

Building Post-Crisis Capacity: Cases from the Solomon Islands

Parliamentary Strengthening Project

Parliamentary Strengthening

Background

The project originated from a UNDP Legislative Needs Assessment in 2001. After the establishment of RAMSI in 2003, the project was developed and launched, and a first phase was implemented from 2005 to 2008 by UNDP with financing from UNDP and AusAID through the RAMSI Machinery of Government (MOG) program. A second phase was launched in April 2008, covering the period from 2008 to 2012¹. The project provides technical assistance to the National Parliament Office (NPO) in the form of a project manager and funding of training activities, consultant support on technical issues, salary of select national graduate staffers and computer equipment.

The project started from a very low basis. Like other State institutions, Parliament was weakened and capacity depleted during the Tension from 1999 to 2003. The Legislative Needs Assessment had noted the lack of independence of Parliament and dominance by the Executive, lack of Secretariat support to Members and performance issues such as infrequent meetings and poor attendance, as well as a general lack of knowledge and understanding of the role of Parliament.

The project design was based on the premise that the secretariat function of the NPO presented an entry point to an overall strengthening of the performance of Parliament as an institution. Project input was targeted at NPO while outcome was measured at the level of Parliament. In the following, a distinction is therefore made between the capacity of the NPO and the capacity of Parliament itself and its members.

What makes this a Capacity Building ‘Success’?

Capacity of the NPO:

A key feature of the project is the hiring of a group of relatively young and inexperienced college graduates as staffers who have developed their individual skills through their work at the NPO. They are now seen as a highly talented and ambitious group with a concern for the future of Solomon Islands as a nation, and part of a future national elite. The fact that several have already left for better paying jobs in the private sector or with international aid agencies is an indicator of the development of capacity at the individual level. There is an expectation that more will follow in their footsteps, and that this could challenge the sustainability of the institutional results of the project: the NPO's ability to continually 'refresh' their pool of talented staff will be a critical determinant in maintaining capacity.

The staffers form a team with a high degree of cooperation and trust that results in high levels of job satisfaction. The team is characterized by strong work ethics, a sense of empowerment and a service minded attitude. There has been an increased participation of women in the NPO - including in leadership positions - as there has been generally in the administration of Government in recent years, but there is only little recognition of gender equality as an objective in the NPO.

The project has led to the formation of a management group composed of the Speaker, the Clerk, the Deputy Clerk and the Program Manager. This group has established a close and trusting working

¹ Solomon Islands National Parliamentary Strengthening Project, Phase 2, 2008-2012 and Machinery of Government, Consolidated Annual Performance Report 2006 with MOG Forward Plan, 2007-2008, by Dr. Suzanne Hoverman, M&E Facilitator, March 2007

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relationship that appears to be institutionalized and resilient beyond the contributions of individuals; during the March-April 2008 parliamentary discussions on the budget, the Speaker was ill and the Clerk was standing for election, but the process was efficiently managed by the Deputy Clerk without having to resort to sole reliance on the Advisor – a great example of distributive competence and leadership. There is a corporate plan that describes objectives for change management beyond project period, and there are examples of how the management function continues effectively, even in the absence of one or more members of the group. However, key members of the management group are scheduled to be replaced in the coming few years, and this will pose a challenge.

Another signal of effective capacity built and sustained in the NPO is their increasing role in providing capacity building support and ‘peer training’ to other parliaments in the region, which provides an reinforcement of ‘success’ through the exposure to regional practice and the peer recognition it brings.

Capacity of Parliament:

The performance of Parliament has strongly improved over the lifetime of the project as measured by a range of quantitative performance indicators. Sessions are longer, attendance is higher, and Committees are more active with more hearings and reports. Furthermore, the schedule of meetings is now to a large extent independent of Government, and Parliament is more proactive in its dealings with Government. There is an increased public awareness and recognition of the role of Parliament as reflected in TV broadcast of debates and newspaper articles and editorials. Members of Parliament report a direct sense of empowerment, saying that they are better able to contribute to the work of Parliament. Before the project, they received little support on substantive issues, and only experienced Members were able to engage effectively. Now, all members are able to get competent support on a short notice, which enables them to contribute on a more equal footing; members express great confidence in the quality of NPO support.

The capacity of Parliament has been strengthened at an institutional level through the introduction of procedures and resources that are independent of individuals. An example of this is a new website and database with past proceedings, legislation and media reports. This database has made it easier for Members to base their contributions on knowledge of historical background to specific issues, and has arguably helped improve the quality of legislation. The leadership function of the Office of Speaker has become more institutionalized through the buffer that NPO provides between the Speaker and other Members as well as the Executive, most particularly through the establishment of systems and processes linked to the Constitution and Standing Orders and not just reliant on the personal integrity of the Speaker. The office held by this charismatic and respected leader, whose reputation at first provided the necessary ‘space’ for the NPO team to begin demonstrating their value, is now protected by the anchoring of standard and ethical practices to the office, not **only** the office-holder.

As a result of the higher quality of Parliamentary work, members appear to be changing attitudes and values away from a narrow focus on entitlements towards an aspiration of public service. Although patronage is still widespread and fundamental to the political system of the Solomon Islands, there is an emerging public debate about this issue, and about how the political system can possibly be used to strengthen public services for all. Parliament continues to be completely dominated by men, and there is little or no acceptance of gender equality.

What makes ‘Success’ possible?

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The capacity of the NPO improved as a result of a teambuilding process that involved all staffers in an inclusive way with little distinction between project staff and staff employed directly by the NPO. Staffers were able to shift seamlessly from project financing to NPO employment during the project period, and NPO staff funded by the project are not treated or used in any way differently from those who have ‘migrated’ to the public service payroll². As also observed in the Office of the Auditor General, the NPO demonstrates the necessity of having the right mix of staff – a few competent highly professional and seasoned public servants plus a cadre of young ‘untainted’ enthusiastic graduates. This balance – and the environment it creates – was striking, and must be recognized, nurtured, and maintained as people come and go, in order for the capacity to prove itself resilient.

The employment of young staffers was based on meritocratic principles, and training of staff has been structured and access to training based on needs rather than seniority. Young staffers were quickly given responsibilities and visibility among Members of Parliament; NPO staff pointed to support they received to make presentations to MPs and the Speaker, and to serve as members of interview panels, which built their confidence and sense of professionalism. It was possible to recruit and retain a highly talented group of young people because of the dynamics of the project that created better working conditions than in Government Ministries and sense of high status. This dynamic is self-reinforcing and contributes to a virtuous cycle, where the trust, openness, and confidence of the team environment become de-personalized and embedded in the institution. It is expected that new talented staff members can be attracted to the NPO even as some choose to leave for better paying positions and new challenges.

The skills and personality of the Project Manager has contributed greatly to capacity development results. He was selected by the Speaker for an interim posting to replace the outgoing expatriate on the basis of his CV showing strong technical knowledge and long career in the Parliament of New South Wales, but he proved to also have valuable interpersonal skills and a collegial ‘coaching’ style that NPO staff point to as both empowering and technically rigorous. He has strong teambuilding skills that involve an ability to communicate a sense of ‘big picture’ understanding coupled with a non-controlling, open and accessible attitude to staff that reinforces a sense of empowerment. It is noteworthy that these intangible characteristics were fortuitous in the first instance, since they would not be discernible in a selection process based only on CVs; in this case, these skills were demonstrated during the interim four months and clearly played a role in his subsequent confirmation as the new permanent Project manager.

The Project Manager has been able to function as a valued member of the management group. The combination of the leadership qualities of the Speaker and Clerk and the technical knowledge and interpersonal skills of the Project Manager has been a key to the strengthening and institutionalization of the management group. The design of the second phase of the project was based on the ideas and wishes of the Speaker and Clerk, which in turn were a manifestation of the broad and deep respect for the current Speaker’s leadership, integrity, and knowledge of the Parliamentary system and its origins; should a Speaker of less standing be appointed upon Sir Peter Kenilorea’s retirement, the continued high performance of NPO would not be guaranteed.

² This integration in both form and function is a very concrete example of the ‘avoid parallel systems’ principle that is prominent in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the OECD-DAC Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations.

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The project has benefitted from a recently changed enabling and supportive political environment and improved working relations between the NPO and the Executive. The budget for the NPO increased in 2007-2008 to cover the salary of a number of staffers, and it is expected that it will continue to receive the necessary budget allocations. The improved working relations have been partly due to the generally cooperative political atmosphere. Parliament is currently characterized by a lack of strong divisions, and this serves to strengthen a sense of trust that makes it easier for the NPO to provide its services to all Members; in the future, as Parliament increasingly engages in political decision making, the history of NPO as a nonaligned impartial service entity will be critical to it sustaining its excellent reputation among MPs, and hence its effectiveness.

Discussions with NPO staff provided multiple examples of an emphasis on process – an explicit focus on cross-training staff and building skills jointly, nurturing new staff confidence by offering them opportunities to make presentations to the Speaker and members, or to serve on selection and interview panels – which underline the importance of balancing the pressure on deliverable ‘results’ or products with a more nuanced and context-specific focus on process, which delivers its own ‘results’.

Capacity of Parliament:

The strengthened performance of Parliament is a result of the recent momentum toward political cohesion seen in context of a generally volatile political development during the post-crisis transition in the Solomon Islands, but has also to a high degree been caused by the development of stronger capacity of the NPO and the subsequent strengthening of interaction between Members and the NPO. The entry point of the project was the NPO and not Members directly, but the strengthening of NPO has enabled it to provide effective and sustained services to Members, including advice on substantial issues. This has helped create a 'snowball effect' of increased demand from Members, and from their own observations, their sense of the NPO as a neutral technical support function available to all of them represents a sustainable strengthening that could outlast changes in the composition of parties or involvement of individual MPs. Training particular MPs on particular development issues provides knowledge, but the institutional capacity that is being demonstrated in examples like longer budget floor debates and substantive hearings by committees is a function of NPO strengthening which then cascades through Parliament more broadly.

The induction workshop for Members is seen as a highly significant event that strengthens their capacity both to perform their roles and to “receive” services from the NPO; the NPO provides continuity and is a source of institutionalization and sustainability, since Members of Parliament are replaced frequently.

Observations for wider consideration:

- The post-crisis environment presented opportunities and openings for targeted interventions in areas where capacity was very low as a result of the crisis, while demand for support was high.
- Limited time horizon, focused on achieving quick wins, but also contributed to a strengthening of longer term institutional resilience; appears to be the result of an attention to processes in project implementation rather than just reaching planned outcome objectives.
- The projects created virtuous cycles of interaction between direct capacity building efforts with quick and visible results, a resulting significantly increased status and influence of project organizations that in turn led to strengthened prospects for institutional sustainability, including replacement of staff, budget allocations and political support.

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- All three public sector projects had a focus on building and supporting functional capacities for leadership, accountability and inclusiveness - all key dimensions of resilient and responsive state-society relations, which may contribute to an endogenous and domestically-driven statebuilding process.