

Contributor: Nwasike Joan

Current Function: Head of Thematic Programmes, Commonwealth Secretariat, Pall Mall, London UK

Date: 2013/04/03

Subject: Making Public Governance Work in Small States for the Post-2015 Development Agenda

MAKING PUBLIC GOVERNANCE WORK IN SMALL STATES FOR THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

Introduction

This paper will highlight the governance architecture in small island developing states (SIDS) and demonstrate how it impacts on public governance and accountability. Among others, it will call on the international community to recognize that the governance architecture in small states reflects the constraints and priorities of the government. Hence, in order to derive optimum benefits from international assistance, efforts that seek to support governance institutions and public service capacity development in small states must begin with strengthening of the centre of government as well as other oversight agencies, particularly the legislature.

Background

The mixed experiences of success and failure that have come to characterize the actualization of the Millennium Development Goals underscores the increasing prominence of public governance mechanisms. In many ways, one could describe the gap between good and bad performers as the result of disparity in the quality of governance. According to the World Bank, governance is 'the traditions and institutions by which authority in

a country is exercised.’¹ These traditions and institutions are often framed in terms of democratic standards. Indeed, strong democratic institutions constitute the bedrock of good governance and by extension public governance as well. Governance, to a large extent, could also be viewed as the achievement of national goals through the use of democratic institutions by which authority is exercised and where adherence to the rule of law, human rights, and the rejection of corrupt practices are paramount. Nonetheless, in developing, fragile and small states, questions arise as to the extent to which democratic institutions can play a role in promoting accountability, efficiency and effectiveness in public governance. Various small states, including those in the Pacific and Caribbean, have attracted much praise for the presence of stable democratic institutions. In spite of this, these democratic institutions have largely failed to effectively deliver socio-economic goods more efficiently, fairly and transparently. This trend has made the issue of public governance in small states a matter of immense public concern. Hence, it is important for various international development initiatives, in reflecting on various programmes beyond 2015, to closely interrogate the issue of governance capacity in small states.

Governance Architecture in Small states

a. The Centre of Government

The governance architecture of any state depicts the extent to which resources are used to ensure that the goals and aspirations of governments are achieved. This is even more pronounced in

¹ D. Kaufman, A. Kraay and P. Xoido-Lobaton (1999). “Governance Matters” Policy Research Working Paper 2196, World Bank Institute, October

SIDS given the multiple development constraints which include issues of professional capacity of the public service due to limited skills and shortage of experienced staff. The governance models of small states, which place the Centre of Government (COG) at the epicenter of policy making and implementation, have emerged in response to these constraints. The COG in these states comprises the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), the Cabinet Office (CO), Ministry of Finance (MOF) and other line ministries. Usually the PMO is the core of the COG in the SIDS and is therefore the hub of coordination in these countries with the Cabinet office often subsumed into the PMO. Prime Ministers are forced to adopt an architecture that reflects the government’s priorities as they seek to work around limited professional skills, incomplete organization structures, systems and processes.

In most SIDS, the Prime Minister, in addition to the Finance Ministry, has responsibility for other portfolios. These multiple portfolios and, coupled with responsibility as Chair of Cabinet, invariably compromises the functions of cabinet. Hence, in many instances, cabinet advances particular programmes of the Prime Minister rather than perform its expected functions, which could compromise its capacity.

Table 1 below shows the ministerial functions of the Prime Minister in three SIDS (Dominica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada) of the Caribbean region.

TABLE 1. MINISTERIAL FUNCTIONS OF PRIME MINISTERS

Name of Country	Institutions of Centre of Government	Portfolios	Functions
Dominica	Prime Minister’s Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minister of Finance • Foreign Affairs • Information and Technology (ICT) 	Policy coordination and decision making on plans and projects; reviews status of projects; Government priority areas;

			Initiates and implement development partnerships.
	Cabinet Office	Fused with PMO	Provides the Secretariat for Cabinet; makes recommendations for senior appointments; Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister's Office and Permanent Secretary of Carib Affairs.
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	Prime Minister's Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minister of Finance and Planning • National Security • Grenadines Affairs • Legal Affairs • Air and Sea Ports • Electoral Matters • Telecoms. 	Policy coordination and decision making; reviews status of projects; identifies and funds priority areas for government; Initiate and implement development partnerships.
	Cabinet Office	Fused with PMO	Provides the Secretariat for the Cabinet Office; makes recommendation on senior appointments; Secretariat for Permanent Secretaries Board; and Permanent Secretary of the Prime Minister's Office.
	Line Ministries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Health Wellness and Environment • Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Rural Transformation 	Priority portfolios which set policy and provide advice in these areas.
St. Lucia	Prime Minister's Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minister of Finance (including International Financial Services) • Economic Affairs • Economic Planning and National Development. • Physical Development, Housing and Urban Renewal • Local Government and the Environment. 	Policy coordination and decision making on plans and projects; reviews status of projects; Government priority areas; Initiates and implement development partnerships.

	Cabinet Office	Fused with PMO	Permanent Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office; Take Cabinet minutes; makes recommendations for senior appointments-
--	----------------	----------------	--

Despite some notable challenges, the fused Cabinet Office, that includes the PM office allows for the sharing of limited financial, professional and system resources. By facilitating a fused cabinet office, there is mutual support and flexibility given to the Prime Minister and other leaders in his cabinet in order to contribute to the political agenda using a short planning cycle. This mutual support is in the form of qualified and professional staff available to service a group of portfolios and priority projects. In particular, since these states are highly indebted, the Prime Minister would want to ensure that there is value for money in the way funds are allocated and spent and therefore wants to have oversight and management of key priority projects and in so doing weakens the institutional structure of the Supreme Audit Institution/Auditor General's Office.

b. The Legislature

The prominence of centres of government in SIDS points to the need to strengthen oversight and public accountability institutions, especially Parliaments, assisted by public audit institutions (Supreme Audit Institutions). Legislative functions, such as lawmaking, oversight and representation, are critical in the pursuit of accountability in governance processes.

Parliaments in small states, although varying in size and function, are usually executive/cabinet-led where the executive is the majority in parliament and therefore controls both the executive and the parliamentary arms of government. There are some arguments which suggest that such arrangements in a country's

parliament allow the legislature to make decisions in a flexible and expeditious manner. This argument is positive and may work in some conditions, such as moments of crisis. However, the question that emerges with flexibility is; in whose interest are decisions being made? Indeed, the conventional wisdom that cautions against arbitrary power and discretionary action in the governance of nations holds true for SIDS as well. In many instances, cabinet decisions are not debated in the Parliament and executive decisions virtually bear the weight of legislation so there is, practically, no oversight. In effect government does not need the opposition to make policy². This issue is further elaborated by the limited number of parliamentary sessions, which average less than 50% of their expected sittings per year in some SIDS in the Caribbean region.³

For interventions post 2015 to be successful there is need for a deeper understanding of the context and the political and economic challenges and opportunities that gave rise to the governance architecture used in small states, rather than promote an idealized model of how public governance ought to work in all states. The above issues in small states merit more attention from the international community.

² Thomas B. 2007. Opposition Politics in Dominica: How Labour came to power. <http://www.cavehill.uwi.edu/bnccde> accessed 22/3/13

³ See Commonwealth Secretariat Working Paper: How Policy is made in eight States of the Caribbean, 2011.