“This crisis has had a devastating effect,” said Hh Zaizay, a Liberian working closely with government ministries, reflecting on the impact of the Ebola outbreak. “But it also creates a window of opportunity for us,” both government and society at large, “to do more than we do now.”

When the Ebola virus first took hold in West Africa, Liberia was among the hardest-hit countries, and it was unprepared for the crisis. Government workers and news stories described the initial response to stop the virus as “strained” and “uncoordinated.”

In some ways, this was not surprising. When Ebola broke out, Liberia was emerging from decades of civil war in which fundamental institutions—education, health systems, and government—atrophied. When the civil war ended, in 2003, 3 in 4 Liberians lived on less than a dollar per day, and more than 6 in 10 people age 15 to 24 could not read.

There had been progress after the war’s end: GDP more than doubled and Millennium Development Goals to reduce child and maternal mortality were met. The situation remained difficult, but Liberia was generally on a positive trajectory. Then the Ebola crisis hit. In Liberia, addressing the virus added an unexpected burden to already-stretched local institutions.

Despite these difficulties, Liberia has gradually begun to build an effective response to Ebola. There are fewer and fewer new cases of Ebola, thanks in part to enhanced health system infrastructure, coordination, and funding. This is the good news. However, over time, other crises will inevitably occur.

To fully eliminate the current outbreak and build ability to withstand the next shock, Liberia must maintain and expand its health and emergency response systems. Developing human capacity to

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deal with the day-to-day realities of crises is crucial, particularly among civil servants—the building blocks of any government. When individuals (whether government employees or otherwise) have the necessary skills and mindset, the institution to which they belong is able to organize and multiply those talents to achieve much more than the sum of its parts. Developing such effective human capacity is critical in the public sector, where employees are charged with so many tasks fundamental to public well-being, especially during complex challenges like the Ebola crisis.

One program that seeks to build this type of leadership is Liberia’s President’s Young Professional (PYP) program, which President Johnson Sirleaf launched in 2009. The PYP program recruits high-performing recent college graduates into government ministries to improve the caliber of Liberia’s civil servants. As of February 2015, the PYP program has placed 73 fellows in government roles. It is currently transitioning from a program managed by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI) to a Liberian entity structured in a public-private partnership with the Government of Liberia.

The program emphasizes training and mentorship and recruits individuals with strong leadership potential, problem-solving skills, and a proactive, independent work style. During the two-year program, each PYP attends regular training sessions and is paired with a mentor. Dalberg completed an assessment of the program in 2014 and found that PYPs generally have much more training than non-PYP peers, as well as stronger professional skills and greater exposure to responsibilities.

In a PYP graduation ceremony, United States Ambassador to Liberia Deborah Malac called the program a Liberian solution for Liberia’s problems. She said that she frequently hears the complaint that the government doesn’t have the capacity to address the country’s vast challenges. But through the PYP program, Liberia uses its most important resources, its optimistic and talented youth, to tackle capacity challenges, she said, telling the PYP graduates: “You have a vital role to play in Liberia’s development.”

Dalberg interviewed these young civil servants to understand the government’s Ebola response through the lens of their first-hand experience. Below, the fellows describe what they saw during the Ebola crisis, how they helped, and what they recommend for the future. Their experience provides a snapshot of what it’s like to work in government during a prolonged emergency. It also shows the very real constraints people faced, along with the ways Liberians, particularly within government, innovated during the crisis.

“YOU HAVE TO DO SOMETHING TOWARD THE EBOLA RESPONSE”

Several PYPs noted the importance of creating pathways for knowledge sharing in the Ebola crisis—person-to-person, within the country, and among different governments. Nigeria and Senegal, for example, quickly contained new cases of Ebola and stopped further spread. Sarah Johnson, a PYP, highlighted the need for regional knowledge sharing when it comes to crisis management, noting that if any country has one case of Ebola, all are at risk. “We need to learn from Nigeria: what are the best practices and what did they do to get to Ebola-free?” Johnson asked.

This concept of connection and shared responsibility is critical, according to Zaizay, the PYP program director. “While the world saw Ebola as a West Africa problem—a Liberian or Guinean problem—we didn’t see it that way here.” Knowing the disease could easily traverse borders, Zaizay saw it as a worldwide problem. He continued, “We all see this Ebola crisis as ‘all hands on deck’: no matter which sector you are in and what you are doing currently, you have to do something toward the Ebola response.”

“All of this came as a big surprise”

Though Liberia’s health system was able to respond to the first wave of the Ebola outbreak in March 2014, the system could not keep up with the scale of the epidemic as it spread to the capital city of Monrovia, where at least a quarter of the country’s 4.3 million people live. Gaps in capacity and infrastructure

became readily apparent, as people simply didn’t have the resources they needed to respond to the outbreak.

Monrovia, explained Zaizay, “had two ambulances to respond to health emergencies. And when the country announced: do not touch the dead, do not touch the sick…call, and an ambulance will come, the question was: where are the ambulances? We have only two.”

Along the same lines, PYP Johnson noted the need to develop Liberia’s emergency preparedness. She recalled, “There was no agency or government ministry that was prepared for humanitarian disaster or disease control. All of this came as a big surprise.”

“WE NEED TO BE AWARE OF WHAT THE OTHER HAND IS DOING”

PYP Christollie Collins highlighted that coordination is a critical success factor for an effective response. Collins was originally assigned to the National Investment Commission, but when the crisis broke out, she was seconded to the Ebola Command Center to coordinate ministerial efforts to eradicate Ebola. Collins said that the lack of communication and collaboration among government ministries and workers hampered efforts to contain the virus. “We’re working with people who are spectacular resources individually, but because we are not coordinating well, we’re not able to tap into their knowledge,” she said.

Collins continued, “We all need to be aware of what the other hand is doing to have smooth and proper coordination of efforts.” Collins feels that a more open system—one with established pathways for coordination in regular times—could help Liberia mitigate panic and confusion during extraordinary times.

“CREATING SOMETHING LARGER”

As important as knowledge and information sharing are, they are even more potent when workers have the space and freedom to identify and test
new solutions to problems. A critical danger of crisis response in a low-capacity environment is a too-restrictive “top-down” management approach in which everyone depends on one or two individuals to provide all of the ideas, resources, and solutions.

The PYP program gave the fellows a community that supported their ability to take initiative: peers with whom they could jointly problem solve before and during the Ebola crisis—including in their shared workspace, the PYP office—and professional mentors whose advice they could rely on. Collins elaborated that these resources drew her to the program. “The PYP offers mentors and supervisors that tutor you and expose you to the government and professional world,” she said. “One of the reasons I joined is because I thought it would strengthen my capacity.”

These assets are not common in Liberia. There is “almost no training for other civil servants,” a member of the Civil Service Agency told interviewers during Dalberg’s assessment of the PYP program. “So the PYP training is a huge advantage.”

Individually, some fellows proactively leveraged the PYP community and training to launch local initiatives to educate the public about Ebola or ease the crisis. For example, Johnson has tried to make hand washing more convenient, as it is crucial to halting the spread of the virus. She noticed that in Liberia hand washing is “not always very feasible because we have small buckets sitting at the doors or public areas for hand washing and there are usually long lines of people waiting to wash their hands at the buckets,” making the wait time a potential deterrent.

Johnson sought to implement larger hand washing spaces, she said, “with six dispensers so you can have six people washing their hands at a time.” The U.S. Embassy sponsored her program to install multi-faucet water tanks in populous areas to reduce Ebola transmission rates, including in Monrovia’s densely populated West Point neighborhood, which has more than 70,000 inhabitants. Zaizay explained that these grassroots solutions are critical, even if less visible: “Ebola cannot be stopped at the treatment facility level; Ebola can only be stopped at the community level.”

“I CAN SAY TODAY THAT, DESPITE ALL OF THIS, OUR NATION HAS REMAINED STRONG, OUR PEOPLE RESILIENT.”

The effects of Ebola extend beyond Liberia’s healthcare sector and have presented new hurdles to economic growth and education. “Every sector of government and even the private sector has been set back,” Zaizay lamented. “So there is going to be a lot of rebuilding of services that have collapsed.”

Though Liberia faces a lengthy recovery, the country has made significant strides in stopping the immediate problem: Ebola’s spread. In her last state of the nation address, President Johnson Sirleaf announced, “I can say today that, despite all of this, our nation has remained strong, our people resilient.” At the time of her speech in late January 2015, there were only five confirmed Ebola cases in Liberia.9

For Zaizay, the Ebola outbreak underscored the need for initiatives like the PYP program. “The Ebola crisis made me, as a program director, see the need for getting young people into public service and decision-making processes,” he said. The PYP program creates “willing, committed young people who can contribute to the next crisis.”

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN? RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING LEADERSHIP IN CRISIS

A crisis of this magnitude could be devastating to any country, let alone one with fragile and emerging government institutions. The stories included here are not comprehensive: they provide only a window into Liberia’s Ebola response as seen by civil workers in one program.

More broadly, however, the Ebola crisis is an opportunity for African governments to welcome innovation and creativity in problem solving for a new approach to governance. There are concrete steps that governments can take to ensure staff are consistently empowered to respond—even in overwhelming situations. Here are a few examples:

REALIZE THAT HAVING LOCAL CAPACITY DURING A CRISIS MEANS INVESTING IN IT NOW—BEFORE THE NEXT CRISIS HITS

A fundamental reason that PYPs were effective is because they had local contextual knowledge. They were able to be ambassadors for change because the people with whom they worked trusted them. In comparison, some of the foreign experts flown in to help support the response at the onset of the crisis appeared as unfamiliar outsiders to communities. In extreme cases this led to violence, such as the brutal attack and murder of eight Ebola aid workers in Guinea.11 Sending foreign experts is not a sustainable solution, not only because of high cost, but also because they may not know the cultural context. In the past decade, donors have renewed focus on capacity building—an encouraging shift. However, as the Ebola crisis in countries like Liberia starkly demonstrates, more can be done to equip countries to respond locally.

Zaizay agrees. “There is going to be a knowledge gap,” he said, because the foreign Ebola experts will move on post-crisis. “If such crises should ever occur again—which is very, very likely—where will we be?”

“I DON’T LOSE HOPE EASILY”

Despite the challenges facing the country, the young leaders are hopeful for Liberia’s future. Collins is optimistic as she pursues a career in public service: “The government can be more effective with the right staff who have the right training. If we can set up a system that is open and where we have proper coordination, we can move into capacity building and infrastructure development.”

“The story I see here,” she reflected, “is a nation of people who are fighters. We learn to adapt and we keep moving forward.”

In illustration of her point, Zaizay added, “I don’t lose hope easily.”


“WE LEARN TO ADAPT AND WE KEEP MOVING FORWARD.”