

**Testimony of U.S. Agency for International Development
Acting Assistant Administrator for Africa, Cheryl L. Anderson
before the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and
International Organizations**

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“The Future of Democracy and Governance in Liberia”

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I appreciate your continued interest in how U.S. policies and assistance programs can help Liberians consolidate a peaceful and stable democracy in which prosperity is available to all.

BACKGROUND

USAID’s development partnership with Liberia dates back to our founding in 1961. As the largest bilateral donor in Liberia, the United States plays an influential role in many aspects of the country’s development. We support the Government of Liberia’s development vision as articulated in its 2013 Agenda for Transformation. Our programs in Liberia address the underlying structural and institutional problems that gave rise to fourteen years of civil strife and war, while at the same time tackling the country’s more immediate development needs, including power or health challenges, often in close coordination with other U.S. Government agencies such as Millennium Challenge Corporation or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Since the end of the Liberian civil war in 2003, the country has made notable progress in a number of areas. This includes the nurturing of a vibrant media and active civil society; civil service and public financial management reforms; and the rehabilitation of infrastructure. Despite these important gains, the country continues to face numerous development and economic growth challenges, as Liberia’s human development index indicators remains among the lowest in the world. Public institutions remain weak and are often corrupt, contributing to a sense that civil and political rights have not led to more effective governance or economic gains. The Ebola crisis revealed fundamental weaknesses in the citizen-state relationship, undercutting citizen confidence that the government can protect the public and provide services. These and other conditions drive USAID’s involvement in Liberia.

It is in the interest of the United States to build upon the progress that has been made and maintain our commitment to help the Liberian people avert crises and live healthier lives. The United States has dedicated significant resources for over a decade to help the country remain on a path of democratic governance and stability. Emerging in late 2003 from two decades of civil conflict, Liberia’s recovery presented opportunities for peaceful development, rather than

destabilization, in West Africa. Our assistance first focused on reintegration and revitalization activities that gave citizens and communities hope, and led the way to successful elections in 2005 and 2011. Post-conflict countries are most at risk of backsliding during the five-to-ten years following its first elections, so recent USAID activities have focused on strengthening the rule of law, while also building capacity within government and in the education, health and economic sectors to deliver services.

A notable highlight of this effort has been our ongoing support to improved governance and management of the economy, which has been successful in helping the Liberian government control its public finances. As a new government is formed following the upcoming elections, the United States will look to build strategically on the current strong relationship and identify opportunities to enhance transparency, strengthen checks and balances, and to support Liberians both inside and outside of government institutions. This includes our work with the nation's next generation of democratic leaders.

2017 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Next month's historic presidential elections present a vital cross road that should reaffirm Liberia's democratic gains and political stability. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf will step down at the end of her term, ushering in a newly elected government after 12 years of rule. If successful, this election will result in the country's first peaceful democratic transition in more than 70 years, marking a critical milestone in the country's progress toward a stable democracy. With a peaceful transition in 2018, Liberia will serve as a strong democratic role model for other countries emerging from conflict. At this point in time, there is no clear frontrunner in the presidential race, and it continues to be a highly competitive process.

Recent USAID assessments indicate that citizens are excited about the election and remain actively engaged in the political process. While the campaign period has proceeded smoothly to date, with political parties and candidates conducting themselves peacefully, the National Elections Commission is still fairly limited in its capacity, and there may be logistical challenges exacerbated by limited infrastructure across the country given the timing of the elections during the rainy season. This will be the first election carried out without significant support from the United Nations Mission in Liberia, which ended its security presence in 2016. USAID continues to support elections preparations, including support to address challenges facing the National Elections Commission. This support has three core pillars: our work first builds public confidence in the elections by improving the performance, transparency, and accountability of the Commission; second, we support citizen participation in electoral processes as voters, activists, and candidates; and third we strengthen civil society and media oversight of the electoral process.

USAID has partnered with local media and civil society organizations, including youth, women and trade unions, to educate first-time and hard-to-reach voters about the stakes in the 2017 elections and encourage their peaceful participation. In parallel, we continue to build the communication capacity of the electoral commission. This includes support for regular meetings between the Commission and political parties to share information and help resolve electoral issues before they escalate. USAID-supported domestic and international observation missions continue to receive accreditation from the Commission and are reporting on the pre-electoral process.

The Sirleaf administration remains publicly committed to conducting a free, fair, and transparent election in October and an orderly transition of power to the incoming elected administration, and USAID remains committed to partnering with Liberia during that transition.

USAID SUPPORT

At this critical juncture, we must simultaneously redouble efforts to tackle the significant challenges that remain, while acknowledging the progress Liberia has made in 14 years of peace. Rent-seeking behavior and corruption in Liberia are one of the largest constraints to good governance and are pervasive throughout government. Critical checks, balances, and accountability systems either do not exist or are ineffective, which undermines public trust in state institutions. The formal justice system, a key accountability mechanism for democratic governance, struggles to administer justice due to low capacity. The Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission was created in 2008, but has been hampered by resource, capacity, and political challenges, and its work has resulted in few convictions.

However, we have seen progress in the Government of Liberia's public financial management systems. Today, there is more standardized, transparent reporting and monitoring of financial resources. Fiscal reports for central government and state-owned enterprises are more visible and accessible than at any time in the country's history. County Service Centers that deliver critical government services to the people are operational in ten counties, with openings planned in the remaining five counties in the coming months. Simultaneously, with USAID support, the Government of Liberia is undertaking reforms to generate more local revenue by improving tax policy and collection.

With critical donor support, the Government of Liberia has strengthened its budgeting and fiscal management; improved pay, performance, and payroll management of civil servants; and has strengthened the capacity of both government actors and civil society to reduce corruption. They have also taken steps to decentralize government services to make sub-national resource management more effective and accountable.

Moving forward, Liberia must continue to strengthen institutions critical to the foundations for democratic governance and to prioritize key reforms that deepen the accountability of government systems and processes. Moreover, if Liberian institutions, citizens, donors and partners focus our collective efforts, we can help end the pervasive corruption that threatens to undermine democratic progress, weaken citizen trust in state institutions, and hamper overall development across the country.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and thank you for the critical support provided by Congress, through the United States emergency assistance to Liberia during and after the Ebola epidemic. With donors' support, the Government was able to control the epidemic, which many predicted would have been far worse. We must continue to invest in strengthening institutions to further improve public administration and communication functions at national and local levels and continue to enable citizens to hold their government accountable. This will enable the government to respond to potential future emergencies and ensure the cooperation of the public in adhering to public health guidance.

CONCLUSION

In summary, USAID would like to emphasize our long-standing relationship with the Liberian people and highlight our commitment to accompany Liberia through this historic transition. We believe that the Government of Liberia can create conditions for a credible electoral process, from the pre-election period through the transparent tabulation and announcement of results, and USAID will continue to support these efforts. USAID is poised to support post-election reform efforts, assist the National Election Commission to apply lessons learned to further their capability, and professionalize political parties to further continue democratic development.

We will urge the newly elected Administration to consolidate democratic gains through effective and accountable governance, responsiveness to its citizens, and adherence to the rule of law. This includes developing and utilizing systems that reduce opportunities for corruption and waste of limited public resources. Our assistance will continue to promote good governance while strengthening critical public administration functions at national and local levels. These systems improve policy-making, budget and financial accounting, human resources management, and domestic revenue mobilization. We will continue to support land policy reforms and efforts to improve the quality of legal services available to the population, and we will build civil society and media oversight capacity, thereby reducing opportunities for renewed conflict or instability – key requirements for sustained peace and economic growth in Liberia.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bass, and members of the Subcommittee for the continued commitment you have shown to the Liberian people. I welcome any questions you might have.