

Case Study



FCM ICMD



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Development of Municipal Agendas in Guyana: Engaging Communities in a Collaborative Approach to Local Government Planning.

Summary

In early 2004, six municipalities in Guyana, with support from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' International Centre for Municipal Development (FCM), concluded a process to develop their Municipal Agendas. The Municipal Agenda Process (MAP) was the first major initiative undertaken in the five-year FCM Municipal Governance and Management Programme (MGMP), which is financially supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The MGMP goal is "to strengthen local governance and management for a more effective delivery of services in participating municipalities".

A Municipal Agenda (MA) is a planning document that sets out priorities and projects for a municipality to pursue over a given timeframe. The MAs were developed in a collaborative and highly participatory process, in which municipal councillors, personnel and community stakeholders were fully engaged. In each municipality, a MAP team, comprising municipal government and community leaders, guided the process to its conclusion, with full support from MGMP Guyana personnel. International and local technical experts supported the MAP teams and project development. In the concluding phase, FCM initiated a partnership between municipalities in Guyana and Nova Scotia.

Introduction

MGMP is a bilateral initiative between FCM and the Government of Guyana, with financial support from CIDA. FCM is an association of more than 1,100 Canadian municipal governments (including Canada's largest cities and rural communities), as well as provincial and territorial municipal associations. Since 1987, FCM has supported various overseas municipalities in capacity building, knowledge sharing and implementation of practical solutions to municipal issues.

Local Context

The Government and people of Guyana face serious challenges for development at the political, economic and social levels. The political divide in Guyana is manifested in partisan politics and racial divisions, which dominate and often hinder decision making at the municipal level. Economic uncertainties are exacerbated by the emigration of professionals and skilled people; poverty remains a serious issue.

The six municipalities involved in MGMP are Georgetown, New Amsterdam, Anna Regina, Linden, Rose Hall and Corriverton. Guyanese municipal governments are mandated to deliver a range of essential services, but struggle to



ABOVE: Municipal Agenda Process (MAP) Team

BELOW AT RIGHT: Mayors, Town Clerks and MGMP staff.

meet their mandate because of vulnerable and small economies, high levels of poverty and the poor quality of services. Municipal governments have problems attracting skilled human resources and raising financial support for their programs. Poor infrastructure, weak governance and management capacity, and mistrust among citizens are challenges common to the six municipalities.

MGMP and Municipal Agendas

“If we get the municipalities right, we’ll get the country right.”

Mr. Pulander Kandhi

Despite these clear challenges, current trends augur well for municipal development in Guyana. Guyanese leaders believe that strengthening local government capacity and structures can enhance good governance and management. Both the National Development Strategy and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper call for strong local government. The Task Force on Local Government Reform is expected to call for reforms that would have far reaching impact, and ten local towns have been earmarked for municipal status.

Over the last few years, efforts to strengthen local government capacity have attracted a number of credible agencies, including the Urban Development Program, USAID’s Democracy and Governance Program and the Low Income Settlements Programme by CIDA and DFID. MGMP has initiated a collaborative approach with these agencies.

The Approach: Engaging Stakeholders through Collaboration and Participation

The approach taken to develop the MAs in Guyana was firmly anchored in FCM’s Municipal Capacity Development Framework. Within this framework, the municipality comprises two entities: the municipal government and the community. While the municipal government is responsible for governance and management, a healthy, cooperative relationship with the community is essential to its success.

After some initial hesitation, there was strong support for the inclusion of community stakeholders in the MA process. A highly consultative process was

designed to allow a wide range of input to shape an Agenda that would be relevant to the expressed developmental needs of the community. Additional input came from other stakeholders, including the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (MLGRD), local organizations such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Team Nova Scotia (a number of Nova Scotia municipalities and their provincial association). The MA process incorporated a number of key stages, including an initial assessment of lessons from other FCM projects. Development projects relating to municipal issues in Guyana were also assessed. Key stages included:

Preparing for the Process

A Guide to Developing Municipal Agendas and a Facilitator’s Manual, developed in consultation with mayors and town clerks and with significant input from project personnel, were used to prepare MGMP personnel and MAP teams for the process. Each municipality organized a MAP team to guide the process and keep the council informed. These teams were fully supported by MGMP personnel, Project Officers and Municipal Development Officers (MDO), located in each municipality.

MGMP personnel, local consultants engaged to draft the MAs, and MAP team members received orientation for the MA project and process. The orientation sessions were also designed to bring municipalities together to share information and build networking relationships. Two external facilitators, experienced in the Guyanese context and culture, provided overall guidance in process design and development.

Consultations with Stakeholders

Between six and eight consultations were held with various community stakeholders in each municipality through workshops, focus groups and interviews. In addition, relevant municipal documents were researched and reviewed, and major municipal programs were assessed. The Drafter (responsible for consolidating consultation notes and drafting the MA) and MAP teams met at regular intervals to review, clarify and approve each stage. Regular progress reports were made at council meetings.

The Municipal Workshop

Each municipality held a Municipal Workshop to complete the consultative stage. Notes from these consultations and research were then consolidated into a Working Document, which was reviewed by representatives from all consulted sectors. The objective was to obtain input to formulate the first draft of the Municipal Agenda. These workshops also enhanced the relationships between community and council representatives.

The National Workshop

A National Workshop was the next phase in the process. This workshop represented the greatest level of stakeholder engagement in the Municipal Agenda development process. It brought together MAP teams, mayors, council members and other municipal stakeholders.

The workshop had four main objectives: 1) To enhance understanding of priority issues identified through the consultation processes; 2) To consolidate the MAs; 3) To encourage municipal members to collaborate on priority projects of shared issues; and 4) To meet with and initiate a collaborative relationship with Team Nova Scotia.

The National Workshop was followed by a process designed to consolidate and refine the MA for approval, endorsement and ownership by the Municipality.

Results: Establishing Foundations and Direction through Consultation and Collaboration

Municipal Agendas:

Each municipality approved its Municipal Agenda, with priority projects identified and outlined.

Collaborations:

Opportunities for collaboration between, across and among municipalities were initiated. Municipal leaders met at various points during the MA process, developing and consolidating relations and initiatives for collaboration. Concrete proposals were discussed at the National Workshop, with teams established to follow up on these.

Municipal Agenda Process (MAP) Teams:

Community members now have significant knowledge and skills that can be used in ongoing municipal development initiatives. In each municipality, there is a wider understanding of municipal government, challenges and limitations in meeting mandates, and the value of a collaborative approach to problem solving within municipalities. Where trust between municipal governments and communities had been almost non-existent and little cooperation existed, the process has improved relationships between a variety of stakeholders, creating a supportive environment and sound basis for ongoing MGMP work within each municipality.

Diversity:

Given the polarization of communities along racial and ethnic lines, the MA process made considerable inroads into effectively involving participants from both main racial and partisan groups. Representatives from the major racial, religious and political groups participated across the divide with great success.

Gender Equality:

A significant number of women participated in leading the MA process and in consultations with the different stakeholders. Discussions on the inclusion of women and gender equality at various points in the process point out the need to develop a deliberate gender sensitivity strategy for municipal development in Guyana. The MA process has established a positive environment to advance gender equality at the municipal level.

Guyana Association of Municipalities (GAM):

Guyanese mayors and municipal personnel have had relatively few opportunities to meet and share experiences of municipal issues. The MA process supported such networking and relationship building, deliberately incorporating time and space for the different municipal players to meet across municipalities. Mayors, councillors and management personnel are now more aware of each other's needs, interests, available expertise and resources. During the MA process, the Guyana Association of Municipalities (GAM) was launched, providing a necessary vehicle for voice, visibility and collaboration on municipal affairs.

Local Capacity:

The MGMP team in Guyana and local consultants engaged in the process enhanced their knowledge of municipal issues, and improved skills in facilitation, presentation, inter-personal relationships and shaping the MAs, through workshops, coaching and mentoring.

International Perspectives:

FCM offered a unique opportunity for sharing municipal experiences between countries. Towards the end of the process, a team of municipalities from Nova Scotia joined their Guyanese counterparts at the National Workshop. A collaborative relationship has been initiated, which bodes well for the sharing of experiences and resources.

Analysis

The Municipal Agendas project was critical to establishing a solid basis for MGMP in the six Guyanese municipalities. Considerable time and resources were invested to ensure a process that would yield credible MAs as well as relationships between municipal and community leaders.

While MGMP leaders viewed both process and product as important variables in promoting good governance, experience on the ground was limited. It was essential for MGMP to engage key stakeholders (elected and community leaders) from early in the design phase to build understanding and consensus for the process. There were significant challenges to this objective. Municipal councils and community leaders expressed serious concerns about working together. Consultations and meetings with and between the different stakeholders at this early stage helped reduce fears and mistrust.

The MGMP management team and external consultants provided considerable insight into the culture of the municipalities. The design of the MA process had to take into account the culture of divisiveness, the lack of trust in public office and serious limitations in human and financial resources. It also had to include more women and incorporate a gender perspective. The project design took advantage of the strong interest in local government reform expressed by both national and municipal leaders, as well as from external development agencies.





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New Amsterdam cleaning up after the fire.

The process required considerable support for its initiatives. The MGMP team provided ongoing support to the MAP team and other stakeholders, and the placement of an MDO in the municipality meant that scarce municipal resources would not be called upon. Financial support throughout the process — for expenses such as travel, accommodation and venues/facilities — was a critical element.

Lessons Learned

Given the innovative design of the MA process, it was important to gauge key learning from the approach taken. The following are some lessons to be considered:

Involving key stakeholders: It was critical to involve key stakeholders in the design stage to build ownership and shape a viable process. The mayors, town clerks and community stakeholders brought significant experience and ideas to addressing concerns and building common understanding.

Capacity of project leaders: It is essential that people who are central to guiding the overall process are capable of undertaking the task. They bring a critical perspective, a high degree of sensitivity and interpersonal skills, which are vital when personnel and volunteers have varying degrees of competence and need support to engage effectively in the process. Project leaders should have a good understanding of the local context, culture of planning and capacity within the municipalities.

External catalysts: Where divisions among stakeholders and lack of trust in public office are significant barriers, consideration should be given to incorporating strategies, such as third parties as external catalysts. A neutral perspective can defuse tension and provide a way out of difficult situations. The two external facilitators in this project brought specific knowledge, sensitivities and familiarity of the local context.

Collaboration and cooperation: Meaningful participation and collaboration among stakeholders require significant support. MGMP successfully brought together and fully engaged multiple and diverse stakeholders in the process, through sensitive relationship building, capacity building and financial support. Critical to this success was the acknowledgement that the process could only move as fast and as far as stakeholders' capacities would permit, and the incorporation of this understanding into a dynamic process.

Recognition of local challenges: Development planning requires the recognition of unique challenges, such as the constant 'brain drain' through emigration. The designers of the MA process considered the very real possibility of losing personnel or consultants, and incorporated strategies to diminish such possibilities, such as involving a larger pool of municipal and community stakeholders in the process.

Nurturing the process: It is important that concerns and misgivings expressed by municipal personnel and community leaders be addressed promptly; this enables the process to overcome such fears and build agreement and/or consensus. Building and maintaining trust requires constant nurturing; it is not a one-shot deal. Building relationships, particularly in a socio-cultural environment with serious racial and political divisions, calls for time and resources. The project recognized these challenges and made an appropriate investment in an approach that was satisfying to all involved.

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