

Building Trust in Government: Improving Public Management through Civic Engagement – BY Myrtle Palacio

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INTRODUCTION

Scope

This paper is limited to a narrative description of the Governance Awareness Tour, an initiative coordinated by the Office of Governance in January/February, 2007. My aim is to introduce the objectives of the tour, the methods of presentation employed, the efforts used to reach out to participants, and the overall receptivity of the participants to the tour and its message.

Studies on good governance and the state have spawned many topical areas and endeavours. These are primarily idealized view points on governance improvement and reasons for failure, very seldom a success; also definition of concepts and practical opinions on corruption, accountability and transparency, including bulleted “how to” pointers for individuals and organizations. In researching best practices to use as a guide for this project, I did not encounter information on the public sector actually engaging citizens in bringing awareness to good governance.

Because this project may be a first for this region, there is a need to share information about it for further refinement and duplication. The project underlines an emerging perspective in the area of governance, namely, the government coming to the citizenry—collaborating, enlightening, informing, and empowering on good governance principles.

Belize

Belize is geographically located in the Circum-Caribbean area. It is approximately 10,000 square miles; whose boundary on the east is the Caribbean Sea, west and south is Guatemala and on the north is Mexico. Belize attained political independence in September 1981, and its ethnically diverse population totals approximately 3000,000.

Two major political parties dominate electioneering and all attempts of emerging third parties and independent candidates have been unsuccessful. One political party was successful at the polls to form the government for over 30 years in the pre-independence era. The first change in government occurred in the first election after independence in 1984. Since then changes in government have been frequent, until 2003 when the same political party was voted back into power.

Tourism is emerging as the number one export earner closely followed by agriculture. Belize's primary exports are seafood food, sugar and banana. Some economic indicators for 2005 show a GDP growth rate of 3.3% and an unemployment rate of 11% (Central Statistical Office 2005).

The Public Service of Belize

Governed by the General Orders, the Belize Public Service implemented its first regulations in 1997, some 16 years after independence. While its actual population is still elusive, it is said that the Public Service is the largest employer, with 12,000 persons, inclusive of the military.

The Belize Public Service has gradually moved from the classically rigid career system to merge with the post system to make way for the recruitment of specialists to top management positions. There are three categories of public officers, namely, permanent established (PE), contract, and open vote (temporary). Although the Belize Constitution defines public office to mean "any office of emolument in the public service" (Sec. 131), only those holding PE posts are recognized by the Public Services Commission in terms of personnel administration. The other two categories are accountable to the respective Chief Executive Officers (CEOs).

Public administration reform was implemented in 1999 with a well thought out and widely consulted plan. Some accomplishments have been:

Introduction of the 9 hour per day public service

Introduction of the system of CEOs

Delegation of personnel administration powers to CEOs for their respective ministries

In addition, the year 2003 saw the introduction of a Governance Unit within the Ministry of National Development. The Unit through the guidance of a Commission was charged with being the leading advocate for governance improvement initiatives.

The Office of Governance

It is amidst this backdrop of citizens' demands and past reform and good governance endeavours that the Office of Governance was born in October 2005. Its birth was the outcome of recommendations and interventions for proficiency in the implementation of public administration reform endeavours and good governance initiatives. The Office of Governance is in itself a reform initiative. It is a new structure whose mandate includes leadership and oversight of public sector management. For greater efficiency and effectiveness, the Office of Governance brings together under one structure, governance improvement, public sector management and reform initiatives, human resource development and ICT/e-government.

THE PROJECT

Putting People First

The Office of Governance adopted the concept of the human capital as key to improving services to the Belizean public. The concept centers on viewing people as assets whose value can be enhanced through investment and treated as any other valuable asset. The project "Capacity

Building for Improved Governance and Public Sector Performance” aimed at improving overall efficiency and effectiveness of public sector management and operations. The sub-theme “Putting People First” targeted the general citizenry and leaders of non-state organizations via a series of governance awareness workshops. This governance awareness portion was to include the wider public as partners in the capacity building campaign.

Objectives

Six one-day workshops were conducted, one in each district town, starting with the southern districts as follows:

Punta Gorda, Dangriga, Belize City, Orange Walk, Corozal, San Ignacio

A seventh forum was conducted in the capital Belmopan which was more in the form of a conference.

The “Governance Awareness Tour” was an endeavour in citizen engagement, encouraged by the Prime Minister’s commitment to actively involve citizens and/or collaborate with organizations. It is also one of the strategic objectives of the Office of Governance as outlined in its Strategic and Operational Plans for 2006/2007 and 2007/2008. The objectives are:

Strengthen capacity of all levels in government and non-state actors to implement/advocate for policies that contribute to improved governance practices

Bring together all stakeholders/social partners and generate support for the sector and awareness for participation

Encourage interactive processes between state and non-state actors guided by the intent to improve awareness to good governance

Develop and implement an information and communication strategy for good governance and meaningful participation

Methodology

Target Audience and Advertisements

Firstly, a national survey was conducted to identify and document all social partners, particularly non-state organizations. These included the leaders of organizations and individuals as follows:

NGOs—people working together for a common good

Public Service—those working in various capacities on behalf of the public good

Civil Society—range of actors who participate in civic and community life

Ordinary Citizen—individuals who are not organizations

One outcome of the survey was the development of a database of organizations by function and district, which was used as the main source for inviting participants who are members of organizations.

A less structured technique was used to gather the names of individual leaders who are not members of groups or organizations. Snowball sampling, a technique in qualitative research was utilized. Initially, names were received from leaders of organizations, and these individuals recommended other individuals and so on. Some 49 names were so collected.

A colorful brochure heralding the event was developed. Its content included an itinerary for the tour, definition of concepts, overview of topics or course content and objectives.

The brochures and invitations were disseminated by e-mail and the postal service utilizing the database abovementioned. Some were hand delivered to those without postal addresses and e-mail. The brochure was also placed on the Office of Governance's website for wider circulation.

Lastly, a staff member with experience in community engagement was sensitized and made responsible for telephone follow-through with community organizations. In this way she involved leaders at the local level to decide on venue, identify someone to provide food and refreshments for the day and other logistical matters. This also helped to herald the events.

The Delivery

Along with the political will from the political directorate, the Office of Governance provided leadership in terms of networking ability, staff commitment, organization skills and depth in comprehending its customers' needs. Some funding was garnered from UNDP/UNICEF to secure the assistance and support of CARICAD. CARICAD provided a highly skilled, qualified and sensitive facilitator to guide the Office and its target audience throughout all the workshops.

The delivery strategy focused on a face-to-face approach, utilizing flash cards and writing boards as teaching aids. The method was traditional. Small group discussions helped to reinforce the concepts in their deliberations, thereby widening the involvement and empowerment of those present.

THE WORKSHOPS

The Content

The following topical areas were first formally presented by the facilitators:

What is Governance?

Spheres of governance

Governance and development

Governance and leadership

Whose Responsibility?

The public and private sector

Non-state organizations—Church, Union, NGO's

Media

How do we ensure good Governance?

Oversight agencies

Information sharing and participation

Framework for Governance

Mechanisms for communication

Legal Framework

The facilitator continuously solicited responses from the participants. She introduced six principles of good governance namely, Accountability, Transparency, Fairness, Decency, Efficiency, and Participation, in an animated manner utilizing flashcards. The animation featured a demonstration of each principle with a story and/or example that is relevant to the participants. Subsequently group discussion further reinforced the concepts and the representatives of each group demonstrated the groups' perception in various ways using skits and formal presentations.

The Participants

Each district in Belize shows a dominant ethnic group in its population, from the Mayans and Garifuna in the South to the Mestizos in the North and the Creoles in the East. So it was with the ethnic representation in all the workshops as generally each workshop was very much representative of the people living in the community.

Similarly the socio-economic circumstances also varied. In the southern border town of Punta Gorda, two participants were illiterate and three were university graduates. However the illiteracy was not a handicap, nor was it a source of discrimination, as one of the two illiterate participants lead one of the small group discussions and presented well on behalf of its members. This observation demonstrates the level of cohesion and tolerance which already existed in the communities, and was generally the case throughout.

Twenty five was the maximum number of participants targeted for attendance in each workshop. The target of twenty five and more was met in two of the seven communities and in two more averaged 80%. One community, San Ignacio in the Cayo District had the poorest attendance of 50%.

The participants therefore were the ordinary people, some of whom are leaders in their community. While they were not there to speak on behalf of their community, they were able to share experiences with each other.

Response

The immediate responses of participants varied from new experience to reinforced experience. Several were not aware of good governance principles but were familiar with three popular terms, namely, corruption, transparency and accountability, having heard mention of these primarily through the media. Most felt that transparency and accountability and in fact the whole governance responsibility, was that of politicians and the public sector only.

The major challenge was this great misconception of who is responsible in many of the workshops and the discussion stemmed around other organizations in the social sector, including

Political Parties and to the individual, such as the home and the Church as was the example of a few participants.

The other challenge was to demonstrate the depth of the effect of the informal framework for governance. Most participants felt strongly that principles and values such as honesty and trustworthiness were very important to them. It was the facilitator together with others who introduced examples of the flaw in the human being leading to “temptation” whose outcome may be corruption.

ANALYSIS AND LESSONS LEARNT

Analysis

The paper gave an overview of all the actors, those involved in the design and implementation and those who participated. The selection process was wide, transparent and very public. Such a representation of public service, NGOs, private sector and ordinary people all involved in the dialogue, all given a voice demonstrated a level of readiness or dynamism which is a key ingredient to strong citizen involvement.

A multiple method of advertising the workshop concretized the proactive engagement of Government to mobilize all interested parties. The telephones were generally used to invite the many who did not have e-mails, but specifically to be able to reach out and reassure the many who had questions or were outright skeptical.

The delivery was engaging and very effective. Having the participants actively involved. Utilizing the chalk/writing boards was surprisingly welcomed as a sort of “novelty” relative to the now more frequently used power point presentations. The facilitator was unusually sensitive to the varying people environment. It was the way she was able to quickly adapt and tailor her presentation to each local circumstance and the way she elicited responses to make participants want to participate. This was a tremendous strength of the Project.

Lessons Learnt

Meaningful citizen involvement and participation must stem from a position of knowing and understanding. Citizen involvement is an essential prerequisite in government transformation. The following were lessons learnt:

- Several NGO’s are inactive, so there is a need to encourage the revival of some of these organizations where possible
- The time of the workshop is during the normal work schedule and may not be conducive to some participants
- Workshops can be offered in the evenings and the topics condensed to accommodate a shorter time span
- Train a cadre of leaders as trainers for sustainability and buy-in

CONCLUSION

My thesis has stated that there is not too much happening where government introduces governance awareness to its citizens. It has also highlighted the methods used, the response of the participants and the communication strategy employed.

Where does all this fit within the realm of good governance in Belize and the Caribbean? Public Administration reform/transformation is not longer a novelty. However, success in governance improvement hinges on widespread and profound support and involvement of the citizens. This success is challenged by the impact of the continuous changes around us through – the impact of globalization, higher expectations from the citizenry, advances in information technology etc. Therefore, our governments need to continuously develop fundamentally new means of engaging citizens in the transformation process. The governance awareness tour is presently a new and possibly historical way of taking the government to the people. Furthermore, it brings awareness to governance, thereby ensuring that there is a clear understanding in order to achieve consensus and ownership.

For continuity, the Office of Governance will repeat the tour in this financial year. One outcome of the workshops through recommendations from the participants is to formulate a communication strategy. Presently, a communications strategy framework is being developed with plans for implementation shortly.