Constituency Development Funds are an emerging tool for increased parliamentary involvement in grass root community development. They are delivered by a line item in the national budget which appropriates funds for MP-influenced, locally determined, constituency level development generally targeting initiatives to alleviate poverty.

Constituency development fund (CDF) is the generic name for these projects. From country to country they have different names but each is constituted by the same basic principles although varying considerably in their modus operandi and the amount of funds allocated.

CDFs give members of parliament (MPs) the capacity to shape policy and service delivery in their constituencies and thereby add to the set of political resources available when seeking re-election.

The Monash workshop builds on previous research undertaken by the Center for International Development (SUNY/CID), Rockefeller College University at Albany, State University of New York. To date much of their research has been carried out in specific countries, for example, Jamaica and Kenya, with the most detailed work being a workshop organized by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, co-hosted by the Parliament of Jamaica in June 2011 in Jamaica and facilitated by SUNY/CID who also held a preworkshop roundtable with its academic consultants in June.

CDFs are generally popular as a tool for delivering constituency based services but are the subject of considerable criticism and cynicism because of the potential for mismanagement where accountability mechanisms are in adequate.

The workshop was attended by delegates from Bangladesh, Jamaica, Malaysia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Timor Leste and Zambia comprising a mixture of MPs and officers of the parliaments. A paper was submitted by Joseph Ketan, an independent researcher from Papua New Guinea who has research connections with CDI in this area. Joseph was unable to attend at the last minute. It is estimated that about twenty countries deliver CDFs so the input from just under half of these provided a valuable insight into the purpose and operation of CDFs.
Also attending were Professor Mark Baskin, Senior Associate for Academic Affairs at SUNY/CID, Dr. Mike Mezey, Senior Fellow, SUNY/CID and professor of political science at De Paul University, Chicago, representatives from Monash, Dr. Ross Donohue, Associate Professor Peter Holland and Katrin Steinack. The workshop was conducted over two days and coordinated and facilitated by Associate Professor Ken Coghill who heads the research team at Monash.

All delegates actively contributed, exploring both the strengths and weaknesses of CDFs as a tool for regional development. Much of the discussion focused on the extent of MP involvement and accountability mechanisms and general oversight. It was generally agreed that the exact nature of individual programs reflects a specific context whether institutional (Kenya), traditional (PNG), or modern (Jamaica), the extent of the role of the MP in administering the fund, the size of the fund per capita, the size of districts, and so on. Each CDF emerges from unique social, economic and political circumstances and display specific characteristics in their operations.

It was further noted that effective CDFs do not necessarily observe the strict separation of powers between the legislature and the executive, government and opposition parties, central and local levels of administration, or government and civil society. Certainly research suggests that there is no “one size fits all” set of specific proposed activities or norms. Consequently, any set of principles that may emerge can only broadly reflect the good governance norms and values of good fiscal management identified by government, major aid donors and multi-lateral institutions. However, it was believed that employment of accepted international norms can help to legitimize and strengthen the effectiveness of CDFs as one of many policy tools to be employed in increasingly open societies.

There are two competing images, firstly; they are a tool of development, strengthening national/local linkages; they do what other agencies fail to do; they build cooperation between levels of government; they provide classic constituency based services. The second image is that they are a source of clientalism and corruption; they violate the separation of powers; it is unconstitutional for MPs to be involved in execution of policy; they distract from oversight procedures; there is an absence of transparency; they are inefficient and bad government.

They are however very popular with MPs despite the great variation in the way they are administered. This is perhaps because they do operate outside the box giving MPs who may otherwise be marginalized a real chance to help their constituents. They can be very innovative and provide a different relationship between legislator and community. Much of the criticism comes from the good governance community who consider they are too political. Evidence from countries where they work reasonably well is that they can make a real difference for a modest charge on the national budget. It is generally estimated that CDFs consume no more than 2% of the development budget at best and much less at worst.

The first day was spent in detailed discussion of systems experienced by delegates and information gathered from other countries while the second day was spent in analysis and the development of scenarios for further research. It was agreed that the best approach for a research project would be
through an ARC linkage project with a group of partners drawn from Monash, SUNY/CID, other institutions with interested academics, World Bank Institute, AusAID, CPA and so on.

The first step would be to consolidate past research including the gap between formal and informal evidence and then investigate questions identified by delegates including:

- What types of CDFs currently exist and what are their goals, structures and processes?
- What are the existing levels of cooperation and coordination, that is, how do CDFs coordinate MPs, local government executive, central government officials and other stakeholders?
- To what extent does/can administration of CDFs encourage local participation in the selection and support of developmental goals?
- Who are the stakeholders and what are the formal roles?
- To what extent to CDFs strengthen support for representative institutions and or political regimes?
- To what extent do sitting MPs politically benefit from CDFs?
- Are CDFs dominated by political party structures?
- To what extent is the nature of CDFs influenced by a nation’s electoral system?
- To what extent do CDFs reflect the needs of constituencies? What are the purposes for which they are/can be used?
- To what extent is the disbursement fair and beneficial?
- What are the mechanisms for accountability and oversight? To what extent are they monitored by Auditors General, civil society organisations, other mechanisms?
- Can they be a vehicle for community based actors to participate in the process?
- To what extent do CDFs provide services that respond to real need? Are they perceived to be responsive to the needs of communities?
- Should all constituencies benefit equally in monetary terms or should there be greater emphasis on alleviation of poverty and hardship?

It is hoped that an application can be lodged in the next round of ARC grants.

The workshop was extremely interesting and informative and has great significance for the work of CDI in the Pacific and Timor Leste. I will be continuing my involvement with Monash as a researcher which will assist in building the level of cooperation between Monash and CDI.

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