



State Society and Governance in Melanesia

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Briefing Note



Civil Society and Governance in the Pacific

Good governance - a term largely popularized by the World Bank - is now upheld as the cornerstone of aid and development programming, both in Australia and internationally. Australia's Pacific 2020 recognizes that governance fundamentally impacts upon development processes and that poor political governance inhibits economic growth and undermines the efficacy of the aid program, so much so that improving political governance is perhaps the most important long-term challenge facing the Pacific Island countries between now and 2020. However, while it is widely acknowledged that governance significantly impacts upon aid effectiveness, it is also acknowledged that aid is a very weak instrument for improving governance.

This briefing provides a summary of 'Strengthening Civil Society to Build Demand for Better Governance in the Pacific: Literature Review and Analysis of Good Practice and Lessons Learned' - a research paper prepared by Dr Nicole Haley for AusAID. This work is based on a review of international literature and a series of case studies focused on ACFID member agencies involved in seeking to strengthen civil society in the Pacific. International experience and that of Australian NGOs currently working in the Pacific reveals that governance is contextual and culturally specific, and that effective and sustainable development is most likely to occur when communities drive the program, when NGOs respond to emerging needs, and when donors allow this to happen. Experience also suggests that demand for good governance is a by-product of a robust and vibrant civil society, and as such derives from broader civil society capacity strengthening and confidence building.

Although a great deal of analytical and practical effort has gone into development in the Pacific - with much focus on strengthening various aspects of governance in the region - to date such donor supported governance strengthening initiatives have made little headway. One reason for this is that much of the effort has been directed towards 'top-down' approaches focused on core state institutions, typically involving institutional or public sector reform (i.e. the supply side of governance). It is increasingly recognized that these 'supply-side' efforts have met with only limited success. Acknowledging the limitations of supply-side approaches, *Pacific 2020* - an initiative supported by the Australian government to foster dialogue on priority issues facing the region - recognizes the importance of increasing attention on the issue of demand for improved governance, and better linking of the supply side and the demand side of governance.

Another reason for the lack of headway is that the vast majority of governance related reforms have been initiated to meet conditionality-based lending requirements, rather than in response to locally or internally driven calls for reform. As such they have lacked sustained commitment, which has had a detrimental impact on outcomes. It is increasingly recognised that strategies and programs to improve governance are likely to be undermined if there is no ability for the community to directly demand accountability from their governments.



Community Meeting in Vatukoula, Fiji photo from by Kristian Maynard, source Tropical Gold

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) are key stakeholders when it comes to building demand for reform and for better governance. It is now well recognized that they can contribute to political governance in a number of very practical ways. NGOs and CSOs in many country contexts (though less so in the Pacific) are increasingly using a range of social accountability practices to increase the accountability of service providers, program managers and governments. The tools being used include participatory budgeting, participatory public policy-making, and public expenditure tracking and performance monitoring. NGOs and CSOs are also educating people about their rights, introducing them to the various accountability mechanisms available, and becoming involved in citizen monitoring and evaluation that critiques government performance. An example is the 'citizen report card' surveys undertaken to assess the quality and effectiveness of service delivery in Bangalore, India.

Although there are some examples of these types of social accountability practices being used in the Pacific region (for example, the Solomon Islands Development Trust report cards), social accountability initiatives and the demand for better governance work in the region is not particularly extensive nor well documented. To date, the research and evidence basis for demand led governance and social accountability initiatives has relied heavily on American and European institutions (eg the World Bank and DFID), which focus principally on the African and Latin American experience. In addition, work is increasingly emerging from India and the Philippines.

Defining Governance

Definitions of governance found in the literature differ somewhat, but all have to do with the way power and authority are exercised. Good governance thus requires effective law enforcement, robust institutions, and regulatory authorities that seek to monitor and support law enforcement processes (e.g. police, ombudsman, auditor, attorney-general, and judiciary).

Perhaps the most useful overview of the current thinking on governance is that provided by Court (2006) in the ODI briefing paper *Governance, Development and Aid Effectiveness: A quick guide to complex relationships*. Court notes that there is widespread agreement that **governance matters**, both intrinsically and for improvements in eco-

nomic and social outcomes; that it is about processes – how things are done as much as what things are done. It is not just about governments, but rather relates to the nature of relations between state and society and the space where state and society come together to make decisions.

Governance is Contextual

Perhaps the most critical lesson emerging from international literature and practice is that governance is contextual and culturally specific - so much so that local and donor driven notions of good governance can sometimes appear totally incongruous. It is determined, among other things, by historical context; socio-cultural context; the political economy of the country; ethnic, racial or religious homogeneity; technical capacity; and the international environment. The approach and methodology employed to build demand for better governance must necessarily vary from country to country, locale to locale, and issue to issue.

Moreover the success of efforts will be contingent on a wide range of factors, including the prevailing socio-cultural context; the strength and legitimacy of civil society and media; the level of commitment of the communities and governments involved; the capacity and effectiveness of those governments to respond; the degree of state-civil society synergy; the issues identified as entry points for engagement (e.g. school or health clinic level performance); literacy levels; levels of internal conflict and violence; and level of domestic demand for better governance. In the Pacific context, factors such as language, culture and history also come into play.

Governance reform is a political and a technical exercise

International experience reveals that governance reform is a political not just a technical exercise. Successful reform requires local buy-in and ownership as well as sustained commitment, and it is highly unlikely to be achieved in the absence of government commitment. Similarly, conditionality alone has been shown to be a relatively impotent tool unless supported by strong political leadership. As such it is important to focus efforts on reforms that are appropriate - suited to local contexts, capacities and resources - and are politically attractive and feasible. Otherwise reform initiatives will fail and/or be abandoned at the first available opportunity.

International experience also suggests that im-

ported approaches, systems and processes are only as good as their adaptability to local context and capacity. Accordingly, there are no one-size-fits-all models that can be implemented or applied in order to improve demand for better governance. The best issues for engagement are those which are locally identified, through a thorough participatory assessment of the existing governance situation, and around which communities are already mobilizing.

Ill-Conceived Interventions

Ill-conceived interventions can lead to poor governance outcomes and inadvertently change the relationship between states and their citizens. They also create the potential for backlash and/or resistance, as recipient governments may well view donors as meddling in their sovereign affairs. Ill-conceived and insensitive interventions also potentially place local organizations and individuals operating within them at risk, and often do little more than increase frustration at the local level. Indeed, educating people, making them better aware of their rights, and providing them with the skills and capability to demand better governance might well leave them disillusioned and frustrated if this demand remains unmet.

Donor-led efforts to foster community demand for better governance should be coupled with initiatives that seek to engage and enhance the service delivery capacity of recipient governments so that they might be more directly accountable to their citizens and better able to respond to their demands. Such initiatives might also require that greater attention be placed on addressing law and order problems, as these not only inhibit the strengthening and effective functioning of civil society, but also the capacity of recipient governments to respond.

Empowering civil society to demand better governance

It is widely recognised that successful and sustained reform requires popular support and domestic demand, but can demand, in practice be grown? Certainly attempts by donors to 'engineer' community engagement in governance risk weakening the independence and legitimacy that are the hallmarks of an effective civil society. However, recent experience has nevertheless shown that demand-led governance and greater accountability are possible under the right circumstances. Examples include the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Pro-

ject (UPPAP), Uganda Debt Network (UDN) and Oxfam Australia's response to the Tsunami in Sri Lanka.

The participatory budgeting programs being utilised in Brazil are of particular interest because they have been shown to be flexible and adaptable to local circumstances. Indeed participatory budgeting has been successfully implemented in both wealthy and poor areas and in industrialized and rural areas alike. A central feature of the process is a yearly cycle of regional and neighbourhood/community meetings, which involve citizens in identifying and finding solutions to their problems and needs. Actively involving communities in such processes can produce a range of outcomes including strengthening vertical accountability, more effective and efficient use of public money, and dampening people's expectations to some extent (in that involvement in the process educates them to the true costs of service delivery). Such a spin off could be of real significance in the Pacific, where the expectations of poor rural communities are often unrealistic, and where there is limited discretionary funding available for service delivery and other works (as salaries account for up to 80% of government expenditure).

Despite its success, decentralized participatory planning and budgeting has worked on a larger scale only when it has been underpinned by massive capacity building campaigns involving investment in social infrastructure in the first instance and the availability of funds in the second. It is also the case that such programs were initiated and implemented by progressive local governments and their success remains dependent in many respects on strong political commitment in the form of resources.

This suggests that the widespread take-up of such programs is still a long way off in the Pacific, namely because local governments throughout the Pacific tend to be constrained by limited technical capacity, moribund public service infrastructure, political interference, a paucity of local leadership, and very limited financial resources. This is particularly so in Papua New Guinea, where such factors have already been shown to impede participatory initiatives. Nevertheless, participatory budgeting and community based performance monitoring have been successfully applied on a small scale in many countries, often by and with the support of NGOs, and implementation on this scale looks to

Box 1: Case Studies examined in *Strengthening Civil Society to Build Demand for Better Governance in the Pacific*

Social Empowerment and Education Program (SEEP), Fiji, run by the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy to work with local Fijian communities to promote community-level engagement.

CARE Cambodia: Promoting Rights in Social and Sexual Health (PRISSH), which seeks to promote human rights and responsible sexual behaviour through increased knowledge and awareness of gender based violence and human rights and to improve access to care responding to the needs of survivors of gender based violence.

CARE Sri Lanka: Plantation Community Development Project, which has evolved over the past 20 years from a needs-based approach to a more rights based approach—addressing deep rooted socio economic and governance issues that keep the plantation community one of the most deprived and marginalized in the country.

Vatukoula Community Consultative Committee, Fiji, which has managed to secure financial and education relief for the families affected by the closure of the Vatukoula Gold mine.

Children of Romania, which was developed initially as a welfare intervention that sought to respond to the tragic institutionalization of over 1000,000 children. It is a long running and highly successful project that evolved over the mid-1990s and World Vision, in partnerships with various institutions, developed an Early Education holistic care framework for institutionalised children.

Oxfam Solomon Islands HIV & AIDS Program, which involves a partnership between civil society and the Solomon Islands Government to build local NGO and Government capacity to implement the National HIV / AIDS Multi-sectoral Strategic Plan.

Begasin Bugati Rural Development Program (BBRDP), which ran for four years from April 2002 and sought to secure improvements in primary health, increase food security, improve disposable income and build governance capacity.

Wetennger Leadership and Governance Project, which is a demand land governance initiative that has focused on improving community governance and leadership capability among the Aboriginal community near Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory.

Community Based Performance Monitoring (CBPM), a program piloted by World Vision in 2004 in Uganda. CBPM as utilized by World Vision enables grass-roots communities to identify problems with basic health and education facilities

have real potential in the Pacific.

In the Pacific, small scale demand-led improvements to governance and ‘bottom-up accountability’ are already being achieved through community radio, through civil society led voter and civic education, and through shadow reporting. Examples of the report card approach include the SIDT score-cards on government performance in the Solomon Islands and the Papua New Guinea Media Councils’ *War Against Corruption*, which involved investigating and reporting on corruption in the public and private sectors following public tip-offs. This work is continued by the many Transparency International PNG (TIPNG) Coalition against Corruption Committees that have been established around the country.

International experience shows that poor education and lack of access to information inhibits the development of a healthy, active and questioning civil society – something that has been noted repeatedly in relation to the Pacific. Access to information is therefore critical to initiatives that seek to build demand for better governance. In order to hold governments accountable, people need to understand the role of elected officials, how governments are meant to operate, the law, and how the law relates to them. They need to understand their

rights and entitlements and also their responsibilities and they need to have access to the media and information about government performance. In addition to knowledge of entitlement, they also need a credible grievance and redress mechanism and empowerment to access them. A good example of a donor-supported initiative with the potential to promote or enhance other demand led governance initiatives is the People’s First Network in the Solomon Islands, which has seen donor funded internet stations set up on several locales within each province.

Nature and Scope of Civil Society in the Pacific

It is now well recognized that socio-cultural diversity in the Pacific, particularly Melanesia, has meant little if any sense of national identity. Often there is very little convergence between national interest and more parochial local ones - Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are all cases in point. This diversity tends to inhibit the coalescing of public opinion that is required to generate the public pressure needed to force governments to be accountable to their citizens. In fact, citizens in many Pacific countries do not expect or necessarily want their governments or elected officials to be responsive to the wider community’s needs – only to their needs and desires. Indeed many see the state merely as something to be used

if not plundered, and this means very little accountability is actually ever demanded by communities. Linked with this, communities often seek to undermine good governance initiatives in order to capture limited State resources.

Needless to say, the pressure from civil society bought to bear on Pacific Island governments to improve their governance has been limited to date. Several reasons have been suggested for this, including: socio-cultural traditions, limited education, lack of access to information and the practical and logistical difficulties of mobilizing scattered rural communities, low literacy, traditional mores that discourage the questioning of authority, and a dysfunctional political system.

It might also be argued that the good governance agenda is in many respects counter-cultural or culturally incongruous in a Pacific context, wherein notions of truth and concealment are both culturally important (concealment runs counter to the notion of transparency) and wherein the distribution of largesse to kinsfolk and supporters is both expected and highly regarded.

It should also be recognised, too, that CSOs and NGOs are expressions of the communities from which they emerge. In a Pacific context many of these groups have a very limited mandate. Often they are born of personal and clan aspirations rather than a desire to mobilise the wider community around issues of the greater good. That is not to say that communities do not mobilise around issues of concern to them. They readily mobilise, for instance, around bride price and compensation (what some would refer to as clan business), but there is little notion of the collective outside these contexts. A key question, then, is how best to harness people's energies and motivate them to demand better governance and more accountability from their leaders, when much of their activity is currently directed towards capturing services for their group at the expense of others.

Australian NGOs in the Pacific

Australian NGOs working in international development are diverse. At present there are more than 50 Australian NGOs of varying size and capacity currently operating in PNG, the Solomon Islands and other Pacific Island countries. Most are focused on community development and basic service delivery activities, and/or building the capacity and confidence of local organisations to supply such services

- few, if any, of these groups are actively seeking to build demand for better governance per se. Most do not implement programs directly, but work through local implementing partners. As such, relationship building and civil society strengthening forms an integral component of their programs regardless of whether their primary mandated activities are focused on health, education, development, environmental protection or social justice. The case studies reveal that Australian NGOs and their local partners are helping to build demand for greater accountability and with it better governance through their community development activities.

Perhaps even more importantly, many of the key lessons emerging from international literature and practice are already reflected in the way Australian NGO's operate in the Pacific. For instance, Australian NGOs typically work with local partners through well-established relationships and recognise that long-term engagement (over years if not decades) is crucial if capacity building and civil society strengthening are to prove sustainable. Their engagement typically extends beyond that of short-term project and program cycles, with the average length of engagement in any particular program being eight years.

Australian NGOs also see good governance as being more about leadership, values and attitudes than about immediate outcomes, and often allow their programs to grow gradually and organically. They have demonstrated a cognisance that country and local circumstances matter. Programs are designed to reflect, support and build upon what Pacific Islanders know will work in their own context. Similarly, programs are often structured in such a way to create an enabling environment rather than generating swift measurable results that can be demonstrated within a program cycle.

What emerged from the consultations, in particular, was a consensus that it is the principles and values that Australian NGOs bring to the exercise and the modes of engagement they employ that contributes most to the success of their civil society strengthening work. Indeed, it was felt that their individual and collective successes could be attributed to the fact that they employ participatory, consultative, and rights based approaches, that they work in partnership with local NGOs and CBOs, value and heavily rely upon local knowledge, respond to local needs, employ citizen-centred notions of social

accountability, and work within and alongside traditional structures and forms of governance without necessarily seeking to change them or viewing them as an impediment to good governance.

Most groups also agreed that governance does not stand alone and that demand for better governance cannot be built on its own; rather, demand for better governance is a by-product of a robust and vibrant civil society. The consensus was that strengthening civil society is a necessarily slow, complex, incremental, iterative and reflexive process that is as much about issues such as health and education as it is about civic awareness and social empowerment.

Issues for Donors

- Donors wishing to support demand led governance initiatives should proceed cautiously and remain flexible and responsive to change and innovation. The approach and methodology must necessarily vary from country to country, locale to locale, and issue to issue. The best issues for engagement are those which are locally identified.
- Funding for demand led governance initiatives needs to be increased and channeled both into civil society confidence building and capacity strengthening more broadly, and into the modified social accountability initiatives that are currently being utilised by several Australian NGOs and their local partners.
- Innovative new partnerships should be encouraged in order to explore and build upon the demand led governance gains now being made in the Pacific and in response to internally driven local calls for reform.
- Donor-led efforts to foster community demand for better governance should be coupled with initiatives that seek to engage and enhance the service delivery capacity of recipient governments so that they might be more directly accountable to their citizens and better able to respond to their demands.

This briefing note is based on a longer piece of work prepared by Dr Nicole Haley for AusAID, which can be downloaded at

http://rspas.anu.edu.au/papers/melanesia/research/SSGM_Build_Demand_Better_Governance.pdf

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