

Partnership in sector wide approaches

Hilary Tolley

University of Auckland
hc.tolley@auckland.ac.nz

Within the context of bilateral support to the education sector in Tonga and the Solomon Islands, this paper will explore how the discourse of 'partnership' has been interpreted and activated within the Sector wide approach (SWAp). In concentrating particularly on the relationship between the respective Ministries of Education and New Zealand's bilateral aid programme, as the 'lead' development partner in both countries, it seeks to explore how various partner relations have emerged. In addition to commenting on the parties' interests and motivation, it will conclude by discussing the extent to which these various aspects have impacted on educational development under the SWAp.

[Keywords: Sector wide approach (SWAp); Tonga; Solomon Islands; Partnership; Education]

Introduction

The word 'partnership' in development parlance is not new¹ but its usage since the 1990s has become so common and widely applied in development discourse that 'partnerships' are now given wide approbation as being central to development practice in the 21st century (Cassels, 1997; Foster, 2000; Brown et al., 2001 cited in Unwin, 2005). The notion of partnership is also used with such equanimity that its presence is taken for granted and the somewhat elastic concept has become generally accepted as fundamental in all fields of development (Unwin, 2005). Its real meaning, however, remains unclear and it is hard to pinpoint what it is about that assumes its value. What is it that makes it so different, and how can the rhetoric of partnership be translated into practical reality (Tomlinson, 2005)?

In the current development context, 'partnership' is advocated as a means to achieving social change and economic growth (Tomlinson, 2005), to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and as a means to ensuring 'better aid effectiveness'. Indeed the eighth MDG embraces a notion of a 'global development partnership', albeit the only one for which there are no quantitative targets to mark its 'success'. Within these global partnerships, the importance of building 'ownership' is identified as a key to achieving development goals and

¹ Concepts of partnerships for development first appeared in the Pearson Report (1969), and later in the Brandt Report (1980) and the DAC report on development cooperation (1996) (Tomlinson, 2005).

expectations; often described as putting the ‘partner’ in the driving seat. While this description presumes that the driver knows how to drive and where they are going, who is actually holding the map or pays for the petrol is rarely made explicit.

So, does the rhetorical value of partnership lie in the ‘collaborative advantage’ achieved by combining resources and expertise, by sharing ideas and good practice and by spreading the costs and risks (Tomlinson, 2005)? Here the idea of partnership is invoked as empowerment, and trades on the illusion of shared power and trust. Explicitly it ties partners together in a ‘good’ relationship of mutually-shared ambitions, projects, strategies and outcomes; hidden, however, is the more oft reality that risk is asymmetrically shared and donor expertise is valued over local experience (Robertson & Verger, 2008). If trust is lacking then presumably reliance will be placed more on external controls and the use of power, rather than shared meanings, thus creating an unequal power relationship (Tomlinson, 2005). As Tomlinson (2005, p.1170) points out: “The presentation of partnership as ‘good’, but unclear in its meaning, invites consideration of the question ‘good in what way, and for whom?’ ”. This introduces the notion that partnerships are never neutral. Power relations shape the boundaries of partnerships - what is possible within them, who may enter and what they bring with them (van de Weardt, 2008), as well as the agenda. Under the current global consensus for basic education in particular, global partnerships ostensibly promote a standardised set of norms, ideas and values, which surely, contradicts the very notion of local ‘ownership’.

In current development discourse, partnerships are often viewed as relational contracts, sold more as a means of reducing or eliminating inefficiency by replacing rivalry and competition with collaboration, harmonisation (particularly among donors) and learning. However, ‘relational contracting’ does not readily translate into symmetrical relations between partners which produce mutually beneficial outcomes; it is more likely to result in partnerships of ‘unequals’ in which tensions between partners persist (Grimshaw, Vincent, & Willmott, 2002).

Thus, it seems that partnerships can be trust-based, assuming a basic level of intent and cooperation from which it is possible to negotiate shared meanings. Alternatively they can be power-based where cooperative intent cannot be assumed, and inequalities will tend to be reinforced because the self-interest of more powerful stakeholders will inevitably prevail (Tomlinson, 2005). In analysing partnerships it is useful, therefore, to investigate the nature of the partnership construct applied by those involved in the implementation of the partnership (Tomlinson, 2005).

Sector Wide Approaches

Sector wide approaches (SWAs) have become the embodiment of the ‘new aid architecture’ and its embrace of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000), the Paris Declaration (2005) and the Accra Agenda for Action (2008). The adoption of sector wide approaches in education and health, in particular, has become synonymous with the partnership and ownership agendas, within which

donors have become known as ‘development partners’ and recipients as ‘partner governments’. Sector wide approaches were originally conceived as a ‘way of working’ in large African and Asian countries where there are a multitude of multilateral and bilateral donors as well as non-government and private bodies involved in a single sector. By integrating contributions from all development agencies within a national policy framework SWApS are seen to engender the holistic development of, for example, the national education system (Buchert, 2002). Hill (2002) makes the point, however, that they are solely a donor construct; a consequence more of donors’ need for greater opportunity to influence policy under the guise of local ownership, and to relieve recipient governments of the duplication and fragmentation of a project approach and a lack of coordination or communication among donors.

While there is no single definition of a SWAp, it is generally accepted that in its ideal form, SWApS can be described as,

... long term partnerships, involving government, civil society and donor agencies. Under the leadership of the national authorities, partners commit their resources to a collaborative program of work that includes the development of sectoral policies and strategies, institutional reform and capacity building. [In the case of education, t]he aim of these reforms is improvement in the quality and accessibility [of education]. These activities are underpinned by the preparation of mid-term resource projections and expenditure plans, and the establishment of management and financial systems (by both partner governments and donor agencies) for procurement, and the disbursement and accounting of funds. Implicit in the collaboration is the development of processes for partners to negotiate strategic and management issues, and monitoring and evaluation of progress against agreed criteria. (Cassels, 1997; Foster, 2000; Brown et al., 2001 cited in Hill, 2002, p.1728)

Embodied within this is a “vocabulary with moral overtones” (Hill, 2002, p.1729), one in which ‘partnership’ and ‘ownership’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘empowerment’ implicitly de-emphasises the asymmetry of power. Within this rhetoric, *assistance* becomes ‘influence’ and *conditionality* ‘mutual responsibility’, and in a world of partnership, with everyone involved, shared risk *hopes* for greater impact, but also diffuses the blame when things go wrong (Hill, 2002; Klees, 2002).

The Introduction of SWApS to the Pacific

It was not until recommendations for the restructuring of New Zealand’s overseas development assistance (ODA) were put into action in 2002, with the establishment of the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID), that the sector wide approach was introduced as a development tool in the Pacific region. Pulling New Zealand ODA strategy into line with its international declarations and commitments (e.g., Education For All and MDGs) and contemporary western development trends, NZAID’s first Education Policy focused heavily on supporting basic education and launched SWApS as the mechanism for its educational support and donor collaboration (NZAID, 2003).

With most educational aid to the Pacific provided through bilateral rather than multilateral channels², New Zealand's championing of the sector wide approach has increasingly influenced governments and regional donors alike. From its initial introduction in Solomon Islands in 2004, the approach is being now supported – to a greater or lesser extent - by all the major donors, including the Asia Development Bank, the European Union, World Bank and Australia, and is now *modus operandi* in an increasing number of countries³ in both education and health sectors.

To date, the literature surrounding SWAps stems from experiences in large African or Asian states with large ministries and many donors. Little has been written about the application of the approach in small isolated island countries with small populations and limited government capacity (both in terms of size and skills) and few donors. Academic research on the approach in the Pacific region is nascent (see Cassity, 2010; Coxon, Tolley, Fua & Nabobo-Baba, 2011; Negin, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c), with data stemming mainly from programme documents (e.g., NZAID, 2006), donor generated mid-term reviews of sector programmes (such as Coxon & Pedersen, 2010; Coxon & Tolley, 2010). This paper draws on the author's involvement in recent research carried out by Coxon et al. (2011), which critically analyses the sector wide approach in Solomon Islands and Tonga, to examine aspects of the development partnership between NZAID and each respective Ministry of Education.

Tonga and Solomon Islands as Case Studies

The independent⁴ research study that informs this paper (Coxon et al., 2011) drew on qualitative evaluative and comparative case study methodologies to examine the broad SWAp experiences of key education ministry and donor stakeholders in both contexts. An extensive literature review and interviews with key informants were undertaken in both study countries over a two year period, as well as with donor staff in New Zealand⁵. Due to the conditions of the research study's ethical approval, the identities of all informants are confidential.

Apart from being the two earliest examples of Pacific SWAps, these countries present a conspicuous contextual contrast that illustrates the extent of variance in development and educational contexts that occurs across the region. While both countries are archipelagos, requiring intricate geo-governance of small islands, Solomon Islands has five times the population of Tonga and comprises 992 islands scattered across 1.35m sq km of ocean. Although 90 per cent of Solomon Islanders are described as Melanesian, there is great cultural and linguistic

² It is acknowledged that the ADB is providing educational loans to Samoa and that Tonga has drawn down a US\$1m loan from the World Bank for education. The EU was involved in education in Solomon Islands but has since left the sector.

³ Including Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Samoa, Papua New Guinea and Kiribati.

⁴ This project was partly funded by a NZAID International Development Research Grant (IDRF) and the author gratefully acknowledges this support.

⁵ The author gratefully acknowledges the interest, time and commitment made to the project by all informants.

diversity between communities with 87 listed language groups⁶. Britain, the country's colonial administrator until 1978⁷, had done little to develop the country and infrastructure and provincial services to this day remain poor. Over 80 per cent of the population live rurally, often in communities of less than 200 people. The spread of Christianity from the mid nineteenth century was so extensive that nearly all Solomon Island communities are represented by at least one branch of Christian faith. Nowadays, the church plays a vital role in the provision of education, particularly at primary level.

The Kingdom of Tonga is politically rare having been under continuous monarchical rule for over 1000 years⁸. Polynesian by ethnicity, the majority of the population are Tongans and complex traditional, social stratifications, in which status and rank play powerful roles in formal and personal relationships, are still adhered to. The Christian faith also features strongly in everyday life and Tongan is the official language of the country, along with English. This cultural and linguistic homogeneity, plus the long-standing existence of a 'strong' centralised state has had significant educational effects (Coxon, 1988). Tonga has a long-standing tradition of providing virtually universal access to six years of compulsory, free primary education and reported adult literacy rates of close to 100 per cent. The missionary legacy has remained an important influence in the country's education system and for over a hundred years education in Tonga has been operated by two separate systems –government operated schools and the private church operated schools. Broadly, the Government of Tonga (GOT) focuses on the provision of primary education, with a general understanding that private church schools take the majority responsibility at secondary school level. Despite this tacit but generally workable agreement, there has long been a 'distant relationship' between government and the other educational providers (Coxon et al., 2011).

In comparison, Solomon Islands' education indicators are considerably lower: adult literacy levels are 69 per cent for men, 56 per cent for women. Primary school access is estimated at 80 per cent and primary completion (up to Year 6) is 60 per cent of initial enrolment; transition to junior secondary schooling is 31 per cent and enrolment in senior secondary, just 15 per cent. The most recent Human Development Index (UNDP, 2010) rates Solomon Islands 123rd of 169 countries; Tonga ranks 85th ⁹, highest for the Pacific region.

While each country has suffered significant unrest in recent times, the effects of the 'Tensions' between 1998 and 2003 left Solomon Islands essentially bankrupt and the central state in near collapse; extortion and corruption increased and the majority of key export industries collapsed. During this period, many donors and

⁶ English is the stated official language of instruction at school, although Pidgin (the lingua franca) is the commonly used medium of communication (Alamu, 2010).

⁷ Known as the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (1889-1978).

⁸ Tonga was nominally a British-protected state under a Treaty of Friendship (1900-1970) but retained its monarchical government.

⁹ It is noteworthy that Tonga's rating has fallen considerably since 2007 when it was rated 55th out of 177 countries.

international financial institutions (IFIs) disengaged, and for many Solomon Islanders there was widespread suffering and insecurity (AusAID, 2006). Following extensive regional consultation, an Australian-led regional intervention force, RAMSI (the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands), was deployed in July 2003 to restore law and order and re-establish other essential systems (MFAT, 2007; World Bank, 2005). As elaborated in the National Economic Recovery and Development Plan (NERDP): 2003-2005, education development (in particular affordable access and improved quality) was seen as a key component of Solomon Islands' broader economic recovery, social restoration and development strategy, and in urgent need of assistance. As part of the reconstruction process, the first Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2004-2006 was developed with three long term strategic goals: (i) to provide equitable access to quality basic education for all children; (ii) to provide access to community, technical, vocational, and tertiary education that will meet individual, regional and national needs for a knowledgeable, skilled, competent and complete people; and (iii) to manage resources in an efficient, effective and transparent manner (MEHRD, 2007b, p.13). The ESP 2004-2006 has since been revised and Solomon Islands is now guided by its Education Strategic Framework (ESF) 2007-2015, broadly consistent with the original direction of the ESP but more focused on medium to longer term high-level goals outcomes and objectives (MEHRD, 2007a).

Despite Tonga's strong and early investment in education and health, economic development was unable to keep pace with the needs of an increasing population. This resulted in considerable migration levels, an increasing dependency on aid, declines in public services, and growing youth unemployment. On entering its seventh strategic development plan (SDP7 2001-2003), Tonga recognised considerable inequalities within its social fabric, and the overarching focus of the SDP7 became improving the quality and standard of living for all Tongans. In 2002 Tonga's Ministry of Education Women and Culture (MEWAC) engaged in a consultative process to align the education sector with the demands of the 21st century and to meet the equality demands of the SDP7. In 2004, the Cabinet approved the Education Policy Framework (EPF) 2004 – 2019 with its three specific goals: (i) to improve equitable access and quality of universal basic education up to Year 8; (ii) to improve access and quality of post-basic education; and (iii) to improve the administration of education and training.

Historically, New Zealand has had a long-held relationship with both countries in educational matters and thus, with NZAID's championing of the sector wide approach, it is unsurprising that NZAID was closely involved in the development of educational SWAp in each country, and has remained closely engaged since. The next section examines how each SWAp developed. This is followed by an examination of the 'partnership' that formed between NZAID and each respective Ministry of Education. The quotations included in the section are drawn from the key stakeholder interviews described previously.

Constructing the SWAp Partnership

In efforts to align Pacific education initiatives with the global agenda, the first meeting of Education Ministers of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) in 2001 laid plans to establish a Pacific Basic Education Action Plan (PBEAP). The primary focus of this was to address issues arising from the region's progress towards the six educational goals of the Dakar World Education for All Framework for Action (PIFS, 2001a, 2001b). This move coincided with the review of New Zealand's aid strategy and the establishment of NZAID with its consequential shift in educational focus towards supporting basic education, and its spearheading of the sector wide approach as a means of supporting this shift.

At around the same time, Dr Derek Sikua returned to Solomon Islands to become the Permanent Secretary for Education (2003), having completed his doctoral studies at Waikato University in New Zealand. He held the strong belief that educational development in his country needed a new approach. With his close ties to New Zealand and its bilateral aid agency¹⁰, Dr Sikua was keen for the Ministry of Education and Human Development (MERHD) to adopt a sector wide approach, and accept New Zealand's and the European Commission's (EC) support to assist in improving the education system in Solomon Islands. The first phase of the Education Sector Investment and Reform Plan (ESIRP 2004-06) was launched in 2004 as a framework for the governance, implementation and monitoring of the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2004-06. The ESIRP Arrangement described the broad nature of the partnership between Solomon Island government, the EC¹¹ and NZAID to effectively operationalise the SWAp model. As an agency staffer explained, "it cemented shared understandings, commitments and agreed terms and conditions". .

Tonga's long history of strong educational commitment and achievement has often clashed with donor prerogatives and priorities leading, at times, to a suspicion of donors by Tonga's education authorities (Coxon et al., 2011). Against this backdrop, and a general perception that donors assume that "money without proper supervision ... will be mismanaged", a rocky foundation to any potential partnership agreement with donors was set. And the sector wide approach and partnership agreement Tonga entered into with New Zealand and the World Bank in 2005 (Coxon et al., 2011) in support of the Tonga Education Sector Programme (TESP¹²) was indeed rocky.

Due to complicated financial arrangements negotiated at the start of the SWAp, the World Bank became the lead donor under the 2006 Development Partners Harmonisation Protocol (DPHP) although NZAID was effectively the sole contributor for the implementation of the approach over the first five years. The

¹⁰ New Zealand is generally well-regarded in Solomon Islands as it was one of the few donors to remain engaged with the country throughout the period of the Tensions.

¹¹The EU was involved through its Stabex '99 funding obligation but proved an incongruous partner as its bureaucratic, procedural policies and decision making processes did not align with those of the government.

¹² The first phase of the EPF 2004-19, costed at NZ\$14m.

cumbersome arrangement, in which NZAID money was administered either through a World Bank Trust fund (using World Bank procedures) or as direct government to government budget support, undermined the acceptance of the TESP as a locally-led sector wide programme, with activities driven more by the funding arrangements rather than the strategic plan. Unwieldy processes, a lack of communication between donors and MEWAC, a mismatch of head office support, personnel clashes and delays due to national events led to a period of frosty relationships between MEWAC and NZAID which threatened to undermine the programme. Personnel changes at all levels have alleviated the situation and drew attention on both sides to the centrality of personal relationships for the make or break of initiatives. This was further accentuated by the extremely positive influence made by the team of national consultants recruited to work directly with school principals in the implementation of the school grants and school based management programme introduced under the TESP.

Similarly, in Solomon Islands, NZAID became the sole financial contributor within the SWAp as, due to bureaucratic constraints, the EC remained largely project-based, and gradually backed out of educational funding. Unlike SWAps undertaken in large African states (see Buchert, 2002), where donor coordination in particular is a major issue, there are considerably fewer players involved in educational development in these two Pacific countries. At the outset in each case, the government collaborated with NZAID and just one other multilateral donor agency which raises the question of whether or not a SWAp was the most appropriate approach for improving the quality of education in each country. In Solomon Islands there were few (if any) of the expected government processes in place (leading one interviewee to describe the initiation of the SWAp as “floated on a sea of hope”) and a great deal of energy has been spent centrally on raising capacity, developing processes and procedures, and writing policy, spearheaded by an embedded international Technical Advisor (TA)¹³. Tangible results have emerged in terms of policy and procedural output, cohesion and staff confidence within the Ministry, but much policy is still to be activated at provincial and school levels. In Tonga, ministerial development has been less pronounced, policy development has been weak and cohesion between divisions and across ministries remains a work in progress. Major strides have been made, however, in resource management through the school grants and school based management initiatives and, after a shaky start, in curriculum development.

Understanding ‘Partnership’

As the sector wide approaches got underway, the SWAp acronym generally became synonymous with rhetorical notions of the ‘new aid architecture’ - ‘ownership’ ‘partnership’, ‘harmonisation’ and ‘coordination’, in particular. International commitment to the 2005 Paris Declaration underscored the rhetoric, and donors worked with the regional PIFS to develop the 2007 Pacific

¹³ The TA has been funded by NZAID.

Partnership Principles which aim to provide a framework for all Pacific 'development partners' wishing to achieve 'shared goals'. Although both countries' education plans were inclusive of other sub-sectors, the 'shared goals' the sector wide approach focused upon tackled aspects of the 'basic education' global agenda (universal access and gender equity to quality primary/junior secondary education) as the priority, through the formulation and implementation of specific programmes. This was clearly in line with NZAID's shift in focus from tertiary to basic education, with 35 per cent of its Pacific budget earmarked for this area (NZAID, 2004).

While the majority of the stakeholders interviewed agreed that a SWAp was broadly something that aimed to engender the holistic development of the education system through a nationally developed policy framework, which integrated contributions from all development partners (Buchert, 2002), there were clear differences in notions of implementation and the nature of partnership between the various groups. From early donor perspectives, SWAps were generally regarded *as a way of working, a dynamic continuum* towards an ideal which stretched across all levels of the sector and beyond. Exactly what that ideal was, however, was unclear. As one agency staff put it, "sector-wide has to be across ministries but it also has to be sector deep involving all the institutions (churches, etc). Ideally it should be locally led." This caveat is interesting in that implies that donors do not assume that local leadership or capacity will necessarily be in place from the start.

From a country perspective, the sector wide approach was understood more in terms of a finance modality and harmonisation of donor activities and other stakeholders; ownership, particularly in Tonga, was assumed fully. As one country official explained, the SWAp is "an approach for donors to come together and put funding into one basket. The ministry develops its own programme and it allocates funding from the basket." This view was reinforced by another who explained, "... [i]deally it is trying to achieve a partnership – it should be a harmonising process. We draw up the plans and priorities; the donor role is to assist with support – financial and technical assistance. But the reality is different...".

This understanding of the fundamental component of a SWAp, as a common pool or basket of funding made available by agencies to national government, implies an understanding that common procedures for planning, budgeting, procurement and reporting are adopted. These are a means to both promote coherence between the work of government and donors and enable development partners to share mutual responsibility (Buchert, 2002). However, as Tonga experienced with the World Bank, and Solomon Islands with the EU, the vastly complicated and bureaucratic processes demanded by these agencies thwarted attempts to align government processes, especially in the early stages, and caused considerable tension. As a Tongan official lamented, "SWAps are supposed to use government processes but finances are complicated, especially if World Bank

is involved...”¹⁴. As Buchert (2002, p.78) similarly found, these cases “highlight the difficulties in overcoming structural obstacles conditioned by multiple actors internationally and nationally who are tied to different sets of interests and ideologies which set boundaries to any common efforts”.

For many, an idealised sector wide approach centred on all stakeholders working together as development partners and contributing across the whole sector, based on the sector programme. This required not only partnership between donors and government, but also partnerships between government and other local stakeholders, such as church and private education authorities, civil society etc., led by the ministry. As pointed out, “the whole sector includes early childhood education, basic education, secondary, technical and vocational education and training and higher education – and, ideally, non-formal and adult education.” In reality, however, partnerships between internal stakeholders have been less obvious, although there have been signs of church-government relations improving in Tonga. In addition to harmonising donor activities to national plans, NZAID’s mandate has been to build ministry capacities to better develop national plans and policies, as well as improve aid absorption methods and scale up efforts. In Solomon Islands in particular, NZAID has worked closely with the ministry and has been influential in moulding the development of the national and sub-sector policy. Being the primary financier, NZAID has assumed the role of lead donor in both countries¹⁵ and has established non-binding Partnership Principles declarations. These declarations have been signed by most of the participating donors and are aimed largely at improving coordination among international development agencies, primarily to avoid duplication of activities and to cushion the ministry from a multitude of individual donor delegations. Where donors’ political relations (e.g., the relationship between the oceanic countries and Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China) and political agendas are at odds with full participation in the SWAp, a variety of tactics have been applied to encourage inclusion rather than exclude donor participants, at least at an information dissemination level.

In terms of promoting country-led and country-owned development, contextual differences have had a profound effect on the degree that mutual and genuine partnerships manifested within each country. These influences are not only structural, in relation to the constraints of human and institutional factors, but also relate to the particular constellation of the different actors involved in the process (Buchert, 2002). In the case of Solomon Islands, little formal governmental infrastructure remained in the wake of the tensions. This created a considerable need for human resource and policy development that could potentially have undermined the establishment of genuine ownership and development partnership, based on mutual understanding and equality. On the contrary, in the longer term, MEHRD appears to have developed a strong sense

¹⁴ In Tonga the managerial arrangement with the World Bank was not only expensive (US\$200,000 to WB in fees) but also involved money being transferred through four currencies and five bank accounts (Coxon & Tolley, 2010).

¹⁵ In Tonga the World Bank was lead donor in name only. NZAID assumed the actual role.

of ownership, while the partnership between country and NZAID has been, and remains, strong and respectful. From the outset, this is likely to have been strengthened by Dr Sikua's visionary leadership within the Ministry and the cordial relationships he held with NZAID personnel on the ground, coupled with the fact that, as Prime Minister (2007-2010), he retained his commitment to education through the budget. Continued leadership in the form of the subsequent Permanent Secretary (and ex Director of Planning), along with central budget support and consistent donor support has led to considerable policy development and the implementation of a variety of human resource processes and procedures. There is no doubt that these developments have been spearheaded by the NZAID funded international sector advisor embedded within MEHRD for the last four years. However, rather than undermine local ownership of these policies and procedures, he has nurtured a culture of self-ownership within the ministry that was clearly demonstrated in the strong convictions portrayed by the presenters at the Education Sector Coordinating Committee meeting (ESCC) in November 2010. Its openness to external participation extends to its policy technical working groups (TWG) where all signatories to the PPD are invited to attend, participate and comment on policy development. While NZAID takes an active role in many of these TWGs, many other signatories remain unrepresented, despite invitation.

In Tonga, its long history of top-down management and strong national pride in the achievements of the national education system underpins a strong sense of Tongan ownership. For MEWAC, therefore, the establishment of the SWAp in 2004 was less about the need to promote ownership and develop central capacity, and more about the harmonisation of internal and external stakeholder activities. The SWAp's introduction, however, came amid turbulent political times and during a period when educational leadership was not particularly robust. With the Ministry divided into relatively discrete units, placing the 'seat' of the SWAp within the Policy and Planning Division was seen more as a donor-led political move, displaying a lack of trust in cross-ministry capability - indeed, it was later made indignantly clear by one government interviewee that "Tonga has sufficient expertise and didn't need expats". The result of this positioning was that the SWAp, and the TESP that accompanied it, was seen by many in the Ministry as just another 'planning project' creating a degree of disenchantment and disenfranchisement within other ministry divisions. Some would argue that TESP would have been better positioned within the Schools Division where impact on schools was the area more crucially sought. Such disconnects among big picture planners, government divisions and the constraints that the donors¹⁶ imposed on the funding, all negatively impacted on Tonga's initial hopes; one agency staffer perceived these as being based on the notion that "Christmas had come and suddenly there would be ... money to spend" (5b).

Any aspirations towards internal 'partnership' were hindered by the severe public service restructuring and redundancies in 2005, and ultimately the splitting of the

¹⁶ Although NZAID was effectively sole financial contributor, with part of the money being managed by a World Bank Trust Fund gave the WB some influence on processes.

education sector between the Ministry of Education, Women and Culture (MEWAC) and the Ministry of Training, Employment, Youth, & Sports (MoTEYS) in 2006. As indicated earlier, scattered leadership and delays caused by national events¹⁷ exacerbated programme delays. Donor frustrations with progress, head-office heavy-handedness, and a perceived lack of understanding of the local context, led to claims of interference and micro-management by the 'lead' donor and the fuelling of considerable partner disharmony. The appointment of an international TA (a Tongan national) as Sector Advisor, along with the recruitment of recently-redundant, experienced educationalists as national consultants¹⁸, finally addressed some of the most pressing local educational issues. Although institutional capacity in terms of processes and policy planning has remained weak, significant progress has been made in school based management and curriculum development. In 2011, the Sector Advisor was appointed as Minister for Education and various senior management changes within MEWAC occurred. These developments, along with a growing interest from other donors to participate in the sector wide approach, lay grounds for further progress in improving educational delivery, although it remains uncertain the extent to which 'new' partners could - or would - provide budgetary support and align with national procedures and reporting systems.

A sense of political resilience is now apparent in Solomon Islands and, as evidenced in the presentations made at the 2010 education sector meeting, there is a strong sense of local ownership and palpable confidence in the Permanent Secretary and her senior management team. As one ministry interviewee pointed out, "[m]ost of us are starting to drive in the second phase". Human resource development within the ministry has resulted in clearer lines of communication and managerial delegation, although frustration was voiced over capacity to follow through decisions and actually make things happen. The inclusive nature of the ESCC, to which invitations are sent out to a wide cross section of the sector (including other ministry and provincial government representatives, donors, trade unions and teachers), provides a valuable forum to disseminate and debate wider ministry plans and progress and strengthen collaboration. The range of donors attending was conspicuously poor at the 2010 meeting in November, however.

Was Partnership Achieved?

Discussions with agency staff and government officials were generally inclusive of the underlying principles and multiple dimensions for partnerships in education sector development. However, putting these ideals into practice has not been uniform. Perhaps due to the relative collapse of government procedures and visionary leadership, the Solomon Islands SWAp has been able to formulate, in a

¹⁷ These included the death of King Tāufa'āhau Tupou IV (10-09-06) and national riots (16-22 November 2006).

¹⁸ The public services redundancies led to the loss of a considerable number of highly effective and experienced educationalists from the sector, some of whom were contracted as national consultants under the TESP.

more inclusive manner, the underlying vision and plans for holistic national development within a context of ‘newness’ and hope, as opposed to the imposition of new ideals within a more hierarchical historical setting, as seen in Tonga. A strong expression of country-led development is evident in both countries while country-led coordination of the agencies has been less obvious. In the case of Tonga, partnerships deteriorated rather than grew, exemplifying the need for government leadership and a genuine preparedness for dialogue to negotiate and express a compromise of differential views in the formulation and implementation of the SWAp, as a coordinated programme approach rather than an imposed blueprint.

Diverse involvement at a personal level has proved critical to implementation in both countries. In Tonga, while relationships have at times been turbulent and detrimental to agency-government relations - “we have a say with the SWAp, but it all depends on personalities” - the positive engagement of the national consultants, drawn from a variety of backgrounds and expertise (ex-teachers, principals, and church authority officials), has strengthened internal relations and lines of communication between schools and government and within the ministry itself. It has “moved things quicker and avoided some problems”; and, as another national consultant explained, “building confidence in teachers and principals is good and [with local consultants] it is non-threatening - we are someone who can help them sort out their problems.”

In Solomon Islands, respectful, genial relations between in-country NZAID staff and MEHRD have forged obvious levels of trust and cooperation; with both sides listening, they have fostered communication between ministries, as well as encouraged ministry staff to take command of their programme. Indeed, the hopes expressed in an early comment made by a senior government official - “... the Ministry of Education is taking the lead and we hope donors will respond to this and not dictate to us. They need to let go.”- show signs of fruition. Comments from a focus group include:

Because of the SWAp most activities attached to the plan ... are financed. So we have moved faster in the last six years than ever before.

The SWAp is difficult in many aspects – you have to work harder and be more proactive, and you also need to report back to donors more than before. We now have to think along the line – and when we do something we much be smart.

The SWAp has given us the opportunity to know these things and we have progressed our achievements because of it.

In addition, the MEHRD monitoring departments invite, and are increasingly involving, officials from other MEHRD departments, related ministries, donors, NGOs (national and international) and other related stakeholders, to accompany them on their field visits to schools across the country. This enhances wider understanding of the challenges faced in delivering education to the chalk-face as well as developing individual relationships. The end of year ESCC is a further example of MEHRD actively attempting to engage the wider community, providing a valuable opportunity for stakeholders – including other ministry and

provincial government representatives, donors, trade unions and teachers - to come together and learn about and discuss new policies, proposals and activity implementation.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that solid, respectful and context-aware inter-personal relations are critical to the success of any development initiative in small Pacific island nations. Strong, confident national leadership and a receptive, informed donor body working according to a common agenda promotes trust in local ownership and provides an environment conducive for change to occur. However, although concentrating on a macro-economic and political framework enhances decision-making, policy development and human resource development at the top, it is easy to lose sight of the real point of the process - to improve education in schools - and to exclude critical actors in the education sector. In both countries Church education bodies play a fundamental and critical role in the provision of education and, in both SWAp cases, links between central government and these authorities are more incidental than explicit and defined.

It is significant to note that Tonga has tended to embrace working with schools over capacity and policy development at a central level, while Solomon Islands has concentrated more on the opposite, with evidence of critical mass emerging in terms of policy and human resource development and ownership. In the case of Tonga, undoubted progress has been made under the TESP but it is hard to see to what extent these developments have been achieved through government-agency 'partnership', in terms of shared ideas and expertise, negotiation and collaborative advantage, than purely a transfer of funding. With regards Solomon Islands, there appears to be consensus that the donor-government partnership has developed into trusting and collaborative relationship which is open to negotiation and collaboration, at a central level at least.

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