Reaching the peak: Contrasting experiences for NGOs in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea

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Introduction
In December 2002, the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) and the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) responded to requests from the non-government organisation (NGO) sector in the Solomon Islands for a program focused on the skills of NGO leadership and management.1 In response, the CDI/ACFID Solomon Islands NGO Leadership and Management Program began in March 2003, with the additional aim to strengthen the Development Services Exchange (DSE) to fulfil an effective role as the Solomon Islands NGO peak body. The program produced high levels of satisfaction within the NGO sector and DSE will be officially re-launched as the NGO peak body in late 2004. CDI and ACFID conducted a similar NGO program in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 2001. However, enthusiasm for the PNG program was short-lived and it did not continue in 2002. The similarities between these two NGO programs, conducted in seemingly similar Melanesian nations, prompted the question of why an NGO leadership and management program that was so successful in Solomon Islands was not successful in PNG.

After briefly considering the complexities of creating an NGO peak body, this paper provides an outline of the factors that enhanced and inhibited the success of the two Melanesian NGO programs.2 The paper highlights the crucial role played by external factors in determining program success and draws brief conclusions on the extent to which program success can be controlled. Relevant factors are identified as: local ownership over program design and delivery; the sociopolitical context; and role of strong NGO leadership. In the case of Solomon Islands, the political situation had opened a flow of dialogue between NGOs, government and stakeholders, creating an immediate need for NGOs to improve sectoral effectiveness and gain representation under a peak body in order to achieve desired outcomes. This environment and provision of leadership was conspicuously absent in the PNG program which contributed to poor program outcomes.

The complexities of creating a peak NGO body
NGOs are not a homogenous group. Typically they vary in their size, scope and mission, making peak body representation complex. The establishment of an effective NGO peak body in PNG and Solomon Islands is made more complex because Melanesian society is diverse and fragmented. Remote communities are not only geographically isolated due to poor infrastructure, but also in terms of access to information, resources and political influence. Ethnic and linguistic diversity create
additional cleavages within society. In PNG, for example, there are over 800 linguistic groups (May 2003:2). Douglas (2000:4) notes there is also an increasing rejection of ‘local’ and ‘national’ in the Melanesian state, giving rise to regional identification with island, province or ethnic groups, which are regarded as ‘homegrown’ and more responsive to people’s needs. 3

Furthermore, the history of PNG’s NGO peak body, the PNG National Association of NGOs (NANGO), demonstrates that if the creation of a peak body is largely driven by external forces, for example donors, NGO attitudes towards that peak body will not be as supportive as to an initiative for collective action which stems from within the sector. The Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific (FSP) established NANGO in 1988–1989 and received funding from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in part because donors were keen for coordination of PNG’s diverse NGO sector. In particular, FSP wanted PNG NGOs to gain access to donor funds during implementation of the Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP), a program supported by the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and UNDP (Dickson-Waiko 2003:259). However, when FSP introduced to NANGO a number of NGOs funded from the US, this sparked tension between indigenous and international NGOs about foreign control of NANGO. Partly as a result of this tension, some indigenous PNG NGOs then refused World Bank funds (Dickson-Waiko 2003:259).

The development of a peak body in Solomon Islands, however, was initiated within the sector to improve NGO effectiveness by the Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT). SIDT, established in 1982, was seen as an agent of change, lobbying the government on behalf of the community and providing development education, awareness raising and training (Roughan 1994:146). In 1983, SIDT established the Development Services Exchange (DSE) as an ‘informational clearinghouse for NGO activity as well as lobbyists for its members’ (Roughan 1994:149, emphasis added).

Program ownership and sustainability
The CDI/ACFID NGO programs in Solomon Islands and PNG responded to a need identified by local NGOs and they were similar in design and content. Both combined local workshops with a study tour to Australia. Topics covered in the workshops included: NGO monitoring and evaluation; staff training and management; financial management; accountability; and relations with government and stakeholders. The programs were flexible, responsive and as participatory as possible. The main difference lay in the facilitation of the workshops and the promotion of local ownership throughout both programs.

The workshops in Solomon Islands were designed and facilitated by Emele Duituturaga, a pacific development specialist who grew up in Solomon Islands, and Abraham Baeanisia, the chair of DSE. Emele Duituturaga and Abraham Baeanisia conducted a Training Needs Assessment that combined local knowledge and their first-hand experience with NGOs to deliver appropriate and relevant training. Furthermore, the three NGO leaders who took part in the Australian study tour were selected by their peers. Maintaining their involvement throughout the program, Emele and Abraham accompanied the NGO leaders to Australia on the study tour and provided support during negotiations with government and NGO representatives. The
process, even when conducted in Australia, was based on local ownership and the involvement of local leaders. This was a key to the success of the program.

The PNG NGO program was primarily facilitated by external trainers from CDI and ACFID. The Australian trainers were experts in their field and had an understanding of Melanesian culture, political systems and customs, however, they lacked ‘insider’ knowledge and local credibility. Local ownership during the PNG NGO program only developed as the program progressed. A steering committee comprising NGO participants was established to consult with NGO personnel between workshops and the final stage of the program was the first time PNG NGOs completely owned a training process (Crooke 2001:1).

It is uncertain whether the strong involvement of external trainers and facilitators directly contributed to poor outcomes during the PNG workshop. Mike Crooke, who facilitated the training in PNG, noted that people often regard external trainers as the experts and are reluctant to be trained by people from their own community. Despite this, PNG participants often see workshops conducted by external trainers as ‘one-offs’. Without long-term donor commitment — even when there is an identified need — workshops are not always prioritised (pers. comm. Crooke 2004). External facilitation of the process helped and hindered program outcomes. Participants valued the training from outsider experts, yet they did not completely own the process, and it is likely that this contributed to the lack of enthusiasm given past rejections of donor control over indigenous NGOs in the 1980s.

**Times of crisis: Seizing the opportunity for change**

The sociopolitical context during the implementation of the NGO programs affected the level of success. In Solomon Islands, the near collapse of the state created the need for societal change, while the Australian-led regional assistance mission gave NGOs the opportunity. While conflict and poor government performance in PNG also created the need for change, it appears that a degree of aid fatigue has nullified enthusiasm about the possibilities for change.

**Solomon Islands**

In 2003, Solomon Islands was described as Australia’s ‘failing neighbour’ (ASPI 2003) suffering from corruption, lawlessness and poor government performance. Australia’s Prime Minister, the Hon. John Howard MP, stated that ‘it is not in the interests of this country that we have failed states on our doorstep, and it would be a failure of our duty … not to extend a helping hand to a neighbour who’s asked for our help’ (Howard 2003). The implications of the crisis in Solomon Islands were seen as engaging ‘Australia’s interests at many levels, from short-term economic, consular and humanitarian concerns to our most enduring strategic imperatives’ (ASPI 2003).

Tensions and violence in Solomon Islands date back to 1996 and primarily occurred between Malaitan settlers living in Guadalcanal Province and Guadalcanal people (Kabutaulaka 2001:3). The Townsville Peace Agreement in 2000 was intended to end armed conflict, however, a number of flaws in the agreement created further conflict (Tuhanuku 2001). While the conflict has been attributed to ethnic tension, Kabutaulaka argues that its origins lie in the ‘poor policies of successive governments, poorly planned large-scale resource developments, the inequitable distribution of development benefits and the need for institutional and constitutional
changes’ (Kabutaulaka 2001:2). Similarly, Roughan (2002) stated that ‘government’s failure to serve its citizens is one of the most important reasons for our current unrest ... governments have been seriously failing their people since 1989’.

Within this context, in July 2003, Australia responded to a formal request from the Solomon Islands’ Governor-General (Downer 2003) and led the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) with the aid of the governments of Fiji, PNG, New Zealand, Samoa and Tonga. The initial plan was for the restoration of law and order, followed by stabilisation of the economy, improved service provision and the strengthening of democratic institutions. According to Paul Tovua (2004:3), Chair of the Peace Council of the Solomon Islands, RAMSI ‘[had] given us hope … people’s only hope for the future’. RAMSI provided the opportunity for NGOs to assist in securing the delivery of services and restoring order (see Roughan 2002). The objectives of the CDI/ACFID program to strengthen NGO leadership and management throughout the provinces, in particular to develop an NGO peak body, coincided with the needs of the NGO sector in this environment to gain representation and become involved in rebuilding the state.

RAMSI also provided an opportunity for NGOs to access additional funding. Solomon Islands relies heavily on foreign aid and Australia is Solomon Islands’ second largest donor (after Japan). Australia’s aid to Solomon Islands took a gigantic leap from A$37.4 million in the aid budget for 2003–2004, to A$202 million with the introduction of RAMSI (see AusAID 2003b and AusAID 2004b). NGOs were able to access a proportion of these funds under AusAID’s Australia Cooperation with the Solomon Islands (ACSI) program (AusAID 2003a). The availability of funds through such means as AusAID’s program and the CDI/ACFID program, combined with the opportunity to voice the NGO position, created the incentive for a more professional and unified NGO approach. The CDI/ACFID program provided the means to make things happen.

The first CDI/ACFID workshop took place during the introduction of RAMSI in July 2003. In addition to training, the workshop provided an opportunity to develop an NGO position on RAMSI. Participants met the Hon. Paul Tovua, Chair of the Cabinet Taskforce on the Intervention, and Mr Chris Elstoft, Policy Advisor to the Special Coordinator’s Office. The Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon. Clement Rojumana, referred to NGOs as partners in nation building and commended NGOs on their ‘complimentary and leadership role’ (ACFID July 2003). NGO leaders also expressed the NGO position on RAMSI to government officials and parliamentarians in Australia during the study tour in September. Representing their NGOs in this context empowered participants early in the program. Participant attendance at workshops increased and requests were made to extend training to all provinces.

This program drew attention and support from PIANGO, AusAID and NZAID, giving broader credibility to the process. Representatives from these bodies participated in the workshops, strengthening links between the government, NGOs and donors. Commitment to DSE as the peak body within the NGO sector has also been strengthened, as was demonstrated by the local community funding DSE’s building repairs (pers. comm. Wendt 2004). National and regional support for strengthening the capacity of the NGO sector provided opportunities for change and, in the nation building process, NGO have been valued by government and international players as
agents assisting with change and reform nation wide. The NGO program — particularly its focus on strengthening the NGO peak body — provided much needed training, given the sociopolitical context, for NGOs to operate more effectively and strengthen sectoral representation.

**Papua New Guinea**

PNG, like Solomon Islands, has suffered from political upheaval, social unrest and economic mismanagement, and has been described as a ‘vast sinking ship caught in an ocean of chaos, political turmoil and social inferno’ (Stella 2003:11). Inter-ethnic tension, violence and lawlessness has occurred since the early 1970s (May 2001:8). Events such as the Bougainville Crisis in 1988, which brought the country close to civil war and led to the closure of its gold and copper mine (one of the world’s largest and a primary source of revenue and export earning for PNG) (May 2003:3), as well as the Sandline Affair in 1997,¹ are examples among many of the crisis in PNG. However, the same urgency for regional assistance did not occur as it did with the Solomon Islands.

Whereas Solomon Islands was described as Australia’s ‘failing neighbour’, PNG has been described as a ‘disorderly democracy’ (May 2003). PNG’s political institutions are weak, the parliament is ineffective and violent outbreaks occur during elections. Yet regular elections are held, each change of government has followed constitutional processes, and the judiciary has maintained its independence (May 2003:1).

PNG has received assistance through countless development programs and structural adjustment plans. Multilateral and bilateral development assistance has come from major donors, including Japan, Australia, Germany, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the European Union (Hnanguie 2003:134). While development aid to PNG has resulted in some improvements in the areas of health, education and infrastructure, controversy surrounds the overall effectiveness of aid over the past few decades.

In the period 1975–2000, development assistance to PNG saw more failures than successes (Hnanguie 2003:140). The ADB’s 1998 Country Assistance Plan concluded that 11 of the 16 ADB projects were unsuccessful. Similarly, the World Bank reported a 22 per cent failure rate for its projects in 1968–1978. More alarmingly still, in 1978–2003 the failure rate rose to 60 per cent (Hnanguie 2003:140). Today, PNG remains heavily dependent upon foreign aid and close to two-thirds of the population lives below the poverty line (Hnanguie 2003:137–8). In 2003, PNG ranked 132 out of 175 countries on the UNDP’s Human Development Index.⁷

One commentator’s perception on the situation in PNG is the belief that over the past few decades a degree of aid fatigue has emerged and people are sometimes sceptical about what can be achieved (pers. comm. Crooke 2004). The CDI/ACFID NGO workshop reflected this sentiment. Although 22 participants registered for the November 2001 workshop, only 14 attended (Crooke 2001), suggesting that training in leadership and management was recognised as desirable but not crucial.

NGO complacency during the workshop was also reflected in the decision by participants not to re-establish NANGO. The PNG NGO leaders identified existing channels through which they could engage with the government and stakeholders if
and when the need arose (pers. comm. Crooke 2004). The Economic Forestry Forum, a coalition of NGOs focused on environmental issues, the National Council of Churches, a coalition of religious NGOs, and the Madang NGO Forum, a regionally based group of NGOs, were effective at representing NGO interests in these specific areas. Should the need for broader representation arise, participants decided a representative from each of the aforementioned bodies would come together. A permanent peak body was regarded as valuable, but would only be formed if necessary (pers. comm. Crooke 2004).

**Fostering effective leadership**

Strong leadership from within NGOs is perhaps most likely to motivate people’s involvement in training programs. In contrast to the PNG program, the Solomon Islands CDI/ACFID NGO program reflected continuity of strong leadership and a commitment to fostering the development of future leaders in the NGO sector. This motivated participants, provided sustainability and contributed to program success.

Fowler (2000:164) reinforces the importance of strong leadership suggesting that in comparison to the government and business sector, organisational performance of a non-profit organisation (such as NGOs) is more significantly influenced by the organisation’s leader; their behaviour and values. A leader’s consistency between rhetoric and practice, organisational calling and vision play a crucial role in developing internal trust within the organisation (Fowler 2000: 165). Abraham Baeanisia, who conducted training in the Solomon Islands program while serving as the chair of DSE, was also the director of SIDT and chair of the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO) in the mid 1990s (Roughan 1994:149). His continuity in the process and his expertise in and commitment to the NGO sector has earned him respect, trust and credibility, which in turn added validity and sustainability to the CDI/ACFID program. The ability of the Solomon Islands NGO sector to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the RAMSI mission is partly attributed to the guidance of Abraham, who motivated the sector and kept optimism high.

On the other hand, the involvement of NGO leaders was not as central in the PNG program. Internal sustainability relied on the ongoing involvement and support from external personnel. While respected NGO leaders were involved in facilitating the final stages of the workshop in November, their ongoing involvement within their own organisations was not guaranteed. Some NGO leaders at the workshop were frequently absent from their workplace, attending conferences and regional meetings. They were not often available to play a leadership role in strengthening the capacity of their NGO (pers. comm. Crooke 2004).

The problem of renewing NGO leadership in PNG also appeared to be due to a lack of training for emerging NGO leaders. As discovered during the CDI/ACFID workshop, there is an expertise gap between NGO leaders and their staff. In some cases this was due to lack of resources, time and money to conduct necessary staff training. In other cases, the lack of training was perhaps due to an unwillingness of NGO leaders to share their power downwards.

Problems with NGO leadership in PNG are not new. In 1989, the World Bank’s Tropical Forestry Action Plan aimed to develop NGO capacity and was implemented
through a new government partnership with NGOs under NANGO (Dickson-Waiko 2003:260). NGO leaders were given control and ownership over the process, however, contrary to the expectation of donors, some used their position as a platform to pursue individual interests, while a number of volunteers left their positions to take up private consultancy positions (Dickson-Waiko 2003:261).

Similarly, in the 1990s a number of NGO leaders used their involvement in these NGO organisations to launch their own political careers (Dickson-Waiko 2003:248). A number of NGO leaders also held, and were still holding, positions within government (pers. comm. Crooke 2004). Respected leaders pursuing alternative careers, combined with a lack of training for future leaders, hindered the development of NGO leadership. The NGO response to the CDI/ACFID Solomon Islands program demonstrates a greater willingness to foster the development of emerging leaders. For example, in Solomon Islands the NGOs ensured that one of the three leaders on the Australian study tour was a person identified as a future leader.

**Conclusion**

The contrasting outcomes of the CDI/ACFID NGO programs in Solomon Islands and PNG demonstrate that development programs do not occur in a static environment. While certain factors can be controlled to promote success, many factors cannot. Local ownership of a program can be promoted through design and delivery, but, without strong leadership or participant motivation to drive the process and create sustainability, this is insufficient in itself to ensure success. The development of effective leadership skills can be fostered by program facilitators if there is commitment and guidance from existing leaders to sustain the process once the program ends. The sociopolitical context in which the program exists cannot be controlled; but the program can be sensitive to the context in order to enhance program success. While design and delivery can guide the process, local factors are the most decisive in determining outcomes.

**Notes**

1. CDI is an Australian democracy promotion institution, which receives its core funding from AusAID. CDI works with developing countries in the fields of good governance and democratic institutions, providing training courses, technical assistance and networking. CDI’s main sectoral focus is on parliamentary process and judicial process. CDI also works in the fields of civil society, the media and political parties, and covers the broad themes of human rights and accountability. ACFID is the peak council for approximately 90 Australian non-government development organisations (NGOs). The focus of ACFID’s work is international development, advocacy and development education.

2. Program success in the paper is measured in terms of the stated outcomes of the program — to develop leadership and management skills and to strengthen an NGO peak body.

3. This relates to the issue of *wantokism*, a Pacific term meaning one language. The needs of a person’s *wantok* have priority over those of the nation (Tovua 2004).

4. Mike Crooke was a private consultant employed by CDI and ACFID as the course manager of the PNG NGO program. Prior to this, Mr Crooke was employed at ACFID.
5. For a detailed account of the origins of conflict in the Solomon Islands see Kabutaulaka (2001).

6. For details on the Sandline Affair in PNG, see May (2001).

7. The HDI is calculated based on the average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development — a long and healthy life, level of education and a decent standard of living. See the UNDP 2003 HDI table at <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2003/indicator/indic_15_1_1.html>.

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