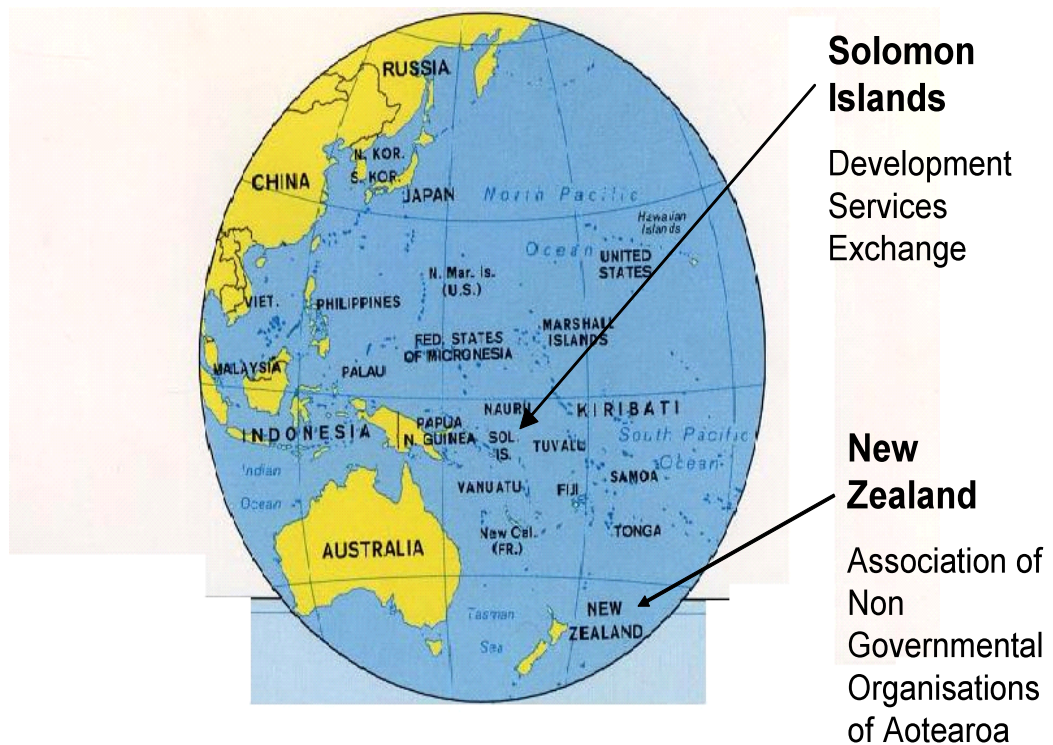


National Associations experiences in improving the terms of engagement with government: Pacific Experiences

**Prepared by
Stella Maebiru-Boki, Solomon Islands and Pat Hanley, New Zealand
For the
Affinity Group of National Associations,
CIVICUS World Alliance For Citizen Participation**

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INTRODUCTION:

The relationships between governments and Non Governmental Organisations (NGO's) are of critical concern as NGO's attempt to operate as independent agencies of community while at the same time frequently attempting to influence the actions and policies of governments in pursuit of a better society. There is therefore an inherent tension in these relationships which requires careful management on the part of NGO's if they are to advance the interests of their constituent communities.

In the Solomon Islands and in New Zealand managing the terms of engagement with governments are a core function of the respective national associations. In the Solomon Islands the national association is the *Development Services Exchange* (DSE) and its counterpart in New Zealand is the *Association of Non Governmental Organisations of Aotearoa* (ANGOA).

This paper sets out examples of how these two organisations have undertaken positive initiatives intended to improve the ability of the NGO sector to influence government policy. The strategies chosen are based on the need to improve relationships before you can hope to improve policy and influence. The paper focuses on the lessons

learned from these initiatives and attempts to identified critical success factors and potential obstacles to achieving the desired outcomes.

The observation has been made that:

“In little more than a year, over twenty countries globally have introduced restrictive regulations aimed at undermining civil society. These countries join more than 30 others with existing laws, policies and practices that stifle the work of civil society organizations.” (Safeguarding Civil Society In Politically Complex Environments;*International Center for Not-for-Profit Law*, December 15, 2006)

Despite this it is critical that National Associations strive to identify opportunities to build effective working relations with government in the interests of the sector and the wider community.

BACKGROUND

While New Zealand and the Solomon Islands are both Pacific nations, they in fact have very little in common. New Zealand is a very rich, well developed nation while the Solomon Islands struggles, as a poor, developing nation to meet the every day needs of its people.

New Zealand has a very stable government and relatively well ordered social relationships while the Solomon Islands has a very unstable government with ongoing civil strife, including armed conflict.

Despite the differences between these two countries the projects undertaken by the respective national associations appear to indicate a number of common themes which are important to keep in mind in terms of the roles of national associations, the importance of being strategic and focused and recognising what is realistic having regard to the nature of the government with whom you are trying to engage.

Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands is a South Pacific nation located just east of Papua New Guinea. It has a population of approximately 550,000 people living on 1000 islands and speaking 74 languages. The population is overwhelmingly Melanesian and Christian (97%).

It achieved independence from Great Britain in 1978. The British Monarch remains as head of state and the Solomon's are a member of the British Commonwealth. .

It has a unicameral Parliament (no upper house or senate) consisting of 50 Members elected on a first past the post system and not a proportional system. Political parties are generally weak contributing to unstable coalition governments and frequent changes of Prime Ministers and Cabinet Ministers.

Gross Domestic Product is approximately \$600 per person reflecting the low level of development of the Solomon's formal economy. However the GDP figure fails to recognise the importance of the traditional, subsistence, economy which is critical to much of the population, particularly out side the capital Honiara.

From 1998 there has been considerable civil strife, reports of corruption and the undermining of civil society. In 2002 the government was determined to be insolvent. In 2003 a Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was established led by Australia. This Mission remains in the Solomon's and includes military, police and public servants from Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific nations.

While civil strife in the Solomon's is typically described as "ethnic conflict" other observers particularly, those living in the Solomon's, describe the conflict as also reflecting conflict between those who wish to "modernise" the Solomon's economy versus those who are striving to retain and enhance the traditional economy.

The Solomon's has only one locally produced television station but it is not accessible to 98% of the population. Rates of literacy are high and as a consequence radio is the most important and influential form of media.

New Zealand

New Zealand is a South Pacific nation located some 2,000 KM from Australia. Its nearest neighbours are the Pacific nations of Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga. It has a population of approximately 4 million people of whom approximately 67% are of European extraction, 15% are Maori, the original inhabitants of the country and referred to as tangata whenua (people of the land). Approximately 7% of the population are from other Pacific nations and 9% are from Asia. English is spoken by nearly all people.

It is a rich nation with GDP being in the order of \$22,000 per person. It has a unicameral and unitary system of government. That is, it has a House of Representatives but no upper house and centralised government with no provinces or states. It is a well established and stable parliamentary democracy with relatively strong political parties of which 8 are currently represented in Parliament. The government is made up of a coalition of 4 parties.

The electoral system was reformed in the mid-nineties with the introduction of a Mixed Member Proportional system of elections. Any party receiving 5% of the popular vote is entitled to representation in the 120 member Parliament consistent with the percentage of the vote which it obtained. This has resulted in an increase in the number and variety of parties in Parliament and the necessity of having coalition government made up of several parties.

While there have, from time to time, been tensions and conflict between government and the NGO sector, the sector retains very high levels of public support which tends to restrict the extent to which the government can ignore or undermine the work of NGO's. Most recently however, (Oct. 2007) we have seen the government use anti-terrorism laws against activists resulting in arrests and imprisonment. All charges

against the activists were eventually dropped but there remains considerable concern within the NGO sector regarding the willingness of government to use extreme measures in a country with no history of terrorism or prolonged violent civil conflict. This also calls raises serious questions regarding the government's commitment to the relationship with the NGO sector and the limits of the sectors ability to influence government on a number of critical issues which may involve vigorous advocacy and public protest.

INITIATIVES

Solomon Islands Initiatives

In the Solomon Islands the relationship between government and NGOs has been unclear. NGOs felt that government did not recognize their roles that compliment each other's role and the government felt the same way.

DSE has 43 members at the moment and we are expecting up to 100+ once the Memorandum of Understanding is signed with the government. Our membership includes NGO's from all ethnic groups and in the future we will have members from all over the country.

Most of DSE members are in Honiara, the capital, and some are in the provinces. It is expected that there will be an increase of new members from the provinces in the future.

Getting information to them is very difficult. If done by post then it will take up to 2/3 weeks before getting the information. Telephone is very expensive for us, so that only means of communication is through emails and the radio programs. But email is not accessible by 29 % of our members, and 42 % have a dial up system which is very expensive and they can only access it once or twice every day.

Some regard advocacy as political action. Twice we have seen civil society in a very difficult position with the government to the point we were threatened by people calling into our office and told us to stop interfering in politics of the country. Even the PM said in the paper that we are behind other people's agendas. Also one of our international NGO members threatened to pull out from being our member.

Despite all the above Development Services Exchange took the following initiatives as positive steps to try to address these issues.

- **Radio program**

This radio program aims to increase public awareness of NGOs in the country. NGOs who are members of DSE utilized this program and it really subsidizes the more expensive modes of communication through the Telephone.

This year DSE aims to involve the relevant government sector to make radio programmes along with NGOs who are working in the same area. We hope that

the public and the government will see the importance of working together and understand how we can help each other.

The public sometimes think of NGOs as donors and this gives wrong perspective for villages, thus their expectation of working with NGOs is very high. This means that meaningful awareness among the public needs to be increased. Because 80% of the population are illiterate, it makes it difficult at times for NGOs to develop people's understanding of the NGO's position. Some of our MP's and the provincial governments especially did not recognise NGOs as their working partners rather as taking outside (foreign) goals to implement in their communities rather than supporting the communities with their issues/goals.

The radio program focuses on the broader sense rather than centralised focus, in that we aim for people to know the organisation's aims/objectives, areas they work, their mandates, what sort of work they are doing and how they can assist the communities. The radio program was run by DSE and we invite our members to participate in these programs. This radio program runs weekly. (note- currently we don't have any funding for that, so we aim to do it again for a longer period starting in July 2008).

- **Parliamentary Breakfast**

This breakfast was hosted by DSE members (Oxfam, Save the Children, ADRA) to actively bring decision makers to participate in promoting advocacy on HIV issues and to also influence the legislature around this issue and take the lead in the fight against HIV.

The parliamentary Breakfast is a good idea but it would be more practical if there are forums done with MPs, in my view, and the view of one of the organisations that participated in this Breakfast. Really the aim of advocating is not quite achieved as it seems to be about awareness and ad hoc advocacy.

- **Involving Government Ministry in implementation of activities**

DSE hosted a day forum to implement awareness of the Pacific Plan for NGOs. This forum aimed to equip NGOs with understanding and knowledge of what our country is doing in implementing the pillars of the Plan. The Ministry responsible for the Pacific Plan is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They were invited to bring the NGOs up to date on where the country is up to in implementing the plan. During the forum NGO's also raised their concerns over which issues should be prioritized and that implementation of these priorities needs to be carried out in a holistic way.

DSE, promotes collaboration between the government and CSOs. DSE coordinates meetings and consultations on behalf of CSOs with the government. These activities give DSE very high status in this informal partnership.

DSE, on behalf of the CSOs, invites Government to the launch of reports from the CSO sector, in order to encourage them to participate positively in addressing issues arising from the reports

- **Media Releases**

DSE issues press releases recommending that the government take positive steps on issues raised by CSOs. An example was the proposed re-arming of the police force. DSE remained concerned over the effect of the ethnic tensions on the economy and the security in the country when the Police Commissioner put out a press release stating that they were going to re-arm certain police units.

Consultations were held with CSOs and indirect protest action was taken by a few NGOs to fight against this decision. Meetings were held and the media was invited to report the issues to be discussed during the meeting. Following these activities in putting pressure on the government about the issue, the government finally decided not to re-arm the police. It was a success for DSE even though during these activities we faced threats and anger from the Government.

Advocating through the media at some point creates a negative relationship between the government and CSOs in the country. This is because the boundary lines are not clearly spelt out for both parties and misunderstanding arises among the parties and partners involved. Sometimes civil society turns out to be an unpopular sector due to the sensitive issues that are discussed and raised through the media.

- **MOU between the government and NGO's**

In order to clarify the boundary lines between the government and NGO's a Memorandum of Understanding has been developed between the government and NGO's.

A proposed MOU between the government and NGOs was discussed in the late 1990s. The MOU was finally signed in May last month. The purpose of the MOU is to prepare the framework for working in partnership between the government and NGOs. This framework will pave the way for MOUs to be developed in more technical terms to cater for partnerships with certain government departments, divisions and Ministries

New Zealand Initiatives:

New Zealand has a robust, well established voluntary and community sector with 97,000 organisations, if we include sports and recreation bodies. The sector contributes an estimated 5% to GDP.

In the mid nineties there was a lot of antagonism between the government and the NGO sector. The areas of greatest tension were in respect to funding arrangements following the introduction of contracts for services, and the lack of responsiveness of government to NGO's policy advocacy particularly in relation to the growth in poverty and unemployment.

Within the NGO sector there was little cohesion and collaboration. There was considerable "patch protection" which inhibited the ability of the sector to work together in a strategic manner to the benefit of the whole of the sector. This was further exacerbated by the government's introduction of competitive contracting which saw NGO's competing against each other and the private sector for government funding. It was in this environment that ANGOA was established.

Over the past eight years government has taken a keen interest in the affairs of the NGO sector. It has, among other things, initiated reviews of government-NGO relationships, provided support for volunteering, reformed charities legislation and the tax laws to encourage increased philanthropy.

At the same time, the NGO sector has developed a much more strategic approach to its relations with government based on the development of respectful relationships across the sector, the identification of key strategic issues and building a mandate for action around these issues and greatly improving communications within the sector particularly between the various interest groups and between national and local organisations.

The following describes three examples of this work in which ANGOA and its members have played a leading role.

- **COMVOICES:**

“This is a collaborative project of 19 NGO’s which provides a channel for the many different “voices” from the NGO sector to speak collectively on the importance of the sector and its importance to all New Zealanders” (Anna Kominik, Manager COMVOICES)

The project was initiated in 2005. It arose out of discussions held at the ANGOA AGM in 2004 when members expressed their frustration at the sector’s inability to counteract negative media publicity and statements in Parliament attacking individual NGO’s. For most organisations communicating with policy makers and the media is often low on the list of priorities compared to addressing their core functions. The means of addressing this problem was for organisations to work collaboratively to initiate, fund and manage a professional media team working on behalf of the sector rather than for individual organisations.

COMVOICES is operated by a private company Ideas Shop. This company had previously managed media and communications programmes for NGO’s around specific issues such as child poverty. It therefore had some knowledge of the NGO sector before undertaking this contract.

This media project has, as its objectives:

- Promotion of discussion and awareness of agreed sector messages;
- Providing leadership and coordination on issues about the sector as a whole;
- Profiling the sector through building a sense of identity within the sector and in the wider community and with government;
- Demonstrating the values of the NGO sector.

Key themes which have emerged through discussion among participating organisations include the value, scale and scope of the sector, funding and sustainability and maintaining the independence of the sector.

The activities of COMVOICES are determined by member groups developing a communications based work plan. The work plan includes both proactive and reactive media work, developing and running media workshops for NGO’s,

developing and maintaining collective links with policy makers and running special events such as the Parliamentary breakfasts.

The successes of this approach includes an increased profile for the sector in the media and among politicians, increased cooperation and collaboration among member organisations on a day-to day basis and some significant changes in government policy and legislation including improved taxation laws intended to encourage philanthropic giving. In addition there appears to be a clearer articulation of the key values of the sector which provides a strengthened ability to express the sectors concerns to the public, the media and government.

After three years a review of this project has been undertaken and areas of work identified for the future to make this initiative more effective. Further work is required to broaden participation in this project. It is hoped that more Maori organisations (tangata whenua) will become involved and that the project will be able to identify and advance issues of particular concern to this vital component of the NGO sector.

There is also under representation of organisations representing youth and older people. As a consequence inter-generational perspectives on issues are lacking.

COMVOices is not an established or formally constituted organisation. Rather it is seen as a movement driven by those organisations who choose to participate. It is essentially a community development model applied at the level of organisational relationships. There is as much emphasis on the process as the outcome. To be effective it requires that members are constantly involved in collective dialogue by which means strategies and actions are identified and pursued with the full support and enthusiasm of the collective. This can be a slow process but it builds trust and confidence.

The media company Ideas Shop is an enabler. It takes the groups priorities and turns them into practical actions. It is also constantly scanning the environment and feeding its observations into the group where it sees an opportunity to advance the sector's interests or where it sees potential threats that need to be addressed.

- **Parliamentary Breakfasts**

These are held at Parliament with Members of Parliament, and NGO representatives attending. There are generally 70 – 80 people at these functions which are now held 3-4 times a year. Public servants do not attend these functions as it appears to be regarded as a political activity and therefore not appropriate for officials to attend.

Several attempts were made in the past by ANGOA to initiate these events without success. The reason support was not forthcoming was due, it is suggested, to approaching only one or two MPs from the ruling party. When they declined to participate no further approaches were made.

Success was achieved when a small delegation of NGO leaders made a point of approaching MP's from all parties. When one MP agreed to host such an event other parties were then prepared to attend.

An MP from one of the political parties hosts the events. The Hosting duties are rotated among the parties. All expenses are met through Parliamentary services. This means that there are virtually no costs involved for NGO's.

All political parties are invited to attend. Of the eight parties now represented in parliament, MP's from 6 parties usually attend. Generally the function begins at 7:30 am. A lot of useful networking occurs prior, during and following the actual breakfast, and is perhaps the key purpose of this get together. The function includes a guest speaker usually an international visitor with expertise on a topical issue or the event will coincide with the release of a report or study of interest to the sector and Politian's as well. The presentation is followed by questions and answers.

The event is seen as non-partisan with the topic of the presentation being of general interest and not intended to be critical of any particular party including the government.

Frequently contact between an MP and an NGO at the breakfast will result in a follow up meeting to discuss a particular issue on which the MP is seeking more information or advice. It is in this way that relationships and understanding is advanced through this activity.

- **Political Party Presentations**

ANGOA has invited all political parties to present their party's policies affecting the NGO sector. These presentations occur at a Community Sector Roundtable Forum. The forum shares ideas rather than being an opportunity for criticising the parties or their policies except in a generally constructive manner. Attempts are made to keep the forum non-partisan. It is important, in our experience, not to try to play one party off against another to avoid being seen to be partisan.

The Party's presentation of their policies will generally occur well in advance of an election campaign when there may still be time to influence policy changes. Our experience is that MP's are often looking for policy ideas to take to their parties for possible inclusion in their political programme.

Perhaps, like the parliamentary breakfasts, the most useful aspect of these presentations is the opportunity it provides to follow-up on issues with the individual MP's or parties. The MP may direct an NGO to take up a particular issue with another MP in their party who has responsibility in the area of concern. Or the political party may not have developed policies specific to the interests of the NGO sector and is willing to consider incorporating additional policies identified by NGO leaders.

These events are just one part of an on-going process of relationship building across all parties. It provides ANGOA its members and other interested

organisations with opportunities to engage with MP's and their parties but it also opens up opportunities for NGO's who have attended the forum to meet MP's and also follow-up on an issue of particular interest to their organisation. In this way relationships with the politicians is broadened and NGO's get a better understanding of the most effective means of influencing the policies of these parties.

COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS

- **Assessing Government Willingness to Engage**

One basic issue for NGO's attempting to influence government policy is the degree of stability versus instability of the government of the day. If a government has a very solid electoral mandate and is under no threat until the next election it is very difficult for NGO's to exert influence unless the government is in full agreement with the proposed policy or action anyway. On the other hand if a government is extremely unstable it may be unwilling to listen to any perceived criticism or appearance of giving in to external pressure. They also may be quite paranoid and see NGO's essentially as a form of political opposition.

The ability to influence governments may be most opportune when there is a coalition or minority government and the government needs to be seen to be able to negotiate successfully around policy issues including with NGO's or else the issue may undermine the coalition or be picked up by the opposition as a popular cause. Also, when there is a coalition government there will be several parties in the government and therefore NGO's have more leverage, if one party is not interested another may be, and through this second party to the coalition the policy may be advanced.

On this basis we can construct a continuum from the out right antagonistic and stable government which is very resistant to any influence from the NGO sector on the one hand, to governments that need to work with the sector to retain power and which see the sector as able to address issues and opportunities more effectively than government.

The **first step** therefore, for National Associations may be to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the government of the day upon which to determine which strategies will be most effective on behalf of the sector. This may mean for example, that if the government is entirely resistant to influence by the sector, efforts might be better directed towards the media and public education. Where the government is supportive of the sector the National Association needs to maximise this opportunity and therefore choose an effective strategy focused on achievable outcomes that benefit the whole of the sector.

- **Assessing A National Association's mandate**

Secondly, National Associations need to be clear as to their mandate, what they can and cannot achieve on behalf of the sector. This mandate needs to be supported by members and the wider sector. From our experience, this mandate relates to the extent that the National Association is able to reflect the broad

interests of the sector over its own interests as an association or the interests of some groups rather than the NGO sector as a whole.

The National Association may be seen as really only representing the interests of the larger national NGO's and not in touch with the grass roots out in the smaller centres or rural areas. Or it may be seen to be more concerned with health and social services, for example, but not reflecting the interests of say environmental groups or sporting bodies or the arts all of which are part of the sector.

When engaging with politicians National Associations need to be mindful of where the votes lie. By tapping into sector wide issues which reflect the concerns of local constituencies **and** the wider sector the NA can serve the interests of elected officials by providing them with an issue to promote which serves their interests, while at the same time enhancing the position of the NGO sector overall. This requires is a very delicate weighing of strategies to ensure that such a strategy does not result in the NA being seen to be co-opted by the government of the day or a particular party.

- **Independent and Non Partisan**

It is important that National Associations are seen to be **non partisan**, able to work with all parties and are prepared to assist all parties to improve policies of interest or concern to the sector. This includes working with politicians who are not currently in power, as in the longer term these politicians may become allies of the sector at a time when they can influence government policies. It is also important to build effective working relationships with opposition politicians as they can at times generate negative publicity regarding the sector in an attempt to cause problems for the government. Seeing the government only in terms of the ruling party and ignoring the opposition parties is a serious mistake.

Recently in New Zealand opposition politicians attacked the government on the basis that they were incompetent because, the opposition claimed, some NGO's were misusing public funds for which the Minister was responsible. The issue received a lot of negative media attention notwithstanding the fact that no evidence was found of illegal or unauthorised expenditure by the NGO's . This attack by opposition politicians might have been avoided if they were better informed about the sector and its operations. This is a role that NA's can play if they have an effective mandate from the sector. However the danger is that by engaging with opposition parties they may be seen to be anti-government. Hence the need for a well understood and supported mandate from the broad sector and not just NA members. By engaging with all political parties the sector will also be able and be seen to be more independent.

- **Understanding the Political Process**

One of the roles that National Associations can play is to educate NGO's regarding the political process: how decisions actually get made, the machinery of government, distinctions between lobbying, advocacy and relationship building.

Where the National Association is located in the capital, there will generally be opportunities for informal contact with government and senior bureaucrats. These contacts are essential in relationship building and cannot be as effective outside the seat of government. This is a distinct advantage of National Associations which can be extremely useful to organisations not situated in the capital. However these kind of relationships can also be misinterpreted as being an attempt to curry favour on behalf of the NA if the broader sector does not appreciate the importance of these ongoing contacts. Some organisations will fly into the capital and meet with a Minister and then fly out again thinking they have succeeded in their aims. This is seldom an effective means of advocating or lobbying government. More can be achieved by building ongoing relationships, particularly with senior officials and using these contacts to build a case and identify the best way of presenting an issue to a Minister. Once the background work is done the National Association may facilitate dialogue between a particular NGO and government as well as assisting with follow-up which can be critical to ensuring that the issue is actually addressed.

Holding Parliamentary breakfast, attending government media events and public announcements are examples of opportunities for building these relationships.

Part of the role of COMVOices in New Zealand is to provide training to NGO's on how to use the media and developing a greater understanding of how government works.

- **Clarity of Roles**

In the case of the Solomon Islands the relationship between government and NGO's was described as unclear. NGO's felt that government did not recognise their roles. There also appeared to be confusion at the level of the community which may expect NGO's to act as donors and fund community initiatives rather than carrying out services in the community. Further, at times NGO's in the Solomon's were seen as imposing external (foreign) goals in the community.

In both New Zealand and in the Solomon's member organisation resigned or threatened to resign from their National Association where the NA was seen to be "too political" or even interfering in matters of a political nature.

Therefore, in both New Zealand and the Solomon's there was seen to be a need to be very clear as to the role of NGO's generally and the National Association in particular. This was the reason that in both countries it was felt that a broad media strategy was needed to increase the public's awareness of the work of NGO's. It was felt that increased public awareness would contribute to increased chances of influencing public policy.

There is often confusion over the roles of NGO's and National Associations regarding the provision of direct services to members, fundraising, communications and information roles as well advocacy. National Associations may have a mix of these roles and need to be clear particularly when engaging in advocacy as to whose interests are being served, why particular issues are given

priority and the basis upon which the National Association is engaging with government.

The importance of clarifying roles places a strong emphasis on the processes used as much as on the actions adopted or the outcomes that are sought. These processes must be open, participatory, transparent, timely and subject to ongoing review and assessment. All of this takes time and resources which are often in short supply but must nevertheless be given the highest priority.

CONCLUSION

National Associations are a relatively new development within the NGO sector. There is a great deal still to learn if the NA are to be effective in influencing government on behalf of its members, the wider NGO sector and the community generally.

However from our limited experience we would stress the need:

- to be non-partisan
- to be focused on the long term
- to develop strategies to educate the politicians, the community and our own NGO's
- to get the processes of decision making and consensus building right
- to develop effective communications strategies
- to recognise issues from the point of view of government
- to work to build collaboration and cooperation within the sector.

We look forward to sharing our experiences with other national Associations so that we can all do a better job in advancing the interests of the NGO sector for the benefit of our communities and society.

Contacts:

Pat Hanley
Chair Social & Civic Policy Institute
Lawler.hanley@slingshot.co.nz

Stella Maebiru-Boki
Development Services Exchange
teamleader@dse.org.sb

Note: For a useful, in depth discussion on this topic see:

IMPROVING THE NON-PROFIT, VOLUNTARY AND CHARITABLE
SECTOR'S EFFECTIVENESS IN INFLUENCING DECISIONS OF
GOVERNMENT

By Sean Moore, Partner / Public-Policy Advisor
Gowling Lafleur Henderson LLP

Produced for The Muttart Foundation. Suite 1150, Scotia Place 1
10060 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5J 3R8