



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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## EMPOWERING OPERATIONAL STAFF:

### LAND REGISTRATION IN SARAWAK, MALAYSIA, 2006 - 2009

#### SYNOPSIS

From 2006 to 2009, Sudarsono Osman, director of the Land and Survey Department in Malaysia's Sarawak state, worked to make land registration processes more efficient by empowering operational staff. Before Osman's tenure, registration processes were complex, and citizens waited anywhere from a day to a year to obtain registered titles. Osman challenged the registrars at the Kuching land registry, Sarawak's busiest, to develop and implement improvements that would become templates for the rest of the department. The Kuching registrars streamlined application forms, created a queuing system, facilitated crosschecking of information, simplified complicated procedures, reorganized the workplace and stringently monitored employees. By early 2009, the Kuching registry had eliminated its backlog of 1,736 titles and achieved 100% single-day registration. Osman extended Kuching's initiatives to each of the department's 10 other divisional registries, holding superintendents accountable by systematically evaluating their registries' progress. By December 2009, the department had erased its backlog and achieved 98%-100% single-day registration across its 11 divisional registries.

*Deepa Iyer drafted this policy memo on the basis of interviews conducted in Kuching, Malaysia, in March 2011. Case published September 2011.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Before Sudarsono Osman became director of the Land and Survey Department in the Malaysian state of Sarawak in June 2006, citizens had to wait anywhere from a day to a year to obtain registered titles from one of the department's 11 regional divisions. Applicants complained about confusing forms, long lines and untended counters. Delays in title registration prevented banks from transferring funds, because proof of ownership was a prerequisite for land transactions, mortgages and

loan applications. The long and uncertain processing times led to disputes over land transfers, as sellers sometimes negotiated better deals while waiting for titles. "It was bad for development in the state as a whole, because it was causing inefficiencies in land markets and preventing the flow of capital," said Dayang Rodziah, a registrar in the division that served Kuching, the state capital. Inside the registries, large and expanding backlogs weighed on employees' morale.

Sarawak, in East Malaysian Borneo, was

Malaysia's largest and most remote state, with an area of 124,450 square kilometers and the lowest population density of all Malaysian states (at 19.4 people per square kilometer). The state's large landmass and widely dispersed population, comprising several indigenous tribes, made land management a key issue. The state operated under a Torrens land system, in which the property title constituted full proof of ownership. About 88% of the land was titled, and the rest, called Native Customary Rights land, was reserved for members of indigenous Malay tribes. The registries' purview rested solely with the titled property; staff registered titles (normally as a proof of transfer) and reissued lost or damaged titles. The registries also contributed to the maintenance of land records in the digitized Land and Survey Information System (LASIS) begun in 1984.

When he became director, Osman, a department veteran of 33 years, decided to change the way business was done. He challenged the registrars under his supervision to redesign processes. At the Kuching division, in Sarawak's capital city, four registrars led by Anthony Aboi overhauled the office that handled the largest application volume. Setting an example for others, they cleared a backlog of 1,736 titles, restructured application forms, streamlined counter processes, reordered archives, and strengthened supervision. Osman expanded these pilot changes to all of Sarawak's 11 divisions in 2009.

This case study demonstrates how synergy between upper-level management and operational staff can address organizational deficiencies and improve service delivery. Osman empowered operational staff by making registrars responsible for the pilot reform process, giving them a stake in outcomes. He concurrently worked to create and reward a culture of innovation that encouraged operational staff to take an active role in improving the organization. By expanding the

Kuching registry's pilot project to all of Sarawak's divisions, Osman made it clear that his department respected and valued employees' ideas. Both the registrars and Osman felt that success hinged on ideas for change coming from the registrars themselves, who had the most expertise on processes and the laws underlying the registry's business.

## THE CHALLENGE

In July 2006, registrar Anthony Aboi ushered three fellow employees into his small office at the Kuching Land Registry. Change was in the air. They met to discuss operational proposals from their new boss, Sudarsono Osman. The Kuching operation was one of 11 divisional land registries in Sarawak state's Land and Survey Department. Osman, a department veteran, had been thrust into the role of department director a month earlier, after his predecessor had died unexpectedly.

The department's client-service charter, a mission statement first compiled in 1993, set an operational target for its registries to register titles within seven days. However, Sarawak's registries had never consistently met this goal. The time required to register titles ranged from as brief as a day to as long as a year.

When citizens approached the counter of one of Sarawak's divisional registries to submit their applications to register land titles, they typically faced several hurdles. Applicants waited in long lines with exasperated fellow citizens to reach service counters that were poorly managed and often chaotic. The counter in Kuching "was so disorganized," recalled Rodziah, one of Aboi's fellow registrars. "People became used to quickly dropping their applications messily on the counter and leaving, because counter staff didn't directly interact with citizens. Additionally, counter staff often did not have knowledge of the processes, which involved checking application inputs for consistency with the law." Because the registry

had no system for communicating with applicants, citizens sometimes had to return several times to check whether their titles were ready. Employees, in turn, “couldn’t concentrate because we kept getting phone calls from people about the status of their titles,” Aboi said.

Because of the lack of communication and organization, many applications were lost or rejected for relatively minor filing problems. “The burden to submit the forms correctly was very large on the citizens, because if they submitted incorrectly the process could go back and forth, with miscommunications, for months,” Rodziah said. Abdul Julani, a local clerk who frequented the registry office and had become accustomed to waiting patiently in line over the years, said, “The open counter was so troublesome. We worried that our documents would be misplaced or taken by other citizens. The returning and waiting for days ... there was no other choice.”

The registrars and counter staff felt overwhelmed, especially in the Kuching division, which served Sarawak’s largest city and had the heaviest workload among the 11 registries. Backlogs developed because archives were disorganized and counter staff lacked expertise regarding complex registration processes. In early 2006, Kuching accounted for 83% of the more than 2,000 applications that were pending across the 11 divisions. “We were very stressed, because the backlog only seemed to keep getting bigger,” Rodziah said. “It was discouraging.” Staff received hundreds of complaints from citizens, reflecting the public ire with department operations.

When he became director in June 2006, Osman decided to focus on systematically improving department capacity. Earlier that year, Sarawak’s state government had sought to streamline operations in state agencies, issuing directives advocating the use of Japanese management techniques. These ideas had floated around the Malaysian public sector since

then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s “Look East” policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The state’s chief secretary had issued an informal directive encouraging public agencies to review their processes, enhance efficiency and apply for certification by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), which sets management standards. Directors of public agencies had sole discretion, however, on whether to do so.

Osman had an emotional attachment to the department, having spent all of his career working in different divisions across Sarawak. An avid football player and the head of Sarawak’s Football Association, he had coached a team from the department in the early 1980s. He enjoyed working in the public sector so much that he had passed up the opportunity to run his own consultancy in Brunei, which would have paid far more. “I even had the keys to my new office in Brunei, but I just couldn’t do it,” he said. “I enjoyed public sector work and serving citizens. ... When I came into office in 2006, I wanted to run the organization differently.”

## FRAMING A RESPONSE

Responding to the state government’s recommendations, Osman and his assistant directors at department headquarters catalogued all 207 of the department’s key work processes. “If we need to improve processes, we first need them on paper to see how we do them,” Osman asserted. He decided to focus on the processes that would create the greatest impact, both in terms of service delivery and department performance. Because land registration received the highest number of citizen complaints, it was the obvious target.

Osman initially suggested that the registrars themselves, who typically worked in back offices, checking the legality of applications and giving final approvals, should sit at the counter and interact directly with citizens. He wasn’t

surprised when the registrars balked. Osman said, “There was a mentality that the registrar was the only one with expertise on the legalities of land transfer. The registrar is like the goalkeeper on a football team: the last line of defense. I thought that the registrar is the best person to know if something is registerable, and should sit at the counter. I wanted to draw them out of their comfort zone with a friendly challenge—get them to think about alternatives—because I knew that they would refuse to sit at the counter.”

Osman believed that poor execution of processes produced poor service delivery. Laxity in counter operations and the growing backlog reflected long, complex processes that involved repetitive steps and inefficient handling of paperwork. At the same time, Osman felt that registry staff had little incentive to fix the system and little confidence that anyone would listen if they spoke up. “The employees were stressed by the backlogs, and they wanted change,” he said. “Yet, there was no incentive for them to come up with ideas. They were too caught up in the daily job. It was a real bottleneck that prevented improvement.”

“We had always worked in silos,” Aboi said. “It was considered improper to suggest ideas to the upper management—a real fear of voicing ideas. We would think, ‘I am only technical staff in the department, I can’t make an impact.’ Even if we had expertise, we didn’t feel like we could freely speak out our ideas.”

Osman had encountered a similar situation during his earlier days at the department. In 1992, he had served as superintendent of the Kuching division, where he remembered witnessing “piles and piles of titles just sitting and waiting for someone to touch them.” At the time, the Kuching division took a year, on average, to register a transaction. Osman formed a small team to expedite the process, and succeeded in reducing the average to three months. However, the changes never spread

beyond the Kuching registry. “We didn’t share our findings, our achievement,” he said. “The bosses at headquarters, the directors of the department, never found out what we were up to. We were comfortable with three months, and did not feel the need to share our findings with the other divisions. We didn’t want people to find out because we weren’t sure if we were allowed to make changes.” As director, Osman now had the capacity to change this mentality by enacting systematic changes that influenced the entire department.

When it came to land matters, Osman understood that registrars held the expertise on both processes and legal issues. In order to improve registries’ service delivery, he knew he had to demonstrate that management valued employee innovation and participation. “We needed to create an environment in which employees had an incentive to generate and share ideas,” he said.

Osman sent a circular to all department staff making it clear that he intended to focus on improving service delivery in three ways: by concentrating on process improvements and innovations, by reviewing the legal issues surrounding processes, and by developing staff knowledge and expertise. “I had to communicate that it would not be business as usual under my tenure,” he said.

Osman had his assistant directors collect and analyze data, using the LASIS computer system, on registration times across the 11 divisions. He focused on Kuching’s data because the registry received the largest volume of applications, and changes there would have the greatest impact on the department. Osman found that Kuching already registered 20% of applications within a day. Registration times for the other 80% varied to as long as a year.

Based on this preliminary finding, Osman realized that consistency was a significant problem. “It’s like the difference between a good batsman and a poor one in a game of

cricket,” he said. “A good batsman bats well constantly, while a poor one only bats well occasionally. We needed consistency to be a good player.”

Osman gathered the Kuching registrars—Aboi, Rodziah, Rorita Muhdden and Malina Mustapha—and discussed his ideas. He talked about how government services had been improved in other sectors, like vehicle registration and passport processing, and how land registration could be improved as well, despite the complications of exacting property laws. “We think that we are special because we deal with legally sensitive land, but we failed to see that this led to rigidities,” he recalled telling them. The 20% achievement of single-day registration meant that the department was capable of issuing titles in a single day. He issued a challenge: “I said, ‘Look, you can do it already. We just need to invert the statistic from 20-80 to 80-20, and then even better.’ We needed to push ourselves to do more.”

The registrars balked at Osman’s suggestion that they sit at the front counter, because they needed office space to root through files and crosscheck titles’ legality. They responded by suggesting that they devise alternative ways to meet the goal of consistent single-day registration. “This is what I was looking for,” Osman said. “There has to be leadership at all levels. I don’t have the energy to reach all the way down, and I needed to decentralize innovation to the staff with expertise while retaining oversight.”

Osman told Abdullah Julaihi, who was the superintendent of the Kuching division, and the registrars that if their efforts produced results, he would extend the changes to all divisions. He also told Julaihi that the department’s process changes, if successful, could be entered in the region’s Quality Control Circles and Innovative and Creative Circles—competitive management fairs run by the Malaysia Productivity Corporation for public and private sector

managerial innovations. “I felt that these gestures would show the registry staff that the upper management truly valued their opinions and would reward them for good performance,” Osman said.

## GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Aboi and the other registrars met several times from late 2006 to early 2007. “We sat down and really asked ‘What is wrong with us?’” Aboi recalled. The team started by sifting through complaints and talking with citizens, employees and the local legal association, whose members often dealt with the registry, to collect opinions and ideas. “We got everyone to complain about the process so that we could come to a consensus to change it,” he said.

The registrars also scrutinized the Sarawak Land Code, which set rigid limits on procedural changes. The code contained registration guidelines that ranged from the kind of information required on application forms to the correct way to crosscheck submissions. The registrars decided to take some relatively straightforward steps before addressing the tougher task of streamlining larger-scale processes.

### *Initial fixes*

Identifying the backlog as an initial target, the team worked on weekends, after hours and during downtimes. Within 30 days, the registry staff had cleared the backlog of 1,736 titles. “We were very motivated to perform well and prove ourselves,” Rodziah said.

Based on feedback, the team then decided to focus on revising application forms, which were confusing for both citizens and employees. The forms, relics from the time before computerization, required applicants to explain their land transactions in paragraph after paragraph of written text. Registry employees had to examine the text closely in order to locate specific information to enter into the computer

system. Improperly compiled forms, missing details and unclear writing resulted in data-entry errors and delays.

The registrars devised a form that fit with the LASIS system, asking applicants for specific bits of information that the land code required. “It was easy to submit and easy for the employee to read,” Aboi said. The new form helped on both sides of the counter: Applicants saved time, and registry employees had reliable information that was easier to process.

#### *Easing the counter squeeze*

The Kuching registrars knew they had to help counter staff deal effectively with the pressures and complications of dealing directly with customers while allowing the registrars to remain in back offices, where they had the files, archives and other resources needed to crosscheck and certify applications. “We asked ourselves how we could make it easier for the counter staff to check submitted applications more accurately, like the registrars in the back do,” Aboi said.

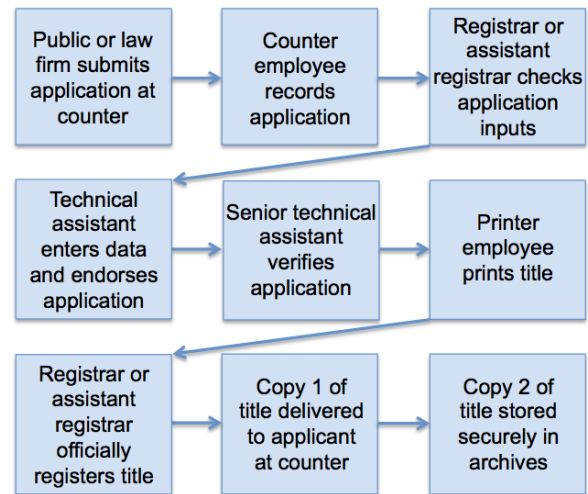
First, the registrars decided to partition the front counter, where applications often had been lost or damaged, into numbered booths, each of which would have an assigned staff member. Next, they made adjustments to manage the waiting line, where angry disputes sometimes erupted among impatient applicants. Aiming to bring order to the system and to eliminate line cutting and intimidation, the registrars decided to assign a number electronically to each applicant upon arrival, and to stamp the number on the applicant’s paperwork.

To help counter staff better understand their duties and responsibilities, the registrars created printed checklists. “We needed to train counter staff so they could make appropriate decisions on applications,” Aboi said. Each checklist identified the forms and documents that applicants had to submit before employees could forward the applications to the back office

for processing. The registrars posted the checklists on the walls of the registry as well as in each counter employee’s work area.

#### *Simplifying the system*

The application process still involved nine steps that required registry staffers to carry documents across and around the room to reach employees who handled each step (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Title Registration Process Prior to Reform**

Seniority rather than job function determined where employees sat. “The applications did not move rationally across the registry. It was very motion-inefficient,” Aboi said. “There was a repetition of tasks and motions, with applications often having to backtrack steps.”

To reduce the complexity, the four registrars used “5S” methodology to reorganize processes. 5S was a Japanese workplace organization tactic used in the Malaysian public sector since the days of Mahathir Mohamad’s “Look East” policy, which sought to emulate the productivity-related successes of East Asian nations. The system called for sorting (removing unnecessary items), straightening (maintaining a strict order of tasks and functions), systematically cleaning the work environment (both in terms of hygiene and



organization), standardizing (maintaining consistent work practices), and sustaining discipline. The Sarawak state government in 2005 had issued a circular promoting use of 5S in public agencies, but the Land and Survey Department had not implemented it. The pithy methodology caught the imagination of the registrars, who decided to apply it informally to their own processes.

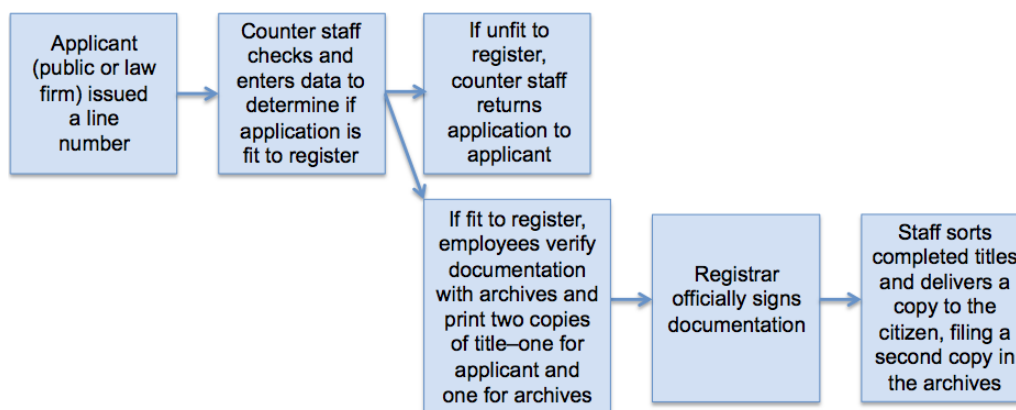
Aboi and his team decided to apply the concepts of “counter to finish” and “single piece flow,” practices that had been promoted by the Malaysia Productivity Corporation, a government-affiliated agency focused on disseminating techniques to improve efficiency. The idea was to apply an assembly-line mentality to registration operations, with each staff member responsible for a single function, no repetition of tasks or backtracking in the process, and a final product. The team removed steps lacking value and seated employees according to the process order rather than seniority. Instead of crisscrossing the room with each step, documents followed a logical, straightforward path among employees who had distinct individual tasks. The registry sent cellphone text messages advising citizens when their documents were ready to be picked up at the counter. The process was reduced to five steps from nine (Figure 2).

Disorganized archives presented another significant hurdle to fixing the system. The registry had to keep a copy of every title it produced, and the modest archives room at the back of the registry had limited shelf capacity. The constrained space made it difficult to organize archives effectively, which in turn made it more difficult for registrars to crosscheck information. Aboi and Rodziah alleviated the problem by making a deal with the Sarawak State Library to keep titles older than 25 years. Getting rid of the older archives created room for the registry to organize the newer documents more effectively.

#### *Monitoring employees*

Aboi and his fellow registrars knew that employee performance was crucial to making the system function and maintaining the work pace needed to avoid creating a new backlog. After analyzing processes, application volumes and staff capacity, they set a goal for employees to register 50 instruments (any type of land transaction application) and 20 titles daily. Employees were expected to assess their own progress in terms of this performance benchmark.

Using the LASIS system, the registrars initially monitored each employee’s output on a daily basis. However, they soon shifted to



**Figure 2. Title Registration Process After Reform**

hourly monitoring after they discovered that productivity accelerated toward the end of each day as employees hurried to meet their quotas. The close oversight rankled some registry workers. “Employees were stressed before about the backlog, but now they were a bit stressed out by the hourly monitoring,” Rodziah said. “There were some complaints, but they eventually adapted because the upper management of the department supported the changes.”

### *Scaling up*

By June 2007 the Kuching registry was registering nearly all of its applications within 39 days, and in early 2009 the registry achieved 100% single-day registration. Pleased with the success, Osman ordered the other 10 divisional registries to apply the changes that had been pioneered in Kuching. “I gave the Kuching registrars democracy in the ability to innovate,” Osman said. “To scale up and standardize, though, democracy had to disappear. It was a command that all the divisions had to follow.”

Osman assigned Aboi and the other Kuching registrars to run a two-day workshop in August 2009 to explain their changes and successes to the staffs of the other 10 divisional registries. Attendance was mandatory. Osman made it clear that he expected the changes to be implemented uniformly and fully. During the month after the workshop, Aboi and his team visited all the divisions and informally audited each unit’s operations, much as they had done at Kuching.

Osman kept close contact with the superintendent of each division to ensure efforts were on track. “I had to micro-manage, to put the project on the superintendents and make sure they complied,” he said. He monitored the superintendents closely on a weekly and monthly basis, having his staff at headquarters check the registries’ statistics on registration times and work volumes. If a superintendent did not

demonstrate sufficient progress, Osman called the individual to identify problems and push for progress. He met with superintendents on a quarterly basis to appraise their performance.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Behavioral norms were key hurdles for both Osman and the registrars. For Osman, creating what he called a “culture of innovation” in the department required institutionalizing changes in employee behavior: getting staff to think “out of the box” and to share ideas. The same applied to Aboi, who had to instill and maintain new processes among employees who were unaccustomed to change.

Osman worked to make innovation a norm by standardizing the entire exercise of piloting and scaling up as a policy within the department and by fostering healthy competition among department staff. He repeatedly told all staff that any new procedures that produced successful results would be applied to all divisions. He also worked to improve employee-manager relations through the department’s social club, *Landas*, promoting sporting events like regattas and football. “When you’re on the field together,” Aboi said, “you don’t maintain a distance, and you get to know each other really well.”

In 2009, Osman instituted an annual two-day retreat, called Annual Quality and Integrity Days, for all registry staff. The first day featured presentations by each division on ideas for improvement. Osman and other high-level managers attended every presentation. During the second day, divisions received rewards based on their performance during the past year.

Osman encouraged superintendents to visit other divisions, directing them to those that showed a commitment to improving efficiency. “We benchmarked among ourselves internally and externally,” he said. “I sent registry staff on study tours to learn about registry abroad, in Singapore and Australia.” Aboi, who attended



conferences in Singapore, said, “It made us feel really valued for our ideas, not for protocol.”

Aboi and the Kuching registrars dealt with recalcitrant staff by emphasizing that upper management was serious about change and that there was no alternative. “On the whole, though, it took time for them to witness that the changes actually made a difference—and after they saw that, they had internalized the changes,” Aboi said. “We knew that people would resist and even ignore the process at first, so we ensured compliance through monitoring. We needed to manage processes and people at the same time. The old-timers couldn’t initially accept changes. It wasn’t easy, but they accepted it once the benefits became clear. It was gradual.”

Another challenge was “general hesitance to accept that change is possible,” according to Rodziah. “Employees couldn’t believe that they could ever achieve 100% single-day registration.” Upper-level encouragement and showcasing improving statistics kept employees invested in the change process. “Eventually, staff’s motivation increased as they felt more pride and

a sense of belonging to the organization, along with our improved reputation” Aboi said.

### ASSESSING RESULTS

By December 2009, the other 10 divisional registries had incorporated the Kuching changes and were registering 98%-100% of titles in one day. Compiled using department data, Figure 3 depicts the incrementally increasing percentage of single-day registrations, department wide.

The Kuching registrars, with authorization from Osman and Kuching superintendent Julaihi, submitted their improved processes and results as a project to the regional Quality Control Circles, where they won first place among 28 private and public sector groups. At the national level, they won a silver medal, along with a Department of Public Service award. These “were the first public recognitions our department had ever received,” Osman said. “The internal and external recognition was invigorating and kept us all motivated.” In the 2010 Innovative and Creative Circle competition run by the Malaysia Productivity Corporation, the Kuching registrars won a gold

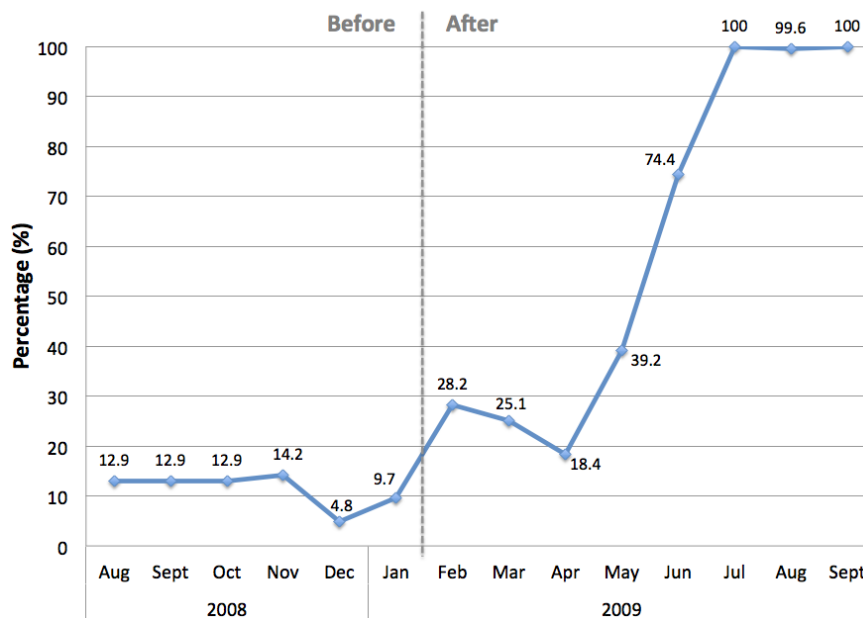


Figure 3. Progress on Single Day Registration

medal. The registrars documented every step of the process changes and received ISO certification in 2008; the previous process had received ISO certification in 2000 and 2006.

The Malaysia Productivity Corporation recognized the efficiency of Sarawak's registries, using the state as a benchmark to display to registries in the 11 states of West Malaysia. Kuching's registrars received invitations to present their changes to registries in West Malaysia. Post-2009, Osman directed registry staff to focus on changes to the land code to facilitate further process improvements. He promoted Aboi to monitor superintendents' performance on maintaining high levels of single-day registration and to study potential revision of the land code. In early 2011, the legal revisions were still in development.

Critics noted that, despite improvements in title-registration efficiency, inequalities persisted in many aspects of the land tenure system in Sarawak. Improvements in efficient registration could not, for example, prevent discrimination by both sellers and buyers, endemic in ethnically diverse Malaysia. The reform effort also could not influence corruption in the distribution of state government permits to develop and obtain titles on Native Customary Rights land.

## REFLECTIONS

Sarawak's success in improving service delivery of land registration received both internal and external recognition. "The registrars were very enthusiastic," said Shezlina Zakaria, manager of the Enterprise Innovation Department of the Malaysia Productivity Corporation. "And there was so much top-level commitment of the management—a combination that made them ultimately

successful. They really took the reflections of members of the process chain into account and made the changes to processes their own."

Anthony Aboi, who led the Kuching registry's reform effort, said, "It's not easy to change operations in a government department bound by legal regulations. We did what we could reach, what we had direct control of. We were very sensitive that we could do some things but not others, improving on fronts that did not require legal revision of the land code. Between business today and business 10 years ago, there is so much of a difference. Now, the next step is to focus on reforming the land code itself."

Dayang Rodziah, another Kuching reformer, said, "With the new process, we have time now to interact with the citizens. They're not just dropping off their applications. If they make a mistake, we can talk to them directly, on the spot, and correct it. This is the change that is most important and will prevent a backlog for good."

Aboi praised the leadership of Sudarsono Osman, director of Sarawak's Land and Survey Department. Aboi felt that the group's success derived from Osman's "ability to give us the freedom to think: to really think about how to improve and what should be done."

Osman viewed success as the product of a joint effort. "Aboi and the registrars in Kuching responded to my challenges," he said. "We embarked on this journey together, and the Kuching employees really worked hard to succeed in changing the workflow. We've proved that operational staff can have a statewide, and now nationwide, impact. If people just believe—work on building and sustaining a certain self-confidence—they can really make a difference."

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