

Implementing The Aberdeen Agenda In South Asia: A Regional Training Program For Elected Members

Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance

Issue 3: May 2009

<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/cjlg>

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In 2005 CLGF members adopted the *Aberdeen Agenda: Commonwealth Principles on Good Practice for Local Democracy and Good Governance*. The twelve Principles were developed at the CLGF's biennial conference in March 2005 and were subsequently forwarded to Commonwealth Heads of Government, who also adopted them as part of their commitment to fundamental political values when they met the following November. Since then members of CLGF have used them in a variety of different ways – to support their own policy making, to enhance their lobbying and advocacy work, and in some cases, notably in Pakistan and Uganda (see CJLG Issue 2), to undertake a self-assessment of the health of their systems of local democracy and governance.

CLGF has worked with its members to ensure that the *Aberdeen Agenda* is operationalised and to find ways to use the principles contained within it to support practical and tangible improvement at the local level. In 2006 CLGF launched a project in South Asia, with the support of the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF), to use the principles as a basis for developing training modules, targeted at elected members,

that would enhance their understanding of the wider governance framework, develop skills to help them be more effective in their role, and to learn from practical case studies from the region.

To take the project forward, CLGF linked up a network of training institutions from within the South Asian region to form a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) charged with providing policy advice and guidance, and with ensuring that the training modules were complementary to, and added value to existing materials available in the sector. The training institutions each produced a country paper that provided a broad overview of the key challenges relating to the implementation of each of the Aberdeen Principles in their respective countries, case studies of good practice relating to each of the principles, and a summary of training provision currently available in the sector for elected representatives. From this background it became clear very quickly that training provision for elected councillors provided either through state organisations or private suppliers is extremely limited in the region.

The institutional members of the TAC were the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), Society for Participatory Research in India (PRIA), All India Institute of Local Self Government (AIILSG), YASHADA India, National Institute of Local Government, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka Institute of Local Governance (SLILG), Sri Lanka, and the National Reconstruction Bureau (NRB), Pakistan. They were joined by Dr Dinesh Mehta of the CEPT University, Ahmedabad, who provided overall coordination, and Dr KK Pandey (Indian Institute of Public Administration), who gave specific training advice.

The modules were developed by Prof Ramakantan and his team at KILA, using the materials provided by TAC members. A group of trainers were trained, using a draft trainers' manual produced by the team, and the modules themselves were trailed at a pilot training workshop. Councillors that participated in the pilot session enjoyed the opportunity to learn about developments in other parts of the region and to share experiences, however the team saw a number of ways in which they could improve both the design and the delivery of the modules to better meet the needs of participants, as well as to ensure that the "training" element was not lost in favour of more general conversation.

The revised modules were delivered at a final training workshop in January 2009. Much greater emphasis was placed on briefing and training the trainers. They had a focused session before the training to work through the modules themselves, and to allocate tasks and agree on how to deliver particular elements of the training. This meant that the training itself went much more smoothly. The trainers used a variety of participatory approaches and exercises, and split the group into smaller working groups, some country based and some mixed. Generally the feedback was very positive.

“It was excellent....I will apply it in my country, in my pourshava (municipality) to strengthen good governance and local democracy in my locality” – Representative from Bangladesh

“...Sharing experiences of local democracy and good governance so that we can introduce good practices in our country” – Representative from Bangladesh

“Shared understanding about outputs and deliverables from the training and clarity on conceptual aspects” – Representative from India

“Sharing of experiences from various and diverse groups” – Representative from Maldives

“A rare opportunity to participate in a programme....it will enhance and enlighten us to lead a successful political career and in turn helps towards the development of our country.” – Representative from Sri Lanka.

Other practical suggestions such as using trainers who have themselves been councillors, and providing more detail in specific areas have also been noted and will be built into future training sessions.

One of the strong messages that came from the training event was that although participants strongly valued the opportunity to share experiences and learn from colleagues from across the region, and that this was seen as a very positive element of the training, they also felt that the training would benefit from being undertaken at the local level, using local case studies and using the modules translated into local languages. A suitable balance needs to be found between regional and more localised approaches.

As follow up to the event, the training materials have been further refined and they will be available to participants attending the May 2009 CLGF Conference. They will also be available on the CLGF website and on the websites of TAC members. The TAC members agreed to work with CLGF to disseminate the modules widely in their countries and to support and encourage their use, their translation into local languages where appropriate, and their wider application. To do this the TAC members have agreed to:

- Establish an informal network to monitor the use of the materials
- Keep them under review
- Develop more specialised training programmes using the existing modules as a base
- Cooperate with CLGF, the Commonwealth Secretariat and other partners in appropriate local, national and regional training and capacity building programmes
- Continue to share and promote policy research on local democracy and good governance including through the development of an appropriate web-pages linked to CLGF.

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum and the Commonwealth Secretariat are committed to continuing to work with and support training and research organisations specialising in local government/local governance issues in the region. This work will include efforts to encourage federal/state/provincial ministries with responsibility for local government to consider a more strategic approach to making adequate training available for elected councillors. Elected councillors play a key role in ensuring local accountability and there is clear evidence that improving knowledge and skills can have a beneficial effect on the decisions that they make.