



PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

NATIONAL PARLIAMENT OF SOLOMON ISLANDS

COMMITTEE TRANSCRIPT

Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs

12 March 2008, 12:40pm

Chairman: We have the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs here with us. That is the ministry we would be looking at next. But before that I acknowledge that today is the International Women's day, and on behalf of the Committee we would like to congratulate the women throughout the country and happy celebrations.

In fact the elevation of this portfolio to full ministerial status only demonstrates the seriousness that this government and the former government placed on the development of women, children and youth, some of the most vulnerable group in the country. That demonstrate the seriousness of this government, and the committee would like to sincerely acknowledge the present government for continuing with that ministry at the ministerial level.

We would like to welcome you Permanent Secretary to brief the Committee. And I would like to warn all of us that we are running against time so may be our questions should be more specific, get something out of what you would like to get from the officials so that we can move on.

We note that the government expects certain outcomes from the Ministry and has allocated a budget to you and expects you to deliver that and we would like to be briefed on how you would cope during this fiscal year. Thank you PS, you can now take the floor.

Ms Sigimanu (*Permanent Secretary*): Thank you very much chair and members of the Public Accounts Committee. Before I go through our submission, I would like to congratulate the chair for your leadership that gave birth to the formation of the new Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs. I think that was a stand that the Women, Youth and Children of this country took very graciously and are very appreciative of the move made by your government. I thought that I should just want to begin with that.

My apologies for being late, technology would not allow us to be early. It is not a good excuse but we had problems with the photocopying machine and so we could not be here on time. But I thank you chair and members of the Public Accounts Committee for giving us this opportunity to discuss matters relating to my Ministry's 2008 recurrent and development budgets.

First, allow us to request the PAC to note that although our Ministry is a year old today, on this International Women's Day, we have not had the opportunity to present to you matters dealing with financing of our mandate and planned operations.

As the Ministry was basically formed from a mere extract of three divisions of Women, Youth and Children from the Ministry of Home Affairs ensuring that the Ministry is strengthened based on a firm foundation, has been necessary. That has not negotiated to allow both the recurrent and development budgets to respond to this demand.

Starting from those extracts expected as well to fulfill our mandate, has forced the ministry with an inevitable need to restructure the ministry's organizational structure based on our corporate plan which we have also developed. .

We believe our mandate denied of the necessary resources to realize its mission and fulfill its vision is a dead mandate.

However, this smaller picture may be to my ministry, we recognize the important role the Ministry of Finance and Planning have played in putting together the recurrent and development budgets, and wish to thank them for the hard work and commitment which went into the preparation of these budgets.

We are pleased to note the inclusion of our submission in the development budget. This has given us some consolations that we can at least move towards achieving some major policy objectives.

Being mindful of the PAC's role of one of examination of government accounts, please allow us to just note some of our frustrations for the records.

Our concern is really in the allocation of the recurrent budget to our ministry. There appears to be a major oversight by the Ministry of Finance on our recurrent budget, except for one significant improvement in the allocation to the Commonwealth Youth program, the changes and increases that we requested and which in our judgment best capture the emphasis of the CNURA policies and the revised approach to the bottom up policy, have not been taken on board. Even suggested movements and changes within expenditure heads, the renaming and revamping of certain expenditure heads have unfortunately not been considered.

We wish therefore to draw the PAC's attention to the following, and we are being very mindful that perhaps this is more a role for the Ministry of Finance but we would like to note for the records that there is great inconsistency between our ministry's establishment and manpower costing and our recurrent estimates.

The 2008 establishment has taken on board the ministry's restructuring including the creation of a new and most important division of research, policy, planning and information. These changes however, are not matched by the ministerial recurrent budget. There is no corresponding reflection of these changes in the recurrent budget although they appear in the manpower establishment.

Secondly, we have been reminding Budget on the omission of grant assistance to child rights and duty bearers of \$100,000 that was posted from headquarter to the Children's Division under expenditure head 297-0309-6411. This is child rights bill on group called 738 bringing the amount from \$15,914 to \$115,914. The amount that now appeared for this line item is the original amount of \$6,391 presumably with a 3% increase.

We need this \$100,000 amount to be reinstated to provide assistance to organize groups dealing with children programs and activities.

Thirdly, we have a budget vote for office rent. We submitted a bid of \$500,000 because that is what went into our bid to the NPF to secure an office space. As you would appreciate we are still sharing with the Ministry of Finance and still do not have an office space even after one year of being established. So with an increased manpower we will not have the necessary space to operate effectively as a ministry. That is also one of our concerns.

We have also submitted a bid totaling \$50,000 to enable Solomon Islands representation at the Commonwealth Youth Minister's Meeting in Sri Lanka this year. We have not been given this amount although the Minister's attendance at this meeting is very important.

Let me also point out here that the \$1million, which is the only improvement that Finance has given us towards the operations of the Commonwealth Youth program have been taken on board with an increase of \$894,000.

Although there has been an improvement in this regard, we feel that the amount has been unnecessarily taken up against us in the sense that we got this huge improvement but it has nothing to do with our operations in the Ministry. We thought we should point that out as well while we are given the floor.

I think this summarizes some of our concerns in the recurrent budget, but let me also note for the records that we are quite pleased with the allocation through the development budget. Thank you very much chair.

Mr Chairman: Before I invite members of the committee to ask questions, all the ministries that come so far have raised the same kind of concerns in terms of inadequate budgetary allocations to very important activities required of the ministries to deliver. I do not know whether the Ministry of Finance is here but they really should be here to give us some response as to how they will address these issues. But when they were here yesterday and the day before there was no real commitment to renewing.

What they seem to suggest is there may be under allocations in other items, so given the course of the implementation of the budget funds can be moved around. There is a mechanism within the budgetary process to do that or fully mindful of course of certain restrictions that allocations from emoluments cannot be moved to other services. That is not allowed. But for other services that can be done. That is the kind of explanation given to us the other day, and I hope it is still the understanding, but there is nothing really stopping you from going back to them and suggesting to them.

The Government is a dynamic machine. Priorities are developed as the budget is implemented. What may appear to be priority now may not be in two months time. I think that is probably what they have in mind when they brief the committee on that matter.

But they are serious allocations and I think we just need to note them for the purpose of the committee's report to Parliament and eventually to the government and will let them deal with you.

Hon Soaloi: Before I make any comments may be on a personal note, I also once again wish the women of Solomon Islands, especially the administrative head of the Ministry who is here. Happy women's day.

Mr Chairman, I notice there are quite a number of grants allocated to the Ministry. When we look at various reports from the Auditor General, one of the main

obvious reasons why there are continuous corrupt practices in ministries that are receiving grants is the absence of proper regulations to monitor and administer the grants.

I would just like to ask if the committee can be informed of any regulations to properly administer these grants allocated to the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs.

Ms Sigimanu: Yes, we do have a number of grant allocations to the Women's Development Division, Youth and Children. Just for the records the grants are hardly sufficient but they are grants that we note and appreciate that need to be accounted for.

At the moment we still have not prepared any selection criteria as to how the grants should be allocated, although we are quite firm on allocating grants to areas to do with training or capacity building especially the rural areas. Much of what we have given so far has been directed towards areas of training, advocacy, awareness and capacity building.

We have also placed heavy emphasis on ensuring that the international women's day, the youth international day and children's international day are celebrated in the provinces. Therefore, much of those grants will also be used for celebration in the provinces, and this year we will be going to Choiseul and Western Provinces to celebrate the International Women's day because we have done youth and children's day here last year so we will now move with those two sectors to perhaps another two provinces.

The emphasis is really on training, capacity building, advocacy and awareness. That is how we spend the allocations.

Hon Soaloai: Just follow on to my first question. Is there any assurance that these mechanisms would be in place as soon as possible?

Ms Sigimanu: Yes, we are looking into that. We have spent much of our time really on planning, realizing that we are new and so we've taken most of last year just strengthening our foundation through the development of our corporate plan and other necessary things that we feel are important to strengthen our foundation or our base for that matter.

But this year we are looking seriously at ensuring that we have selection criteria or guidelines to guide how funds should be allocated because it is also important that provinces know exactly what the allocations are meant for. We do have a responsibility to ensure that is done.

Hon Mark Kemakeza: Thank you for these papers that you have submitted PS. If we look at the development estimates it means there is not much being allocated to this new Ministry. There seems to be no youth and no children. As a newly established ministry you should have highlighted substantial amounts that should be geared towards our youths.

Mr Chairman: Are you looking at the development estimates?

Ms Sigimanu: I note your concern. As part of our submission to get some explanatory notes as to the proposals that we have submitted to Planning, and let me say may be

approved in principle at this stage and hence their appearance in the development budget, we are mindful of the need to may be go out and place more emphasis on youths and children's activities as well as women.

What we have there is really based on the need to, like I said strengthen our foundation as well because we have policies that need to be reviewed, and so the policy and planning project that appears there will be spent on the review of the national youth policy which is now outdated, review of the national women's policy and review of the national children's policy, which is still in the draft form but needs to be reviewed as well.

We have other obligations towards UN because we have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. And so reports to the UN Committee are now due, and that in itself would require us to request a substantial amount of money just to get the initial report done for CEDAW and a report to be done on the Convention on the Rights of the child.

Also looking through our submission there are other areas that we would like to concentrate our efforts on. One would be a children's forum on something to do with awards and advocacy.

We are also mindful of the fact that government has placed emphasis on ensuring that we convene the National Youth Parliament, and so we will need to spend some funds on that as well. The CNURA Government has very explicitly mentioned the need to recognize the efforts of the youth and award them with a national youth award of some sort.

Again for the youths, about \$1million will be spent on the musical youth empowerment, and that is also very much reflected in the CNURA Government policy. And so we are basically responding to major areas that require us to place some emphasis on.

On the children's sector we have two bills - the Child Rights Bill and the Child Protection Bill, which we are yet to consult widely on them and we need to piece those things together in order to get them through to Parliament.

There is basically quite a substantial amount of work to be done which would require much of our efforts. And we have been very mindful of the fact that we do not have much of our capacity in there, and so some of the work will be outsourced. I think we have been realistic not to over burden ourselves with work that we simply cannot implement.

Hon Sogavare: In terms of budgetary allocation is that supporting what you raised earlier?

Ms Sigimanu: Yes, for the development budget. In fact they took in our submission as it was.

Hon Sogavare: You were talking about outsourcing certain functions as well and that is because of capacity. Which areas are you looking at here?

Ms Sigimanu: Well, I think for the reviews and even for the writing up of reports will require us to outsource because we simply do not have that capacity. Whilst we

appreciate the fact that there is knowledge within the NGOs as well as in the government in other stakeholders, there is sufficient perhaps know-how, we feel that to piece the whole thing together would require some expertise to really help us drive the process.

Hon Sogavare: The musical youth empowerment, how is that going to be administered?

Ms Sigimanu: The CNURA policy statement is quite explicit on the need to empower youth to perhaps promote their musical talents both circular and religious. It is also quite explicit on the need to do recording and so we are assuming that would require a studio and perhaps some thinking around how that can be done. But we have collected some ideas already based on the youth idol show that was done last year.

We are thinking that perhaps another way of embracing that concept would be to reach out to the rural areas and having competitions there and then getting the winners to come to Honiara and have a national competition that is not just Honiara based but captures all other youths in the provinces. That way we feel they could be more exposed to what is available here and both overseas, and perhaps in a small way we could begin in that manner and then move on from there to capture the essence of what CNURA really want us to do.

Hon Sogavare: In terms of delivering may be a broader youth and women development program, as you are aware there are already existing organizations outside of government circles like churches have youth departments, women department and children department. How are you working with these existing delivery agents that you might call it?

Ms Sigimanu: I am proud to say that we have managed to establish close links with our stakeholders both within and with NGOs. This is because we believe our mandate cannot be sufficiently addressed or effectively address without them taking part. So we have to be inclusive in our approach. We have taken that stand right from the beginning embracing the fact that partnership building is important because our strength really lies on the NGOs and the community as well as other sectors.

We are also mindful of the fact and recognize the fact that women, youth and children issues are cross cuttings, and so they are not just matters for the ministry. We matter in all other sectors. We matter in agriculture, fisheries, and you name it, and so if we can mainstream the sector issues and concerns, perhaps in a big way they can drive from their own sectors what their issues and concerns are. That is how we are viewing that matters of concern to women, youth and children are not just matters for the ministry.

It is just a fact that perhaps at this stage government ministries are not really seeing through our eyes, embracing the fact that gender equality is very much their business as much as it is anybody's business or the Ministry's business or youth empowerment or children's rights are very much roles they need to view as their responsibility as well. We have not really seen that happening in other sectors, but if they can own our Ministry's mandate, I think a lot can happen to those sectors very positively.

The same applies to the role NGOs play as well. Let me just say that I think our link with NGOs is much stronger than our link with other government sectors. We are looking at gender mainstreaming and mainstreaming of youth concerns, children's concerns and priority needs through the government machinery as well.

It is a huge and daunting task but it is a necessary task that we have to tackle head on. That is our view in taking forward or driving forward the youth, women and children mandates.

Hon Sogavare: Thank you very much PS, you certainly have the right focus there on how to get that Ministry moving.

Mr Mendo: The ministry has a shortfall of \$200,000 in the establishment. That will be taken care of in the supplementary in June. The Public Service also has contingency of \$500,000 which can support that.

Hon Sogavare: There would be another Ministry standing behind the queue to bid for that

It really boils down to what the government is actually prioritizing. As I said, the government is a dynamic machinery and priorities evolve as the budget is implemented, and so you may see that that Ministry would probably stand in front of the queue when the time comes. Are there any last questions?

Hon Soalaoi: That Ministry, especially when it comes to youth, from experience in the past in our youth days, youths normally resort to unwanted activities and attitudes if they are not addressed properly.

I guess one of the ways in which we can start putting some decent thoughts into the minds of youths is the idea of having a youth parliament. You mentioned that there is no allocation under your Ministry for youth parliament. Under the National Parliament there is an allocation of \$50,000 under head 279-0001-6418 for youth parliament. Also last year is this idea of youth parliament being born.

The point I want to make is if you are going to make any additional bid or submission in the coming supplementary in June, I think you should seriously think about including allocation for youth parliament.

What we are facing at the moment is youths having all sorts of things in their minds and we are trying to involve them in activities that can only be done for normal thinking people.

I think the best thing we can start to do is to try and indoctrinate with thoughts that are decent, and I think youth parliament would be an appropriate forum that youths can use to express their views about their government and anything they think that should be done to suit their needs since they come directly under your Ministry.

Ms Sigimanu: Thank you for raising that concern. Certainly we included that in our development budget submission to the Ministry of Planning, and that is included under the Policy and Planning project which has been allocated an amount of \$1.3million. Perhaps in starting that initiative, some funds of that amount will go into youth parliament. But let me just say here that we very much welcome that there is need to get the youths to have such a forum to decide on things that are important to them.

We are also mindful of the fact that if the outcomes of the youth parliament are not integrated into government policy planning, into sectoral plans and policies, then they are as good as pets. We would like to see that being integrated through policy and planning as a whole of government approach but also sectoral approach as well. That is one thing we will also be ensuring it is done that there is a mechanism for integrating the outcomes into the government machinery and see how they can also be filtered through NGOs and other mechanisms outside of government.

Mr Chairman: Thank you members of the Committee. I think we have very much deliberated on important areas that need to be considered in this Ministry. I would like to thank you very much Permanent Secretary and officials for coming. I think you got the full grip of the Ministry and the directions it is going right under the palm of your hands, so congratulation PS and I wish you all the best in implementing the 2008 budget. Thank you very much for coming.

Ms Sigimanu: Thank you very much Chairman and your committee members.