

Dan Honig Fellowship Report

September 10th, 2008

I danced around this for a while, unsure of how to start this report. How do you describe one of the richest experiences you've had?

Getting Started

Maybe it's best to start at the beginning. As I sat on the Brussels flight descending into ROB, I wondered where the city was (answer: 60 kms from the airport). While the ministry had offered to arrange a car to meet me, I had asked them not to bother, and instead had a Liberian acquaintance from college pick me up at the airport. My bags were lost, so after filing a claim, I went out to find my buddy. We started driving to town in the now-waning daylight; soon we had our first run-in with a Liberian pothole, taking out two tires (we had only one spare). We drove slowly to the gas station in Shefflein Town, where we arranged to leave the car for the night, and waited for an hour or so for another car from the city to come pick us up.

It's strange the things that matter; the little details in life that make you love a place, or hate it, the features that one finds salient and that become the basis for understanding and interpretation (I always think of the moment in the book Disclosure in which the main character reveals he didn't cheat on his wife because, during foreplay, the woman coughed). For me, the beginning of this chapter in my life was sitting on the roof of a car under a dim light, surrounded by glass bottles of gas (each containing about 4.8 liters, sold as 5 liters), smoking cigarettes, and learning the beginnings of Liberian English from the boys who worked at the station. I can't put my finger on what made me smile all night – perhaps it was the slowness of the pace, the lack of surprise at a car with two flats rolling up, that first Liberian 'snap' handshake; I think maybe it was just the comfort of everyone, of the scene, of calm in a place which one's subconscious associates with tension. I was pretty sure, as one of my friend's friends rolled up in his tinted-windows SUV, that this was a place where I could be happy.

The next day I walked into the ministry of finance around 9:15 AM, dressed in shoes and a shirt I had bought 20 mins before (Luckily, I had brought a suit in my carry-on). I told security I was looking for the minister – that I was supposed to work here. The guard on duty looked me up and down. He smiled, yelled "Echo" (which I later learned was how one called the elevator, or more precisely, Gladys, the elevator operator), and soon I was ascending to a place that would eventually feel as comfortable as any in the world to me. Five minutes later I was interrupting a senior staff meeting to introduce myself; an hour after that I was helping to prepare for the next day's legislative hearing, countering the concerns of the Auditor General regarding the FY 07/08 budget. When I got back to my friend's place at 2 AM, he had waited up for me.

"You OK?", he asked worriedly. "Yeah", I said, "Yeah I am." I felt happy, productive, honored to be a part of it, a bit confused, a bit exhausted, and wished I had had a bit more time to invest in the matters I had dealt with that day. I didn't know then, but know now, that I would feel just the same way a year later. And that I would love having that feeling every day.

Leadership

Before this job, I hadn't really worked in an office, or had a day-to-day supervisor, in about 6 years, having done some grad studies, helped start an NGO in East Timor, and worked for NGOs in a couple different

countries with minimal supervision, or as field staff. By illustration, I remember my joy the day I discovered lists as a tool for keeping track of stuff. At the beginning of the year, I honestly felt that I was just horrible at my job, and decided to compensate for my lack of finance background by being the Jon Barry¹ of the Ministry of Finance, making up for talent with hustle. I quickly discovered that there was no way one could work harder than my boss, Minister Sayeh.

Being Minister of Finance is an incredibly difficult job – the endless stream of ‘retail’ problems, the constant push from cabinet colleagues to expedite just about everything, the difficulty of remaining calm and above the fray, while trying to focus on policy and direction, on setting a vision for reform and action and then moving that agenda forward.

Working for Minister Sayeh was humbling. Here was a woman with more experience than virtually all the folks sitting around her round, Liberian-crafted conference table, who would still pay enough attention to the details to catch grammatical errors in 60-page documents; a woman who left a comfortable life in DC to work in a building where she often had to climb the stairs ten floors; a woman who would pause during meetings to explain to me - her assistant – what the jargon meant, and in so doing flag to donors and government officials alike that I was a part of the conversation, to be treated accordingly; who worked more hours than I did, even when all I felt I was doing was work, sleep, and eat; who still – still - remembered birthdays and children’s names, treating everyone as a person; who was unfailingly earnest, candid, and warm.

It wasn’t long before I – who had long seen myself as a self-motivated guy apt to chafe under even well-meaning supervision – found myself committed to her vision, and trying to do what I could to make her life easier, to clear some of the muck ahead of her so that she could walk a bit farther in a day. In my more hubristic moments I felt myself a part of a team that collectively was the Sword of Sayeh, helping to support her and the Government’s attempts to push Liberia forward; in my more humble moments I felt myself scurrying to get out from underfoot. And I always felt incredibly lucky to have a seat at that beautiful and simple conference table, to be able to see one of the country’s key leaders – and I would argue its sharpest ministerial mind – conduct the business of state.

I learned that a great leader isn’t just ‘inspiring’ in the abstract – a great leader could inspire me, push me to do more by her example. I learned that the tone someone sets really can affect the opinions of institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, truly change the course of government policy, and serve as an important catalyst for change.

Shoes Make the Man

Before this job, my work in the developing world had all been with NGOs. In that capacity my view of government tended to be of a unitary actor – a thing called ‘government’, which made laws, consulted (or more often didn’t) with the population, and generally mucked things up for those trying to get things done.

Having a window into what it is to set policy, to run a government, was incredibly enlightening. This includes the very real trade-off between consultation and action; the more one listens, the less time one spends fighting the myriad fires. I learned that sometimes government inaction, or mis-action, is the result of a few individuals, or lack of adequate skill, not ill will.

¹ A former NBA basketball player

I now read negative stories in the press and feel them unfair, suspecting – or, in some cases, knowing firsthand – that they tell only one side of a complex story. Now, when I hear a civil society organization criticize what government has not done, I wish that view were balanced by an awareness and recognition of the impressive strides that this Government has taken.

And I've come to realize that, of course, there's no more a single thing called 'Government' any more than there's a single, unitary place called 'America'. I now tend to look inside the box, seeing government as many people, folks who may have differing goals, motivations, context, institutional incentives, etc. Part of what I got to do for a year was help navigate this, trying to understand what would lead to desired outcomes; experience I suspect will inform me in whatever I do irrespective of the name of the organization or institution in which I find myself.

The Fellowship and Liberia

While I believe I had the good fortune to work for the best of the best, the incredible thing about this Government is how many folks there are who follow in the President's example, capable and earnest folks who care ultimately about making their nation a better place to live. These individuals work, as President Johnson Sirleaf said in launching the PRS process, to "get the processes in place to ensure that a child born today in Liberia has greater opportunities than we ourselves inherited. It is our obligation to create an environment so that those who wish to succeed will succeed. We need to provide the education, the health care, the infrastructure, the enabling environment, as well as the transparent and fair processes. These tools will allow the true drivers of development, the true agents of change - the people – to do their good work."

When random folks – at an airport, say – ask me about Liberia, and what it's like working for an "African Government", I always say something like "It's great. I've worked in a couple spots, and it's great working in an environment in which you never have to worry about whether the government wants to do the right thing. In Liberia, it's just a matter of figuring out what that right thing is, and how to get there." I say it because I want to suggest that there can be good governments in Africa, and to encourage average Americans to disaggregate what is still, in many ways, the darkest continent, a place where we may have filled out the map in every possible way, but we rarely bother to look at that map, to learn it, to understand it. I also say it because I believe it, with all my heart. This is a country whose senior management are incredibly wonderful folks. I came into this job having seen Timor-Leste fall back into conflict, still wondering if development work was the course for me; I leave it thinking about Ph.D.s in development, reinvigorated and committed to helping, in some small ways, those places where sustainable change seems tantalizingly possible.

Being a fellow is, in a way I didn't realize when I accepted this job, a ticket to a different world. There's a whole network of people, including young 'strivers', that you end up meeting and becoming at least a temporary member of as a result of the gig. This has left me with more insight into how people get ahead, and how much networks matter; it's also left me capable of networking with, and no longer intimidated by, folks whom I would have avoided interacting with a year ago. One of the things that surprised me the most last year was realizing that important folks are still just folks; smart people with their own quirks, incentives, foci. I think the fellowship creates comfort for fellows with this world, and in so doing opens up new possibilities.

Scott Fellows form a network of folks outside, but somewhat organic to, the system, easing in the sharing of information, the understanding of context. To borrow from Steve, you sit in a room full of the fellows and realize that, collectively, there are few rooms in the country in which resides more knowledge about the various things government is doing. Some day, I hope and believe, information will be shared easily across government via a well-trained civil service whose capable members, full of pride at their labors, ensure decision makers are armed with information and analysis, decision makers who in turn are guided by policy decisions made at the highest levels and transmitted throughout. Liberia is not that perfect world – indeed, were it, the Scott Fellows would be unnecessary. Our task as fellows, I think, is to help in the interim while working to help hasten the arrival of that day.

Capacity and Sustainability

I got myself into a little bit of hot water during my interview for the Scott Fellowship when I expressed my views about ‘capacity building’ – namely, that the concept that there’s this thing called ‘capacity’ which expats can come help ‘build’ isn’t the most fruitful way of looking at it. It seems to me that skills are best transferred when that transfer works both ways, in counterpart relationships where both parties recognize they have much to learn, and can accomplish more, working together than working apart.

Perhaps my biggest regret from the past year is that I didn’t do much of this – didn’t work closely with a Liberian counterpart, a Liberian peer. I’m not sure what the fix to this is, in that one of the great advantages of the Scott Fellows is that they serve as a sort of fungible capacity for their supervisors; my role was more of a normal line position, full of just-in-time delivery and the stresses that encourage you to accomplish things today rather than build systems for tomorrow. With that said, I can’t help but feel that I could have done more. While certainly much of this rests with me – with my decisions and actions – I wonder if there would be a way for the fellowship to encourage ministers to partner fellows with young, eager civil servants to help build skills as a sort of built-in civil servant counterpart, while still retaining the ability of Scott Fellows to serve in whatever role the minister deems appropriate.

Working with Donors

“Wow” seems like the best summary of a year dealing with Liberia’s ‘Partners in Progress’. I feel like I’ve seen some incredible behavior, in both directions. I’ve seen donors fight with each other, and waste government’s time, on the most ridiculous, non-substantive details of pomp and circumstance; donors talk about ‘ownership’ while pushing their agendas and trying to look good back at home office; donors engage in whisper-mongering to Government’s detriment for self-aggrandizement; missions with multiple Ph.D. economists complain about the data quality they receive from a ministry of finance which has exactly zero economists with Ph.D.s (my answer: if you want better data, lend us your economists for a year).

I’ve also seen a good number of hard-working folks doing all they can to support government and build systems. I’ve seen the difference earnest, capable country staff can make; the IMF resident representative in particular is simply spectacular.

If you are, like me, a white dude from Detroit who does development stuff, it’s a fair bet, *ceteris paribus*, that you’ll end up working for a donor someday. If that does happen to me, what I’ve learned in Liberia will be incredibly useful. And if it doesn’t, I’ll be better able to understand the system and incentives, and the important ways in which what sometimes matters most isn’t particular skills, or background, but

rather having good people who mean well and care more about getting the job done than getting credit for having done it.

Cooler Things I Got To Do

I got to do many pretty fantastic things as a Scott Fellow. I've included the section of my updated CV from this job, as cleared by Minister Sayeh, as an annex; but I also wanted to go into depth about a few of my experiences.

Poverty Reduction Strategy –The Ministry of Finance led the work to develop Liberia's first full Poverty Reduction Strategy, and I had the opportunity to play a technical coordination role that gave me access, and exposure, to a wide variety of sectors and actors from across government, civil society, the private sector, the legislature, rural counties, and development partners. In addition to learning a lot, it was a thrilling process. I got to watch and assist folks who had spent the last decades in war build a plan for a medium term that was newly secure, and thus worth planning for and building expectations around for the first time in decades. My role on the PRS required a set of skills (management, coordination, planning, a bit of political persuasion) that I didn't know I had, and feel I developed, of course with plenty of missteps along the way. The PRS was incredibly rewarding, personally and professionally – and in the end it yields this document, this book, in which so many folks can take pride.

HIPC Triggers – I played a role in refining, negotiating, and coordinating the development of the triggers whose fulfillment will allow Liberia to reach HIPC Completion Point, the point at which debt relief is irrevocable. This will allow Liberia to begin a new chapter, freed from the burdensome, odious debt overhang which now constrains Liberia's ability to act. This negotiating was a kind of strategic game, in which the country wants to get to triggers that can be done as quickly as possible (completion point is reached only when the last trigger is met), but wants them to be substantive accomplishments (or at least seem to be so) which are acceptable to the IMF and WB boards. I felt pretty palpably like I was a little man playing a part in an important game called 'Liberia's debt relief', something that was both humbling and invigorating.

Paris Club – Also on debt, I got the opportunity to be part of Liberia's delegation to the April 2008 Paris Club meeting at which Liberia renegotiated its debt with bilateral creditors. While I played a role in the preparatory work, my contribution at the negotiation itself was modest; the incredible part of this experience was just being there. I was able to see how the negotiations were approached by the Liberian side, the nature of the negotiation, and the incredible – and unusual – mechanisms via which the Paris Club operates, and the world turns.

Cabinet, LRDC Steering Committee, and Every Day at the Ministry of Finance – Watching incredible folks govern and understanding some of their constraints, their stresses, and the ways in which decisions are made, then seeing the consequences of those decisions play out.

Liberia Poverty Reduction Forum – This conference, held in Berlin in June 2008, was just a mess of important (and sometimes self-important) folks. Its preparation was a combination of the grand and the minute, from invitations, seating arrangements, visas, and travel insurance to communiqués, bilateral side meetings, and messaging. Preparing the event involved working very closely with a small number of other technical folks on a job that had often seemed like more than our meager numbers could accomplish, but which in the end met success. What makes this event special for me is the feeling of camaraderie, the collective joy, the feeling of well-spent sweat and well-earned rest that accompanied its completion. I

think I'll feel a kinship to those folks – and the team that put together the PRS as well, to a lesser extent – all my life. It felt good to be with a team that worked so hard, on the whole so well together, and who did something together that would not have been possible without the earnestness and dedication of all.

What I'll Miss/Reflections

I'll miss the fellowship of the fellows; the feeling of being in the middle of a crucible, things constantly firing at my head; seeing the tangible results of actions, decisions, advice given, as well as learning from where things went less well, or my suggestions proved less sound. I'll have other jobs where I implement, where I make decisions, where I provide advice, where I challenge myself, where I work for inspiring people. But will it happen all at the same time, in the same job? Will it happen at the same speed, the same rate? I look back at the guy I was last year, and at the risk of hubris I'm proud of him. He worked hard, he screwed up sometimes, but in the end he did what he could. Along the way, I'd like to think he helped a pretty excellent person do an incredibly difficult job; he learned, he matured in some ways.

I feel reinvigorated, ready for the next challenge and the one after that, whatever that might be. I feel surer of myself and my world. I can't express fully how grateful I am for the opportunity I've had through the Scott Fellows, how lucky I feel to have been selected, and what an honor it was to work for Antoinette Sayeh. I've said, and believe, that this was the best job I've ever had, and I certainly believe it to be – to crib from the Peace Corps –the hardest job I'll ever love.

Minister's Departure & New Challenges

A mid-week morning sometime in May. Getting called into the minister's office with senior staff for an emergency meeting, and hearing that Minister Sayeh would be leaving to become director for the Africa region at the IMF. Feeling joy for her, and surprise. Though I had been expecting something (I was close enough to the minister, and her schedule, to know that there was something I didn't know, though I never asked) I had no idea what, when. Now I knew. Looking around the room at the uncertainty newly introduced to the lives of so many folks, seeing the transition ahead, the difficulties. The meeting lasted a bit of time, as staff talked it out; some felt upset, some felt happy for her, some, I felt, saw future opportunities in their mind's eye.

As for me, I felt happy for the minister, but also unsure; so I took a walk, thinking about what this meant for me, my future, my plans. I walked a couple blocks to a man who sells popcorn on the verge of a gas station. I bought my popcorn, and chatted as I occasionally did about the day's news. I walked back to the ministry, saying hello to all the folks who called out my name. As I entered the ministry's fence, I realized that for me this ministry was, and is, home.

I wanted to see what came next; what the next chapter would look like in the corner of the world called the Liberian Ministry of Finance. So I'm still here, in a different gig; I'm still part of the mix, still working for the Government of Liberia, in service of the government's ends. I'd like to think that folks are happy to have me, and I'm certainly still thrilled to be here. I'd like to think that I am, and can continue to, help in the transition, bringing with me some knowledge of what happened last year, and how we got to where we are today. I'm also working in my new capacity to help build up a part of the system, to establish structures and practices that will, hopefully, add value to and remove some work from senior staff both this year and in the years to come. We'll see how it goes; I'm pretty hopeful, and sure that in the fluid, casual, intense, always surprising, and often inspiring world of President Johnson Sirleaf's administration, it will work out just fine – how could it not when such incredible folks want to do good?

Finishing Up

Having been unsure how to open this report, I now don't know how to close it. Maybe I could pretend this was a speech, in which case I think I'd close with something like this:

"To Ed Scott and his family, CGD, JSI (especially Carrie Huessler-Radelet, David Pyle, Charlotte Ndiaye, and Sharon Rocco), many, many thanks for the opportunity, your support, your encouragement, your time.

To my fellow fellows, it's been absolutely an honor to have served together. Conor, Ben, Deuce, I think I share the feeling that we got incredibly lucky with our crew, and I expect to see you all at my wedding someday.

To Dabah, Yea Yea, Kessele, Smith, brother Adama, and the rest of the 9th floor, my Liberian family, it has been just wonderful.

To my colleagues at the Ministry of Finance and across the Government, I think you know how I feel about you; the opportunity to work with, and learn from, you has been incredible, and I'm looking forward to the opportunities to continue to do so that lie ahead.

Rebecca, Momolu, Molly, KK, Josh, Mark, Michael, Kristiina, Robert, everyone else who helped make the seemingly impossible possible, who helped move things forward... awesome.

I've had so many mentors in my year as a fellow, but two stand out, two mentors and guides.

Steve, you got me here, I'll always claim because of your great love for Michigan. You made the hectic calm, the confusing understandable; you always had the time to lend a hand, or make a suggestion, or get a drink. Empathy and wisdom with a calm, laid-back manner, and a dose of understanding; not much more one can ask for, I think.

Minister Sayeh – Monsio – I've learned more from you than any other person I've ever worked with. I feel that from here on out, my failures and flaws will be my own, but my successes will to some extent be of your doing. I could go on all day about how wonderful it was to work with you, for you – Thank you for the opportunity, for pointing me in the right direction, for not caring about the pen on my shirt, the disorganization of my mind, the many mistakes and missteps. Thank you for forgetting the bad and remembering the good. Thank you for your trust, your faith."

But, of course, this isn't a speech; and soon the final period will come, and my year as a fellow will be finally, officially, over. It's always sad to close a chapter; I find it especially hard to close this one. For me, the consolation is my belief that the rest of the story will be the better for it, building upon what has truly been a transformative, shaping experience.

Hasta la Victoria Siempre,

Dan Honig
Scott Fellow Alumnus

Annex – Extract from my CV

Special Assistant to the Minister of Finance (Scott Fellow)
June 2007- July 2008

Monrovia, Liberia

This fellowship program (<http://www.cgdev.org/content/article/detail/13725/>), funded by the Scott Family Foundation via the Center for Global Development (www.cgdev.org) and implemented by John Snow International, allowed me to work closely with the Minister of Finance, Antoinette M. Sayeh, during a critical period in Liberia's post-conflict development. My role was essentially to assist the minister in implementing her agenda.

- *Accomplishments*

- Coordinated the technical work around the development of Liberia's first full Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) and drafted sections of the document;
- Worked closely with others in coordinating the clearance of Liberia's arrears to the IMF, WB, and ADB, assisting in Liberia's Paris Club Negotiations, and furthering negotiations with Liberia's commercial and other multilateral creditors;
- Served as the principal point of contact within the Ministry of Finance for the IMF, WB, and some other bilateral and multilateral donors, and participated in regular meetings (including the 2008 Spring Meetings of the IMF/WB) and negotiations with partners, including around the IMF's Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF), the World Bank's Economic Governance and Institutional Reform Project (EGIRP), response to the 2008 Global Food Crisis, an African Development Bank's Labor-Based Public Works project, and the HIPC Decision Point document (including coordinating the finalization of the HIPC Completion Point Triggers by the Government and negotiation of same with the IMF and WB).
- In collaboration with the Liberia Reconstruction and Development Committee (LRDC), Liberia's central partner coordination agency, coordinated the preparatory work for the Liberia Poverty Reduction Forum (LPRF) held in Berlin, Germany, in late June 2008
- Supported the Economic Revitalization Pillar of the LRDC, chaired by the Minister of Finance, which coordinates various government agencies and partners' work to revitalize Liberia's economy
- Supported Liberia's launch of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and the interim secretariat until permanent staff were recruited
- Drafted speeches and presentations made by the Minister of Finance and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
- Advised the minister on a variety of topics
- Joined the minister in meetings with a variety of government and non-government stakeholders
- Liased with a variety of government and non-government stakeholders outside the Ministry of Finance to assist in implementing reforms and in the normal functioning of the ministry
- At times supported and assisted the work of other units and individuals in the ministry, including the Deputy Ministers of Revenue, Expenditure, and Administration and the Bureau of Concessions
- Performed a wide variety of other tasks as requested