

Women's involvement in managing government development projects: A case study from Solomon Islands

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Background

In Solomon Islands, government development programmes comprise projects that reflect the government's development policies. They are activities that the government of the day wishes to achieve, and are implemented by respective government ministries and their stakeholders. These programmes aim to improve community livelihoods with regards to market access, healthcare services, education and information. A cross-sectoral approach to stakeholder engagement and project management is an important requirement for achieving government development programmes. The Solomon Islands National Development Strategy 2016–2035 (Solomon Islands Ministry of Development Planning and Aid Coordination 2016) emphasises inclusive partnership and the country's commitment to achieve national development outcomes.

Mainstreaming gender into government ministries has been a priority for Solomon Islands since 2010 (National Gender Equality and Women's Development [GEWD] Policy 2016–2020). A policy outcome in the GEWD 2016–2020 includes equal participation by both men and women in leadership, governance and decision-making. An expected outcome from gender mainstreaming is that women have equal opportunities with men to be recruited to all levels within government ministries, and participate in all roles, including managing government development projects.

Most socioeconomic literature talks about women being beneficiaries of any development project but not as leaders in progressing development (Gill et. al. 2009; Labuinao 2020). In fact, research has shown that, in government projects, women mainly perform administrative roles, including planning activities, organising events, facilitating meetings, performing procurement duties, project monitoring, evaluation and reporting. Lawani and Moore (2016) found that women tend to perform tasks that are perceived to be "less tough", and usually manage projects that are relatively small in scope and cost, and technology dependent.

The roles that women play in the formal sector with responsibilities for government development programme and projects are explored in this paper. The case is the Freshwater Fish Hatchery project in the Solomon Islands Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR). The involvement of women in project management is described, the benefits and challenges identified, and opportunities for improvements proposed.

Methodology

Literature review

A desktop review was performed whereby literature regarding women's participation in development projects was collected and reviewed. Recent policy documents were retrieved from online sources on topics regarding gender equality in Solomon Islands, as well as studies on women managing government projects.

Face-to-face interviews

A qualitative research approach was used to collect information for this article during May and June 2022 to reveal women's views on their participation in the MFMR Freshwater Fish Hatchery project. Internal interviews were setup with the officers of the Aquaculture Division, Project Management Division and Mekem Strong Solomon Island Fisheries team who are directly involved in the project. In total, 16 people were questioned independently; 9 were female officers, 4 were male officers and 3 were male contractors to the project. Interviews were done face to face using predetermined structured interviews. A narrative analysis was done on the primary data obtained in order to support literature reviews and observations from meeting minutes and other internal project documentation.

Freshwater fish hatchery project

MFMR has an ongoing development programme called Community Fisheries Livelihoods. This programme supports rural fishing communities through: 1) infrastructure development, 2) supplying and improving fishing technologies, and 3) providing information and advice to the public regarding community fisheries livelihoods. The MFMR Freshwater Fish Hatchery project aims at improving community livelihoods, supporting food security and economic growth in communities, and promoting commercial aquaculture development in the country (Anon 2018b). It also aims at becoming a research centre to support aspiring academic professionals in the area of fisheries and aquaculture development.

This is a national project and the first of its kind to be built and managed by the Solomon Islands Government. The hatchery is 32 km northwest of Honiara on Guadalcanal. The site is located along the coastline and was once known as the Aruligho International Centre for Living Aquaculture Resources Management site. It is jointly funded by the Solomon Islands Government and the New Zealand-funded

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Figure 1. Eastern view of 10 fishponds (25 m x 15 m) at the project site. © Sebastian Misiga



Figure 2. The water and offgrid solar installation facilities to power the centre. © Sebastian Misiga

Mekom Strong Solomon Islands Fisheries (MSSIF) programme, and has promoted an inclusive approach in all of its development stages. The Solomon Islands MFMR Aquaculture Division and Project Management Division, with support from the MSSIF team, are responsible for setting up the national aquaculture centre.

The project has four phases: initial phase, designing and planning, execution, and project closure. The execution phase has four development stages, the first of which will focus on infrastructure development. The third stage will train fish farmers and import genetically improved farmed tilapia (GIFT). The final phase is all about supplying male GIFT fingerlings to rural fish farmers across the country.

Currently, the project is in the execution phase, and the construction of an office building, hatchery building and fencing

of the project site are all taking place. In addition, 10 fishponds (25 m x 15 m) are being (Fig. 1) along with infrastructure for water and solar power supply (Fig. 2). Completion of supporting infrastructure for the national aquaculture centre includes the construction of staff residential homes (currently at the contracting stage), improvement of a post-entry quarantine facility, and landscaping (currently at the tender preparation stage). The hatchery is scheduled to be completed and operational by the first quarter of 2024.

Women's role and participation in the project

Five contractors are currently working at the project site, and all are overseen by the MFMR's Project Management team. Of the officers directly involved in the project, 73% are women who are permanent officers alongside their male colleagues and are dedicated to the development of the national



Figure 3 Signing the memorandum of understanding with landowners during the cultural ceremony, *chupu*. © Francis Pituvaka



Figure 4. Technical Working Group reviewing the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources gender strategy. © Nina Lean T. Harry

aquaculture centre. Both male and female officers play roles in supporting and managing the project's progression at both the administration level and in the technical fields. Two of the three project leads who are responsible for decision-making in the participating divisions are women.

Project initiation phase

In the project initiation phase between 2010 and 2016, decision-making was male dominated. The MFMR executive personnel and management team who were mainly male (75%) at that time, took up the active role in pursuing the tilapia initiative and establishing a national aquaculture centre in recognition of the government policies of its Corporate Plan: 2015–2018 and the Solomon Islands Democratic Coalition for Change government policy 2018. The aim was to develop and promote the country's aquaculture sector as an alternative option to offset the challenges faced by the capture fishery (Anon 2018b) and support livelihood and food security. With continuous interest by MFMR on the project, in 2017 the Cabinet approved the concept and proposal for

the national aquaculture centre, which was initially focused on Nile tilapia. Funding was allocated through the Solomon Islands Government development budget to MFMR for beginning the project and donor support was secured through MSSIF.

Design and planning phase

During this stage, discussions were mainly on defining the project's scope, creating plans and identifying and securing a suitable project site. A feasibility study was performed by the Pacific Community in 2018 to support MFMR in setting up the project (Pickering 2018). The proportion of women among the participating divisions at this time was 40% and most of the women were junior officers. Women participating in this phase engaged in planning the whole project and outlining phases of development that would follow. Women took the lead in organising meetings with selected stakeholders and a cultural ceremony called *chupu* with the land-owning group at the project site (Fig. 3). Women led awareness programmes in communities for the project's beneficiaries, and performed logistics; facilitated meetings, workshops and training sessions; and performed secretarial duties at the in-house committee meetings. Decision-making at this stage included women although they were fewer in number as confirmed by meeting records of members' attendance. Respondents felt that their contributions carried weight in decision-making.

Gender advocacy

Throughout the designing and planning phase, and as part of the initiation phase, gender advocacy in MFMR was widely promoted, and gender equality was extensively communicated across government ministries. As a result, in 2014, gender focal points were appointed in government ministries,



Figure 5. Women inspecting and verifying construction of steel rod bars of the fish ponds. © Nina Lean T. Harry



Figure 6. Women assessing the area for demolition works and site clearance. © Nina Lean T. Harry



Figure 7. An informal group discussions on the project progress at the project site. © Nina Lean T. Harry

including MFMR,² and a gender analysis of the fisheries sector in Solomon Islands was published (Anon 2018a). A call for the review of the outdated MFMR gender strategy 2011–2013 was announced, and so an internal gender technical working group was formed in 2021 to review the strategy (Fig. 4). In addition, officers attended gender training workshops led by the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs. MFMR also held gender training for its staff in 2021. With the increase gender advocacy within the MFMR and across government sectors, the ministry recognised the need and value for gender equality in its recruitment into the sector. From around 2017–2020 the MFMR underwent a restructure program in its recruitment that allowed the aquaculture unit and the project management unit to become divisions of their own. This paved the way for more females being recruited into the aquaculture and project management divisions. Consequently, between 2018 and 2020 women were recruited to hold leadership and senior positions in the project.

Execution phase

The project entered its current execution phase with women leading and actively participating in decision-making at the top level, organising events, performing secretarial and administrative duties, and being heavily involved in project procurement processes, including tendering and contracting for the construction of infrastructure.

The Project Management Division is 60% women, and is led by a female who is responsible for coordinating, facilitating and finalising the annual MFMR 5-year Medium Term Development Plan document. This is the annual submission of the government's Development Budget Bids to secure funds for the ongoing project. Division staff are also responsible for the monitoring, evaluation and reporting of the project's construction phases to MFMR (Figs. 5 and 6), contributing to resolving social issues raised by contractors on site, and providing recommendations for project advancement and appraisal (Fig. 7).

Male interviewees stated that women are respected for their role in administrative duties, their organisational skills, and in project procurement processes. Contractors also expressed that women officers worked well

² See: <http://www.mwycfa.gov.sb/what-we-do/gender-equality-women-s-development.html>

alongside the contractors at the project site, and handled project risk professionally. They were described as coordinating activities easily with core project beneficiaries who are mainly the adjacent communities. Male project colleagues also stated that women are easier to work with and are the backbone in moving the project forward. This latter statement is supported by Nyong and Archibong (2019), who stated that women are the heart of development in terms of having control over economic activities and are partners in the development of their nations.

Gender relationship and cultural sensitivity

Project staff work well together as a team. Interviews suggested that 80% of men agreed to support female colleagues on the team. The workload is shared equally among women and men in achieving goals within project timeframes. All women said that their male colleagues were supportive of women's leadership and decision-making with regards to the project. Information-sharing regarding the project's progress among female and male colleagues was excellent. For example, opinions and ideas on progressing the project are expressed and shared openly among project team members. Also, decision-making comes from a committee point of view, where women make up 7 out of 14 members.

When dealing with stakeholders from other line ministries and from other organisations, the majority of whom are male, female interviewees stated the same sentiments: that male workers were supportive of them with regards to project issues. They have confidence in having women taking the lead in project areas of concern. Again, having the same goal in developing the centre for a better future encourages participation, effective cooperation, and collaboration among genders and stakeholders.

At the same time, managing a government development project in a rural community requires an in-depth knowledge of local cultural and traditional values. As suggested by Lawani and Moore (2016) in their study, cultural factors must be considered when implementing project management in a developing country. The project's female officers familiarised themselves with the area's customs and cultures, and the approaches taken in managing the project considers the involvement of communities in the project's vicinity. Communities and landowner groups were consulted prior to the project's development. A local community survey was conducted to obtain views regarding the project setup. Consultations were held with respective community leaders as well as the Guadalcanal provincial office before beginning the project. A Guadalcanal cultural ceremony was held for the government, communities and landowners as a way for parties to cooperate and support the project, and to declare their intention to develop their land. Participants were offered an awareness programme to enhance their understanding of the development on their land. Ongoing formal and informal interactions with local communities strengthen the relationship between the government and local communities.

While both male and female officers have been involved in these activities, male colleagues are typically the ones to handle social issues when they are encountered. In those cases,

women became "back benches" because they lack confidence in dealing with disagreements because it is usually men who are instigators of any social unrest within the project. However, the presence of women in matters openly discussed usually calms the atmosphere and a heated discussion will conclude with favourable resolutions. This is consistent with the finding by Henderson and colleagues (2013) who reported that an advantage of women playing roles in managing projects is their "presence"; that is, the power of a female presence to diffuse arguments and conflicts.

Benefits

This study found that 100% of female interviewees benefited from being part of the Freshwater Fish Hatchery project. About 80% of these female officers are less than age 35 and, therefore, are career oriented and view the project as a learning avenue in building their careers. The project has also improved their project management skills, as well as their skills in monitoring and report writing. Women expressed satisfaction with broadening their knowledge and understanding the government's procurement processes with regards to the project. Boosting confidence in performing and facilitating meetings, training sessions and workshops were also some of the benefits shared by 50% of the interviewees. Another benefit identified was an enhanced relationship between stakeholders who are involved in project development, especially with the contracted companies on site. Participating in the project has strengthened their relationship with nearby communities and established easier communication channels with the people. Henderson et al. (2013) confirmed that women's strength in project management lies in their communication skills, collaboration and professional relationship building. Likewise, the project has helped to improve women's individual negotiation skills, which are needed to convince, influence and satisfy key project stakeholders.

Challenges

According to Henderson et al. (2013:765): "each project represents a new beginning in terms of a unique blend of requirements for, and constraints on, project scope and objectives, resources and cost and quality targets." This statement reflects the challenges confronted by the project team regardless of gender. Challenges such as managing contracts within a project timeframe, dealing with budget delays, budget constraints due to low cash flow and the need to chase approvals from multiple government ministries affects the achievement of project key performance indicators.

In addition, contractors sometimes fail to meet deadlines due to multiple reasons including poor financial management, delay of construction materials from suppliers due to COVID-19 restrictions, and bad weather. This places pressure on everyone and can affect individual work performance within MFMR.

Under such pressures female officers stated that managing a team of male-dominated companies can be a challenge whereby female officers sometimes feel insecure and lack confidence to communicate instructions to contractors on site. Lacking the technical knowledge in construction field

required women to consult the external infrastructure project manager and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development for matters relating to technical areas of building constructions and their processes. A literature review by Angela Paneque de la Torre (2020) supported the idea that managing projects is a male dominated profession because traditionally it focuses industries like construction which are traditionally male-dominated.

Conclusion

The MFMR Freshwater Fish Hatchery development project anticipates opening the national aquaculture centre by early 2024. Women on this project team have displayed active participation in enhancing and achieving the government's development policy priorities. It is evident that more awareness of gender equality objectives and mainstreaming in the public service and more equitable hiring practices in the MFMR have increased the number of women at all government levels. This has not only created new career opportunities for women but has also been a platform for women to prove that they are able to engage in all aspects of project management in a setting where this has not been the cultural norm. Along with having female leaders and role models, support from male colleagues has been instrumental in bringing about this shift within MFMR.

Furthermore, successful and sustainable development comes from the inclusive participation of all relevant stakeholders. Understanding the objectives of the project is an important step in progressing project development. Both women and men must learn to develop a high degree of professionalism in delivering project deliverables, and for women – in a traditionally male-dominated field – overcome the fear associated with managing projects. This will be assisted by familiarisation with government processes to properly implement the project on time, and within the scope and budget.

Active collaboration and communication with government stakeholders, contracted companies and beneficiaries advances the project development, and so more training sessions for both women and men to build their capacity in development projects is required. Government policies and strategies are to be gender sensitive in their implementation so as to support development projects in communities.

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