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Australian Aid in the South West Pacific
Insider/Outsider Perspectives

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Introduction

In his introduction to papers presented at a conference on *Development that Works*! Crosbie Walsh (1993:1) cautioned that:

> … development is different things to different people; it is people, society and time specific; it is something which requires vision, deferred gratification, and hard work; it cannot be achieved without cooperation; it is dependent on the favourable interaction of political, social and economic forces at local, national and global levels, it is not inevitable, and it can so easily come unstuck.

If for 'development' the words 'effective aid' are substituted, this cautionary statement is equally cogent when examining the future path for Australian aid in 2003. Questions arise: Whose vision of development or effective aid? How do we gauge whether those involved are providing the hard work and accepting the need for deferred gratification, which may be required to achieve success? Just who is being developed - those who provide donor aid or those who receive it? What do we mean by 'cooperation'? Does it imply acceptance of the donor agency's development ideas and strategies or is there some sort of shared vision and shared planning in order to reach mutually agreed upon outcomes?

There are geographical and historical imperatives which call for a greater focus on the effectiveness of Australian aid in the South-West Pacific. In his lecture on ‘The South Pacific-Policy Taboos, Popular Amnesia and Political Failures’, Graeme Dobell (2003:2) argued that Australia needs to ‘accept its unique role in the Pacific as a great gift, not a burden’. The implications of 90 years in a colonial role in Papua New Guinea and Australia’s geographical location cannot be ignored. Security, economic, political and social issues are all closely interrelated so: ‘Australia needs to start talking in terms of community and people rather than aid and exits’(ibid:15).

While it may be an understandable temptation to exit when aid seems to be failing to achieve positive outcomes, it is clear that for Australia this is not a desirable or even achievable response. There are lessons to be learned from failures as much as from successes. As the ‘Review of Australia’s electoral assistance program to PNG’

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(AusAID 2003) points out, an analysis of what went wrong with the 2002 elections can help in planning for more effective and successful outcomes in any future election assistance project. The complex nature of Australia's relations with small Pacific island nations also means that there can be no simple conclusions or generalised prescriptions towards achieving these more efficient and successful outcomes.

The views we will present in this paper are based on our own personal experiences and involvement. The issues raised about the broad context of aid distribution will hopefully be a positive contribution towards ongoing analysis and discussion.

Insider/outsider perspectives

The aim of this paper is to present the collective and reflective perspectives on Australian aid by two rather different authors.

Ruth is a Bougainvillean who has worked within her own community and has also collaborated with Australian, New Zealand and other aid agency personnel in the development and implementation of a variety of local and regional projects and programmes. Often this has involved helping rural women tell their stories to ensure that outside aid programmes and projects are appropriate and really meet their needs (Saovana-Spriggs 1999). The Bougainville case studies and examples in this paper present an insider's perspective on Australian aid. At the same time, Ruth's educational and work experiences in Hawaii and Australia mean that she understands, and sometimes even shares, outsider perspectives, and the need to be a mediator between different cultural world views.

Maev was clearly an 'outsider', when she began teaching at the University of Papua New Guinea in 1972. However, over the past thirty years, she has learned by experience, both by visiting and staying in rural communities, and by working and sharing with Papua New Guinean and other Pacific island colleagues their hopes and frustrations in the search for sustainable development. There have been times when working as a consultant, she has seemed too much of an 'insider', especially to aid donor agencies, to other members of Australian or internationally funded aid project teams, or when providing a critique of Australian aid (O'Collins 2002). At other times, especially when writing a consultant's report or discussing follow-up activities, Maev may have been seen by her counterparts as very much the expatriate 'outsider'.

The dilemma facing those who share insider/outsider perspectives is that, whether they seek this role or not, they are often called upon to act as mediators or cultural interpreters. Writing about his experiences as a mediator in the 1950s, the anthropologist Erik Schwimmer (1958:343) ruefully commented that this was not a role he had consciously sought:

> Analysing the occurrence, I must have felt unconsciously that I would be unable to work happily within the framework of New Zealand culture and I had chosen the most accessible escape to freedom. I fear that many mediators, attempting an equally frank introspection will come to a similar result.

There is a very delicate balance which must be maintained in any critique of aid donors, whether international agencies, NGOs or national organisations such as AusAID. Constructive criticism may be what is intended, but the recipients of the critique may consider that insufficient recognition has been given to their achievements or to external factors which have limited the success of particular projects. It is also important that social planners who provide a critique of Australian aid consider what alternative paths could have been taken. This means that we should consider the warning of one South Pacific development specialist (Schoeffel 1993:E1 14) who concluded:

> Thus sociology has not come forward as a strong or assertive profession in development practice. So before we blame the aid donors for failing to insert the contribution of sociology and the careful analysis of sociological variables into their project, we must search our own souls.

With these caveats in mind, this paper outlines some of the problems and pitfalls in the journey along the road towards ‘development that works’.

Reviewing Australian Aid

In his preface to a collection of papers from a 1995 seminar critiquing *The Reality of Australian Aid*, Patrick Kilby (1996) noted that there had not been a systematic and overall review as to whether the aid program was meeting 'its own overriding humanitarian objective'. Authors called for a greater emphasis on poverty alleviation, gender awareness, and the strengthening of civil society with greater support for NGOs. The various arguments presented both at the earlier seminar and in the final publication received widespread attention.

It was therefore not surprising that in June 1996 the Minister for Foreign Affairs commissioned an independent Committee to review the official Australian overseas aid program. Many of the submissions to this Committee emphasized the need for a more coherent approach and backed earlier comments that Australia's aid programme was indeed bedevilled by mixed messages and conflicting agendas. The title of the final Report (*One Clear Objective: poverty reduction through sustainable development,* AusAID 1997), reflected an acceptance of the need to clarify Australian aid policies against the criticism that commercial and diplomatic imperatives and interests often took precedence over humanitarian objectives.

A major submission was provided by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA 1996) and published as *Development Dossier Number 38*. It noted that the increasingly important role of NGOs went far beyond cost-sharing and accountability debates. In their view (p.107): 'NGOs have an increasingly important role to play in AusAID's programs, not simply in the delivery of aid, but also in bringing their combined experience to the policy and program development tasks'. If there were to be greater cooperation and partnership with official Australian aid agency personnel and other partner agencies, it was important that NGOs would prove themselves to be 'up to the task'. A guide to monitoring and evaluating development projects by NGO agencies (Broughton and Hampshire 1997) quickly followed. Penelope Schoeffel had earlier cautioned (1993:E1.13), that governments and NGOs might also need each other:

> The conventional wisdom of bottom up in the NGO sector is not always effective in the Pacific islands region; in fact in my observation NGO projects are as likely to fail as bilateral and multilateral projects. Many naively suppose that the right approach is to bypass government and work only with NGOs and 'communities' forgetting the basis of modern prosperity is a rationally organised government framework.

As Australian aid agencies were moving to work in closer cooperation with NGOs, a general policy shift towards privatisation also meant that more and more aid projects and programmes were outsourced to commercial organisations. At the same time, the political sensitivity of aid projects, particularly on Bougainville has, from the Australian point of view, often made it difficult to ensure that political and commercial imperatives did not take precedence over humanitarian objectives. The report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs (Australia 1999:120) pointed out that:

> Australian aid could not possibly (and should not) meet the entire development and reconstruction needs of the province. The main focus of the Australian aid program for Bougainville continues to be activities which directly assist the peace process, as well as the rebuilding of damaged and destroyed infrastructure, and assistance in restoring basic services in the priority sectors of education, health and agriculture.

Did the stakeholders on the ground understand these different aid priorities? Were they expecting rather different outcomes, and if so, were these expectations realistic?

NGOs and Project Aid: Insider Perspectives

The nature and processes involved in aid delivery by the Australian government to Papua New Guinea and other Pacific Island countries have changed in the recent past from direct budget aid to tied-aid grant projects. The former arrangement involved direct government-to-government dealings. Recipient governments then involved the appropriate departments to use aid money in various national projects. However, the shift to tied aid grant has meant increased direct dealings with people in rural communities, often through local NGOs who have direct dealings with international NGOs counterparts. It has also meant a shift in outsourcing financial packages to the aid donor country's internal commercial companies.

Why the need to change? What were the problems perceived as hampering aid money from reaching the right people?

One of the major complaints in the case of Papua New Guinea has been that the responsible government of the day, and its appropriate departments, have not adequately disseminated aid money to local community projects. This is not a new complaint but one that has hung around the government’s neck for many years. It was hoped that the new focus on NGOs would be more effective, but problems soon arose.

One observer reported that the problem with the new arrangement (aid money donated directly to local NGOs in mainland PNG) was that once the people heard about the change, they quickly set up local NGOs here and there. As a result, numerous small local NGOs have sprouted overnight. What this means is that the aid money given to these numerous small-scale NGOs thins out very quickly. Everyone gets a small amount and in the end no substantial work can be achieved on community projects because there is not enough money to cover the required costs (personal communication 2002). While this may not be the situation throughout the country, it illustrates earlier cautions that by-passing local authorities who may have valuable local knowledge does not always produce the best aid outcomes.

Similarly on Bougainville, people have had their share of aid money as well as the accompanying difficulties. Aid money has come through connections with some local NGOs and through AusAID outsourcing aid work to Australian companies.

In the mid-1990s, AusAID set up its office in Buka and, after the Peace Process gained momentum, application forms for community projects were made available in the office. Only community groups and local NGOs could apply for funding for community projects, as AusAID has had a policy not to directly fund individual families or Churches.

There were mixed reactions to this aid assistance. Overall, it was a relief to receive financial assistance to assist in rebuilding and resettling people back into their villages and normal lifestyle. On the other hand, the people found the application forms much too complex, the English too difficult and the requirements too stringent. The level of detail was more intimidating than inviting and this made people feel powerless. An alternative model was the New Zealand Aid office's application forms. These, the people felt comfortable with as they were written in simple English, only in about two or three pages, and with less stringent requirements.

Another complaint was that the communities who had filled in the forms experienced long delays waiting for the outcome. It took the office quite a long time to process the applications. This led to general dissatisfaction, frustration, and suspicion as to how the aid money was being distributed.

A further problem was over the local person employed by AusAid in its Buka office, who was an officer from mainland PNG. People preferred a Bougainvillean person to work with AusAID officials at the AusAID Buka office. There were conflicting views on the matter. Bougainvilleans at that time had very negative views and attitudes towards both Australia and Papua New Guinea's involvement. This was a highly politically charged time in the region. Meanwhile, AusAID officials were concerned about the question of whether financial aid would be distributed fairly throughout the region. One of the questions, AusAID may have asked at that time was, 'Would a Bougainville person not manipulate the distribution of financial aid to favour one group over the other?'

In 1997, Ruth attended a community-AusAID meeting with the northeast coastal communities. The local mainland PNG officer working for the Buka AusAID office was present and two AusAID consultants, one a local person and the other an expatriate. The discussion centred on AusAID's apparent slackness in processing project applications. Application forms were filled and sent by a number of communities to the Buka AusAID's office and people had been waiting for responses over long periods of time. Community representatives at the meeting spoke of a three to four years waiting period. The discussion became so heated that the mainland local AusAID officer was obliged to leave the area and return to Buka. His professionalism was questioned and no one could guarantee his security as well. However, as the two consultants were known to the community and in the past had worked for the North Solomons Provincial government, they were able to remain and continue the discussion with the local community.

After the Joint Standing Committee visited Bougainville in March 1999, they commented on 'the political sensitivities and complexities inherent in providing aid to Bougainville' but concluded that given the expectations of different groups and opposing factions, 'criticisms were in a sense inevitable' (Australia, Parliament 1999:121). It was also inevitable that there would be very different views on the benefits of an outsider who might be more objective in assessing applications, compared with an insider whose appreciation of local knowledge might involve closer links to particular groups in the area, or be influenced by personal views on how the delivery of aid might influence the Peace Process.

At the same time, it was clear that a more open and understandable application process would have gone a long way towards minimising tensions and increasing a sense of ownership and local involvement.

Outsourcing and local involvement

As part of reconstruction aid to Bougainville, AusAID contracted Australian based companies to do major construction works, particularly on roads, wharves, schools, and the installation of water tanks in village communities.

In 1998, when Ruth was on the West Coast of the island, she saw many water tanks lying about in a village. At the village meeting, she asked some of the men, why they could not put up the water tanks. 'AusAID has its own company that brought them over here and it is the company's responsibility to put them up', was the answer they gave.

It was clear that an effective initial feasibility study to select appropriate sites for the installation of water tanks had not been undertaken. The project was well underway before the company was faced with the reality of life in this rural community. The village houses were mostly thatched roofs, and apart from a few houses at the local administrative centre, there were very few iron-roof houses with gutters. If tanks were installed to collect water from these selected houses, the shared benefit to the whole community also needed to be considered.

Many young Bougainvillean men are former BCL, other private companies or government employees who have been left unemployed and have been living in their village communities. The feeling among this group of people and the general population is that local skilled tradespeople and professionals should be employed to do construction and similar work. The majority hope is that by giving them these responsibilities, they would regain self-confidence, and a sense of ownership and authority in the overall program of local economic recovery.

Other aid agencies have seen the installation of water tanks as being a way to meet a number of development goals. The project could assist unemployed youth, not only to learn new skills, but also to receive this training from local technical teachers. Prior consultation with community leaders, and particularly with local women, could ensure that water tanks were located in the most accessible positions and all members of the community were involved in the planning and implementation of the project. Training in maintenance and upkeep meant that the project would have longer-term benefits and that it could be seen as part of the overall community recovery effort.

On the other hand, this was a more time-consuming and labour intensive process as far as the aid delivery process was concerned. No doubt AusAID management had to take these factors into consideration. A large-scale project, which involved bringing in an Australian company, meant that many tanks could be distributed in several locations and, at a later stage, outside technicians could carry out the installation. Inevitably there was little sense of local ownership and community leaders became observers of the process rather than initiators or implementors. Their perception of the process was that it demonstrated a lack of confidence on the local people's ability and capability.

In summary, this example raised some broader issues about aid distribution:

(a). Lack of local participation promotes a sense of inadequacy, a lack of self-confidence and a sense of powerlessness.

(b). Decisions on the process of aid implementation processes often seem to remain the domain of aid donors when a more participatory partnership would be more effective.

(c). The perception of aid becomes confused with multinational commercial activities. When Ruth talked to a group of men, one a mathematics graduate and friend from university days, they commented that this project was *bisnes bilong waitman, em ol bai wokim.* (This was the commercial aid company's own business and it had nothing to do with the people).

(d). An initial feasibility study should focus on how the benefits of a project will be shared by members of a community.

The Joint Standing Committee received a number of submissions, which pointed to similar problems and stressed the importance of encouraging greater local involvement in development projects (op.cit:136). It reported that there was a widespread view that: 'The prospects for increased long-term gains by using local resources would outweigh any extra time which might be taken to complete particular projects.'

Politics on the ground:

Apart from assistance with water tanks, AusAID and the New Zealand Aid initiated a number of other projects to promote economic growth in village communities. In recent years, particularly in 2000 and 2001, the provision of cocoa seedlings and solar cocoa driers have been very popular projects with AusAID and the European Community,

On one occasion Ruth visited a village where a solar cocoa drier had been installed. This solar cocoa drier was designed for a community that consists of about six villages, with a population of between 300 to 500 people. When she enquired about the ownership, she was clearly told that the solar cocoa drier did not belong to the community but belonged to a particular family. A member of the family responsible then said that they had obtained a loan of K2,000 to pay off the overall cost of all the materials purchased to build the structure. Afterwards, as there seemed some confusion, she inquired around the neighbouring villages. The people had a different story to tell and related it as a fresh but bitter memory. In the final analysis, they all knew that the solar cocoa drier was given in the name of and for the community. It was a trial project and hence did not involve a family or individual obtaining loans from the bank. The AusAID office in Buka assisted the people in this project. The whole structure also came with a sign saying that, 'the solar cocoa drier' is a community project. But, in this case the sign was not put up on the side of the road as others had erected theirs along the north-east coast road on the island.

The question remained: How could such a useful community project have turned into a family project? The main complaint was a lack of communication and the use of English in negotiating with the AusAID officers. Those with good communication skills and who were able to use English to their advantage had been able to obtain assistance as the work could proceed more quickly, and there were relatively few hiccups in finalising the project. The successful applicants were more highly educated, understood the process and were able to captivate the AusAID officials. The non-English speaking members of the community were isolated from the whole project and felt that they had been ignored and marginalised.

This is an important issue as often communication problems create unnecessary barriers between aid officials and the community. This may in turn increase the tendency to deal with things quickly and ignore or avoid difficult issues.

At a time when conflict resolution is particularly important, greater local involvement would ensure that the benefits of a development project are shared equitably, rather than becoming the focus of increased tension. Otherwise, aid projects become the political spoils of those with greater negotiation or communication skills.

NGOs, Women, and the politics of image building

This is neither an analysis nor a criticism of the work of the international and local NGOs but a reflection on whether aid money is meeting people's needs adequately. Whether consciously or unconsciously, there are a number of underlying motives and intentions that run deep in the networks between local and international NGOs. Some of these involve the politics of image building; cultural clashes in ideals and values;

and the lack of tolerance or, perhaps a better word, 'patience' in trying to develop effective partnerships.

The politics of image building is quite a tricky one because it does not involve all members of local NGOs but a minority, especially at the leadership level. Of course, not every local NGO plays the political game and many, particularly small-scale Church based NGOs, stay well out of it. One or two large local NGOs are much more on the ball in this game particularly those that have close connections with reputable international NGOs, mostly with those in Australia. There is an incredible pressure to maintain a high standard of work performance in and amongst international non-government organisations. The motives behind the pressure to perform vary but there are a few important and interdependent ones. These include the need to maintain organisational, national and personal reputations, to meet the requirements of United Nations Conventions, and to maintain levels of performance and financial viability.

Maintaining an excellent reputation of an organization in the eyes of the international community and respective governments implies many things. Leaders have to be reasonably professional and effective in what they do and be supported by an equally effective team. The system itself must also be effective, manageable and as internally conflict-free as possible. But, what is the cost of maintaining such a demanding reputation?

Local NGOs that are in direct contact with the international community of NGOs get drawn into this image building process. Local NGOs leaders are required to fill in forms with politically correct jargon. Gender empowerment or empowering women, women's rights, equal opportunities for women, children's rights, human rights, poverty alleviation in Third World countries, crime prevention, conflict resolution, peacemaking, peace-building, peace-monitoring, peacekeeping and so forth become popular and important buzz words. The use of correct jargon is important because it shows a level of understanding of international goals by local partners and it assures local applicants of financial support from overseas aid donors or sponsors. At the same time, it reassures overseas partners that the rules are being followed by the local partners, so that they have a degree of trust in local leaders' capabilities.

There is a delicate sense of confidence building in the local leader's personal worth, and the reputation of her NGO. She is responding to these assorted entries and requirements because she too wants a piece of the pie. However, what is fundamental to her group is the financial assistance for the community and this involves building a personal and organisational reputation, and good rapport with aid agencies in donor countries. In order to achieve this, local leaders are sponsored to travel to conferences overseas to present their work, achievements, and future projects for future development. This is often good and essential networking. On the other hand, global jetting has the potential to remove the leader(s) from dealing adequately with women's realities on the ground and could cause conflicts between women leaders. Often women are not informed of the purposes and benefits of these sorts of international networking. But the pressure is on, time means money. In order to obtain the necessary support, she has to produce, and impress the aid donors and the international community. Essentially, the driving force is the politics of 'image building'.

We do not doubt the wonderful achievements by many of these hard working people serving their communities. Throughout the conflict in Bougainville, many of the women who are now leaders of reputable non-government organisations have given themselves to work for their communities in very difficult and life-risking or life-threatening situations. But there is that underlying powerful thin thread that runs through local and international non-government networks – the politics of image building.

The Millenium Peace Prize

The Leitana Women's Development (LWDA) Agency on Buka Island is an agency assisted by the Melbourne based Women's International Development Agency. The LWDA has its roots in the original local group formed in 1992 on Buka Island and the neighbouring Islands. Its initial work focused on humanitarian assistance for war-affected and displaced families. Following some initial international connections, it developed other areas of concern, such as aids prevention and education and a counselling centre for war-affected and displaced families and individuals. All this was done with the assistance of its international counterparts particularly with the Melbourne based Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

In 2000, the Leitana Women's Development Agency in Bougainville was awarded the Millennium Peace Price. The president and one or two of her executive members travelled to New York to receive the peace award.

The announcement came as a shock to many other women leaders of other women's organisations (local NGOs) on the ground. They raised a number of questions with me at the July 2001 Bougainville Women's Summit held in Arawa in Central Bougainville. How did this come about? How come we (other women leaders) did not know about this? A number of organisations have worked in similar life-risking situations but in even worse conditions than the Leitana Women's Development Agency. Why were we not given the privilege of being informed and be able to select women leaders to receive the peace award? The under-current of bad feeling ran high among a number of women leaders and some members of local NGOs who have had direct dealing with international NGOs and rumours were rife. At one point, it was even said that the award was more than a million US dollars. Whether this was known to be a wild exaggeration or not, it made a local juicy story.

During the Summit, there was still a lot of ill feeling about the matter. To avoid further rifts between herself and the other women leaders, the president of the Leitana Women's Development Agency sent a representative to the summit. Participants recognised the need to resolve the conflict and recommended that the women leaders reconcile with one another and with other Bougainvillean women living in and outside the island.

It is important to stress that the useful and valuable work undertaken by LWDA is not in dispute. But why was LWDA the only organisation to be recognised and who was responsible for the selection? Could the Millenium Peace Prize have been shared by two or three local women's organisations? Was this really to give some international NGO a 'pat on the back' by the UN?

Although the goal of the Millenium Peace Award was to give recognition to those women who had worked so hard for peace, the process was clearly flawed as the lack of clear and open communication and explanation fuelled unnecessary inter-group internal conflict.

Women's Rights – A western conceptual construct!

During the First Bougainville Women's Summit held in July, 2001 in Arawa, Central Bougainville, about 200 women from all over Bougainville attended the summit. On the second last day of the summit, women were grouped according to their districts to discuss a range of issues, one of them being 'the need to set up a Bougainville Women's Council under the Autonomous Government and the Bougainville Constitution'. A women's group from the west coast of Bougainville included women who had defected from their home group and had joined the Leitana Women's Development Agency. There was a heated debate over the issue of being disloyal to their home group. The woman who was accused of being disloyal to her home west-coast women's group defended herself by playing the 'women's rights' card.

Having defected to Leitana Women's Development Agency, she was now being trained to recognise her 'rights' as a woman and having recognised this, she was now exercising her rights in her community.

What concerned me [Ruth was one of the core organisers and a participant at this gathering] about this 'women's rights' card game was the fact that, the woman playing the card knew very little about the implications of this western women's rights concept. What would happen if her young daughter played the same 'rights' card, whereby she could easily abuse such rights. For example, if she wished to explore her sexual fantasies, she could easily purchase a packet of condoms in a chemist shop. Coming from a very traditional and conservative society, the mother may be in for a lifetime shock, particularly when considering the extent to which her daughter might exercise her rights.

Furthermore, she comes from a matrilineal society in Bougainville where women hold positions of power and privilege, and in claiming the western notion of women's rights, she was in fact, saying she did not have power in her traditional culture and was now assuming and exercising new found rights. She seemed to be unaware that she belonged to a culture and a society that upholds women's status. On the other hand, was this merely her misunderstanding of the notion of women's rights and inability to translate the concept and relate it to what existed in her own culture?

These sorts of western concepts of 'women's rights and independence' assume that a woman has no rights at all in her traditional culture and society. In other words, she is devoid of power, rights, privileges and independence. The imposition of these concepts could be potentially damaging and conducive to building up conflicts between and amongst individuals, families and clan groups.

I do recognise the need to promote women's place and participation in politics, education and health and in many other areas. However, the issue that women and men in Bougainville need to consider is: 'How might women's important place in traditional society be recognised and transposed to the political arena in contemporary Bougainville society?' In addition, there is a great need to establish comparative studies and analysis in these areas. What must be avoided is the continuation of the imposition of western ideas, philosophies and ideologies on local people, without understanding indigenous ways of life or cultures in their traditional societies.

The Bakery Project: an aunt's story

Cultural values and ideals continue to clash with each other, those of the west and those of traditional Bougainville or PNG.

During 2001, while staying in Bougainville, I used to visit an aunt who had a little bakery project. I would buy whatever she baked on that day, and chat with her before returning to my village. During those visits I noticed some rather unusual characteristics in her project.

Customers were few and far between. Why, I wondered?. There was a potential market right there in the village community. But the problem was that not many people had cash in their possession in the aftermath of the conflict as the local economy had been very slow in building up.

She was also not getting as much assistance from her family as she normally would with other daily activities. She had to chop firewood, fetch water, knead the flour, and then bake and sell the bread. Only one of her sons helped now and then to manage her finances.

The Bougainville Women's Council was given a substantial amount of financial assistance by the European Union. A micro-credit scheme was one of the ways in which the aid was used. Individuals and/or groups of women were encouraged to apply for a loan in the scheme. My aunt is of the early missionary educated lot of people and her educational achievement was pretty minimal. One of my aunt's sons helped her with a loan application form and upon being granted the loan, he continued to assist her in managing her finances.

The objective of the scheme was to empower women in rural areas by providing loans which would elevate them to become independent and empowered in many areas, including becoming financially independent and politically empowered. The implication was that women at village level or in traditional societies are powerless or are not given greater opportunities to participate in political debates and at other decision-making levels. By introducing such schemes, it is assumed that an individual woman's profile will be raised and hence, will have greater independence and increased participation in the political arena for instance.

Yet, this type of individualism is not in the Bougainvillean social-cultural make-up. The culture is clan-group-community oriented rather than individually oriented. Yes, there is space for individuals but that is a different matter altogether. That is why my aunt's family related to her project in a different way - although they were benefiting from her meagre earnings. The whole set up was individually based, it isolated the family and hence, the family distanced themselves from her and the project.

In the final analysis, the underlying principle and purpose of the project disengaged my aunt from her family and the community. This is because, particularly in the village community context, individual monetary gain does not necessarily equal greater empowerment.

Are there other ways of working with women in village communities?

The lesson from this example is that small-scale projects to assist women at village level must not begin with the idea that a woman or women are independent of every other person in the community. Everyone is integrated into different social groupings and networks - family, lineage, clan based or even women's fellowship groups. This means that individualism is not culturally applicable as it is in the western world. In general, aid should target these sorts of groups rather than individuals. Even in urban areas, where it might be thought that there would be exceptions, cultural and social connections and obligations often exist and need to be taken into account.

There is a fundamental problem for traditional societies such as in Bougainville, PNG and the Solomons 'in ensuring the visibility of women's power'. Trying to identify women's traditional power through western eyes, may in most cases only mean that it is neither visible nor recognisable. The 'downtrodden beasts of burden' label sometimes given to women in these societies legitimises this invisibility. It is this fundamental lack of understanding the cultures that needs to be addressed in order to more effectively disseminate aid for women's betterment and the improvement of life at village communities.

Aid and Peace Monitoring in Bougainville

In November 1997, as part of the Bougainville peace process, a Truce Monitoring Group (TMG) under New Zealand command and consisting of 250 unarmed peace monitors, including 19 civilians, from Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand, arrived on the island. The important role played by New Zealand as an honest and disinterested broker had been evident during the peace negotiations, which led to the establishment of the TMG. This was of vital importance in the initiation and continuance of ongoing peace monitoring. The different ways in which the TMG was viewed on the island and by peace monitors who were part of this regional initiative have been recorded in a collection of papers by TMG members and others on different sides of the conflict (Rebecca Adams 2001).

At the end of April 1998, a Peace Monitoring Group (PMG) took over, with the same mandate and regional involvement, with additional personnel from Vanuatu and Fiji but under Australian command. In addition to continuing tensions and the potential for conflict between different groups on Bougainville, there had been and continues to be a deep-rooted suspicion of Australian involvement. Australia's historical colonial involvement and its ongoing assistance to the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and the Papua New Guinea police made it essential that the shared peace-monitoring role was not compromised. The Australian Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee's Report (Australia- Parliament 1999:136-138) endorsed the neutral and separate role of the PMG to ensure it was, as far as possible and practicable, not directly involved in the delivery of aid. At the same time, as the Minister for Foreign Affairs stated (Downer 2001:41ff.):

> Australian development assistance to Bougainville, delivered through AusAID, has been carefully targeted to knit in with other elements in the peace process. In doing this, Australia has been prompted by an understanding that the restoration of basic services and a return to normality will provide a peace dividend to Bougainvilleans.

In 1999, the Joint Standing Committee's evaluation of the PMG's first year in Bougainville was generally very positive, suggesting that, despite the ever-present tensions and potential for conflict, the overall operation was a very valuable contribution. Inevitably, however, the stated policy of separation of aid delivery and peace monitoring roles has been much more difficult to maintain on the ground. Reflecting on the problems which arose, one member of the PMG (Luke Foster 2001:121) observed:

> An issue that caused us angst was the provision of aid. Unfortunately the issue is not cut and dried. While the PMG is not in the business of aid it was a continual thorn in our side. Many hours were spent discussing with Bougainvilleans why we were unable to respond to seemingly reasonable and minor requests.

Other problems were inherent in the process of trying to develop a shared team approach, with male and female members from different cultural backgrounds, and civilian and service personnel. As the majority were Australian, male, and from service backgrounds, it is not surprising that those with other perceptions of particular situations and of the need to address local concerns in a different way, often felt that their voices were not being heard. Initially, some officers were not used to working collegially with personnel from Fiji and Vanuatu, and did not always recognise the value of their cultural knowledge and professional expertise. One civilian PMG member (Melissa Bray 2001:133) also reported that often information obtained from women when visiting villages and meeting with local community members was not taken seriously enough:

> This sort of information disappears as the PMG forms its overview of Bougainville - information that seems small but can have a serious impact locally.
>
> As an aside, I am not sure that the PMG was very attuned to cultural values on Bougainville. As the only woman in our team site, (with 20 men) I was sometimes taken to be the cook, or providing other services to the team. I had to work to clarify my role. The PMG needs to consider these issues, as they affect the way the operation is perceived, valued and respected by local communities.

Another civilian monitor (Yvonne Green 2001:143-148), while reporting on the very positive aspects of her experience, considered that the PMG uniform, while meant to reassure villagers that this was an official, neutral and trustworthy group of outsiders, could be a barrier to acceptance and understanding.

These were some of the worries and concerns of members of the PMG, outsiders trying to carry out a very difficult task in a strange and unfamiliar environment. But, significantly, their concerns about a lack of communication and possible misunderstandings of their role were mirrored in this account of PMG sponsored activities, which Ruth gathered during her visits to different villages:

> In the first year of the Peace Monitoring Group (PMG) establishing their base in Buka, some members began checking aidposts and schools. In one of those investigative trips, one or two of the members of the PMG (or maybe they were Red Cross or health officers in PMG uniforms?) were dropped and picked up by one of their helicopters in a village along the northern tip of Bougainville. In about a half an hour, they had assessed that the aidpost needed spraying for termites. Once that was done, the villagers were told that the aidpost would receive medical supplies. A local worker was sent with chemical sprays. He ripped apart the inside of the building, sprayed the timbers, spent the night and then headed back to Buka the next day. For almost three years, that little aidpost sat unrepaired and empty of medicine. The people waited and waited and waited. It was medicine they were waiting for. If it were something else, the community would not have been so frustrated and worried but it was medicine and really, the basic supplies of chloroquine, cough medicine, and antibiotics.

Another question was: Why, even if official aid had to be kept separate, could it not be a priority to encourage local economic recovery and development?

PMG teams often employed local women to do laundry for them and this injected much needed cash into the local economy. However, Ruth points out that it is still a mystery as to why the peace-monitoring group and its administrative and support networks never bought local foods in local markets. PMG’s food was shipped over mainly from Australia and New Zealand. Coleslaw, lamb flaps, New Zealand fish, Australian potatoes, carrots and assorted fruits such as nectarines, apples, etc, etc. In the meantime, local markets were flourishing again with fresh food in abundance. Individual members may have bought one or two things in the markets but as a group no bulk-purchases were made in the local markets.

Why was that? Explanations may have related to lack of knowledge of local food and concern that it might be less healthy, or that sufficient quantities and continuity of supply could not be guaranteed. But the overall impression gained by some local people was of a colonial and contemptuous attitude that local food was not good enough and that the people could not be relied upon.

In this particular situation it seemed that cultural distance and lack of local knowledge meant that relationships that could assist peace-monitoring roles were not pursued and the economic development aspect of the elusive and prized 'peace dividend' was diminished. It was interesting that Ruth's experience replicated a similar experience which one of Maev's nephews reported to her when hitch-hiking around mainland Papua New Guinea in 1974. He found that the expatriate missionaries and government officers with whom he stayed rarely went to the local markets to buy food and commented that, apart from when he stayed with villagers, he had eaten more local food when staying with her in Port Moresby.

An almost insurmountable problem is how to convey these concerns to policy-makers and implementing organisations without appearing to be unappreciative of the good work being done. As a number of submissions to the 2002 Joint Committee review of 'Australia's relationship with Papua New Guinea and Pacific island nations' pointed out, it is important that a critique of Australian aid is seen as just that - a critique not a condemnation - or a suggestion that the aid is not needed and valuable. The question is how to make it more effective and accessible to people on the ground. The need for a process, which involves respect for local knowledge, open communication and understanding, and encouragement of small-scale development activities, is widely accepted. At the same time it seems impossible to implement.

Perhaps one answer is to look back on what seemed to work in the past, during a period when AusAID was not so visible on Bougainville. This was a time when volunteer agencies from a number of countries, rather than commercial aid agencies, provided many of the outsiders who assisted in the implementation of aid projects.

Overseas Volunteers in Bougainville: An insider looks back

This leads me to share my work experience with volunteers - mainly from Canada, and England with a few Germans and Japanese - prior to the outbreak of the conflict in Bougainville. AusAID and New Zealand Aid did not exist in Bougainville during the good old days.

This group of professional workers did not come in consultancy suits and black briefcases nor did they live or dine in hotels - understandably, since they were on volunteer salaries. But one of the most impressive and memorable characteristics of these people is the fact that they lived a very down-to-earth kind of lifestyle, and they also projected this in their work with local counterparts, the provincial government and people at village level. Of course, as is expected in any work environment, there were problems here and there but their attitudes and commitment to their work and the people was very positive, co-operative and tremendously encouraging to their local counterparts. What was very crucial about the nature of the cooperation was the fact that professional skills of locals were greatly enhanced on the job. Enhancing professional skills in a non-intimidating-friendly environment was the appropriate approach. At the same time, unless it was clearly necessary, there was no pressing need to attend courses outside the province, as the need was being taken care of in this partnership approach. An additional advantage to this approach was that it meant that male or female government officers did not have to leave their families for over long periods of time attending additional courses. This was a highly cost effective approach.

Communication is as crucial as professional skills and partnership. The overseas professional volunteers had learnt the lingua franca, Tok Pisin and used it occasionally and effectively, both at village community and official government levels. Using Tok Pisin eliminated a lot of misunderstanding in this cross-cultrual context. What was also very important was time spent with people. Regular visits to monitor progress of projects were just as crucial. The volunteers were prepared to spend hours or even days and weeks with people in village communities working on village projects. They made frequent visits to village communities to monitor progress of the projects.

Developing local ownership is not as simple as buzzing about, but it is a task that requires taking people through their visions of development, until such time when people feel they are ready to carry on without professional assistance. Only then can the professionals let go and let the people take complete control. Essentially, in the end, it means people taking control of the directions and goals of what they perceive is good and appropriate developments for their society. This seems to be a workable alternative, but it is a process that takes time and commitment.

There was also a great deal of co-operative listening and learning from both sides and co-operative work by the two parties. This style of work established a sense of certainty and trust. It is something that is built over time rather than by quick successions of visits by consultants and external commercial companies. It is worth knowing whom you are working with or for, as it reduces any feeling of being patronised or exploited and lessens any lack of trust. It also counters the belief that aid has become just a bankrolling institution for aid workers.

In summary, overseas volunteer work reflected the following qualities:

(a). They were well-qualified experts in their fields. The Canadians often had work experience with their own indigenous people, and many had experience with other third world countries.

(b). They had no hidden agenda nor were they burdened with a shared colonial history.

(c). They did not dictate community projects, as the communities defined and organised their individual projects according to the immediate resources and landscape. The volunteers merely assisted and provided basic training at community level.

(e). Volunteers' participation in community projects started from the very beginning, until people felt comfortable working on their own, and that was the point when the volunteers left them alone.

(f). At the same time, volunteers continued to make regular visits to communities running their own projects, and provided assistance when required.

(g). Above all, they were relaxed with community people and promoted self-confidence in the people with whom they worked.

The nature of community projects

A number of successful local projects were initiated during this period. They were all on a community, rather than individual or family basis and were established within the provincial government's structural framework. They included the following:

(a). Small-scale community farming projects. These supplied urban townships with fresh vegetables while maintaining an adequate supply for village communities. There was a mobile market set up with trucks selling vegetable produce in villages along the Bougainville highway. This included tomatoes, watermelon, carrots, English potatoes, local root crops, lettuce and many other fresh vegetable produce.

(b). Community fishery projects established in coastal areas. On one island, north of Bougainville, a community fishery project even managed to survive into the crisis, until members of the Central BRA looted the shop and the electric generator that supplied electricity to the whole island.

(c). The Provincial Government had support systems for these community projects. Training institutions, many of which had been specialised training centres, were set up both at urban and district levels and were wholly funded by the Provincial Government. These centres catered for the professional needs of the community people in rural areas. In addition the Village Industry Research Unit provided an avenue for collaborative new initiatives with local communities and the provincial government. One of these was a small-scale timber-harvesting project purposely built to meet the needs of the local communities, rather than to export the product internationally. This was an excellent approach to sustainable development.

(d). The provincial government offered financial assistance through what was called a 'kina for kina' scheme. It essentially was a dollar-to-dollar matching scheme. The only requirement in the scheme was that the people came up with the same amount of money they wished to obtain from the scheme.

(e). Monitoring and reporting on the progress of projects were shared activities with professional volunteers, relevant provincial government officers and members of the community This type of evaluative work assisted in building up people's self-confidence as well as trusting one another's skills and capability.

(f). Community boards were elected and were given the task to take charge of projects, rather than individual members of the community. These enterprises left individual members of the community total freedom from financial requirements and conditions with regard to loan payment. Similarly, members of the community were at total liberty to go out and fish in their own time and sell whatever amount of fish they wished to sell. Additionally, people were not required to obtain fishing licences nor were they required to meet fishing conditions and taxes, as in highly industrialised countries. There was so much freedom in these sorts of cash generating small-scale activities which, in my view, suited the nature of traditional societies.

Overall, these community projects did not exist or operate in a vacuum as many local NGOs do now. Prior to the conflict, the North Solomons Provincial Government was able to provide adequate support for community based projects so that they were seen as part of overall development planning. These were examples of 'development that works' and also of positive partnerships between overseas volunteers, local communities and provincial government.

Current planning for the autonomous Bougainville Government provides some hope that the successful lessons from the past can provide a similar framework for future successful partnerships between communities, local and provincial government and outside donor agencies.

Outsider reactions

Many Australian NGOs share Ruth's concern that aid has become too commercial and that outsourcing has vastly increased the distance between aid workers and local communities and organisations. The conflict on Bougainville also shows how our colonial history cannot be ignored but must be taken into account. This issue is addressed in a trenchant critique of Australian regional defence policy by Christine Stephenson (an academic commentator from the United States who spent some time in Australia). Looking at tensions in relationships within the region she observed that (2002:120):

> They are also reminders that it is easier for the colonized to world-travel to Australia than it is for the Australian to world-travel the other way to knowledge. The colonized has been steeped in the lessons of adjustment to western ways of security in these matters. The colonizer is the one who will find it difficult to put aside arrogant perceptions of the bleak to work toward a less defensive posture of empathy.

Yet, even if this is so, a climate of shared dialogue between Australian policy-makers, aid workers and other local stakeholders must be established so that alternative processes can be developed. And, as the following exchange between Maev and Senator Hogg illustrates, (Australia, Parliament Senate Committee hearing, 18 October 2002, Hansard Proof Copy, p. 16) critics also need to acknowledge and affirm the very real commitment of many aid workers.

> Senator HOGG - Can I put it this way: We have become involved in five-star diplomacy, rather than two-star diplomacy.
>
> Prof. O'Collins - Or no-star diplomacy.
>
> Senator HOGG - It was described to me in another inquiry that people spend their time in the Hyatts - and I am not knocking these places - rather than in lowlier motels where the ordinary people might be conversing with each other.
>
> Prof. O'Collins- And, if you are sleeping in a village, people will come and talk to you, but how many high-powered officials do that. It is expensive, it is time-consuming and they would not be there.
>
> Senator HOGG - Is that what you are getting at though - that it is the way in which we conduct our business, as much as anything else, that is the problem?
>
> Prof. O'Collins - Yes, but I think sometimes you see people doing wonderful work, and that is why one immediately starts qualifying. You see people doing wonderful work, who are sensitive and can pick up the wariness and silence in someone and give them time. Then you go to other meetings where you hear: 'It's time to for us to finish, no further questions,' and out they go, and you know that there are further questions. So I would not say that the problem is all five-star.

Another issue raised in this Senate hearing was whether in local communities AusAID should make more direct use of Church based organisations. For some this seemed to present a better option than merely channeling aid through commercial agencies or larger NGOs. But, it was also clear that this would not provide a simple and straightforward solution to the problems of individuals or small sections of a community benefiting unequally. As well as competition between Churches, internal divisions might also result in inequitable or inefficient aid delivery processes. There was also the ever-present problem of those who would be marginalised because they did not belong to the group who had won the aid contract.

Success or failure may be measured very differently, depending on the perspectives of those assessing a project. A great deal can be learned from failures, particularly if the development journey is measured over a longer time frame. A related question might then be: If we encourage people to take over, make decisions, and participate in the planning of a project, should we not also accept that they have the right to fail?

However, it is also clear that sound management and supervisory and accountability procedures are very difficult to achieve without some sort of functioning bureaucratic framework. Yet, often the regions or countries who most desperately need donor country support are those with the most chaotic and ramshackle systems of governance. During the hearing, Hank Nelson raised this problem, noting that some might argue that ‘it is a lot easier to effect improvement in a country with part-functioning institutions than one without functioning institutions’. However, there were strong humanitarian arguments against withholding aid for these reasons.

Conclusion: The importance of sound local knowledge

A major barrier to developing an effective and flexible aid delivery system is the impact of outsourcing and the fragmented and uncoordinated nature of many aid donor responses, particularly in times of civil unrest or natural disasters. Over time, it is clear that the outsourcing of Australian government aid to Papua New Guinea and other south-west Pacific countries has led to an erosion of corporate cultural knowledge and contextual understanding of the region. Sean Dorney (1998:15) cited an Australian journalist Richard Laidlaw, who argued that:

> Part of Papua New Guinea’s problem is that its image in Australia has more to do with imperfect vision, than with a tutored understanding made deep by prolific exposure.

Dorney concluded that:

> With a few notable exceptions, the Australian media pays scant attention these days to Australia’s former colony unless there is high drama such as during the Sandline crisis in March 1997 or a disaster relief effort such as the one in which the Australian Defence Force played such a high- profile role during the drought induced famine of 1997-98. The rest of the time it is the bizarre and tragic, especially violent crime involving expatriates that fill the limited agenda.

This lack of ready access to up-to-date information on social, political and economic circumstances is further increased when communities in need are themselves marginalised from the mainstream society. The following example from Solomon Islands illustrates how these interlocking problems can hamper the delivery of appropriate and timely aid to disaster-effected communities.

In the first week of 2003, the year had scarcely begun when reports appeared in the Australian media of the terrible damage caused by hurricane Zoe, which struck the Solomon Islands outlying Polynesian atolls of Tikopia and Anuta. The situation was further complicated by continuing violence and ethnic conflict, which had led to a major breakdown of basic services and government infrastructure in Solomon Islands. It appeared that the chaotic state of governance in Solomon Islands meant that there would be no immediate action taken to assist people in desperate need. After several days, a request was made to the Australian government to investigate the extent of the disaster. Photographs taken on initial reconnaissance flights - one by the Australian Air Force and another by a private cameraman showed absolute devastation and estimates of possible accompanying loss of life varied wildly. Pressure mounted for the Australian government to just by-pass government to government protocols and provide aid directly (*The Canberra Times* 1/1/03:2, 2/1/03:2 and 3/1/03:2 and *The Australian* 2/1/03:1).

When a commercial helicopter sponsored by *The Australian* finally landed on Tikopia and direct contact was made, it emerged that the people had saved themselves by retreating to high-ground 'hurricane caves', used for generations in just such emergencies. Curiously, although several 'experts' who had lived on or visited Tikopia were interviewed, no mention of the existence of these caves had been reported in the media. The Australian and New Zealand government had worked in unison to provide fuel for a patrol boat, the charter of another ship and relief supplies which were now on their way to the atolls. (*The Canberra Times* 4/1/03:4) and *The Weekend Australian* 4-5/1/03:1). At the same time it was clear that ongoing assistance would be needed as houses and food crops had been destroyed and there was no way of the islanders communicating with the outside world.

A thoughtful editorial in the *Canberra Times* (4/1/03:C5) pointed out that, it was reasonable to be concerned that it had taken several days for appropriate action to be taken, and that there were lessons to be learnt. However it noted that:

> Levelling criticism at the Australian Government for failing to respond earlier is also unwarranted. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, pointing out that the Government immediately offered assistance, adds that the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands has to be respected and that any help must come after the appropriate request from the Government. That process and protocol still stand despite the dysfunctional state of the Solomon Islands Government.

The way in which governments, and private individuals responded to this particular disaster reflects the interconnected nature of social, political and commercial factors which all have to be taken into account by donor countries. If its people are to remain a viable community, longer-term assistance to rehabilitate Tikopia will also involve all three elements in the aid equation. There are no easy answers to urgent development needs, and, in the face of disaster, both traditional and modern responses have their place. As Sinclair Dinnen pointed out (1999:71), this will only occur if we develop the ability to '*draw upon the best from indigenous and foreign traditions and deploy them in creative ways'*. But, this will also only happen if all those involved in the process share a respect for and understanding of each other's cultural world view, both in general terms and in the particular local context.

In 1996, Penelope Schoeffel completed a report for the Asian Development Bank, which looked at sociocultural characteristics of Pacific Island countries. She pointed to the inadequacy of statistical information on the status of Pacific island women and noted some of the major differences in and between countries (pp. 33-34). She concluded:

> In the Pacific islands, sociocultural issues are often crucial, since the calculations of rate of return often includes assumptions about incentives and levels of productivity, which may be erroneous. If the social specialist finds social issues, including those affecting productive capacity, that are likely to compromise the success of the project, under the present system such a finding is unlikely to be accorded much weight by other technical specialist, whose mandate is to design a project.

However she noted this might be crucial to success or failure as: ' Understanding the situation and realities of Pacific islands is essential to the achievement of more effective programs of assistance.' (p. 147). This understanding is particularly important for all those concerned with aid in the Bougainville context. Yet, as we have argued, and many concerned observers have noted, local knowledge and understanding is in short supply, often among those whose mandates are to design and implement aid projects with financial and time efficiencies in mind. Many aid workers and others involved in peace monitoring and reconstruction were clearly unaware that:

> In a communal society such as Bougainville, where the maintenance of relationships is fundamental to life itself, social capital must be considered an integral part of all development efforts (Peacock-Taylor et. al. 1999:5)

We also need to be aware that aid is only a part of the wider reciprocal gift relationship process. There are political, economic and social benefits for a wide range of stakeholders so the notion of ‘donor’ and ‘recipient’ may have only limited meaning. While the political and economic benefits may sometimes prove a source of disquiet, social capital may also be enhanced. This was evident in the personal accounts of TMG and PMG members who frequently noted that they had gained so much from their time in Bougainville. This was because they, like so many others before them, had been able to accept that they had come to learn as much as to contribute.

Whatever the differences, the failures and successes, the shared partnerships and the lost opportunities, it is clear that the struggle to make aid more effective will have to continue. As Maev pointed out to the Senate Review Committee (O'Collins 2002:11):

> We need to retain and build upon the wisdom and experience gained from what has already been accomplished. With the benefit of hindsight, we may be more prepared for the next crisis, and learn from past successes and failures. This is our neighbourhood, so, however frustrating and challenging the task, it cannot be abandoned.

So, as Ruth concludes: What is the matter? Why is it so difficult to follow this path? We are supposed to be friends, we are supposed to know each other better as we share a history of the past and will share a history of today and of the future.

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