



SUPPORT FOR LEADERS & COALITIONS

BACKGROUND

A growing movement in international development recognises that developmental change is fundamentally political and that this has implications for the way that donors work. Donors are often best placed to play a facilitative rather than a direct role in bringing about development change and programs need to be politically smart, locally led and adaptive. The Australian funded Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) is one program attempting to 'think and work politically' through its support for developmental leaders (DL) and reform coalitions in the Pacific.

In late 2015, PLP commissioned research to capture how its experience in the Pacific fits with and contributes to wider international lessons and debates on leadership, thinking and working politically and 'doing development differently'. The research analysed PLP's findings from its support of four coalitions:

- Women in Shared Decision Making (WISDM), Vanuatu
- Tongan National Leadership Development Forum (TNLDF), Tonga
- Simbo for Change, Solomon Islands
- Green Growth Leaders Coalition, Pacific Regional Program

The research confirms that donor programs like PLP can play an important role in supporting existing reform coalitions and brokering new ones, and provides important examples from the Pacific region.

PLP AND COALITIONS

PLP is a regional initiative of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade that recognises the pivotal role of leadership in development. PLP builds, applies and shares knowledge on DL (i.e. individuals, organisations and other stakeholders working together on inclusive policy and institutional change for the public good.)

In supporting DL and reform coalitions, PLP has also sought to 'think and work politically'.

Key Points

- Reform coalitions and leaders can come in a variety of forms and work in numerous ways and still be fit for purpose.
- Investment is needed in long-term, genuine partnerships that put local leaders and coalitions in the driving seat.
- Program staff require a deep understanding of local contexts and political dynamics in order to find appropriate partners, support reforms, read opportunities and identify roadblocks.
- Programs working in innovative ways need to effectively communicate with donor agencies, demonstrate results and manage risk.
- Initiatives like PLP that think and work politically have an important role to play in complementing and enhancing more conventional aid programming at bilateral and regional levels.

PLP's experience demonstrates that donor-funded programs can play an important role in supporting developmental leaders and reform coalitions.

Four elements are key to PLP's approach:

- 1 PLP places strong emphasis on knowledge of local context and politics. Staff are almost entirely Pacific Islander and make extensive use of personal networks to obtain information and build relationships.
- 2 PLP staff strategically use local knowledge to identify potential partners and inform ways of working. PLP identifies groups and individuals through strong networks, rather than grant applications, and uses local knowledge to approach difficult issues sensitively.
- 3 PLP staff work formally and informally behind the scenes, keeping a low profile and allowing local actors to lead reforms. This is important in ensuring reforms are genuinely (and seen to be) locally led. This is facilitated by PLP's light footprint in country, with just one country representative.
- 4 PLP takes an open-ended, 'iterative' approach to developmental change and does not begin with pre-determined solutions. Six-monthly 'Reflection and Refocus' sessions, ongoing action research and in-built activity monitoring help PLP and coalitions learn, adapt and change course as needed.

LESSONS LEARNED

The coalitions and DL supported by PLP reveal a range of ways of working that challenge conventional wisdom about how development change happens and ways that donors can support it:

- *Leaders do not need formal authority to be effective*, with PLP-supported coalitions showing leaders may emerge from both the formal and informal spheres. In addition, leaders can wield both 'hard' or 'soft' power, with the latter especially important in the context of working with women leaders in the Pacific.
- *Coalitions can emerge organically or be proactively nurtured*. Donors can play a more proactive convening role in the emergence of new coalitions when necessary, as long as the reform is genuinely locally-led.
- *Coalitions do not necessarily have to be inclusive to be effective*. Coalitions that are quite exclusive in their membership can still achieve results, such as policy or legislative change. However, exclusive processes may not be able to achieve broader attitudinal changes that support implementation of policy or legislative reforms.
- *Coalition membership does not need to be fixed or formalised to be effective*, but rather can be fluid and evolving. This may be particularly important in the Pacific context given the small population size and the density and overlapping nature of networks.
- *Coalition membership need not be equal*. Coalitions need members with a range of different functions and some may be more essential than others. Often a small core group of people within the coalition may take responsibility for driving the process.
- *It is not always necessary for people to know they are part of a coalition*. It may not be necessary for all coalition members to be brought together as long as there is a central leader (or leadership group) coordinating the inputs of others towards achieving the coalition's objectives.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

PLP's experience demonstrates that donor-funded programs can play an important role in supporting DL and reform coalitions so long as there is a supportive donor environment. This requires internal champions within the donor agency advocating and making space for these approaches, close working relationships between the donor and implementing staff, flexible and long-term funding arrangements and a recognition that change trajectories and results are not easily predicted.

- *It is necessary to be pragmatic when deciding which leaders and coalitions to support*: Leaders and coalitions that can achieve developmental change may not adhere to all the pre-conceived ideals about effective governance. For example, developmental change can come from leaders who are assertive or domineering with a range of motivations. Coalitions may or may not be exclusive and may be loosely or highly structured.
- *For genuinely locally led development, focus on partnerships*: A partnership approach that is genuinely supportive of partners can help to get beyond transactional aid relationships. This is critical if we are to take seriously the recognition that developmental change is locally led.
- *It's not about the money – but it is about how the money can be spent*: Developmental change does not necessarily require large injections of donor funding, yet there is a need to be flexible in how money is spent. Meeting and travel costs can be a strategic use of funds to catalyse change through building and leveraging networks.
- *Identify staff who think and work politically and provide an enabling environment*: Thinking and working politically relies on staff (preferably long term) who have detailed local knowledge and are sensitive to how politics infuses day-to-day interactions. Recruitment procedures need to be set up to capture such skill sets. An enabling environment is also required for staff to use their skills, including devolved authority, risk tolerance and a culture of learning.
- *Find ways to monitor and communicate program ways of working*: Programs that work in innovative ways need to pay particular attention to effective communication and demonstrating results. Insightful and creative monitoring and evaluation is necessary to measure the performance of governance and leadership programs.
- *Be realistic about the risks involved in supporting developmental change and manage accordingly*: Change processes are, by their nature, unpredictable. Each leader or coalition supported should be understood as a 'small bet'. Not all bets will pay off – some change processes will fail and others will not be achieved within the preferred timeframes. Mechanisms such as co-location or joint programming/ management can help donors and programs to manage these risks.

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