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Katalyst blog series: Working with government - Katalyst's experience



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Maintaining a good working relationship with the government of Bangladesh is imperative to the Katalyst programme.

Katalyst is implemented by Swisscontact under the umbrella of the Ministry of Commerce of the Government of Bangladesh. During the final stages of phase 3 of the project, which started in March 2014, the relationship with the government has been more than just a mere exchange of pleasantries and occasional invites to events. The ministry now plays a more robust role in monitoring the activities and progress of the project. The project maintains a good relationship through prompt responses to requests for information and regular reporting.

According to the Technical Project Proposal (TPP) signed between MoC and Swisscontact-Katalyst, the government steers the project through monthly annual development plan (ADP) meetings and steering committee meetings. The steering committee is headed by the senior secretary of the MoC, along with members from the Donor Management Board (DMB) and Katalyst management. The project director of Katalyst, a senior government official, heads the Katalyst management team in these meetings with the government and plays an important role in bridging the gap between the ministry and the project. The project director is a joint secretary level official, assigned from the government to monitor the project and is a spokesperson for the project in the ministerial meetings housed in Katalyst.

One of the major government requirements in the current phase is the regular reporting of Katalyst's activities in the ministry's prescribed format. These reports are generated every month on two workstreams: the technical activities, referred to by the MoC as "physical progress", such as studies, workshops, capacity building;

and promotional events which are carried out by the project and its financial expenditures. Unlike donor reporting, where the changes and results brought by Katalyst interventions are easier to explain, preparing reports for the ministry are more complex. The reports need to adhere to specific guidelines, but portraying the results of a M4P project in a pre-defined format is a huge challenge and requires very careful interpretation of information.

Showing tangible outcomes from project activities on a monthly basis is another tricky aspect of MoC reporting. Typical M4P projects cannot always produce immediate results on farmers or market systems. Explaining the specific dynamics of a M4P project, at the same time as keeping ministry officials satisfied regarding tangible results every month, is a daunting task.

In addition to regular reporting, the MoC often requests other ad hoc information. Again this is in their pre-defined formats, which is often not rational or practical for the project. In such cases, un-preparedness due to lack of available information can be costly for the project. However, Katalyst management always gives full effort to get a prompt response to the MoC on any such issues.

Apart from regular monthly reporting, ad hoc requests and other formal liaisons, there is always the 'subtlety factor' in the project team's approach when engaging with government officials. Body language, intonation, keeping the right balance between assertiveness and courtesy - all these play a vital role in maintaining a cordial, smooth relationship with ministry officials. As the government holds supreme power of authority, the onus is on the project management team to ensure that the government understands and extends full support to the implementation of the project. Keeping them comfortable while not compromising the project's activities is key to successful implementation.

Yet, not all experiences with ministry officials are complex and challenging. Once they develop an understanding of the project's work and acknowledge the due diligence of the project management in maintaining a healthy working relationship, officials often extend their support in different capacities. The ministry serves as an important link for building critical networks with local agencies and private companies. A recommendation from the ministry and assistance in terms of working with other government agencies or bringing about policy level changes can facilitate project activities immensely.

Katalyst has two staff assigned specifically to manage the requirements of the government under an external relations unit. The unit has a business consultant supported by an external relations advisor. The consultant is a full-time employee of the project, managing day- to-day tasks and working closely with the project director. The external relations advisor is part-time staff, and an ex-government official so they know how government works. The unit is supported by the project's management.

As Katalyst's external relations consultant, I have developed a good understanding of the government's requests. The initial days might have been nervy, but with time I grew into the role and built my confidence. The other big takeaway from this role was that investing time and resources prudently behind the government system would go a long way in helping the project attain its goals.

Overall, maintaining a good relationship with the government on the project's behalf has been a unique experience for me. The Katalyst management proactively engages with government officials and keeps them on board with the activities of the project, which has earned it a good reputation in the books of the Ministry of Commerce.

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