

# Capacity Development BRIEFS

SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND LESSONS LEARNED

## CHALLENGES FOR NEW LEADERSHIP TEAMS IN FRAGILE STATES

By Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia

*Fragile states pose a challenge for good leadership—for renewal and reform. States in the grip of poverty, with broken socioeconomic infrastructure and a political culture of impunity, require courageous leadership, one that is unafraid of risks and able to challenge itself to be innovative and look toward the future. In this brief, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia, shares lessons learned from her experience in leading a post-conflict country. She emphasizes the importance of taking a broader view of the national leadership system while building national leadership capacities and cautions against adopting a "one size fits all" approach. Drawing from Liberia's recent turnaround, she identifies key capacities that need to be developed. She points out that consciousness of ethics forces the setting of standards and requires leaders to lead by good example, particularly when it comes to demonstrating and imparting honesty, tolerance, participatory democracy, work ethics, and understanding. This brief was adapted from her remarks at the World Bank Institute's Capacity Day 2007, which took place in Washington DC on April 19.*

Fragile states exist in many forms. Some are newly emerging from civil conflicts with the attendant stresses that are evident in political destabilization and economic downturns. As a result, such nations grapple with the complex and multifaceted challenges of lifting themselves from conditions of war to conditions of peace, healing, recovery, security, stability, and socioeconomic opportunity for its citizens. Other fragile states lose sustainability or efficacy in their political and socioeconomic order and system.

Fragile states, in either form, are generally characterized by acute poverty, weak and unsteady political institutions, broken socioeconomic infrastructure, and a political culture in which impunity reigns. These states experience and languish under bad governance systems where the rule of law and fundamental tenets of democracy are disregarded, where public service is unaccountable, corruption is rife, and infrastructure is dysfunctional. These conditions imply economic stagnation that creates hopelessness and despair and leads to lawlessness, indiscipline, and crimes.

These conditions provide the basis for change. It is an opportunity for leadership, for renewal, and for

reform. Change and transformation in this respect means a break, formulating a vision based upon new concepts and structures. This requires leadership that is courageous, unafraid of risks, unafraid of criticism, unafraid of labels, and unafraid to challenge itself and the members of the teams that work with it—to be creative and innovative, and to look forward to the future. It is a leadership that inspires, motivates, guides, and leads its people toward a common vision and a common national purpose. A new leadership that accepts responsibility, listens to its people, but does not lead primarily because pollsters say this or that decision is right. Yet, a leadership that never is indifferent or inattentive to the opinions and demands of its people, leading a *team* and a *nation* out of a pro-

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tracted period of conflict when institutions, systems, processes, and human capacities are at their weakest, demands more than just the *traditional* and *textbook* traits of leadership.

These traits must be supplemented and matched by effective *management* and at times *technical* know-how and skills. It is not enough to just lead; the leader also needs to undertake *hands-on management roles*, making room for tasks to be done. This is so, not only because of the absence of adequate managerial competences, but also due to the increasing expectations of the people, which usually outpace available resources.

## Lessons from Experience

Let me share a few lessons learned from my experience in leading a post-conflict country. As some of you might know—until very recently, thanks to our international development partners—my country, Liberia, was labeled a failed state, not a fragile state, but a failed state. But the differences between a fragile state and a failed state are semantic, rather than real and meaningful. As a post-conflict nation, Liberia has had and continues to have many challenges.

The first step in addressing these challenges—in providing the leadership—was to assemble the right team: women and men with the required qualifications, the right attitude, the integrity, commitment, competence, and will to make sacrifices for their nation.

It is important to take a broader view of *the national leadership system* when building national leadership capacities. Leadership *roles* and *responsibilities* are distributed at various levels of decisionmaking as well as in different parts of the country and productive and social sectors. Failure to see and address the total picture appropriately could lead to gaps in the leadership chain and ultimately weaknesses in the delivery of both public and private goods and services. This realization brings to bear the constant need for rein-

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forcing a *leadership-team approach* to governance and performance.

To take the view that a *one-size-fits-all leadership model* exists and simply replicate that model from country to country could spell disaster. A number of issues need to be factored into any adopted model. First, *human development levels* differ among countries. Second, *cultural structures and social systems* of those to be led are not homogeneous among countries. Third, levels of *governance capacities* are not the same. What is, however, important in defining a model is the sharing of knowledge and best practices and supporting each other's national governing models within a *global governance framework* that is intended to lift our peoples out of poverty and enhancing their participation in the development process and its benefits.

Irrespective of the level, sector, or region at which leadership roles are played, a *delicate balance* must be found between those *factors that are within and/or outside the direct control of the leader*. Dealing effectively with decisions made by other leaders outside of the internal leadership team, particularly regarding the associated outcomes of those decisions, calls for a unique form of *innovative and purposeful leadership*. The extent to which capacities are developed to bring into balance *external and internal factors* in the decision-making process would determine the level of success or failure of a particular leadership team.

The *ethics base* of leadership also cannot be ignored. This is *the* critical aspect of leadership, which imposes a *sense of responsibility, accountability* and equity on those who lead to earn respect and acquire authority.

### About the Author

#### Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of Liberia

The first woman ever elected head of an African state, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is the president of Liberia. She served in the early 1970s as Liberia's finance minister under President William Tolbert. After Tolbert was deposed and executed, Johnson-Sirleaf left Liberia to avoid detention by his successor, Samuel K. Doe, and spent most of the 1980s in Kenya and the United States as an executive in the international banking community. After ceding the election of 1997, she again left the country to avoid President Taylor's charges of treason. Called the “iron lady” of Liberian politics, “Ma” Johnson-Sirleaf returned to Liberia after Taylor fled to Nigeria in 2003. As the standard-bearer for the Unity Party, she ran again for the presidency in 2005, promising economic development and an end to corruption and civil war and beat George Weah in a runoff election in November 2005. She assumed the presidency the following January. Johnson-Sirleaf studied at the University of Colorado at Boulder and obtained a master's degree from Harvard University.



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### Liberia’s Capacity Development Challenge

Recognizing the role of poverty in the Liberian conflict, the requirements of the Millennium Development Goals, as well as the urgent need to lift Liberia from the ashes of war to conditions of peace, reconstruction, development, and renewal, my administration has launched an interim poverty reduction strategy as the bedrock of its policy direction.

The interim poverty reduction strategy hinges on four pillars:

- Enhancing national security
- Revitalizing the economy
- Rebuilding infrastructure and delivering basic services
- Strengthening governance and the rule of law.

To discharge effectively the inherent *roles* and *responsibilities* of a leader, the necessary *capacity package* should contain a number of practical elements including the following:

- The characteristic of being visibly committed to a positive vision of the direction in which the country or a particular sector or region should go
- The ability to articulate that vision, obtain popular buy-in, and lead your constituencies in pursuit of that vision
- The consistency of being in touch with those who you lead, reaching out to them and being responsive to their basic needs;
- The ability to purposefully engage and interact with international and domestic partners, not losing track of the shared interests of your people.

We have undertaken the first steps in collaboration with our people and our development partners. A key response was the 150-day action plan that my government successfully concluded. Although we have achieved some results, the road is long and challenges remain. Limited basic services have been restored, and the beginnings of democratic governance initiated. Economic performance has improved, prospects are looking brighter, and peace and security have been maintained. These visible changes, although small in comparison to what needs to be done, have renewed hope for Liberians and created a belief that their future will be a brighter tomorrow.

### Capacity Day 2007: Leadership Matters Vision, Effectiveness, and Accountability

The World Bank Institute’s Capacity Day 2007, held in Washington D.C. on April 19, explored how the Bank and others can improve support for leadership development. The event featured experts and leading thinkers who came together to debate on the methods of leadership development. Some key messages included:

- Leadership development is more than training individuals; it encompasses a broader set of changes in institutions, policies, and behaviors.
- Programs need to emphasize the need for leaders to collaborate and compete, innovate and learn from experience.
- The learning process in leadership development needs to evolve as conditions change.

For more information please see <http://info.worldbank.org/etools/capacityDay2007/>.

## Q&A Session from Capacity Day

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia

**Question: What would happen if we do not bolster support for leaders in post conflict states?**

*Answer: The issue of support is very important for us. If we do not get the support to be able to deliver the basic services, particularly the creation of jobs for our very young population, we run the risk of having their vulnerabilities exposed and the risk of them once again being recruited into conflict, undermining all the progress that we have made.*

**Question: One of the things that we often don't talk about leadership is the role of gender. Given your very unique perspective on this, please share what this means to you and how we can think about this differently?**

*Answer: Let me put it this way, because I am always faced with this question. And my response is always that I am a technocrat. I am a professional who happens to be a woman. But that said, as a woman, I bring a special sensitivity to the task, a sensitivity that comes from being a mother and in my case a grandmother. To be able to be very concerned about the human factor, the needs of children and women in society. I think many of those on my leadership team who are women bring the same kind of sensitivity to their responsibility. And I think that's why our leadership may perhaps be more effective.*

**Question: Do you think that in every sense, women are generally better leaders than men?**

*Answer: I don't know what the empirical evidence will show, but in a qualitative way I will say yes. For one thing to start off with, women are more honest. Women are better managers, because they manage the home so well, so they are accustomed sometimes in cases of resources constraint to allocate with better efficiency. Yes, I think women are better leaders. I hope I can prove that it is true.*

## About World Bank Institute (WBI): Unleashing the Power of Knowledge to Enable a World Free of Poverty

The World Bank Institute (WBI) helps countries share and apply global and local knowledge to meet development challenges. WBI's capacity development programs are designed to build skills among groups of individuals involved in performing tasks, and also to strengthen the organizations in which they work, and the sociopolitical environment in which they operate.

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