DEVPOLICYBLOG

Lessons not too late for the learning: posting of the full WCWL report

By Tony Hughes
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In November 2012 members of the What Can We Learn project (for more background click here) held a three-day 'closed symposium' at USP, Suva. Thirty experienced practitioners—men and women, Pacific islanders and expatriates—met there to share and debate their accumulated insights from over a thousand person-years of engagement in Pacific islands social and economic development.

Volume 1 of the symposium report was released in December 2013 and Volume 2 has now been released, with both available here. Volume 2 presents the eleven papers commissioned from participants for the symposium, with rapporteurs' summaries of the ensuing discussions. The complete report illuminates what happens when large, wealthy nations and their political and commercial institutions engage with small, remote and superficially similar but ethnically and culturally distinct societies in the name of social and economic development. The symposium discussions provide the elements of a guide for avoiding the pitfalls that the participants' experience and observations defined.

Several themes pervaded the findings of WCWL and can be expected to shape any follow-up activities, as follows:

- Differences in cultural identity, political power structures, topography and resource endowment among PICs are such that the only significant national characteristics they share are insularity and remoteness—both now in the process of being redefined by economic globalisation and the revolution in telecommunications. These realities are only slowly being recognised by aid donors and international organisations.
- Partly as a consequence, institutional preconceptions among aid donors and multilateral banks about the steps ('reforms' is the label favoured by donors and banks alike) that PICs should undertake to improve their social and economic performance, have frequently hindered rather than helped the establishment of sustainable development processes;

- Abundant aid and multiple donors create twin moral hazards for PICs and donors: (1) easy access to external assistance undermines the political resolve needed to build domestic capacity to sustain essential public goods and services; (2) PIC governments can embark on poorly conceived or planned policies, safe in the knowledge that if things fall apart, the aid donors (for whatever reason) will always rally round to rescue a PIC in trouble ('We can't afford to have a failed state on our doorstep', PM John Howard, launching RAMSI). Can these risks to effective and sustainable PIC policy-making be overcome? Is it worth making the effort, given that on a global scale, permanent and comprehensive support for PICs (excluding PNG) is quite affordable?

- In a *Survival Kit for Practitioners*, an attitude of 'positive scepticism' is recommended: i.e. positive about the legitimate aims of governments, but cautious and asking serious questions about the ways and means proposed to achieve those aims. Such scepticism can appear to political leaders as disloyalty, resulting in the practitioner's reduced access to decision-makers. Similar problems in other countries have been nicely parodied in 'Yes, Minister' and 'The Hollow Men'. How can the political and technical bases of policy-making best be amalgamated in PICs?

It seems clear that development solutions for each PIC have to be individually worked out. Extreme importance then attaches to PICs' individual abilities to deploy their political, economic and diplomatic assets in pursuit of the health, wealth and happiness of their people, without losing their national identity and self-respect—all this while surrounded by an ocean that is already responding to global climate change in ways that are likely to mean re-assessment of the parameters of the development game.

With the posting of both volumes of the symposium report on the Devpolicy website here, attention can shift to devising practical and politically acceptable ways of applying lessons learned. The most striking of those lessons is that key people in the PICs already know what will have to be done to address their social and economic needs, and they know where to obtain whatever they need, in order to get where they want to be.

Identifying what stops PICs from doing what they know has to be done, and what incentives would cause them to take the necessary action, is envisaged as the focus for the next phase of WCWL.

Tony Hughes is Project Coordinator of the What Can We Learn (WCWL) project, which is funded by a group of donors active in assisting PICs' development, including Australia, New Zealand, UNDP, ESCAP and ADB. For more background on WCWL, click here.

About the author/s

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Tony Hughes is a freelance consultant in economic management. He lives in Solomon Islands and has worked in a number of Pacific island states. His current research concerns lessons from the experience of development practitioners who have been working in the Pacific in the last 20-30 years.