Innovation in Leadership Development in the Sri Lankan Public Sector

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Abstract

The Sri Lanka Leadership Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA) in partnership with Monash University are implementing an innovative programme designed as a key component of the reconstruction effort following the end of the civil war, with funding provided by AusAID, the Australian Government donor agency, as part of the international support Sri Lanka is now receiving. The programme aims to develop leadership skills amongst the nation’s 325 Divisional Secretaries. Twenty five Divisional Secretaries drawn from diverse areas throughout the country, including some which had been directly affected by the conflict, some by the 2004 tsunami and some by both, have participated in the pilot programme. The Divisional Secretaries include almost equal numbers of men and women.

After assembling for an initial session in Sri Lanka and each developing a draft work plan for a development project for their own Division, the group spent two weeks together in the Australian cities of Melbourne and Canberra. Each participant has been required to present and develop their project proposal, applying the knowledge and skills acquired from experts and field visits in Australia. These projects are completed on return to their Divisional headquarters and later reported at a meeting in Sri Lanka which marks the conclusion of the programme. However, the programme aims for improved leadership learned by participants to deliver benefits for Sri Lanka throughout their working lives.

(224 words)

Key words: governance; leadership; Sri Lanka; decentralisation.
Introduction
Efficient, effective functioning of public sector organisations is a key to any country’s rapid development. The programme reported in this paper aims to facilitate achievement of the key objective of developing a new management culture with strong leadership to carry out development activities. These include: better understanding of contemporary public management issues such as transparency and accountability; developing leadership skills to implement change management through development of analytical, interpersonal and communication skills; developing partnerships with stakeholders to deliver services to the public efficiently; increasing the ability of the public sector to rectify adverse effects of market operations; strengthening capacities of senior public officers in understanding the impacts of the macroeconomic environment; and adapting and adopting a new business culture underpinned by information technology. The programme aims to do this by engaging senior officials in management best practice and expertise in key Australian public sector organisations and higher education.

Sri Lanka Government Goals
Sri Lanka is a lower middle-income country with an average annual growth rate of 5 per cent during the last two decades. The countries overarching goal is speedy economic and social development with equitable distribution of benefits of development across society. The Government has adopted the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNPAN 2010) which are being given top priority by the Ministry of Finance and Planning. The MDGs have been the major driving force behind poverty alleviation and development in the world and public services have been identified as central to their achievement. Between 2002 and 2007, the UN Secretary-General produced five consecutive reports on the role of public administration in achieving the MDGs, with the aim of encouraging governments to ‘make it a priority to improve service access and delivery’ (United Nations, 2007: 17).

In Sri Lanka the need for this type of programme was intensified by the challenges posed by the effects of the 2004 Tsunami devastation, the Global Financial Crisis and the devastating civil war which ended in early 2010. Sri Lanka is going through a transition period both economically and politically due to the end of the civil war that lasted 26 years. The President of Sri Lanka, in his independence speech in February 2010, stressed the critical need to reconstruct devastated areas in the North and East and rehabilitate displaced people and, at the same time, steer the country towards overall economic growth and development.

However, the country currently faces a severe shortage of skilled and experienced leaders in the public sector who can formulate, implement and assess sound public policies to achieve this end. At the national level, Sri Lanka’s Minister for Public Administration has highlighted his government’s measures to provide efficient, people-friendly and rapid public services (Seneviratne, 2010).

To this end the Government of Sri Lanka intends to implement a “public sector driven development strategy”. Australia has entered into partnership to contribute to achieving that goal by helping to build a knowledgeable and result-oriented public sector leadership which will usher in a new management culture and steer the transformation process in the direction of the identified goals.
The Government of Sri Lanka has recognised advantages in the government sector forming partnerships with the private sector, civil society and NGOs to reconstruct the existing governance structure and strengthen the administrative leadership. Whilst all actors in the governance model have important roles, public sector leaders must take precedence over the other stakeholders as they have the sole constitutional authority to provide a secure legal and administrative framework, guidance and coordination rather. However, this does not require the public sector to be domineering towards non-state actors. This is similar to the approach previously described as integrated governance (Samaratunge & Coghill, 2010).

In this case, it is implemented through the Australian Leadership Awards - Fellowship (ALAF) programme, which aims to address the major obstacle to progress posed by a general lack of innovative and competent leaders to implement development goals. A major focus of the training programme is developing a generation of leaders who can train others by coaching and sharing knowledge inspiring others to become involved while upholding good governance practices. The specific goals include training for reconstruction by equipping senior civil servants with a sound knowledge of crisis management, humanitarian issues and infrastructure development in a context of contemporary public management.

The programme also aims to provide knowledge and experience of advanced methods in public management and the expertise required to cope with the challenges of leadership generally and in Sri Lanka specifically. It does this by exposing participants to active discussion and analysis of practices in Australia and engaging them critically with the directions espoused by practitioners.

The value of an integrated governance approach is demonstrated by Australia’s enviable record of implementing partnership arrangements between sectors. The programme develops participants’ knowledge and experience through exposure to Australian ‘best practice’ management in visits to carefully selected organisations. These provide concrete examples to participants of implementation challenges, lessons and successes.

Participants are expected to take the acquired knowledge through the training programme back to their organizations in Sri Lanka and utilise and transfer that knowledge through implementing priority programmes and acting as catalysts of change. The programme includes a follow-up workshop in Sri Lanka to review learning and progress and further promote knowledge transfer through critical analysis of experience and review of solutions to identified obstacles.

Participants are also expected to take on the role of mentors in their respective positions and guide their junior staff not only through advice but also by example. The programme will actively promote the role of leadership in achieving this outcome. This active promotion will focus strongly on the importance of equality initiatives in government service as a model for social development and modernisation.

SLIDA
SLIDA is Sri Lanka’s premier training organization for the development of knowledge and managerial skills in the public sector and it is developing a strong research and teaching partnership with Monash University. At the request of the Sri Lanka National Administrative Reforms Council (NARC), SLIDA has developed a high-level training programme to prepare senior public leaders to take up positions in the administration. The key modules proposed
under the NARC programme include: strategic planning and management; leadership for results and good governance; and policy formulation and implementation. The ALAF Programme integrates with the proposed NARC training program.

**Australia’s interests**

Sri Lanka is an important country to Australia for several reasons: a) asylum-seekers who were fleeing the civil war and later were fearful of its aftermath have been making their way to Australia by boat (referred to as “boat people”) and costing Australian taxpayers large sums but also causing considerable political reactions amongst some Australian voters concerned by the possibility of uncontrolled immigration by large numbers. It was estimated that about 8800 boat people (from all sources) could be processed in 2010-11 and re-settled at a cost of AUD80,000 per asylum seeker (The Age 12/05/2010); b) South Asia’s economies are growing rapidly and they present a wide spectrum of Australian trade and investment opportunities. Through fostering deeper and more extensive links with Sri Lanka Australia can develop a stronger presence in the region in matters of economy, trade and geopolitics. Sri Lanka, in addition, has a longstanding relationship with China and India, and it therefore offers a strategic location for Australia; c) Australia maintains its continuing attractiveness as a destination for skilled migration and Sri Lanka has ranked as one of the largest sources of skilled migration to Australia (ABS, 2007; DIAC, 2008, 2009). As a result, the Sri Lankan ‘diaspora’ has been extensive and Sri Lanka’s cultural links are important contributions to Australia’s development.

AusAid policy documents reflect Australia’s view that leadership for good governance is a critical element to facilitate social and economic development in aid recipient countries and assists the realisation of the MDGs by 2015.

**Monash University**

Monash University is Australia’s largest and most international university. Its Department of Management, through its specialist centres and its individual staff, provides a range of analysis and training programmes. It has mounted conferences and workshops covering the South Asian region which have brought together academics, consultants, and very senior government officials (including the then head of the Bangladesh Civil Service). It maintains a range of linkages with South Asian institutions and actively recruits students and academic staff from the region.

**SLIDA - Monash University Relationship**

One of the authors is Sri Lankan-born and maintains strong family, personal and professional links with the country. These relationships have facilitated a number of research partnerships between Monash University and SLIDA that have resulted in academic publications, workshops and seminars.

Under the ongoing research project “The Impact of Overseas Training Programmes on Human Capital Development and Administrative Capacity Building in South Asia”, data is being collected on 200 senior public servants with the collaboration of SLIDA. The findings of this research support the training programme by identifying strengths and weaknesses of foreign-funded programmes for senior public servants.
The Director of SLIDA, the Minister of Public Administration and Home Affairs and his Secretary discussed the proposal for the training program with the Australian High Commission to Sri Lanka. Monash University was identified as the provider due its strong research programme underpinning the understanding of key academic experts of the developmental, institutional and policy elements of the Sri Lankan public sector, its active ongoing links with SLIDA, and its international reputation in South Asian.

**Participants**

All the personnel nominated as participants are members of the Sri Lanka Administrative Service who have been in senior leadership positions for approximately 15 years. By virtue of their authority, they are in positions to effect changes in their work settings and to lead policy development in the next, critical phase of Sri Lanka’s recovery and reconstruction.

In the selection process: officers were invited to workshops on a seniority basis; they were evaluated by a panel of very senior public officers on the merits of a case analysis presentation; those who scored highest were selected Australian Leadership Awards Fellows.

The selected Fellows have been assessed as leaders able to effect changes in their work environments since they function at a strategic and policy development level at Divisional Secretariat level, interacting with central and provisional government. They are well placed to promote the agenda of change and improvement that the programme entails.

**Gender equity**

The Government of Sri Lanka supports and propagates the policy of gender equality in all its operations. In the recruitment process to the Sri Lanka Administrative Service equal opportunities for men and women are provided. In the merit-based selection process principles of gender equality were strictly adhered observed.

The Government of Sri Lanka promotes the policy of gender equality and actions are being taken to ensure integration of women’s empowerment and gender equality perspectives in development programme and project formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Gender mainstreaming and expansion of gender sensitisation programmes are being implemented through the Sri Lanka National Campaign for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

In terms of gender budget initiatives (GBIs), GBI perspective has been implemented in post-conflict reconstruction activities in the North and East regions of Sri Lanka. The problems faced arising from the civil war, especially the role of displaced women whose partners have died in the recent conflicts, is reflected in the programme module to sensitisie participants to gender issues.

In the proposed program, initiatives for promoting gender equality is an integral part of demonstrating best practice management in Australia, including discussion of legislative and institutional supports to combat discrimination and management planning to accommodate work-life balance and similar responsibilities. Through workshop-based discussion and specialist guidance, participants become more sensitive to the importance of initiating policy formulation for new projects in disaster management, reconstruction and rehabilitation, resettlement of displaced people, livelihood development and improving income support,
empowering destitute women in war-torn areas, modernisation of the public sector and establishing good governance generally.

**Programme**
The programme introduced the Divisional Secretaries to better practice through experts from national government (Commonwealth of Australia), sub-national government (State of Victoria) and local government (City of Monash - in metropolitan Melbourne) and academia. In several cases this included site visits to exemplary agencies. In every case, adult learning principles were applied and participants were encouraged to join in questioning, discussion and debate on the topic being presented.

*Development Project*
Each participant developed a workplan for their development project. These are actual projects in which it intended that participants “learn by doing”. The projects are listed in Table 1.

These projects were very diverse. Among the most surprising to the Australian hosts was the conflict between herds of wild elephants and villages close to jungle habitats in three of the participants’ Divisions. Among the innovative solutions proposed in these Divisions was the planting of agave to form a spiky natural barrier that elephants would not breach.

Other projects ranged from rehabilitating agricultural land which had reverted to jungle during the civil war to huge improvements in services through the introduction of information technology.
Table 1. ALAF-SLIDA Programme 2010 Divisional Development Projects

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Project</th>
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<tr>
<td>The wild elephant menace</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work plan for building thirty five houses and toilets in Pirappamaduwa Resettlement village</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rehabilitation of abandoned water tanks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Renovation of Agro-wells in Resettlement Area.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jungle clearing for resettlement of 04 Grama Niladhari (GN) Divisions (small villages).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict between elephants &amp; humans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction of houses for 20 underprivileged widows selected from villages in Mundel division</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upgrade the living standard of war and tsunami affected widows in Manmunai North Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improvement of community participation for Infrastructure development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minimizing the number of patients affected by dengi virus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrated rural development</td>
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<td>Human resource development of villagers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation of electronic work processes for issuing a birth, marriage and death certificates in Maharagama Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improvement of knowledge of the public about government provisions regarding lands tenure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identifying and addressing reasons for poverty in the Division</td>
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<td>Encroachment of state land</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishment of Divisional Disaster Monitoring Unit (DDMU )</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation of electronic work processes for issuing Revenue Certificates, Valuation Certificates etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Micro Credit System for the poverty alleviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Providing convenience service to SLIDA customers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improving transparency and quality of service delivery through introducing Land Information System</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishment of a customer information management system</td>
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<td>Selection procedure and work process of the decentralized budget projects conducting in the Division Secretariat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transfer policy for Divisional Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation of electronic work processes for issuing National Identity Cards in the Division</td>
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</table>

Each work plan: takes into account the services delivered by their organization; identifies an area of activity where change is necessary to deliver service to the public more effectively and efficiently; considers how he or she, as leader, would plan the desired change; develops and specifies the steps of the change proposed; determines how the change will be implemented; and finally decides how feedback will be obtained, steps monitored and the progress of change evaluated.

Each completed work plan: reflects what the participant learned from the programme in Australia, including presentations and site visits; provides the background to the Workplan including identifying the relevant Sri Lanka Government medium to long-term policy for development and specifying the problem; explains the governance affecting the problem, identifies the stakeholders in the specific problem and the nature of the stakeholders’ interests and roles in the effects of the problem and its resolution; outlines a realistic plan of action, including the strategy; describe the features of the participants own leadership role & style/s etc and relationship management. It identifies the resources required (financial, material, personnel, skills, other) to address the problem, the source/s of each resource and the steps taken to obtain those resources.
Each workplan describes what changes can realistically be expected by 2015 and the evaluation to be undertaken, including justifying the indicators (i.e. performance measures) to be applied.

Finally, it identifies how that workplan’s features can be applied to other problems affecting the participant’s Division.

**Conclusion**

The intended outcomes include: development of a sound theoretical knowledge in such areas as Effective Public Sector Leadership, Use of Creativity and Innovation in Public Policy, Integrated Governance and Challenges in Policy Development; case study analysis will have enabled participants to apply this knowledge in real world situations; presentations and workshops will have enable participants to enhance their communication skills, active listening skills, critical thinking, teamwork, problem solving and networking; workshop style sessions with guest speakers will have facilitated sharing of each other’s experiences, networking and knowledge of Australian practices; and industry visits in Canberra and Melbourne will have provided first-hand information to participants on how learned theories are applied as best practices in the real world and enabled them to form links with industry officials.

This pilot programme is a continuing “work in progress”. The two week programme in Australia is complete and participants returned to their Divisional Secretariats where each is completing the workplan for the development project.

Evaluation of the programme to date has been encouraging. However, the real test will be the quality of the completed workplans and the successful implementation of the development projects.
References: