

Capacity Development BRIEFS

SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND LESSONS LEARNED

BUILDING POST-CRISIS CAPACITY IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

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This Capacity Development Brief summarizes the results of a multidonor team review of four examples of post-crisis capacity development interventions in the Solomon Islands in 2005–08 whose performance was frequently cited as successful by local stakeholders. Although not based on post-project evaluations, the review found a number of patterns and potential lessons: (1) responding to immediate needs fosters national ownership, (2) “quick wins” can lay the basis for wider system impact, (3) being clear on “capacity for what” is key to project success, (4) critical mass in capacity means taking a team approach, (5) training must be grounded in time-relevant and actively operational tasks, (6) a coaching and partnering style is essential and, certainly, not optional, (7) leadership becomes catalytic in capacity development when a broader coalition is engaged, and in some cases supports a “heroic individual” as its leader.

From 1999 through 2003, the Solomon Islands experienced a governance crisis, heightened by economic pressures that exacerbated tensions among Solomon Islanders of different island origins. Physical security deteriorated as the integrity of security agencies failed and key government institutions—from schools to the Central Bank—were compromised by violence.

On July 24, 2003, the Solomon Islands National Parliament unanimously approved deployment of the Regional Assistance Mission for the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) as a regional peacekeeping force.

Triangulating Success: Finding and Learning from Reputed “Wins”

This brief pulls together observations from a review of four projects in the Solomon Islands:

- *Parliamentary Strengthening Project.* The project’s goal has been to improve the capacity of the Solomon Islands National Parliament to perform oversight, accountability, legislative and representative functions and roles efficiently and effectively by working with the National Parliament Office (NPO).
- *Office of the Auditor General (OAG).* As part of RAMSI’s overall Accountability Program, support to this office was intended to strengthen this key Solomon Islands institution, which is charged with

ensuring accountability in the conduct of public accounts and administration.

- *Solomon Islands Government Housing Management Project, Phase 2.* This project has been assisting key government agencies in managing government housing by implementing accountable and transparent policies and management practices in the Government Housing Division.
- *Production and Marketing of Quality Vanilla.* This subproject of a larger livelihoods intervention works along the value chain from farmer to buyer to intervention wholesaler to improve sustainable returns from high-quality vanilla production.

To build a common platform of understanding for future efforts, a multidonor team (box 1) investigated alleged successes by “triangulating” actual success from the perceptions of a range of stakeholders involved.

Why is capacity important? The team explicitly chose not to treat capacity as a catch-all term for training courses, computers, and office space, but instead as the ability of people, organizations, and society to manage their affairs successfully—not external to or separate from people. It is the collective product of system dynamics (influenced by and influencing attitudes and behaviors) that manifests as joint performance



(comprising individual competence and skill, deployed alongside others' competencies).

Knowing that individual leadership was perceived as key to several projects' success, the team approached discussions with stakeholders with an explicit recognition of three dimensions of leadership capacity (vision, competence, and integrity) and explored the extent to which the projects exhibited patterns of growing institutional capacity that illustrated these dimensions (box 2).

Patterns, General Observations, and Lessons

Although there was no *a priori* connection during project design for these four interventions, interviews with a wide range of participants, stakeholders, and observers did generate patterns and observations that allowed the team to point to lessons that may hold value for other efforts to build capacity in post-crisis settings.

Respond to immediate needs to foster national ownership. The post-crisis environment presented opportunities and openings for targeted interventions: capacity was very low in core government functions as a result of the crisis, but more important, demand for support from key government leaders was high. The three public sector projects (Parliament, OAG, and housing) were all derived from modest, focused initial interventions that generated specific value, leading to a second phase with a more ambitious, but still focused project scope. This "incremental" project evolution seems to have helped build true project ownership by key government counterparts; Solomon Islanders emphasized that because they can see their own role in defining the iterative project design they see that as evidence of their investment in, and not just agreement with, the project (box 1).

Create a basis for wider system impact. The design of all the projects was to focus on specific organizational entities with relatively small numbers of people. However, the projects also presented opportunities for much wider system impact. Rather than focusing narrowly on reaching planned outputs or outcomes, the time-limited projects focused on achieving quick wins, while strengthening long-term institutional resilience, through attention to process in project implementation. The projects created virtuous cycles of interaction, in which direct efforts with quick and visible results produced significantly increased status and influence for the teams; this in turn strengthened the base for institutional sustainability: staff recruitment, budget allocations, and political support. Early focused interventions in the two most mature projects—parliamentary strengthening and OAG—have now had enough time to produce impacts with potential spillover that are leading to broader system impacts.

Be clear about "capacity for what?" Clear agreement on what capacity the projects would build first was essential to their success. The projects viewed capacity as systems and processes *plus* the individual skills and knowledge needed to produce specific results. The OAG and housing project teams attested to the importance of these systems and processes as well as the value added of the increasingly skilled Solomon Islanders who operate and manage them.

Achieve critical mass by acquiring, nurturing, and maintaining a team with capacity. At the offices of the national parliament and auditor general, staffers formed a team with a high degree of cooperation and trust that resulted in high levels of job satisfaction. The post-conflict window of openness and hope for change, coming after several years of agency staff attrition, offered the opportunity to recruit a mixture of highly competent and experienced Solomon Island civil servants and recent graduates and to create teams characterized by high levels of competence and correspondingly high levels of energy and enthusiasm. Young staffers were quickly given responsibilities and visibility among members of Parliament; parliament office staff pointed to the support they received from both their Advisor and the Clerk, to make presentations to members of Parliament and the Speaker and to serve on interview panels, which built their confidence and sense of professionalism.

This experience underlines the importance of balancing pressure for deliverable results or products with a more nuanced and context-specific focus on process, which delivers its own results. Although this dynamic is self-reinforcing and contributes to a virtuous cycle, Parliament office staff emphasized that their challenge has been to exhibit resilience to change at a time of staff turnover: the team is now seeking to fill positions of current staff members who have chosen to leave for higher salaries and new challenges.

Box 1: What Worked in the Housing Management Project?

- The project was founded on an intimate knowledge of the government's needs and environment.
- The government—not an outside design team—answered the question "capacity for what?"
- The project was based on an inclusive egalitarian style of advisors and physical integration of advisors' workspace with their local teams.
- The project addressed any skills gap through task-specific classroom training, on-the-job coaching and mentoring, confidence building, and culturally relevant short courses.
- Effective inter-ministerial group created for the project's policy dialogue modeled capacity that was well aligned to the complex "whole government" nature of the problem.



Maintain an effective project style. Across all projects reviewed, multiple stakeholders emphasized the critical role of the coaching and partnering style of skilled advisors and trainers. Project staff in the OAG, housing management, and parliament-strengthening projects are entirely co-located and integrated with their respective government unit's staff. All three teams are characterized by coaching, congenial support, and an inclusive approach. Government staff commented that they were proud of "their" technical assistance teams, both in terms of their skills and attitude.

Government staff also noted the importance to project success of grounding training in time-relevant and actively operational tasks (box 2).

Acknowledge the importance of leadership exerted by a heroic and politically savvy individual supported by a broader coalition. Reported success stories at the auditor general's office and at Parliament were in no small measure due to the charisma and professionalism of their leaders, supported by a network of Solomon Islanders from across society, and to direct technical assistance delivered with an open, inclusive, approachable, and nurturing style. Although the "heroic leader" storyline is well known in both projects, it is important to acknowledge the complex dynamics that underpin their success. The resilience of the leaders' hard-won gains and of the system of which they are an integral part comes from support from a coalition of forces. In the case of the offices of the auditor general and national parliament, crucial support has come from prominent members of Parliament, a small number of senior public servants, some powerful sections of the community, and the media. Both project examples demonstrate the potential role for the donor community to help far-sighted leaders, when they exist, to develop their support networks. To be sure, it is the presence of broad, multi-stakeholder coalitions that act as critical change agents supporting reform (box 3).

Box 2: The Role of Training

Effective examples of formal training were based on a skills gap analysis that included self-assessment and on training modules specifically adapted to fit the Solomon Islands context. The level of context-specific adaptation is impressive, supporting the need for upfront investment to develop skills and knowledge that are useful and deployable.

For the auditor general function, international standards from the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI) had been regionally customized for the South Pacific. The auditor general advisor team further adapted these contextualized regional standards for use in operations and training. In both the auditor general's office and the housing division, quasi-formal, in-house training and computer skill sessions were closely linked in time to actual tasks needed for the unit's work program in that week or month.

The capacity of Parliament has been strengthened at an institutional level by introducing procedures and resources that are independent of individuals. The leadership function of the Office of Speaker, for example, has been institutionalized through the buffer that the national parliament office provides between the Speaker and members (as well as the executive), in which systems and processes are linked to the Constitution and standing orders and do not rely just on the personal integrity of the Speaker.

The office held by the charismatic and respected Speaker, whose reputation provided the necessary starting point from which the parliament office team could demonstrate its value, is now protected from political interference by its success in anchoring standard parliamentary processes and ethical practices to not *only* the officeholder, but also the office itself (box 4).

Take advantage of linkages within and across agencies and institutions. All three public sector projects (i.e., Parliament, OAG, and housing) benefited from existing linkages among government entities. For example, the National Parliament Office was more capable of delivering its core support to the Public Accounts Committee because of capacity deployed by the Office of the Auditor General, while the auditor general had a valuable ally in the National Parliament Office on the issue of accountability. Similarly, following an extensive audit of housing entitlements and their management, the process was reinforced through strong interactions among the housing project, Government Housing Division, and auditor general's office. The acting auditor general regards follow-up by the housing division to be the best they have experienced by a line ministry, whereas the ministry leadership, housing division, and project team all regard OAG inputs as essential to their efforts to base policy debate on analytics. Similarly, the Integrity Group Forum, which periodically brings together Solomon Island leaders from key accountability agencies together to discuss issues of mutual concern, is recognition of the larger system in which these

Box 3: What Worked in the OAG Project?

- The project benefited from the influence of an activist, visionary, and politically astute leader.
- This leadership was embedded in a broader coalition of support and enhanced by distributing the leadership function among senior staff.
- The leadership coalition and its demonstrated technical competence drove outcomes across a network of government integrity entities (not only OAG).
- The post-conflict window allowed recruiting of a staff team with a balance of competence and energy.
- The project advisors and AG nurtured a strong sense of a "national" Audit Office, transcending the divisive clan and island identities that were exploited during the violent conflict.

Box 4: What Worked in the NPO Project?

- A focus on team building
- Meritocratic hiring: a focus on needs, not seniority, in access to training
- Young energetic staffers given responsibility
- Strong technical and interpersonal skills of the advisor
- An enabling and supportive political environment
- Strengthening the NPO first, to achieve wider impact on parliament performance

stakeholders connect with each other for coordination and collaboration.

System wide collaboration also brings significant benefits in producing and implementing coherent policy and advice. For example, OAG project advisors advocated for rewarding capacity results within the larger government system, convincing the Public Service system to acknowledge documented individual successes in skills development (substantiated by periodic written assessments) in the public service review and promotion process. Likewise, in the private sector project, inputs on farming and curing of vanilla beans, which is only one part of the value chain, is structured in ways that recognize and take advantage of the dynamics of the private sector market system (box 5).

Conclusions

The three public sector projects focused on building and supporting functional capacities for leadership, accountability, and inclusiveness—all key dimensions of resilient and responsive state-society relations that contribute to an endogenous and domestically driven state-building process. This brief has reviewed a number of lessons from this project experience, but overall, three key lessons resonated strongly with the government staff interviewed:

- Be clear on what capacity is and is not sought
- Use a coaching and partnering style

Box 5: What Worked in the Vanilla Project

- Leading with information, knowledge, and iterative support, not by giving tools and equipment
- Focusing on farmers who already made the commitment to invest significantly in vanilla vines
- Using a nucleus model to link smaller farmers to lead farmers
- Combining technical credibility, practical skills, collaborative style within expatriate and local expertise
- Directly harnessing private sector dynamics, rather than building proxy capacity in government where niche products are not a priority

- Ground training in actively operational tasks.

In the Solomon Islands, frequent mention is made of the Melanesian cultural norm of sharing physical resources, but guarding or hoarding knowledge. In this socio-cultural context, there may be a transformative power created by sharing information: efforts by government teams and their advisors to facilitate habits of transparency—improving the quality of and access to shared information—within donor-supported capacity development projects may be as critical to changing the ways people work as any skills training or short course.

For More Information:

The Solomons Capacity Building Review was conducted in September 2008 by a joint donor team comprising John Davidson, Assistant Director-General, Australian Agency for International Development; Christian Lotz, Peacebuilding Specialist, U.N. Development Programme; and Laura E. Bailey, Senior Operations Specialist, World Bank.

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