its support, it is not an exaggeration that we would not have



completed any of our applications. Having said that, I must say I felt that the process relegated the government to a passive role when it should have been at the center. The sponsor should facilitate the recipient's entry into the process and support, not replace the recipient. Whenever I raised this contradiction in meetings, the response was always that we (government) are the drivers of the vehicle of change. To which I always replied that we did not want to be drivers of the vehicle; we wanted to be the owners, because drivers take instructions from owners.

6. In emergency situations, the structures and systems must be built to the specificity of the strengths and weakness of the local institutions, and even then they should be adjustable. That would require knowledge, understanding, and willingness to adapt, adjust and be flexible. Structures and systems should reflect local realities as well as the expectations of meeting standards of best practices from similar situations. "Best practice" is relative and inextricably linked to culture, at the institutional and societal levels. Parachuted and re-assembled systems can hardly be expected to work in new countries the way they did in countries for which they were designed.
7. The MoE Planning Department was fortunate to have specialists in partner organizations who were thoroughly professional and extraordinarily committed, with unabashed passion for their work. Peter Darvas (World Bank), Stella Kaabwe (UNICEF), and Aleesha Taylor (Open Society) were appreciated within the department as attentive listeners to the MoE side and they demonstrated a willingness to explore solutions with the MoE. With all of their other pressing responsibilities, they always found time to share their experiences. Sadly, Peter Darvas was transferred from his Liberian assignment just as we began to prepare our EFA-FTI Catalytic Fund application. His absence left a very large gap that his replacement was never able to fill. I was replaced at the MoE in June 2010. Stella Kaabwe, a passionate advocate for children's education, ended her UNICEF employment sometime later, leaving Aleesha Taylor of Open Society the lone veteran of those battles to give Liberian children the same opportunities that their peers in other countries enjoy. I often wonder how education reform would have progressed if this team had been left in place for six years.