

International development case study

Deborah Williams

My first experience overseas came in 1997, when I was asked by the British Council to go to Pretoria at a few days' notice to work with the Presidential Review Commission of South Africa, established by President Mandela to advise on public services transformation.

It was taking international soundings before completing its final report, mostly, as I found out later, to appease the international donor community.

My role in South Africa was to provide a short analysis of UK financial planning and management reform in the public sector, so although there was a need to set this into a development context, the work was familiar.

I had been a consultant for the British Council and had been an independent adviser on public sector management and finance for three years after a career with the National Audit Office, Audit Commission and Price Waterhouse.

Three unknown colleagues were providing similar analyses of structures, functions and organisation, human resources management and IT. These four areas are inextricably linked and that other important factors, such as political context, drive reform.

It was only on the plane that I remembered that in the rush I hadn't arranged travel insurance.

These days, I have permanent insurances, but then I was left with no option but to ride it out. The briefing from the British Council spelled out the security risks, but I was well looked after to the extent of being deposited at and collected from every meeting.

But I arrived jet-lagged on a Saturday morning to be driven straight to a commission meeting.

Bodily present, but mentally vacant, I joined about 40 people who were robustly cross-examining findings by working groups. I didn't say a word.

By the end of the day (Rooibos tea the only drink - I'm still not keen), I felt delirious with confusion about what I was going to do in the next five days. Everyone else was confused too, and there were cultural and political boundaries to break through.

The main hurdle was my ignorance about donor politics and the relationship between the recipient client and the various aid agencies.

In South Africa, representatives from the Canadian aid agency, CIDA, were providing most of the donor financial planning and management expertise and it was comforting to chew things over with them and other colleagues.

The British Council provided the logistical support as contracted project manager, and was also able to provide political insights.

I enjoyed the experience immensely, complete with its cultural shocks. Having lunch with the chairman and deputy chairman in the civil service club, I learned not only about

their difficult political histories as members of the African National Congress, but also that the black chairman had never been in the club before.

On another occasion, a black member of the commission got hopelessly lost as he gave me a lift back to my hotel in the diplomatic quarter. Apologising profusely, he explained that he had never been in that area before because he would have been barred under apartheid.

Having travelled a fair bit, the poverty did not shock me, but the extremes of wealth did. The precautions taken to secure property and personal wellbeing also surprised me. I was amazed at being escorted everywhere and at being prevented from walking one block between offices in the business area of Johannesburg.

Back home, I completed a short summary and appraisal of UK reform which was incorporated into the final submission to the president. Its virtue was relative brevity compared with the many other weighty submissions made to the Commission.

Despite shortcomings in service planning and delivery, many mechanisms of accountability in South African public services now surpass those in the UK.

Since then, I have worked with the parliaments in Uganda and Bangladesh. In Uganda, I undertook an organisational review, and in Bangladesh, I helped with the design of a project to develop the role of select committees in ensuring accountability for public services and expenditure.

I still also work in the UK, and have spent a fair amount of time with the DfID policy division.

Last year, I went to Nigeria for a staffing review of the DfID office in Abuja in the light of pressure to reduce administration costs in Whitehall departments.

My hosts took no chances in ensuring my personal security, something of which I was slightly dismissive until I learned about the aid agency vehicles that have been held up or involved in accidents.

I have learned to check carefully the project management arrangements for all overseas work, to understand the various stakeholder interests and lines of accountability, to work with a known colleague if possible, to question the motives of the occasionally corrupt politicians and officials, and to accept all personal security safeguards.

It is sometimes difficult to be sure of the impact of this kind of consultancy work as so much depends on the relative interests of donors and recipient governments. My overseas consultancy has never extended beyond a month. I admire those people who work out in the field for years at a stretch; my work is relatively easy compared with theirs.