



Staff Development and Legislative Professionalism:

A Framework for Enhancing Legislative Assertiveness.

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by

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Staff Development and Legislative Professionalism

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Introduction

For more than fourteen years of war, Liberia was governed by an ever changing composition of legislatures. Beginning in 1991 with the seating of the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) headed by Dr. Amos Claudius Sawyer then the Liberia National Transitional Governments (LNTG 1 to 3). The Legislators appointed¹ by the winning National Patriotic Party (NPP) in the aftermath of their 83% victory at the 1997 elections brought into the Capitol a new crew of public official and generated a new face of lawmakers and staff composition. Over these years, the character of the legislature has been less than assertive and tilted primarily in the direction of its benefactors. There has been very little to count on, in terms of legislation. Respective legislators' arguments and bill supported was increasingly devoid with very research capacity to enhance the knowledge of the first branch of government. Under these rather fluid conditions of the legislature, staff recruitment and development fell short of general priority. Respective legislators' staffed the Legislature generally outside guided stipulations of the Civil Service Agency (CSA)² for general administrative staff. Support staff of individual legislators has, over the years, been recruited principally on filial and other wanting non –professionally reasons.

As Liberia advances to yet to another epoch of national life, preceded by elections, there is an optimism that for the firsts time in Liberia, there might evolve out of the process a collection of astute, well educated but politically nervous actors who, for the first time in their lives, in a non-partisan manner, will grapple with the intricacies and demands of a highly demanding and progressively challenging society with woefully unrealistic expectations of national leaders. With the arrival of the KAF and other international partners who have expressed interests to capacitate Liberia's anticipated legislature, there is an air of hope that a new day is dawning within which, representatives of the people will utilize the expertise of international

¹ The elections that year were only for the President. Legislators were appointed by the winning party NPP. The Proportional Representation process was utilized in the 1997 electoral process. Until the bi-elections of Tom Woweiyu and a few others no legislator was elected.

² Liberia's statutory agency responsibility for recruitment and placement of public servants

goodwill and transform the posture of that branch by taking advantage of the outcome of the programs.

This paper seeks to provide some insights on staff development and the process of engendering legislative professionalism at all levels of that body thereby providing for a more assertive carriage of management of its roles and responsibilities to the state and its people.

Support versus General Administrative Staff

Staff persons in the legislature are generally broken up into two broad groups: *support staff* who are directly tied to respective legislators and staff that are recruited primarily to contribute directly to the overall administration of the legislature. Comparatively, general administrative staff most often is larger than those, professional or career legislative staff recruited directly to the offices of individual legislators. These work on substantive legislative matters, such as bill drafting, research, policy analysis and budget review. The major distinction between these two groups is the specific roles they play, though in a mutually distinct but coordinated manner. In view of these considerations, the workforce of the legislature is essentially diverse, drawing together on the variation of a nation's mosaic. There are immense benefits to be derived by the legislature when diverse views, multiple approaches and a variety of research approaches into its work culture and activities.³

Recruitment to the legislature is invariably based on the mandate(s) of the recruiting institution, such as that of the legislature. The legislature has key responsibilities for which staff is and should be attracted through a transparent and meritocratic fashion. Staff of the legislature is recruited essentially along the lines stated earlier: administrative and general support.

The overall roles of the legislature are primarily:

- Enact laws
- Represent and mediate differing constituency interests
- Debate and establish political priorities and resources allocations that directly affect peoples' lives
- Oversee the executive branch

The legislature provides a counter balance between the executive and as the extension of the voice of the electorate on public policy matters. It is again based on these responsibilities; staff is recruited to assist in the execution

³ NCSL: Embracing Diversity in the Workplace; Operational tips

and management of the stated responsibilities. To ensure that decisions are informed properly, legislators rely on the developed administrative, research and documentation skills of support and general staff. Development can basically come about through two primary means: recruiting professional persons and or ensuring regular training and professional upgrading of staff persons for greater legislative efficiency and effectiveness.

Essential Roles of Administrative Staff:

Within the context of the general administrative framework of the legislature, staff persons directly assigned in administration revolves within the following specific roles and responsibilities:

- *Protocol:*
Protocol within both executive and legislative branches is the “first port of call” for visitors and other branches of government. It can be most challenging to erase a poor image that is created resulting from improper handling of visitors. Every staff person must essentially comport themselves in such a manner that suggest them to be self appointed Ambassadors for the Legislature. More precisely however, is the need to polish continually the ambassadorial skills of staff persons assigned directly in the protocol section of the administration. Their overall responsibility should be to coordinate the inflow of visitors, especially at functions of that body and to ensure that cooperation amongst individual legislators is smooth. Protocol is the mirror of the legislature and so must be staffed by skilled individuals who understand and appreciate what it takes to build the image of an institution as a consequence of the way people are dealt with.
- *Provision of Budgetary and Administrative Services:*
Staff persons provide for the legislature budgetary and general administrative services including; projections on the amount of stationeries and office supplies to be consumed by all offices of the legislature, overall maintenance and supervision of the grounds of the legislature, salaries, allowances, benefits and other financial and non-financial returns to both staff and legislators alike. Staff persons carry the enormous role of keeping the institution operational, while Legislators tarry on in the sworn pursuits of enacting and reviewing laws in the overarching interests of all Liberians. Staff supervision and placement is a another major responsibility of general administration. Under the leadership of the Chief Clerk, general administration seeks to ensure that

- *Documentation and Internal Research Services:*

The strength of the legislature is mainly in its ability to document and research efficiently and effectively. Staff must be recruited with some basic skills in these areas. Over the life of the state, references to archives of the legislature supports the intellect of the institution generally. Hence, as part of the many critical responsibilities of general administration of the Legislature, personnel recruited to manage this aspect of the role must out of necessity for productivity, be trained continually. Modern trends now turn to digital documentation rather than the rudimentary dry archiving process as practiced today. Skills in data processing is essential adds to easy access. Internal research is made easier and time efficient. Passed legislations become readily available immediately after a click of a mouse. Training today in transcription and other efficient recording processes and techniques are essential for enhancing the documentation and research potentials of the administration of the legislature.

- *Communications:*

A communications department must out of necessity be staffed by persons versed in communication skills. The practice of processing information gathered from within or from without the legislature for dissemination to the public or a specific target group is important to the image of the institution. Administrative staff must be positioned appropriately in how to distribute information and how data gathered is processed for that information for beneficial use of the legislature. The role of staff persons in enhancing communications internally is as crucial as is the situation of a department created with the mandate of serving as the “mouthpiece” or an external relations department of the legislature. Staff of an external relations’ department should be capacitated to engaged external actors on issues affecting the legislature or evolving out of it, in ways that protect the image and respect of the institution. Staff person must be specialized and great communicators.

Amongst the many other responsibilities the above listed roles of administrative staff persons are critical to the overall stature respect. image and outlook of the legislature.

Professional Support Staff

After microscoping some of primary roles of administrative staff of the legislature, we now turn the focus to professional staff of the legislature. These are support or aids of individual legislators who are recruited directly by law-makers with varying reasons for the decisions. According to an informal research conducted by a local group, most legislators within the last few interim governments have staffed their offices with friends and relatives without necessarily considering professional capabilities and proficiencies. The character of such a set up is normally mediocre and lacks much in substance and posture. The caliber of staff persons who should be recruited in the offices of legislators carry a greater demand on their professionalism than often is the case with administrative general staff persons. They must be career individuals recruited for specific assignments. *For instance, Dr. John Doe is a legislator who got elected based on his position on Public Health, Public Right to Information, and Greater Support to Public educational Institution. As a Doctor, Mr. Doe might not be verse in education and related issues, but based on his stance on the issue, he recruits someone proficient in the area to assist him formulating bills and legislation, to conduct policy analysis on educational issues in informed way.* The potency of a legislator relies heavily on the quality of his staff. The more productive and professional the better does the legislator stand out. Along these lines, A typical professional staff concentrates on the following responsibilities:

- *Specialized Internal and External Research –*
A major responsibility is to keep a legislator informed not just on the Routine issues but on the specifics and details of critical issues for which the legislator might not readily informed. The staff must be depended upon to update and prepare his boss and bring him/her up to speed. This responsibility therefore calls for research beyond the parameters of the office to wider society. Staff are positioned to filter and transmit information from grassroots to legislative debate room by assisting legislators and pre-empting possible issues for which legislation should be passed.
- *Promote Constituency Relations-*
Staff most often than not serve to promote constituency relations between individual legislators and their constituencies. Where a legislator is drawn to several constituency events, staff persons can

then fill in and provide the connection needed to keep constituencies in touch with the law-makers.

- *Communications-*
Staff plays a key role in keeping legislators informed not just about issues confronting the particular constituency of the legislator but even internally within the legislature. Internal communication between and among legislative actors is crucial to the overall disposition of the responsibility of a legislator. It must be stressed however, that it is crucially important that every legislator staffs his/her office with a communications persons whose primary responsibility will be to manage the image of that legislature, what and how things are said is of outmost importance to the legislators and their constituency relations.

What is the Importance of Staff to the Legislature?

After considering the aforementioned roles and responsibilities of the staff, both professional and administrative, the importance of staff to the Legislature is then highlighted. The importance of staff to the legislature is as key as the presence of a legislator. They both work to compliment each other even though the support is meant to promote the position of individual legislator and by extension, the general population. Below are some key propositions declaring why a staff is importance the legislature:

- Staff provides key support services which legislators, on their own, cannot provide for themselves.
- Staff bring together a collection of various skills and expertise with which legislators are informed
- Staff expresses the diversity required to enhance legislators' outlook and impressions about national issues.
- Staff tend to conceal the limitations of legislators by complimenting them through research and related activities.
- Staff are the repository of legislative knowledge. They provide the internal institutional continuity

Enhancing Legislative Professionalism

Legislative Efficiency and Effectiveness:

The legislature would be considered efficient and effective given the manner in which both staff and legislators combine discharge their roles and responsibility within reasonable timeframe and in a timely manner. There must be an unspoken synergy between both sectors of the legislature working relentlessly carryout the statutory functions and responsibilities if the legislature. This can only be a reality when both sectors recognize and understand the very nature of representation and the implications for legislative strengthening. Representation is considered the fundamental role of the legislature in a democratic environment⁴. A legislature's posture is enhanced by its appreciation of and interaction with society's diverse sectors and actors all in the name of advancing society to greater heights of socio-political achievements. The effectiveness therefore of a legislature is in how it reaches out to constituents, civil society and marginalized groups. The legislature, buttressed by the skills, expertise and support of its staff may utilize several means to actualize and render their representation role as effective by:

- Mirroring constituency views against what their evaluated perceptions might dictate is best.
- Balancing between serving constituency interest and focus more on the national good.
- Promote a balance between competing constituencies viewpoints irregardless of the advantage to particular sectors.

A legislature is considered effective when it is capable of managing to incorporate all actors, especially civil society organizations, in national decision-making processes.

Finally, both legislators and staff persons work in synergy to promote the image of the legislature in promulgating laws and ensuring effective overall supervision of national governance in a responsible and nationally rewarding fashion.

Legislative Professionalism:

The professionalization of the legislature is amongst the most prominent trends in development assistance of national political institutions especially in developing countries such as Liberia⁵. The level of professionalism again, is determined, in large, by the caliber/quality of staff persons that are recruited to and in legislators that are elected, to the legislature. In some cases, there are external research institutions utilized to assist in developing a higher quality of representation by the legislature. Staff, more than

⁴ 2000 November, Understanding Representation, Office of Democracy and Governance, USAID, pg. 1

⁵ Grossback and Peterson, Understanding Institutional Change,2004

legislators contribute immeasurably to the image of the legislature. Staff as more independent actors may play a peculiar role as mediator during time of division in government and as crucial source of expertise in term-limited legislatures.⁶ It is however worth noting that professionalization of the legislature, beyond recruiting quality staff, is further associated with better office space, salaries and ergonomic conditions. Staff has a unique impact on policy development and the changes over time in the element of legislative professionalism. The rapidity of staff changes Liberia impacts negatively on the image of the legislature coupled by the incessant regime changes over the last two decades. Impacting therefore vitally on legislative professionalism are budgetary considerations. While there have been efforts in the past to provide for the recruitment of quality staff, legislators chosen for short-sighted benefits to hire mediocre rather than qualified professionals who would invariably assist in the institutional image building process. Society is left with the need to understand the influence of legislative staff at a time when political institutions pressured by both internal and external considerations.

Professionalism enhances legislative decision-making because it provides the legislature to generate better policy information. Information is a critical source of political power and influence and remains central to the formation of desired public policies and policy actors.

In Uganda, *The 1997 Parliamentary Act* in which the legislature turned around its misfortunes by enacting the law give birth to a new autonomy which guaranteed that this first branch of government operates using resources under its control and provided that staff persons were not covered under the civil service structure. In pursuant to the Act, a parliamentary service was established to develop and manage staff. This included the setting up of a parliamentary Commission to administer parliament and guaranteed its autonomy.⁷

Professionalism can be enhanced as stated not only by the recruitment of quality staff and the provision of enumerations that are attractive but with the efforts to institutionalize that branch of government with resources with which to control and affect its activities as needed and required.

⁶Ibid,

⁷ Nakamura and Johnson, *Rising Legislative Assertiveness in Uganda and Kenya*, 2002

Benefits of Professionalizing the Legislature:

There are numerous benefits to society which comes about as a result of a professionalized legislature. Among the many benefits are the chosen few below:

- *Institutional Character Building:*
In an environment where the roles and functions of the legislature is carried out without bias to self or narrow alliance but in the overall interest of the state and its people, there is belief and trust in their ability to protect the public good. This belief and trust is manifested in an image of respect and confidence from society. Institutional character of substance and resoluteness is the results. This is today a desired quest for most of Liberia's institutions. An effective legislature can contribute to good government by using its oversight to perform a number of roles including exposing corruption, mandating the adherence to policies, policing and holding institutions accountable for results and serving as a means of raising equity considerations. Effective oversight is a rarity in fledging democracies where the first branch relies on the executive for its sustenance.
- *Enhances Public Trust in the Governance Process:*
The public is often in distrust of the governance process simply based on the dominant influence of the executive branch over other branches of governance. With a situation where there is an effective check on the usurpation of powers of other branches and in light of the check on the activities of those branches internally, society's limited appreciation of the governance process is lifted to newer heights. Governance then tends to be institutionalized rather than overly patronizing. Public trust is critical to governance continuity and strength.
- *Enhanced Statutory Posture:*
The quality of decisions and policy promulgations emerging from a legislature speaks loudly about the level of competence of its staff. Institutions are respected based on what comes out of them. A professional legislature of competent staff and careered legislators provide for enhanced impressions of that body from society. The

statutory posture of the body is s unimpaired by any other influence. This again enhances trust, confidence and respect for the legislature.

Conclusion:

Professionalizing the legislature is a two prong approach which calls for attention to both legislators and staff in particular. There is a strategic partnership of professionalism between the two sets of actors. With training and retraining exercises conducted, staff proficiency is enhanced and the posture of of the legislature is improved. Staff are therefore urged to view themselves not just as employees but as potent partners in the process of image building, policy review and promulgation, governance supervision and foremost, protecting and balancing the competing interests of various constituencies.

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