

Dear Sir / Madam,

I was formerly an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development, an AusAID initiative. While the experience was generally great, my role was somewhat more disappointing. I was given the role of Contract Building Manager for the Samoa Police Headquarters.

There were two distinct challenges with this role.

First, my task of training locals to manage and maintain the building. While this was a rather 'noble' inclusion in the MoU between Australia and Samoa, the reality was, and will always be that developing countries do not have the means (resources, skills) to maintain a building or similar 'gift'. The MoU required the Samoan government to fund maintenance including the training (and salary) of a Building Manager. My first issue in-country was that the Ministry of Police did not have the money, resources or skills to provide building management. They were basically told to do something but not given the means to do it. Secondly, they had no desire to. It was not in Samoan culture to 'maintain' anything. In their culture, you used something until it broke, and then you either fixed it or replaced it. My first 3 months were an uphill battle of Australian culture vs. Samoan culture. And that wasn't fair to either culture, because the MoU was designed to give the Samoans a top quality building, but it lacked any real understanding of why they had never given themselves a top quality building in the past - they didn't have the capacity to (financially or resource wise).

So I add that aid projects in the future should consider the multifaceted aspects of cultural systems in project delivery. In other words, you can't give something and then expect it all to work out somehow. There has to be a period of handover and longer than in Australia, because it is introducing completely foreign concepts to local people, unlike in Australia where we have high standards and strong legislation to support us. And you can't use aid projects to change cultures either, to make locals / projects more Australian just because we have a great way of life and we want everyone else to have good things too. Samoans have an unfortunate way of saying yes to everyone, especially when they feel the person is above them in rank, or when they can get something out of it. More cultural understanding should have gone into the planning in this specific case, and not just a bunch of architects and engineers trying to come up with the best design to suit environmental conditions. There's a people element too, in all projects, not just buildings, and that part needs far more consideration than it is given at present in all aspects of providing Australian aid.

Why? Because the second challenge: money. I tell you sincerely that if this particular project had been managed better, they would not have wasted as much money and let the building contractor walk all over them. The person who managed the project at AusAID, as far as I could tell, had no construction experience, only program experience (and left once the building was built) - and therefore too much reliance was given to the external consultants. The external consultants (who I directly worked for), were not passing my feedback about the issues to AusAID because their interest was to have a successful project, and to look good in the hope of obtaining future AusAID projects. Nothing against them, but that's how private enterprise works. It's up to the government to have the right people in place to manage the consultants and

contractors it hires, to ensure that the Australian taxpayers get their value for money out of aid projects and programs. The project also used the wrong type of contract, the building was delivered late, and the builder was paid the 'bond' prior to works being completed. Blunder after blunder occurred because no-one cared much or understood how to manage the project on the Australian Government's end.

It could have cost a measly \$20,000 AUD to put in place a properly trained, salaried local as Building Manager for 5 years, which could have been added to the MoU. Australia spent \$13 million on this project, but couldn't even plan for the maintenance? Where's the value for money in that? Instead, it cost about \$30,000 to send me over as an AYAD for one year to sort out all the building issues, and supposedly train someone up. I had no resources, the Ministry of Police kept throwing up challenges like they didn't have someone to train up so I should nominate who they should fire. I ended up using my office/expenses allowance to buy the Ministry simple things like brooms, mops, and cleaning products for them to use. Is this really how future investments in capacity building are going to be run? On the backs of volunteers, with the only interest in getting a tangible outcome so the Minister can have his picture in the paper?

For me, it was not just my project that was like this - I visited Tonga also and spoke to Tongan and Samoan AYADs and found the same thing was happening to them (lack of information, difficulty with projects because it was culturally insensitive, wasted dollars not to mention lack of support). I even tried to talk to Bob McMullan when he visited Samoa about this, but all he could say it that this was an administrative issue. Ensuring Australians get the best value for money in aid provision is far more than administrative. Furthermore, if real savings could be achieved by not wasting money, tightening up procedures, then those aid dollars might actually go a lot further and create more projects, more jobs, and more capacity driven development. What I want to see is an efficient aid system that works, not the current hodge-podge where buildings are built but no planning goes into the maintenance / future of the building (maintenance funding should be mandatory as part of construction projects); where one program manager in one country doesn't speak to his/her peers; where AusAID frontline project/program managers do not get the specific training - in the best means of procurement, contract management, project delivery and stakeholder management (to keep contractor, both Aussie and locals honest and on track) - for the projects that they are working on; and where skills are not being transferred in AusAID, such as when one person on a project leaves, someone else of equal training/capacity is able to step in and keep projects / programs on track, to ensure best value for money to the Australian public.

In summary, better cultural exchange in capacity building (not just senior managers but also from those who actually use the projects, buildings, programs); and better utilisation of aid funds to deliver projects programs.

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Kind regards,
Jaime Serpanchy