

The Commonwealth Local Government Pacific Project: Seeking 'Most significant change'

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Graham Hassall¹

Victoria University of Wellington
Wellington, New Zealand



The origins of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum's Pacific Project date to a 1997 roundtable in Papua New Guinea. Substantial activity, however, commenced more recently in 2005 with the launch of a 5-year project to enhance the quality of local government in the small states of the Pacific Islands. The project was well-conceived and managed to establish strong 'buy-in' by major stakeholders and partners. A mid-term review was undertaken in 2008 and was generally positive. The project is now in the final stages of implementation of what it hoped will be only its first phase. In 2009-2010 its central task is to ensure that the 'key results' envisaged at the outset are achieved: donors are looking for evidence of real impact in participating countries; project administrators are refining management practices on the basis of the mid-term review (as well as the regular feedback they receive from participating countries); participating countries are being asked to realistically plan, and to better integrate project activities into their ongoing work-plans as evidence of both genuine development outcomes and future sustainability of lessons learned.

¹ The author is grateful to the staff of the CLGF Pacific Project for abundant assistance with materials for this review and to Regional Advisor Terry Parker for comments on the draft.

Background

Local government is not particularly strong in the Pacific Islands. Half of the population remain in rural settings and traditional villages which are nonetheless being rapidly transformed by modernization. The increasing urban population are in cities, towns, and particularly peri-urban settlements which are struggling to provide adequate infrastructure, services, and leadership. Having decided to explore options for a project to assist the development of local government in the Pacific Islands, CLGF and the Commonwealth Secretariat convened a Regional Symposium on Local Governance in the Pacific in Suva in 2004. Proceedings of this event were published, (Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth Local Government Forum 2004). On the basis of this report, and the evident success of the symposium, a five-year project for the Pacific Islands region was launched in 2005 to *'improve quality of life for communities in the Pacific region through strengthened local democracy and good governance'*. The project commenced at the same time that the Pacific nations, under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum, were developing the Pacific Plan to promote regional integration, and when a number of international agencies were developing the associated *'Pacific Urban Agenda'*.²

Project purpose

The Pacific Project was designed to support local government capacity-building through the pursuit of six objectives:

1. Encourage appropriate, participatory, representative and responsive local government in the Pacific Region
2. Ensure effective intergovernmental relations and central government support to local government
3. Enhance international and regional cooperation to promote effective local governance
4. Build capacity of local government institutions and structures to respond to rapid urbanisation, deliver better services and hence provide an enabling environment for economic and social development
5. Promote effective management of urbanisation and good local governance

² These agencies include the UNDP Inter-Country Programme, UN ESCAP (EPOC), UN Habitat, and Asian Development Bank.

6. Ensure recommendations and outcomes of the [Suva] Regional Symposium are implemented and monitored, and adequate capacity exists within CLGF to manage the project implementation.

Project management

An office was established in Fiji in office space offered to the project by the Suva City Council, with a sub-office later established in Port Moresby hosted firstly by the Papua New Guinea Urban Local Level Government Association, and from 2008 by the PNG Department of Provincial and Local Government Affairs. Following the mid-term review and in view of project expansion, separate and larger premises were occupied in Suva from 2009. Overall responsibility for the project lay with a Commonwealth Secretariat (CFTC) funded regional advisor,³ supported by a small team of project officers.⁴ A staff member of the Governance Program at the University of the South Pacific (USP) was engaged as part-time Training Coordinator.⁵ Project activities under the current phase commenced in October 2005 and the first Technical Advisory Panel (TAP) and start-up workshop was held in late November 2005. The TAP, comprising representatives of the participating countries, together with collaborating partners and donors, provides programmatic governance and meets annually to consult on progress and to establish the work program for the following year.⁶ Project staff maintain a website at <http://pacific.clgf.org.uk> and the Project's specific activities in pursuit of its five-year objectives are available online.⁷

Stakeholders and partners

The project initially focussed on seven countries – Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. Tuvalu joined in June 2006, and Cook

³ Mr. Terry Parker, who also oversaw the related Honiara and PNG projects. The position came to an end in December 2009 following a handover to the counterpart Project Manager, with future advisory arrangements to be being finalised.

⁴ In 2009 these comprised the manager of the regional project (Karibaiti Taoaba), three project officers (Megan Praeger, Sachin Sharma and Ted Lulu (mainly engaged on the PNG project), and a project administrator (Letila Naqasima).

⁵ Mr Feue Tipu.

⁶ Associate members are the School of Governance and Development Studies at the University of the South Pacific, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Commonwealth Secretariat, UNDP Pacific Centre, UN Habitat, UN-ESCAP (EPOC), Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International, Local Government New Zealand, Local Government Managers Australia, UTS Centre for Local Government (University of Technology Sydney), NZAID, AusAID and CLGF London.

⁷ See http://pacific.clgf.org.uk/userfiles/Pacific+Region/File/CLGF_Pacific_Project_Info_Booklet.pdf

Islands in March 2007, bringing the number of countries in the project to nine. A project to strengthen Honiara City Council in Solomon Islands was established in parallel with the regional project, following an invitation from the Solomon Islands government to the CLGF in 2004 to assist in post-conflict institutional rebuilding. A second additional project, in support of local government in Papua New Guinea through the Commonwealth Local Government Good Practice Scheme, was also added under a separate funding arrangement with the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). The principal funding partner is the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID), although AusAID has also made substantial contributions, and other support has been provided by a number of development partners.

Progress in achieving objectives

The Project is working toward six major ‘aspirational’ objectives, which are appraised below.

1. Appropriate, participatory, representative and responsive local government

Progress toward the goal of encouraging more responsive local government in the Pacific region is premised on an awareness of current circumstances of local government in the participating countries. Initial assessments found that little systematic evaluation of local government was available. Baseline research therefore became an important element of the project and scholars at the University of the South Pacific were invited into associate status with the project, and asked to undertake specific research tasks.⁸ These included a bibliography on local government and decentralization in the Pacific; case studies and other background documents for the 2007 Commonwealth Local Government Conference in Auckland; case studies on traditional governance and local government; a concept paper on intergovernmental relations; and, support of a review of local government legislation in Pacific Island states being undertaken by the UTS Centre for Local Government.

Other research was conducted in-house by project staff, with at least 14 scoping missions being planned or undertaken during 2005-2008, as well as two inventories. The scoping missions included capacity-building needs assessments, prospects for twinning programs,

⁸ This refers primarily to two institutions: the Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies in Development and Governance (PIAS-DG, renamed in 2009 the School of Governance and Development Studies) and the UTS Centre for Local Government at the University of Technology Sydney.

legislative review, policy review, library support, and the status of women in local government. Inventories were prepared to determine 'who is doing what' in local government, and to determine training needs in the region. The goal of improving understanding of and participation in local government was also pursued through engagement with civil society groups in presentations focused on voter and civic education, in one case using a local drama group. The project has also consistently advocated an expanded role for women in local government, and works toward this with UNIFEM's Pacific Project, FemLink Pacific, and other partners. In Fiji, a number of the Project's objectives were furthered through collaboration with, and considerable assistance to, the nascent Fiji Local Government Association. In 2007 for instance, the Association was funded to commission an investigation into the state of infrastructure construction and maintenance.

2. Intergovernmental relations and central government support for local government

The project faces many challenges in improving intergovernmental relations in the participating states. Much evidence suggests that central governments in the region have given too little attention to the cultivation of local government,⁹ except perhaps in Papua New Guinea where the robust nature of local communities has always checked the centralizing tendencies of national governments. For the remainder, the challenge of establishing adequate central government support remains.¹⁰ In the context of Fiji, the CLGF Pacific Project was instrumental in enabling the Fiji Local Government Association to establish a full-time secretariat and gave support to its developmental role. Apart from Fiji and Papua New Guinea, where local government associations have been established, local government bodies are not currently developed to the stage where such associations are feasible or in fact would add value.

⁹ See, e.g. the findings of Graham Hassall and F. Tipu (2008) 'Local Government in the Pacific Islands', *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, vol. 1 (May), p. 1024. See <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/cjlg/article/view/766/1026> on such matters as local government expenditure per capita, and the small scope of fiscal transfers from central government.

¹⁰ During the life of the project, local government on the island of Rarotonga (in the Cook Islands) has been disbanded and while local governments still exist in Fiji as an institution [the central government in Fiji does 'support' local government], they are not elected. Since the dismissal of elected councils, and the suspension of Fiji from the Commonwealth as a result of the 2006 military coup, project activity in Fiji has effectively ceased.

The Fiji Good Local Governance Campaign commenced in September 2005 with the goal of improving local level governance as "...a means for sustainable and inclusive urban development and management that leads to efficient and effective service delivery." The Campaign was coordinated through and housed at the Ministry of Local Government and Urban Development but overseen by a representative Steering Group and a coordinator. The campaign provided a platform through which various other CLGF activities could be communicated to local government staff and councillors, such as: dialogue on principles of good governance at new councillor orientation programmes; direct involvement in a Public/Private Partnerships Workshop and Local Elected Leadership (LEL) development; participation in drafting a concept note and support for a Good Urban Governance Index project; and, assistance with implementation of the Fiji government's Urban Policy Action Plan. Although there is no direct mention of local level government in the Pacific Plan initiated by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2005 to enhance regional collaboration, CLGF has worked consistently with the Forum Secretariat to ensure some level of engagement on local government issues. A Memorandum of Understanding between CLGF and PIFS formalising this working relationship was signed in 2007.

3. International and regional cooperation

The project has been successful in establishing international and regional cooperation on matters of local government in the Pacific. As noted earlier, funding for the Pacific Project is given largely by NZAID and AusAID. Technical assistance has been provided by Local Government New Zealand through such activities as a scoping mission to Fiji local councils in 2005, which resulted in a recommendation for the establishment of a full-time secretariat for the Association, and resulted also in practical support for local libraries in Fiji. Other project initiatives promoting international cooperation have included the roll-out in the Pacific of the Commonwealth Local Government Good Practice Scheme in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Samoa and Tuvalu, and the establishment of technical partnerships between local councils in those countries and Australian and New Zealand counterparts. The partnerships program for PNG and Australian councils, funded by AusAID, has now expanded into a large separate project. However, the establishment of enduring and effective linkages between Pacific urban local authorities and those in Australia and New Zealand has been more challenging than anticipated. More Pacific towns have sought twinning and other arrangements than the project has been able to facilitate, and, where arrangements have been put in place,

identifying and pursuing specific areas of effective skills transfer has proven difficult, given the differences in culture, expectations and the different stages of developmental need and interest.

4. Build capacity of local government institutions and structures to respond to rapid urbanisation, deliver better services and hence provide an enabling environment for economic and social development

Rapid urbanisation is one of the major risks to human security in Pacific societies in the coming decades, and the resource gaps facing Pacific urban authorities makes capacity development one of the most pressing issues. Although a training inventory was initiated at the outset of the project to identify training needs of local government (completed between 2000 and 2004), this inventory has not been given wide circulation. It was useful however in gap identification and generated some training programmes such as strategic planning.

One of the project's major successes has been in the field of local leadership development. A Regional Training of Trainers (ToT) was held in Fiji in March 2006 in collaboration with UN HABITAT and UNDP,¹¹ making use of a Locally-elected Leaders' (LEL) program developed by UN-Habitat. The 30 trainers from eight Pacific countries who completed this program proceeded to 'roll-out' leadership training in their respective countries. Although other training programs have been run, in such areas as basic asset and financial management and strategic planning, demand has continued to focus primarily on leadership training. By the fourth year of the project (2008), the TAP had approved no less than 99 activities, of which 81 were commenced and 31 completed. (Commonwealth Local Government Forum-Pacific Project 2008: 3). By mid-2009 approximately 600 locally elected leaders in the 9 project member countries had participated in LEL workshops. In a number of cases, however, training and other project activities have been delayed by situational uncertainties, by the scarcity of human resources, or by changes in priorities within participating countries. These challenges have been present in each year of the project, and were a topic of considerable consultation following the 2009 mid-term review.

¹¹ The program was conducted by facilitators from the Training and Capacity Building Branch of UN Habitat, Nairobi (Mr John Hogan and Ms Hawa Diallo), and supported by regional trainers who had previously undertaken the international ToT held in New Delhi in January (Mr Feue Tipu from Fiji, Dr Glynn Galo from Solomon Islands and Mr Russel Purai from PNG).

5. Promote effective management of urbanisation and good local governance

In general, local government entities in the Pacific face a range of critical issues whether rural or urban. These were well summarised in a report of a workshop for City and Town Managers in Papua New Guinea in May 2006:

Local governments in the Pacific region operate in a changing and uncertain social, political and economic environment. Challenges such as rapid urbanization, with its inherent increased management responsibilities, decentralization, high expectations from the citizens, resource constraints, service delivery and implementation gaps, good governance, citizen participation and community mobilization, remoteness, political volatility and effective working relationships with traditional structures all add to the strategic management and decision making responsibilities of local leaders. (Commonwealth Local Government Forum 2006)

The project has worked with a range of partners to convene development activities designed to increase capacities in urban administration.¹² These are: The Governance Program at USP was commissioned to assess the utility of Urban Governance Indicators through a pilot survey in Sigatoka and Lami in Fiji; in Papua New Guinea, the project worked with Papua New Guinea Urban Local Level Government Association (PNGULLGA), UN Habitat and the UNDP Pacific Centre to undertake pilot ward profiling in Kokopo; in Vanuatu, the Project supported the development of a corporate plan for Port Vila Municipality in early 2006 (a plan which was subsequently adopted and implemented) and success with this project resulted in a further initiative concerning planning and reform exercises in a number of additional provinces, notably Shefa, Tafea and Malampa; and, a workshop on Public-Private Partnerships held in Fiji in March 2006 in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and the Fiji Ministries of Public Enterprises and Local Government that attracted 55 representatives from central and local government and the private sector. The CLGF's participation in the World Urban Forum in 2007 also drew international attention to the urban issues in the Pacific.

The challenges facing Honiara City Council in Solomon Islands have been a particular focus of the efforts of the Regional Advisor. The council had been suspended in 2004, not too long after the country as a whole had experienced several years of instability. In the subsequent period, intense effort has gone into institutional strengthening, financial management, local planning, improvements to service delivery and staff development. A mid-term review of the Honiara project undertaken in September 2009 found that after a

¹² UN ESCAP, PIFS, UN Habitat.

slow start excellent progress was being made, particularly in the area of revenue generation where the council's own-source revenues have increased more than six-fold and it is now debt-free – a remarkable turnaround. Whatever the challenges on the ground, one of the Pacific project's successes has been its partnerships with other regional and intergovernmental bodies in convening significant regional conferences on urban development, including the second regional Pacific workshop on urban management (Commonwealth Local Government Forum, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific et al. 2007)

6. Ensure recommendations and outcomes of the [2004] regional symposium are implemented and monitored, and adequate capacity exists within CLGF to manage the project implementation

The Project 'Start-Up' Workshop, held in Suva on 30 November and 01 December 2005, provided the opportunity to plot the course of the project and ensure that it was well planned and embedded with regional stakeholders. Each participating country, with the exception of Vanuatu and including New Zealand and Australia, was represented at the workshop together with Project Partners, the Commonwealth Secretariat, CLGF London, PIAS-DG, PIFS, UNDP PSRC, UNDP ICT, UN ESCAP (EPOC), UN Habitat, Regional Rights and Resources Team (RRRT), Auckland University of Technology and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). Each participating country was requested to develop its own workplan to implement the recommendations of the 2004 Regional Symposium. Predictably, PNG and Fiji produced the most detailed workplans, whilst other member countries focussed on recommendations that were most relevant for them.

The workshop elaborated the membership and responsibilities of the Technical Advisory Panel.¹³ The responsibilities were:

- drive the project and set strategic direction
- approve the annual workplan
- establish a management framework (including delegations)
- receive progress reports on implementation and financial reports

¹³ There are two categories of TAP membership: (1) **Core (decision-makers)** - representatives from the identified partner organisations responsible for the project from each of the participating countries, plus LGNZ and LGMA; and (2) **Technical and Associate (advisors)** - representatives of key regional Project Partners – the USP's PIAS-DG (now the School of Government, Development and International Affairs, PIFS, UN Habitat, UN-EPOC, UNDP Pacific Centre, FSPI, Commonwealth Secretariat and CLGF London. NZAID, AusAID and any other development partner supporting the project.

- address any variations from the adopted plan
- work with the appointed specialist in monitoring of project activities and outcomes, and evaluation of the impacts of the project
- provide technical inputs where needed
- provide general oversight of the project.

An external monitoring and evaluation (M&E) specialist was engaged to support the development of the M&E framework, and later to be a member of the team to carry out a mid-term review.¹⁴

Discussion

From the present vantage point – towards the end of the first five-year plan of the CLGF's Pacific Project – the prevailing view on the part of project management, stakeholders, associates, and development partners appears to be that the project has been successfully established and seen beneficial early results. The immediate tasks, however, centre on ensuring that lessons from the start-up years are integrated into future practice. Key findings and recommendations of the mid term review (Peek and Sansom 2008) were:

- The project had made sound progress, was meeting a pressing need for better local governance, and should be expanded and extended beyond 2010.
- Project activities were generally appropriate but were spread across too many activities to retain strategic focus and should be reduced in number; also each country should have a rolling 3-year strategic plan for its activities linked to a rolling 3-year funding arrangement with NZAID.
- Project reporting (progress and financial) should be less detailed, more succinct and focussed on the targeted readers. The Technical Advisory Panel should be delegated more responsibility for financial control and decision making, in line with the OECD *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* and the PIFS *Pacific Aid Effectiveness Principles* on country and regional ownership and leadership.
- The partnership approach has placed pressure on the responsible agencies and points of contact within participating countries to find the time and resources to initiate, plan and implement project activities, resulting in delays and deferral of some activities.

¹⁴ Professor Graham Sansom, Director of the Centre for Local Government at the University of Technology, Sydney.

- Greater attention should be given to project communications to build a solid base of ongoing support and highlight achievements.
- The project requires a more strategic approach to local government issues in the region, through: clearer articulation of a regional agenda in addition to country-level programs; inclusion of heads of ministries at TAP meetings; support for a periodic meeting of Local Government Ministers; convening of a second Regional Symposium on Local Government (in February 2009); and, stronger advocacy for recognition of local government's role at heads of government meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum.
- The CLGF Pacific office needs to be strengthened with additional project staff and appointment of a senior Regional Director.
- These recommendations were discussed at length by TAP meetings in Apia in October 2008 and Nadi in March 2009, and this full consideration of the project's method of operation, together with appraisal of its successes and challenges, assisted all those involved to reassess how they should best engage with it.

Project activities have generated a range of knowledge projects which could potentially be used more intensively in planning future activities. These include among others:

- Literature review by Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies in Development and Governance (PIAS-DG) [now the School of Governance and Development Studies] University of the South Pacific.
- Proceedings of the 2004 Regional Symposium on Local Governance in the Pacific.
- Voter education in preparation for the elections in Vanuatu and Kiribati
- Assessment of Pacific local government Acts.
- A potential model for sub-national government in Tonga.
- A discussion paper on central/local government revenue sharing and general fiscal decentralisation.
- The formal submission to the Pacific Island Forum's Pacific Plan on the role of local government institutions in managing urbanisation and achievement of the goals of the Plan.
- An inventory of 'who is doing what' by regional agencies and development partners working in the governance, urban and sub-national sectors (UNDP Pacific Centre, UNDP Inter-Country Programme, UN ESCAP (EPOC), UN

Habitat, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Asian Development Bank and CLGF Pacific Project.

- Report of the Public/Private Partnership Preparedness workshop in Fiji in March 2006.
- Practice papers on central/local government fiscal arrangements, role of local government associations, gender in local government, urbanisation and local government, strategy in local government, amongst others.

Some of key themes for further consideration within the project include: indicators of urban development; assessing the impact of local-level leadership training, and further needs assessment of local level leadership; impact of climate change on local authorities in Pacific states; gender issues; scope for upgrading informal settlements; and, prospects for local government financing.

Political instability in the region remains one area of risk, and sensitivities about local government continue to exist in the region. In Fiji the military removed the democratically elected government by coup in December 2006, and in late 2008 also removed the elected councils of Fiji's cities and towns. As stated above, local governments still exist in Fiji as an institution, it is just that they are not elected. This step, which ran counter to the recommendations of a review of local government commissioned by the interim regime, prompted CLGF to issue a statement urging that elections for local government be reinstated at the earliest possible time (Commonwealth Local Government Forum 2009).

Amongst the many development assistance projects in the Pacific region at the current time, the CLGF Pacific Project has some important distinguishing features. Firstly, it is the only organization in the Pacific region with a dedicated focus on local level governance. Secondly, it works in partnership with participating countries without dictating the terms. Although this means that the project stands or falls on the basis of activities agreed and implemented by participating countries, it also provides potential for greater sustainable capacity development at local level than would occur through direct project implementation. It achieves a high level of buy-in from participating countries through their membership of the project's Technical Advisory Panel. To ensure constant improvement, it has an in-built monitoring and evaluation component. Full consideration of the project's mid-term review will lead to improvements in this aspect

of project administration. Participating countries know that they must report more responsively and in terms of project impact and learning. The evaluation of Local Elected Leadership training in Fiji adopted the methodology of 'Most Significant Change', with follow-up surveys and reflective discussions with participants to identify often small but nonetheless significant improvements in their own performance, and that of their local government bodies that have the potential over time to translate into more far-reaching change. That methodology seems to capture the essence of the Pacific project: it is deliberately focused at the grassroots, and although more attention will need to be given to the broader strategic and political framework, local participation and partnerships remain the heart of the enterprise.

In the context of progress already made and ongoing challenges in the Pacific noted above, commitment to the project remains strong, and it is steadily earning respect amongst both governmental and non-governmental bodies as a serious and credible effort to develop the capacity of local government across the region.

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