

THE CIVIL SERVICE' ROLE IN BUILDING UP OUR SOCIAL CAPITAL

(RAKAN Sarawak's series of interviews with the
STATE SECRETARY on
DEFINING PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY)

RS RAKAN Sarawak : In one of the speeches you delivered, you talked about "social capital" and how it is related to a truly progressive society. Can you elaborate further on this topic?

DATUK AMAR WILSON BAYA DANDOT (STATE SECRETARY):

Social capital is the "soft side" of any democratic country, state or organization. It includes the informal networks, the accumulated know-how, the intangible stuff that promotes mutual understanding, support and trust among the people. To explain my point further, I'd like to use the phrase used by Alexis d' Tocqueville in a book he wrote over 150 years ago called "Democracy in America". Alexis d Tocqueville wrote about the "habits of the heart" and how these make for a strong democracy. He noted that the most important thing a democratic society must have is what he called the "habits of the heart". These refer simply to the things that appeal to peoples' hearts and sentiments and thus, help win their trust, loyalty and support.

Today, this is what we refer to as "social capital" which is essential to running successful and progressive countries or organizations. A country or, in a smaller scale, an organization will necessarily have its formal structures, frameworks, rules and laws and procedures that are easily defined, described, quantified. In addition, social capital, which is somewhat intangible and harder to define and quantify, is that one other dimension in the life of a country or organization that is crucial in its success.

In the context of a country, for example, social capital could include the networks of various volunteer organizations and societies or charitable bodies, whose sole

purpose for existence is the betterment and welfare of their own members, or to collectively reach out to and seek to provide for the needs of the less privileged members of a country's population. I've always believed in the key role that voluntary associations play in safeguarding our democratic rights and ensuring the equitable distribution of wealth among the people. I have seen how places with a lot of active NGOs have a more progressive society compared with places that don't have similar or active societies, associations and organizations.

Voluntary associations, nonprofit groups, nongovernmental organizations, bring people together and give them a sense of connectedness and mutual concern. The various organizations and societies, which remain active and dynamic, would also inevitably help their own members to progress, especially when they run more meaningful activities like entrepreneurial business activities for their members' benefit.

In an organizational context, social capital can include the common vision and shared purpose of all the staff within that organization. A company may enjoy access to substantial financial equity, and may have strong leaders and highly qualified manpower, but if it does not pay any attention to strengthening the understanding and acceptance among the employees of their common vision and purpose, then it may not be a truly effective, successful and stable entity.

While social capital is a "soft concept" that is hard to control and quantify, it is a product of the interrelated policies and practices adopted by the government of a country or by the management of a company or an organization. All citizens or residents of a country and



all members of an organization, no matter their ranks or positions, can help build up and strengthen their country's and their respective organization's social capital, within their sphere of control or influence. A country or an organization with a very solid and strong social capital base will be able to weather all kinds of situations and

circumstances, and will most certainly grow from strength to strength.

RS RAKAN Sarawak :

You mentioned that social capital is “the product of the interrelated policies and practices adopted by the government of a country or by the management of a company or an organization”. In the context of the Sarawak civil service as an organization, what are the specific policies and practices that have been put in place that should allow our civil servants, within their respective spheres of control and influence, to strengthen our social capital?

STATE SECRETARY : There are several key policies that we have formulated that clearly show how much we value the social capital of our civil service organization. First was in the area of hiring and recruitment. Our clearly - stated policy is to hire the best person for the job. And the best person may not necessarily be the one with the best academic qualification from a prestigious university. What we always look for are people who have the capacity to adapt to different environments and situations. We also look for people who have the ability to empathize with the peoples’ needs and concerns. These qualities are important because of the very nature of the civil servant’s vocation of servant leadership.

We also have a policy of continuous training and learning for our staff, to keep their knowledge and skills and competencies relevant to the needs of the public that we serve. As the public becomes more and more educated, sophisticated and more exposed to quality services, they expect increasingly higher standards of service delivery from us. And so, all of our civil servants are expected to be lifelong learners, the kind of people who possess the innate

desire to continually upgrade their competencies and capabilities.

Among our officers in the top and middle level management, they are expected to adhere strictly to our policy of “being always in touch with the field”. We have adopted the “site visit to verify” work culture among the senior officers in our organization and as much as possible, we conduct meetings on the ground so that we can immediately assess actual situations and thus, make faster decisions. I, for one, spend about one-third of any given week, traveling to our district and sub-district offices to keep tabs of what’s happening on the ground. This is also my way of showing to our field staff that I truly value their efforts, and that I am there for them. Social capital thrives on an atmosphere of trust, and being there to listen to their concerns and to acknowledge the results of their hard work and committed service, enhances that sense of trust and goodwill among us.

RS RAKAN SARAWAK : How do we ensure that there is that high level of trust within the civil service?

“A conversation with SS”

STATE SECRETARY :

Trust is born out of shared values and a common sense of higher purpose. As civil servants, we all know, and we must continually remind each other, that we are all co-workers in the noble mission of improving the peoples’ lives and serving them to the best of our abilities.

We have instituted and developed certain mechanisms that allow us all to fulfill this mission on any working day. All our Government Orders, and other rules, regulations and procedures governing our conduct and the manner that we must perform our roles and functions, have been formulated to ensure only one thing – to enable us to provide competent, professional and ethical service to the public. It is clearly communicated within our ranks that all civil servants must understand, accept and abide by all these rules and regulations; and those, who deviate must suffer the consequence.

For example, as custodians of public assets and properties, we expect all civil servants to demonstrate ethical behaviour in the handling, use, and care of these assets. It is clearly communicated among us that no civil servant must engage in any practice that cannot be discussed openly, or allow any transaction that cannot be recorded on the books, subject to independent audit.

We continually remind our civil servants of the higher purpose of our jobs. We are not just here to earn a living...we are here to improve peoples’ lives and help them realize their potentials. Oftentimes, our efforts may go unappreciated by others, but our rewards lie in seeing that lives and communities have been transformed for the better because we did our job well.

