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GC holds National Conference for Political Parties on Decentralization and Local Governance Reforms in Liberia

The Governance Commission held a two day Conference for Political Parties on decentralization in Buchanan Grand Bassa County from June 8-9 2016. Twenty of Liberia's twenty two registered political parties, donors and partners graced the occasion.

During the conference's opening ceremony on Day one, Grand Bassa County Superintendent's designee, Eddie Williams welcomed everyone to the City of Buchanan, and noted the relevance of decentralization in Liberia's development and reform processes, with emphasis on inclusive peoples' participation in local governance. He enumerated the numerous benefits of the County Service Center, a key component of decentralization which, among other things, includes assuring government's delivery of and easy access to public goods and services. Mr. Williams urged participants to prevail on their members currently serving in the National Legislature to pass the Local Government draft Act, LGA, which is highly crucial to the full implementation of decentralization in Liberia.

Donor and collaborating partners and the Conference urged Liberians to prioritize decentralization and lobby their lawmakers to the draft Local Government Act currently before the Legislature. Development partners at the conference included the EU, UNDP, and UNMIL.

In Remarks, the **European Union Ambassador** to Liberia Ambassador Tina Intelmann among other things observed that the political scene is getting very active in Liberia, yet it is still not clear which direction Liberians truly want to stir their country. She therefore urged the participants to probably work on a framework that would help determine a clear direction to lead Liberia toward a common goal, one that assures growth and development. She said political parties should take advantage of the decentralization process, a process to which the European Union has contributed 4.5 million Euros to assure provision and easy access to public goods and services such as offered at the county service centers. She hoped that the conference would provide logic and understanding to political parties so that the LGA is passed into law, the decentralization process is not reversed even after the 2017 elections, and government and donor spending monitored.



UNDP for its part reminded participants of the important responsibilities of political parties including representation of people, ideas and policies (should they be successful in a competitive election process) and urged participants to blend such responsibilities with decentralization which assures of the provision and easy access to basic services. Mr. Kaykay acknowledged the imperfectability of decentralization but added that it is a process that does not end in one day.



He noted that people are financially, economically and/or politically excluded from participating in national growth and prosperity programs but decentralization addresses the issue of exclusion, while at the same

time empowering citizens by providing options and opportunities for inclusion and participation as witnessed by the opening of county service centers and the increase in business registrations. He said when political parties support decentralization they would have fulfilled a fundamental responsibility to society and national development.

UNDP commended NEC for making a representation at the highest level at the Conference, noted the challenges of decentralization to NEC, but promised support to the elections process.

Also making remarks was the **United Nations Mission in Liberia, UNMIL. Mr. Bornfree Adile** said UNMIL



sees decentralization in Liberia as a priority issue critical to reforms needed for national development. He said it was about changing views about the future. Mr. Bornfree Adile noted that as of July 1, 2016 Liberians are expected to take control of their own security, though UNMIL will continue to provide some support to Liberia including the decentralization process. Mr. Bornfree Adile reiterated that decentralization is about innovation, and encourages citizens' participation in the development of their county and country as a whole. He therefore urged political parties to work towards assuring that the necessary structures are put in place to support decentralization and national development.

Dr Roosevelt Jayjay was designated to represent the Minister of Internal Affairs Dr. Henry Togba. Dr. Jayjay reminded political parties that as the conscience of the state and embodiment of the people, (and in pursuit of a democratic nation), it was important that they work toward assuring that Liberians are able to achieve their individual and collective aspirations. He said decentralization has become the thermometer for national growth and development, and therefore the need for political parties to see it as a national priority issue that must succeed.



National Elections Commission Chairman Mr. Jerome Kokoya, in remarks (and among other things)



observed that the impressive turn out of political party leaders at the Conference was indicative of their interests in the entire elections process. He said the election process is guided by the rule of law and therefore the need for the passage of the Local Government draft Act to support the full implementation of decentralization in Liberia. His comments were in line with the election of county superintendents and others as proposed by the LGA which need the backing of a legal framework. He also urged political party leaders to encourage the passage of the LGA into law in support of the full implementation of decentralization and enhanced people's participation in the elections process.

Commissioner Yasuo Weh-Dorliae made remarks on behalf of the Chairman of the Governance Commission Dr. Amos Sawyer. Dr. Dorliae likened decentralization to religion. He said there are many religions all geared toward preparing the path to heaven so too he said decentralization in the actualization of



national development.

Day 1 of the Conference featured two major presentations:

The first was the Overview and Status of decentralization reforms in Liberia by Commissioner Dorlaie of the GC; and the second on “The role of political parties in decentralization reforms” by Senesee Freeman. The first presentation highlighted the decentralization policy, the history of centralized governance, political decentralization, faces of inequality and marginalization, goal, objectives, benefits, background and achievements, and the current status of the decentralization process.

The second was participatory with participants divided into four groups to discuss and report on the role of political parties in decentralization reforms. The groups’ presentations had similar findings including that political parties adopt decentralization in their platforms and manifestos; that political parties engage the Executive branch of government, through a joint resolution, to send the draft LGA to the Legislature for passage into law; lobby Legislators; increase public discussions and awareness on decentralization and the draft LGA; engage IPCC. Both sessions were followed by interactive discussions facilitated by Dr. Alfred Kulah, Consultant.

Political parties were given three minutes each to make statements as to their commitment or non-commitment to the decentralization process. All committed to supporting the full implementation of the concept of decentralization except the Liberty party that raised issue with the election, and reporting process of county superintendents.

All Liberian Coalition Party, ALCOP thanked GC for the current state of the decentralization process and for organizing the conference geared toward political parties’ involvement and commitment to the decentralization process, and commended the Liberian government for the support given the decentralization process thus far. ALCOP promised to remain supportive and committed to the decentralization process. ALCOP promised to remain engaged in the decentralization process.

Alternative National Congress, ANC noted that decentralization was incorporated into its party platform because the party believes that decentralization is the way forward to assuring national development. The party expressed commitment and support to the process, and expressed willingness to working with GC to assure the success of decentralization in Liberia.

Congress for Democratic Change, CDC commended GC for being proactive in its efforts at making government more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people. They look forward to the devolution of government which they believe goes beyond everyday politics to ensure that Liberians participate in the economy of Liberia. They called for the incorporation of education in the decentralization process, bringing under the umbrella of the University of Liberia all public universities and colleges in Liberia. CDC wants government to proceed with caution the decentralization process so as not to create parallel governing contending structures. CDC pledged its commitment to working with GC and other political parties and partners in crafting a national agenda to making government more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the Liberian people.

National Democratic Party of Liberia, NDPL disclosed that Decentralization is a part of their party's platform though not explained in detail, adding that they are committed to working with GC and to learn more as to how the party can be of more help to the decentralization process. NDPL promised to commit to a process that leads Liberia to a transformed future that highlights development.

Liberia National Union, LINU recommended among other things that an institutional framework be put in place to guide the decentralization process while the Local Government Act is being discussed and pending passage into law. The party cautioned that plans be also made to address future challenges associated with decentralization to assure that the process is not stalled. LINU hopes the LGA takes into consideration the people's rights to freely express their concerns without reprisals or victimization.

Liberia People's Party, LPP urged all Liberians and stakeholders to support the decentralization process and to consider it as a challenge that we need to overcome in order to achieve national growth and development. The LPP wants counties to see as national priorities agriculture, health, and education, and urge government to improve these services for the benefit of the Liberian people, and make funds available to sustain county development projects.

Liberty party, LP says though it supports the decentralization agenda, the party will not support the draft Local government Act as is right now until it is amended. The party expressed concerns relative to the election of county superintendents and the system of reporting under the current proposed LGA. LP questioned "to whom would the superintendent hold loyalty to: the people that elected him/her or the president?" LP was however quick to add that decentralization is relevant to national development and promised to lobby their lawmakers to give the draft document the attention it deserves for passage into law.

The Liberty Party did not sign the Joint Referendum document but said it remains an available partner in fostering decentralization and other policy programs of GC and the Ministry of Internal affairs that address empowering the Liberian people.

The National Patriotic Party, NPP for its part, attributed the underdevelopment of Liberia to a centralized system of government. NPP believes that decentralization is key to national development and commended government for initiating the process. NPP observed that decentralization will enhance economic activities in rural Liberia, adding "*that people can now live and work in their counties and that teachers will no longer have to abandon their classrooms for weeks to travel to Monrovia to receive their salaries*". NPP noted that sincerity is lacking in Liberia and therefore urged Liberians to make practical their love for country and desist from playing lip-service to patriotism.

The ruling **Unity Party, UP** disclosed that some members of the Legislature have described the draft LGA (which promulgates decentralization) as a "stab in the back", alluding that it undermines their authority while at the same time giving more political power to the local people. The party maintained that despite these odds all efforts are being made to ensure the draft Act will be passed into law because it is the right thing to do in support of national development, and people's participation and inclusivity in governance.

The **True Whig Party, United Peoples Party** and others all pledged their support to the decentralization process, and promised to lobby their respective lawmakers to ensure that the draft Local Government Act (LGA) is passed into law.

The review of the Draft Joint Resolution, the final item of Day 1 agenda, was post-poned to Day 2 of the conference to give participants ample time to read and digest the draft resolution before affixing their signature to the document.

Day 2 of the Conference featured an impressive presentation on the operations and available services provided at the County Service Center in Buchanan Grand Bassa County, and the signing of the Joint Resolution of Political parties.

Commissioner Elizabeth Sele Mulbah Addresses NARDA Assembly

Governance Commission Vice Chair Madam Elizabeth Mulbah has called for the establishment of effective governance, management and accountability structures in Liberia that will, among other things, access secured funding to enhance civil society organizations (CSOs) ability to freely and constructively network and/or collaborate rather than compete with each other.



In her Key note Address at the New African Research and Development Agency's (NARDA's) 2016 annual Assembly which ran from June 10-11, Commissioner Mulbah made reference to the signed Government/CSOs Accord, a document which calls for CSOs empowerment, and highlights commitments by both government and CSOs to national growth and development. She noted that one sure way to empowering CSOs is through capacity building which enables them to contribute effectively to socio-economic and political development. Mrs. Mulbah observed that civil society organizations are at varying levels on what she referred to as "organizational development ladder" adding **"this must claim the utmost attention of the Government, if the partnership is to blossom and bear fruit"**.

Madam Mulbah urged both government to protect and preserve the partnership by creating the "enabling environment" for civil society organizations to maintain their independence and democratic space as well as facilitating the organizational development and access to resources. Commissioner Mulbah spoke under the theme **"Government-Civil Society Organization Accord: from Theory to Practicum"**. The Assembly's general theme for 2016 was **"Effective Partnership for Greater Impact"**.

The Government-Civil Society Organizations Accord is a memorandum of understanding in which civil society organizations are aligned with Government's development priorities to assist the Government in achieving those priorities. During the launch of the Accord by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in April this year, the President welcomed the partnership noting **"this partnership can only yield win-win-win results for the Government, civil society organizations and the entire citizenry"**. President Sirleaf said

“the role of civil society organizations as development partners has never been given its due recognition and prominence until the 1990s when an NGO Policy was formulated”.

Of all the Government’s partners, civil society organizations are perhaps the most important and strategic in accelerating grassroots development. It is against this backdrop that Government is committed to strengthening the enabling environment within which civil society organizations can realize their potential and give impetus to Government’s myriad development programs including the Agenda for Transformation and the National Healing and Reconciliation Roadmap, both of which are already embedded in the framework of the National Vision 2030.

Observers believe that there is need for strengthening the enabling environment which includes, broadening the space for civil society organizations to thrive as independent entities that exercise their civil liberties in a responsible manner; supporting the building of institutional and human capacity of civil society organizations so that they become more productive and effective partners with Government in the implementation of development programs; and assisting CSOs in their resource mobilization ventures.

Several outstanding personalities championed the establishment of the National CSO Council of Liberia and are still championing the cause for an empowered national CSO Council. These include NARDA’s Executive Director Lancedel Matthews, former Finance and Development Planning Minister Amara Konneh, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Mrs. Elizabeth Mulbah, and especially Dr. Amos Sawyer – Chairman of the Governance Commission. In fact it was the GC, MFDP, and CSO leadership that worked together tirelessly to develop the government/CSOs Accord launched by President Sirleaf at the Development Summit in April 2016.

Former Finance Minister Konneh on several occasions pledged the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning’s commitment to strengthening its partnership in national development, supporting CSOs comparative efforts in undertaking initiatives as well as serving as partners in advocacy and monitoring.

Dr. Amos Sawyer admits that as at 2006, civil society organizations were very highly visible, influential and dominant as service providers adding *“as widespread as they were throughout the country, the need to regularize their functions and specializations within the framework of the state became apparent”*. However, as donors returned and sought partners for collaboration, most CSOs became less specialized and more generalized, shifting everywhere there was funding. According to Dr. Sawyer, *“their functions became more overlapping and unstructured thereby necessitating Government’s intervention through an improved approach to existing NGO regulations and strengthening of standards by which all CSOs including NGOs would operate as development partners with government.”*

The Governance Commission held numerous consultations with CSOs over the years geared toward identifying and better understanding the landscape of NGOs and CSOs operations in Liberia as a basis for working with them on policy related issues and with the following objectives in mind.

- a. to establish and/or strengthen umbrella leadership structures with which CSOs can be

Identified and categorized and, if possible, undertake collaborative engagements in the fifteen counties;

- b. undertake the mapping of CSOs in the fifteen counties and produce a CSO Directory;
- c. build leadership capacity in order to strengthen their rights-based approach to advocacy grounded in professional and technical knowledge, and
- d. develop with GoL an agreed framework for policy-based dialogues and consultations to strengthen democratic governance and national development.

It is important to note that, among other achievements, a National Civil Society Council was established in 2012 though still in need of significant capacity development and support to assure of the desired umbrella leadership and thematic competencies; an initial mapping of NGOS also undertaken in 2012 and arrangements for updating the directory of CSOs have started.

This GOL/CSOs Partnership Policy represents the collective agenda making our partnership more predictable and productive. The GOL/CSOs Accord highlights commitments, objectives, and general as well as specific actions of/for both government and CSOs (under their umbrella group NCSCOL).

The four objectives of the Accord are to:

- a. Create an enabling environment for the development of a viable civil society;
- b. Broaden and deepen participatory governance through the Liberian Government partnerships, citizens and development partners to build a society that is both inclusive and cohesive;
- c. Integrate the role of civil society organizations as strong, diverse and independent development partners of government in national development processes;
- d. Promote multi-sector approaches that amplify the voices of the poor and marginalized people in national development.

The GOL/CSOs Partnership seeks to institutionalize a framework for an active productive obligatory engagement between government and civil society that provides the enabling environment to consolidate existing and emerging new spaces into strongly accountable, inclusive citizens forums to broaden and deepen participatory governance in Liberia.

The signing of the memorandum of understanding by both parties reaffirms their commitment to work within the framework of the Partnership Policy and serves as a solemn commitment for conducting and directing future engagements. Commissioner Mulbah's full speech at Day 1 of the 2016 NARDA Annual Conference can be viewed on the GC website as well.

LACC says NIF is on the Brink of Collapse - Blames Members

The National Integrity Forum (NIF) of Liberia is at the verge of total collapse if nothing is immediately done to resuscitate that integrity institution. The Chairman of LACC - the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission Cllr. James Verdier observed that the NIF is expressing strangulation and imminent death due to lack of financial support from member institutions.

Speaking at the World Bank sponsored annual retreat of the NIF at Corina Hotel in Sinkor on Wednesday June 7, 2016, Cllr. Verdier hoped that the retreat would discuss means to resuscitate the Forum and enhance collaboration among member institutions. He urged members to recommit themselves to the goal and objectives of the NIF using their individual strengths to impact society through the Forum. *“There is need for professionals to come together and cooperate to make the forum relevant in the society”.*



The LACC boss (Cllr. James Verdier) also chairs the NIF’s Steering Committee. He emphasized that members of the Forum themselves are undermining the integrity of the NIF in that they rarely attend meetings to discuss pertinent issues



intended to strengthen the Forum but rather send their technicians to deputize them at steering committee meetings, adding *“it is better for the institutional heads or their principal deputies to attend and not someone from the lower rank.”*

NIF members include the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), Governance Commission (GC), LACC, Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia (CENTAL), the Ministry Information, Culture, and Tourism (MICAT), Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), Public Procurement and Concessions Commission (PPCC), Law Reform Commission (LRC), Liberia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiatives (LEITI), Liberia Chamber of Commerce (LCC), Press Union of Liberia (PUL), Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), Corporate Responsibility Forum (CRF), the Ministry of Labor (MOL), Ministry of Finance for Development Planning (MFDP), Civil Service Agency (CSA), Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY), and the General Auditing Commission (GAC).

As its vision, the National Integrity Forum is dedicated to providing a platform for collaboration amongst institutions for the promotion of integrity, and its goal is *“to increase the participation of citizens, non-citizens and institutions to holistically fight corruption” in this country.* The forum is expected to serve as a “referee for all integrity institutions” and sets the pace on how such issues are handled and publicly discussed.

The key objective of the integrity annual retreat was to strengthen collaboration between and amongst integrity institutions. The sustainability of the forum was also another important issue discussed. The LACC has been the major financier of the NIF. The retreat featured two major presentations on the topics:

- 1. The Sustainability of the National Integrity Forum: A National Platform for Change;**
- 2. Building Strategic Alliances and Synergies for Collective Action: Issues and Challenges.**

The LACC boss also addressed the presidential establishment of the Task Force headed by Cllr. Fonati Kofa. Chairman Verdier explained that the Task Force set up by President Sirleaf is not meant to usurp the functions of the LACC but that the LACC and Ministry of Justice are working together with the task Force to achieving a common result. He noted that LACC still retains its statutory mandate in the ongoing Global Witness Report against some senior government officials.

Remarks by Donor organizations

UNDP representative Mohamed Boakai noted the UNDP would like to see more robust fight against corruption from integrity institutions, suggesting that the Liberia Revenue Authority (LRA) be part of the forum, and ensure integrity, transparency and accountability in the collection of taxes across the country.

EU Political Counselor, Emmart Sundbad, also noted that the EU would like to see corruption eradicated in Liberia, pointing out that at least ten percent (10%) of funds donated to Liberia are consumed by the wrong people “and that is corruption”. He therefore recommended that openness, transparency and accountability can help end acts of corruption in Liberia.

Presentations

GC Commissioner Ruth Jappah was the NIF retreat’s first presenter. She spoke on the topic “**The Sustainability of the National Integrity Forum: A National Platform for Change**”. Commissioner Ruth Jappah highlighted the need to strengthen the NIF, have a clear organizational identity, identify opportunities for sustainability (which is one of the pillars of the forum), develop strategic plan along with a financial plan to include a long- range fund-raising plan. She emphasized that the need for steering committee members to engage more often and recommit to the aspirations of the National Integrity Forum.



Commissioner Jappah emphasized the need for NIF to begin discussions that would lead to a four to five-year road map that identifies realistic and achievable goals in keeping with its mission. She noted that for an organization to be relevant it must have a strategic plan that speaks to the mission, vision, goals and niche of the organization.

“We did not have money from our respective institutions to do this. What we had was a vision for fighting corruption, values grounded in working together, and a strong leadership that kept us together from start to finish”.

James Dorbor Jallah, Executive Director of the Public Procurement & Concessions Commission (PPCC) spoke on the topic: **Building Strategic Alliances and Synergies for Collective Action: Issues and Challenges**. The presentation focused on building alliances and synergies among member institutions of NIF: strategic plan for NIF as the way forward.



NIF’s strengths derive from its member institutions and therefore the need for collaborations and networking. Such collaborations yield the following: Shared goals/activities, expertise and resources; cost reduction; reduced competition; power shift (change in political bargaining power); increased positive public perception; and image enhancement and trustworthiness. However, **challenges of the NIF include tufts protection, political and limited resources, rivalries (Jealousy, Competitiveness, Conflict), and personal dislikes**.

Mr. Jallah described the National Integrity Forum as being “a platform to achieving our collective goals: efficiency, transparency and accountability”. He called on NIF members to collaborate with each other to engender the following outcomes:

- a) Cost and risk reduction in the management of public assets,
- b) Ensure that performance and service delivery in the transparency sector of Governance is improved, and that
- c) Good governance becomes institutionalized across government.

The core values of the NIF include Human Rights and Dignity; Accountability and Transparency; Partnership and Collaboration; Excellent Performance; and Ethical Behavior.