The Strengthening Political Integrity and Stability Project is one of the high-profile projects that the Commonwealth Secretariat has helped to facilitate and execute throughout its member countries. With the help of the Commonwealth Pacific Governance Facility (CPGF), the project was begun in Solomon Islands in 2011. This article deals with the project’s initial implementation and early achievements, including the Solomon Islanders’ overwhelming support for reform and their recommendations for improving the country’s political system.

Objectives and expected impact of the project

The preparatory phase of the project commenced in August 2011 and ended in August 2012. Its aims were as follows:

- To identify and agree on the political integrity and instability issues that are contributing to the poor status of governance in Solomon Islands.
- To set up a nationwide consultation process to discuss with the people of Solomon Islands the issues identified, and to gauge their views as to how those issues should be addressed.
- To make firm recommendations to Cabinet on the best way to implement the consensuses developed by the people on the issues raised.
- To develop a comprehensive project design document (PDD) to consolidate the implementation of the recommendations approved by Cabinet.

The broader objectives of the project, when the PDD, is implemented are:

- To increase legitimacy of elected MPs (i.e. all MPs to be elected by a 50 per cent +1 majority of voters in a constituency) during elections.
- To exert the principle of free and fair elections effectively.
- To encourage and establish a political party system as an integral part of parliamentary democracy in Solomon Islands.
- To encourage political leaders to become effective leaders, and at the same time discourage corrupt and unethical conduct.
- To strengthen the capacity of integrity institutions to proactively assist leaders and to effectively hold them to account for their conduct.

While this project’s life is projected to be long, after only 12 months there are already signs of achievement; the most significant being the enormous public support for the project. As such, the recommendations currently with Cabinet for approval on ways to strengthen political integrity and stability are a true desire of the people of Solomon Islands.

Background

Solomon Islands is a resource-rich country, which if properly managed, would have greatly increased real per capita income over the last ten years. Thanks to the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission for Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in 2004, which brought an improvement to law and order as well as to some aspects of government machinery, the country’s economic performance has really begun to show its potential. Compared to many other Pacific Island countries, Solomon Islands has a lot more in its resource arsenal to make the economy buoyant and the people prosperous.

As recently as 2009, political integrity and stability had been singled out by the country’s leaders as the key elements of good governance that are necessary to provide an enabling environment for sustainable economic development. The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for Solomon Islands, published internationally by Transparency International, supports, or appears to have influenced, the government’s stance to date. In 2011, Solomon Islands was ranked 120 out of 183 countries surveyed, receiving a score of only 2.7 out of 10 (0 = Highly Corrupt and 10 = Very Clean). The CPI clearly authenticated the perception that the level of integrity on the part of the country’s leaders is low.
Low political integrity levels (lack of discipline, loyalty and honest behaviour) and political instability (frequent changes in the ruling government or prime minister) are intrinsically linked. In such an environment, MPs expect and are expected to keep changing allegiance in parliament, and often with financial motives. Between 2000 and 2011, Solomon Islands experienced the formation of eight different governments.

Recognising this problem, former Prime Minister Derek Sikua introduced a Constitutional Amendment Bill and the Political Party Integrity Bill for their first reading in 2010. Both bills were intended to:

- Enforce the compulsory registration of political parties.
- Give greater recognition and responsibilities to political parties.
- Restrict the frequency with which the motion of no confidence is moved in parliament.
- Reduce ‘party hopping’.

Neither bill had the support of MPs and were therefore defeated.

**Commitment of government to reform**

The government of former Prime Minister Danny Phillips (2010–2011) and the current government of Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo (2011–present) both agreed that political stability is crucial to the successful management of the country's social and economic affairs. Equally important is the need for MPs and aspiring MPs to have integrity and a culture of accountability and respect for the offices they hold and powers they exercise on behalf of the people.

The current and last two prime ministers have all been convinced that the achievement of political integrity is indispensable to the realisation and maintaining of political stability in the country.

**The role of the Commonwealth Pacific Governance Facility**

Considering a recent Political Party Integrity Bill to be insufficient, and recognising the need for consultation and the complexity of the task, in 2011 the then Prime Minister Danny Philips requested CPGF technical assistance. The following key actions were subsequently agreed:

- To set up a Cabinet task force to work closely with the CPGF Director and to make recommendations to the prime minister from time to time on actions that will help achieve political integrity and stability in the country. The task force will also oversee the implementation of the project, and facilitate robust national discussions on proposed actions to strengthen political integrity and stability.

- For the project to take a bi-partisan approach and for the prime minister to write to the leader of the opposition for his support and to be part of this initiative. This means that the opposition leader will be fully informed of any developments in the implementation of the project.

- That a nationwide consultation on integrity and stability issues be conducted so that the people of Solomon Islands are given a say in the way public leaders’ actions have affected them negatively and how these impacts can be remedied.

- For the Solomon Islands Government to show its commitment to the preparatory phase of the project by providing funding support. Up to SBD5.3 million from its own resources will be transferred directly to the Commonwealth Pacific Governance Facility (CPGF) to manage within a pool of funds also contributed by the British Government and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

These agreed recommendations were designed principally to strengthen Solomon Islands’ ownership of the project and to ensure that the solutions to strengthen political integrity and stability are people-driven; and the prime minister’s support triggered the CPGF’s substantive support work for the project. Terms of Reference for the Cabinet task force was developed; integrity issues in public life in Solomon Islands were researched; the consultation process was planned and scheduled; and Cabinet papers were developed by the project team with guidance by the Director. All of the above actions were necessary for the CPGF to provide effective advice and monitoring of the project.

Following a change of government in November 2011, the new and current Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo re-launched the project to confirm his Cabinet’s commitment to the goals and planned activities.

**The consultation process**

**Provincial consultation**

With the guidance of the Cabinet task force, the nationwide consultation commenced in November 2011. More than 480 national, provincial and community leaders representing the people of Solomon Islands formally participated in this consultation process. Many more provided their views/comments via direct/internet discussions. The participants represented different civil society groups, principally women, youth, traditional leaders and Church organisations. All provincial premiers, the Lord Mayor of Honiara City Council, the majority of members of provincial assemblies, Honiara City councillors, heads of departments of provincial governments, rural development workers, health workers and other senior officials also took part.
The consultation was designed to provide maximum opportunity for participants to comment on the issues identified. Each group was requested to present their report for comment, if any, by all participants. The average consultation period in each province was two days. All the provincial reports were used to formulate a Consolidated Report on the nationwide consultation process.

**The National Summit (16–19 July 2012)**

The National Summit on Political Integrity and Stability was organised primarily to allow delegates from all provinces and Honiara City to reflect on the draft Consolidated Report and to authenticate its accuracy. The Summit was well attended by premiers or deputy premiers and their delegates, the Lord Mayor of Honiara City, the prime minister, the Speaker of Parliament, the leader of the opposition, the judiciary, Cabinet Ministers and MPs, integrity institutions (Auditor General, Ombudsman, representative from the Leadership Code Commission), senior government officials, development partners and representatives of civil society organisations such as Transparency International (Solomon Islands), Solomon Islands Churches Association and ethnic minority groups.

All provincial and Honiara City delegates spoke in favour of the draft Consolidated Report and agreed that it was an accurate record of their views/positions expressed during their provincial consultation. In response the prime minister, when officially closing the Summit, pledged his unwavering commitment to implement the findings of the nationwide consultation. He also called for support and commitment from his fellow parliamentarians in order to fully implement the collective demands of the people.

**Recommendations to Cabinet**

The task force met to consider the consensuses of the people and unanimously agreed for the following recommendations to be made to Cabinet:

**(i) Electoral reform**

That the electoral system be changed from a first-past-the-post (FPTP) to an alternative voting system. This will guarantee that a candidate is only declared an MP when he or she has attained no less than 50 per cent plus 1 of valid ballots casted in his/her constituency.

**(ii) Establishment of a political party system**

That political parties be properly constituted by way of enacting the Political Party Integrity Bill. The Act is to spell out the requirements for the registration of a political party, the governance of political parties, obligation of political parties, the establishment of the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties, and the funding of political parties.

**(iii) Reforms of the Leadership Code (substance and operation)**

That the existing Leadership Code Act be strengthened to include good leadership principles/values or ethical standards expected by the Solomon Islanders from their leaders. There should be effective machinery in place to administer the Leadership Code Act, as well as the establishment of an Office of the Ethics Adviser.

**(iv) Establishment of an Integrity Commission**

That an Integrity Commission be established as an independent institution with its budget appropriated by parliament annually and not subject to control by any government department. The Commission is to comprise of the following offices:

1. The Leadership Code Commission
2. The Independent Office Against Corruption (ICAC)
3. The Office of the Registrar of Political Parties
4. The Office of the Ethics Adviser.

**(v) Specific reforms**

The task force recommended that the following processes and procedures were also in need of reform:

- Voter education
- Women in parliament
- Anti-defection measure
- Election of the prime minister
- Position of Leader of Independent MPs
- Operation of parliament
- All constituency funds
- Constituency grants
**Reflection**

The Commonwealth Secretariat, as a neutral, member-based intergovernmental organisation, is well suited to facilitate such a high-profile project where the issues to be resolved are at the heart of making good governance the mainstay of any member-government machinery system. The Strengthening Political Integrity and Stability Project accentuates the deepening of democratic values – one of the pillars of Commonwealth governance. With good planning, a whole-of-government/parliament approach, the securing of multi-donor support, and the support of the people, this highly sensitive project can help to reform governance. The success of the Solomon Islands project thus far affirms the appropriateness of the approach taken and the worthy role of the Commonwealth in implementing such a highly sensitive project.

**Mr Mose Saitala** is the newly appointed Director of the Commonwealth Pacific Governance Facility (CPGF). A Tuvaluan national, he has previously worked for the UNDP’s Governance Programme and regional organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

- Motion of no confidence
- Recall of an MP.

The Consolidated Report on the nationwide consultation process, with its firm, detailed recommendations, was submitted to the prime minister by the Chairman of the task force on 6 August 2012. A Cabinet Paper has also been prepared on the Report, in which Cabinet has been requested principally to:

- Endorse the Report.
- Endorse recommendations (i)–(v) above.
- Agree that during the implementation of each of the recommendations, Cabinet will be further requested to approve the finer details of implementation of that recommendation.
- Provide US$6million as seed funding for the full project implementation.

A comprehensive PDD will be developed to implement Cabinet decisions as soon as they are received by the task force and CPGF office.