Challenging 'integrated conservation and development' in Papua New Guinea: the Bismarck Ramu Group

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This paper examines the Bismarck Ramu Group's challenge to models of integrated conservation and development through a distinct Papua New Guinean model of community partnerships and self-reliant strategies. Strategies that empower indigenous communities and increase their self-reliance are central, as is engaging indigenous communities in the process of deciding on conservation measures.

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People in Papua New Guinea are very much connected to their land—it's their guarantee of survival—it is like money in western society…it is like a mother to a baby (John Chitoa, Bismarck Ramu Group Co-coordinator).

Where development has been linked to conservation, there has been huge controversy over the setting of priorities, the authorship of projects, and the nature and meaning of both 'conservation' and 'development'. Integrated conservation and development projects (ICADs) have been established for many years around the world, yet in Papua New Guinea their history has not been a happy one. They have consumed enormous resources yet have often both alienated local communities and failed to control the onslaught of natural resource industries. This has led some indigenous groups to reclaim the process, and to redefine conservation and development in their own terms.

The Bismarck Ramu Group (BRG) in the Madang region of Papua New Guinea is one such group. It has created a model that is attracting national and international attention. In 1999 the group split from a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)-sponsored ICAD project and focused instead on programs of villager mobilisation, led by indigenous workers, and with no material incentives. Some successes in establishing wildlife management areas

and a range of other village-level achievements, combined with a popular approach that makes links with traditional practices and local histories—and so resonates well with local people—have led other Papua New Guinea and international groups to seek training and contact with the Bismarck Ramu Group, so as to learn and adopt some of its methods.

Rejecting the ICAD model

ICAD projects began in Africa and India in the 1980s (after the failure of many simple 'development excluding' nature reserves) with the aim of 'building linkages between the welfare objectives of local communities and biodiversity conservation goals by providing communities with development support' (McCallum and Sekhran 1997:4). They generally involve some form of material incentive for local communities to agree to protect natural areas. The incentive for some form of development is seen as compensation for forgoing exploitation of the natural environment that is to be protected. These protected areas are usually linked to biodiversity 'hotspots'. However the compensation model tends to assume that local poor people are likely to be driven to destroy the natural value of their locale, and have few of their own indigenous resources for environmental management. Large international non-government organisations, such as the World Wildlife Fund and Conservation International have committed heavily to ICADs, often in collaboration with resource corporations and development banks. They maintain that such projects have been successful in promoting both rural development and biodiversity conservation (World Wildlife Fund 2000).

From their origins in Africa and India, ICAD projects spread to Papua New Guinea. By the late 1990s there were many different types of projects in Papua New Guinea,

including the Oro Butterfly Project, backed by the PNG Department of Environment and Conservation and AusAID (Oro Province); the Kikori Basin ICADP, run by World Wildlife Fund-USA (Gulf and Southern Highlands provinces); the Lak ICADP, backed by the PNG Department of Environment and Conservation and the UNDP (New Ireland Province); and the Bismarck Ramu ICADP, backed by the PNG Department of Environment and Conservation, the Christensen Research Institute and the UNDP (Simbu and Madang Provinces) (McCallum and Sekhran 1997). The Bismarck Ramu Group sprang directly out of the failures of the Lak ICAD and frustrations with the Bismarck Ramu ICAD. However, the Kikori Basin ICAD and the Oro Butterfly Project illustrate some typical problems with ICADs.

The Kikori ICAD set out to develop small income-generating activities for Southern Highlands communities in a resource and biodiversity rich area. The World Wildlife Fund was backed by the giant oil company Chevron and, later on, the World Bank and the US State Department. The World Wildlife Fund claims that the project has successfully integrated conservation with community capacity building, education and eco-forestry (World Wildlife Fund 2000). Chevron said it considered its money well spent, because 'WWF will act as a buffer…against international environmental criticism' of its oil operations in the area. When village-based eco-forestry operations collapsed, the project sourced 'eco-forestry' timber from a company that was logging sensitive mangrove areas (Rowell 2001:np).

The Oro Butterfly Project arose from concern over land clearing for oil palm, which had endangered the habitat of the world's largest butterfly, the Queen Alexandra Birdwing butterfly. AusAID funded a several-million dollar ICAD project to research the butterfly, prepare education and conservation plans, and offer economic and social

57

incentives to local communities. These incentives included support for cash cropping (coffee and cocoa), rainforest products, eco-forestry, captive butterfly breeding, school support, water supplies and health services (AACM 1995:5–6, 38–43). One year into the project, the local community had expressed concern over basic infrastructure, particularly roads and health centres. The project staff had installed some water tanks, assisted with some health contingencies, and was 'lobbying' to improve the roads into the area (Papua New Guinea 1996:2–4). When malnutrition problems were discovered in the plateau area, a rabbit breeding program was introduced, but this was poorly conceived and ended up a failure. The final report to AusAID suggests a successfully completed project, but independent investigators found disillusion-ment, poverty and failure in its wake (O'Connor 2003).

The Bismarck Ramu Group built on the experience of the Lak ICAD. John Chitoa, now co-coordinator of the group, worked in the Lak ICAD. He says that it set about trying to compete with logging companies, offering an 'early reward scheme' to groups already receiving royalties from logging. The idea was to get villager-landowners to agree to leave certain trees still standing, and still have access to royalty equivalents. The project began in 1992.

> But we found out later, towards the end of 1993/1994…basically people were confused, they thought that the integrated conservation and development idea was just like another developer coming, it was just like another New Guinea Lumber Company (Chitoa 2003b).

The project was run by the PNG Department of Conservation, backed by the UNDP. Because there were hundreds of thousands of kina in the project, the villager-landowners thought that they might get more from the ICAD than from the loggers, so their expectations were high. But the project came to Lak after logging was underway, and did not have the resources to compete with the logging company, which had tactically slowed down its use of incentives, and set up its own 'landowner companies' (Cooke 1997), while the ICAD used up its own resources. The planned eco-forestry, small-scale logging projects did not work, as the community saw them as a poor alternative to established payments (albeit short term) from the big loggers (Chitoa 2003b; McCallum and Sekhran 1997).

The Lak Project (1993–95) was assessed by the UNDP as a failure, but lessons were documented in two books: *Race for the Rainforest* (McCallum and Sekhran 1997) and *Race for the Rainforest 2* (Ellis 1999). The project was said to have failed because a large bio-diversity conservation area was not created, and logging followed the delivery of a range of incentives to landowners, intended to help them stop the logging (Chitoa 2003b). The lessons included an awareness that ICADs and their material incentives could create dependency and passivity on the part of landowners; that cooperative endeavour, 'partnerships' and 'participation' are easily spoken of but may often be superficial; that landowner attitudes towards conservation are critical; and that logging companies had a comparative advantage (that is, facilitated access and no real regulation) in dealing with local communities in the PNG political climate (McCallum and Sekhran 1997:51–77; GEF 1998).

The second UNDP report noted that there were many problems with the 'material incentives to compensate communities for opportunity costs' approach used in Lak, including the generation of unrealistic expectations of 'cargo' (western goods and services) amongst local people, and the fact that 'ICAD projects cannot compete with mining or logging companies…in the

provision of immediate material benefits to communities' (Ellis 1999:6, 64–65, 68). Long-term education and landowner awareness was required. John Chitoa says that one of the big lessons learned from Lak was that

> [w]e should not play the same game as the loggers…the company's strength is money and assets…that stuff was raising expectations in the field…[and] we are not in a position to compete…our strength lies with information, knowledge and skills (Chitoa 2003b).

The Bismarck Ramu ICAD Project (1995–99) began in an area that was more protected from the imminent threat of logging (and large-scale cash cropping) but suffered from many of the same problems. Members of the Bismarck Ramu project were dissatisfied with the ICAD design, which separated conservation and development (Ellis 1999). Such an approach, it was said, could not be truly driven by the landowners. As a result, several of the project team departed from the ICAD method and eventually created the Bismarck Ramu Group, breaking away from the PNG Government and the UNDP.

Flip Van Helden, who worked with the Bismarck Ramu ICAD, says that a change in approach was driven by team members during this project (Van Helden 1998; Van Helden and Schneemann 2000). Discussions within the team in 1996 led to the recruitment of a community development specialist, and a shift to a more 'people-centred approach', where the biologists were eventually 'marginalised' by the social scientists (Van Helden 2001:242). Yet a shift away from the use of material incentives and towards 'community entry', where the priorities of local communities were factored in, was said to be 'fundamentally incompatible with the underlying economistic premise of [the] ICAD idea' (Van Helden 2001:245). One effect of this was that the ICAD, in the later days of UNDP funding, was no longer primarily a conservation project.

It's difficult to preach conservation… there were other things on people's minds—health and education. We would help them look at their village—problems that they faced. As we built trust with them, as the relationship grew, we could possibly talk about looking at the environment (Lalley 2003a).

Several changes took place before members of the Bismarck Ramu ICAD finally broke from the UNDP. First, community entry, which involved listening (without previously fixed conservation agendas) to villagers' concerns, was regarded as the first step in a community development process. This was not to say that community organisers had no agenda; their own social and conservation concerns were simply accorded a more deferential place.

> The Bismarck Ramu community-entry strategy…did not aim to push conservation, but rather through a gradual process of trust building, local problem analysis and an emphasis on self-reliance [aimed] to find out which communities in the area of interest could have a potential interest in resource management issues, and would therefore be suitable partners for further project work (Van Helden 2001:270).

Second, all material incentives were abandoned. No money or 'cargo' (for example, motor vehicles and tinned food) were to be associated with their entry into a community.

> The Madang project staff sincerely came to believe in this new 'non cargo' approach, treating conservation as a self-help rather than a lack-of-economic-incentives problem (Van Helden 2001:247).

A third major change was that all inter-national workers but one (the trainer, Barry Lalley) had left the project by 1999 (Lalley 2003c); no international workers were

involved in community entry. This was not because the group disliked or did not have good relations with foreigners. It simply was a product of Papua New Guinea's post-colonial history (including the 'aid' and resource industries) that foreigners are always associated with influence and the allocation of 'development' moneys, including bribes. BRG Finance Manager Tamana Tenehoe, a Bougainvillean woman and core group member, explains

> …if we have a foreigner in the team, the first picture that people in the village will get, they will expect something from outside…Whereas when we have our own local people going into the communities I don't think it raises their expectations (Tenehoe 2003).

Community development and landowner support

After the break from the UNDP, the ICAD members formed the Bismarck Ramu Group, which was located on the same premises but with new funding links. Funding was secured from two European foundations (the Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation and Bread for the World), which have generally taken a 'hands off' approach, knowing and trusting the group and its work. The Bismarck Ramu Group developed a group of eight full-time staff and 16 part-time community organisers (Chitoa 2003a).

BRG members generally stress the Melanesian nature of their approach, and indeed in their village work there is constant emphasis on the value of customary relationships, on building self-reliance, and on environmental management based on traditional principles. As one member stressed

> …BRG is basically a mobilisation of local people—to empower local

people…BRG wants to help people to decide what is important for their lives and future generations—and to see the relationship between the environment and how their ancestors have lived for centuries (Guman 2003a).

However, when looking at the Melanesian features of this approach, it should be recognised that there are also international influences. The Bismarck Ramu Group's initial community development trainer, Barry Lalley, who still sees himself as an 'outsider', says

> [t]hey wanted to try to make the organisation as Melanesian as possible… But it's been interesting to watch these influences because as they try to keep the organisation Melanesian, they also adopt outside thinking—they really can't help it in this globalised world (Lalley 2003c).

One such outside influence was the writings on 'participatory democracy' of Ann Hope and Sally Timmel. Referring to some African cultural practices, they drew attention to the broad community-level consultation, the 'weaving together of a social fabric' and the importance of women's roles in a process of development. Even research within indigenous communities required community consent, developmental 'aid' that benefited only élites should be rejected, and the 'trickle down' effect of broad economic growth was worse than useless (Hope and Timmel 1996:4–6). The PNG experience of the 1980s and 1990s seemed to prove their points: that economic growth would not help marginalised peoples, and that policy formulation without community input was 'a recipe for disaster' (Hope and Timmel 2001:214). Since independence, Papua New Guinea has seen record export performance, coupled with very poor social indicators (see Anderson 2003:15–16), and

large mining developments that had led to war and massive social disruption.

This emphasis on 'process' has its roots in indigenous practice, but also has a structured counterpart in western thinking. A lot of time is taken in the Bismarck Ramu Group's internal meetings, which last almost a week, every month. Barry Lalley says that the length of meetings is 'strictly Melanesian…because relationships matter, people matter' (Lalley 2003c). The implied 'inefficiency' point is not lost on BRG members. But they say this practice represents a deliberate focus on relationship building, rather than the quick cut to a desired outcome. Yanny Guman says that the Bismarck Ramu Group is

> …a process-oriented organisation… we build relationships…we value people's time. We don't talk about all the tangible things that will happen after, the relationship building is the first part…a lot of criticisms actually come up, saying that well 'it's process driven—it's time consuming, a lot of resources—it's just wasting time' and of course to some extent it is; but in order for good community development to take place…people [must] identify their own outcomes (Guman 2003b).

The respect for small landowners in Papua New Guinea is a clear indigenous feature of BRG practice. The group places land custodianship at the heart of a strategy of self-reliance and ecological management. Not all developing or indigenous communities have this advantage, but in Papua New Guinea the land is very fertile and over 95 per cent of land is owned by small groups under customary title. However logging and mining companies regularly subvert community decision-making processes, and the Bismarck Ramu Group has joined landowners' ongoing battles with companies and development agencies, such as the World Bank, to defend customary land title.

Finally, the focus on self-reliance is an indigenous feature, which builds on support for customary land title, which is in turn linked to kinship systems. Everyone in Papua New Guinea has access to land, and a means of survival—until kinships and land systems are broken. The Bismarck Ramu Group constantly stresses self-reliance, in part because of the disastrous consequences observed for some who have alienated their clan landholdings, and have therefore rendered their children and grandchildren destitute. Life and unemployment in the many settlements around Papua New Guinea's cities is precarious. Helping develop self-reliant strategies is seen as being at the core of the BRG approach to community development.

> Our version of community development…is basically self-reliance of the people...[we are] helping to organise the people so that they can do things on their own, without sitting down and waiting for outside assistance (Paol 2003b).

Yanny Guman points out the stark reality of lack of government services that also lies behind the strategy of supporting self-reliance.

> People out there—they're rural, they're isolated—they expect a government official or someone from the church to go in and provide all the things they need, but they will never get it…so we believe the key and the most important part of any process of community development work is to get people to realise they have the answers within themselves (Guman 2003b).

However, the group recognises that communities often do need resources, and money, regardless of the BRG approach.

Basically we are not against money, we're not against cargo…but you do not start with money…we know that times are different now, people are pressured to have money for school and health fees…but we want to help them get up on their own two feet and use their own resources (Chitoa 2003b).

Indigenous partnerships

Engagement with a community was initially seen in seven stages: entry, education, assessment, analysis, planning, mobilisation and follow-up (Table 1). Entry to a community involved meeting with the elders, exchanging stories ('story-ing') with community people, and the community development team meeting to assess the community. Education meant holding community meetings on PNG history and culture, and on the theme of self-reliance, exchanging stories with community people and arranging a time to return. Assessment involved community mapping (by the community), an exchange of stories which link to the previous visit, and a

Community Development Team (CDT) facilitated community assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses. The analysis (step four) began with negotiations over a further meeting in which solutions and an autonomous way forward might be planned. This would be followed by planning, which involved a CDT assessment of the community's plans, discussion of the community's vision, prioritisation of the problems to address and development of an action plan. The sixth stage of mobilisation involved the community putting their plan into place. The role of the CDT followed over into a seventh, follow-up phase, where there would be monitoring, encouragement and further facilitation. Each stage began with meetings with community leaders to ensure that it was all right to hold another meeting (Bismarck Ramu Group 1997:4–15). These steps were discussed intensively at BRG meetings, and later simplified into a four-step process (Table 1). The Community Development Teams were renamed Community Organisers; then in 2004 they were called Community Facilitators, to give greater recognition to the fact that village communities are really doing their own

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Table 1   **Steps in the BRG community organising process**

Initial (7 step) model	Revised (4 step) model	…with options
Entry	Entry	
Education	PNG timeline	
Assessment	Village timeline	
Analysis	Community mapping	
Planning	* Choice of six options ——————>EXIT	
Mobilisation		Network
Follow-up		Planning
		Land use planning
		Problems
		Matrix (conservation)
		process

Sources: Bismarck Ramu Group, 1997. *Bismarck Ramu Group (BRG)*, Guide for Community Development Team Members, Bismarck Ramu Group, Madang; Sinemile, G., 2003. Interview with the author, Madang, 9 December; Lalley, B., 2003c. Interview with the author, Madang, 5 December.

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community development (Chitoa 2003b; Paol 2003b).

Importantly, conservation was not introduced by the community organisers as an initial or central theme, a clear break from the ICAD approach. The Bismarck Ramu Group maintains that

> …any attempt at conservation must be done in a real partnership with the community…We have chosen to begin from where the people are—not in terms of conservation or the environment, but in terms of their lives, their problems, their struggles and their dreams. From here we can eventually get to conservation (Bismarck Ramu Group 1997:26–27).

That is, the Bismarck Ramu Group themselves value environmental protection, but as a matter of community organising process they will not seek to set an agenda or lead with their values. In addition, the community organisers make it clear that they have not come to deliver any 'cargo' (outside goods), money or to impose a predetermined project. Their task is to help the community organise, and to empower itself, using its own resources (Bismarck Ramu Group 1997:22–39).

However the Bismarck Ramu Group makes it clear that they seek to promote self-reliant strategies including communities holding and properly managing their own land, 'good' cultural values including 'recognising the strength and value of women', and explaining 'the negative impacts of large-scale development and the tricks used by companies'. BRG workers made it very clear (see, for example, Sinemile 2003, Paol 2003a, Caspar 2003) that they saw only losses, not gains, for local people who had alienated their land to loggers, miners, cash croppers and other big companies. There is a clear BRG view against corporate development. Grace Sinemile (2003) says '[t]he companies come and get whatever they want, so I don't see any betterment…from the companies'.

Companies are here for profits and no matter what they will wheel and deal and manipulate the people for their own end. So our bias has been against big development, if there is any kind of development it has to be from the people and planned by them and normally it would be small development at their own level—manageable by them (Paol 2003b).

There were a few short-term benefits from big corporate projects (cash, vehicles), then the hard reality of long-term dispossession and environmental degradation bit hard. Companies in Papua New Guinea want to get their hands on land and cheap resources—they are almost all natural resource plunderers. If villagers make it clear they want to do business with a big company, and do not want the Bismarck Ramu Group, the community organisers will just leave.

The steps of the organising process are a guide for the community organisers, and not a structured process for the villagers to 'progress' through, or qualify in. Nevertheless, as a method, they are taken seriously by the Bismarck Ramu Group. Trainer Grace Sinemile points out

> …we only guide them; [for example] if they want better water in the community, if the water source in the community is not good, we find some resources, but not from outside…they themselves have to [make it happen] (Sinemile 2003).

In 2002 the seven steps were reduced to four, with six different pathway options (Table 1; see also Sinemile 2003; Lalley 2003b). The main difference in the first four steps was an emphasis on local village 'story-ing', that is, learning the lessons of their own history. New features in the six options were, first, recognition that the community organisers may not have anything to offer the villagers (leading to their exit); second, that network connections might be immediately useful;

third that planning might not always involve land use planning; and, finally, a selection of land conservation options—National Park, Fauna Sanctuary, Protected Area, Nature Reserve, Conservation Deed, Conservation Area and Wildlife Management Area—from which communities can choose. These options all have some legal status, but each has different combinations of community or state control. Communities typically choose an option which reserves greater community control, and minimises the potential government threat to take over their land (Caspar 2003). The BRG conservation team now has the technical skills to help with developing a community's chosen conservation option.

The BRG 'model' of community development might be summed up as

- developing indigenous partnerships with villager-landowners (which involve a well thought-out process of 'community entry')

- assisting villager-landowners to develop self-reliant strategies based on customary land tenure

- assisting villager-landowners in community planning, including resource management and conservation options.

Conservation by other means

Even though protected area options only come at the end of a long process, the Bismarck Ramu Group's indirect approach to conservation has nevertheless produced results; after the communities' needs have been worked through. John Chitoa describes the way in which, in 1999, the Bismarck Ramu Group helped communities in the Foroko and Sepu areas (in Madang Province) create two Wildlife Management Areas of some 80,000 hectares.

> People…have health problems which they need to attend to, they have education problems—so we decided that we will do community development first…[As] it turned out we achieved our [conservation] objective …by salvaging two wildlife management areas with the people…So by the processes that we use, people were able to conserve those areas without us using money or cargo (Chitoa 2003b).

The current BRG Chairman, Poin Caspar, was one of the BRG community organisers at Foroko and Sepu during this time. He explains that, before conservation, the communities focused on their education and health needs.

> The first two issues that they identified were education and health. So we took them through the [BRG] process…they prioritised problems they were going to address with their own resources …[and] decided to address the issue of education first. As a result of that, a person in their community developed an elementary school in the community …[in addition] they have an aid post set up and [now] they have a health worker in the community too (Caspar 2003).

Later, a second large protected area was created by eleven clans from Wanang Village. After BRG community organisers had spent two years with the community, the conservation team went in and took the communities through another process. Concerned that their area would be logged, as an adjoining area had been, these 11 landowner groups signed an agreement to not allow any big extractive 'development' on their land. Now, for any change, or for any form of small development, every one of the 11 groups has to agree to it (Paol 2003b). This Wanang Conservation Area covers 18,570.4

hectares of primary forested land of the Upper Sogeram region of the Madang. The Wanang agreement is a 'conservation deed', as distinct from a 'wildlife management area'; but both mechanisms are amongst the options presented by the BRG process (Paol 2003b). Both the Foroku-Sepu wildlife management area and the Wanang Conservation Area are in the big river valley between the Adelbert Range and Bismarck Range.

The BRG conservation process begins with the traditional concept of conservation, which people have been engaged in for many years, and leads up to the choice of mechanisms, including community management and traditional penalty systems.

> In wildlife management you have to have laws and penalties, and so that is how we incorporated the traditional concept of conservation. So for instance, we had a law that if someone from another clan goes into my land…I can lay a penalty on him, a western type of penalty and also a traditional form of penalty…you give me a certain amount of money and on top of that you need to give me maybe a pig…they decided themselves—the landowners (Caspar 2003).

The highest levels of protected areas (probably the equivalent of IUCN categories 1 and 2) were linked to traditional sacred sites.

> Naturally there are taboo areas that are strictly sacred sites which is out of bounds…in the language of some conservation people, they are like 'wildlife banks'… But from the traditional times…there have always been sacred sites. They serve as areas for wildlife to breed. And then when there are many of them, [wildlife] come out of the conserved areas and people can kill them outside; but not inside (Paol 2003b).

The highly protected areas had spiritual as well as conservation significance, and were not just protected, but (in a hunter society) were exclusion areas.

> The spirits in that sacred site only know me…and I know the stories that involve that sacred site. So it was strictly forbidden [to enter the area] …Very sacred sites are forbidden to even [others] in the community, except for the immediate owners of the land (Caspar 2003).

In the end, Poin believes that the Foroko and Sepu people were very happy with the outcome. 'The people say now that "it's our WMA", they seem to own the WMA' (Caspar 2003). Whatever form of conservation plan is chosen by a community, there needs to be some combination of agreements and deeds, access arrangements, boundary mapping, laws and penalties for transgressions and community surveillance and management of the area. The BRG conservation team is able to assist with setting up these arrangements.

The high profile achievements—80,000 and 18,000 hectares of protected areas— attract attention, but the Bismarck Ramu Group remains focused on community development goals and confidence-building processes that may result in a wide range of outcomes.

Group process

Two remarkable features of the Bismarck Ramu Group's internal workings are the amount of time spent in group activities and the very low-key approach to expected outcomes from their work. Both features reflect the emphasis on relationship building. The Bismarck Ramu Group also declares itself as a non-promotional organisation, having no pamphlets or visions of expansion. It sees its community organisers as hybrid part-time

workers and volunteers—people who are regularly and necessarily taking their practices back into the communities in which they live. On gender, the group has developed policies that include a two-to-one mix of men to women in community organiser teams, and a women-only policy of managing finances.

The entire group meets every month for five days to discuss group activities. One such meeting is associated with a briefing before sending out the community organiser field patrols, and another after the patrols return, associated with a debriefing. Each patrol lasts about three weeks, and after the debriefing the workers go back to their villages to practise at home what they practise in their work. This is considered an essential part of BRG work: that it is replicated in the workers' home villages. So in practice, community organisers spend almost half their time in their home villages; they have another life.

The week-long meetings involve many reports, as well as trust exercises, group planning and role-playing. As a result of this intensive group contact, good group understanding and a strong sense of trust is built up between members.

As far as possible, community organisers go out in teams of two men and one woman. This to some extent reflects the gender composition of the group, but is also a deliberate design to ensure the security of the group in remote areas, the logistical strength to carry out certain field work and cross rivers, and to ensure that there is a woman in each group to talk with the women of the village. Bismarck Ramu Group's evaluators said that

> BRG is honest about its work with women…[they] continue to struggle with ways they can improve their work and its impact to 'help people recognise the strength and value of women' [BRG aims] and that they recognise this

as an important central aim in their work in the communities (Eagles and Jones 2002:21).

While there are efforts to increase the proportion of women in the BRG management group, a decision was taken some time ago that only women should manage the group's finances, both in patrol teams and at the group's offices.

> I think our people trusted the women more than the men, and they trusted the women to take care of the money when they went out on patrol…and not so much the men…[this was] because I think the women are wise—wise spending the money and not the men. That's how we see it here (Tenehoe 2003).

This policy recognises well-established findings, in many countries, that women spend money more according to family needs, while men use money more for 'discretionary' spending.

Lessons from the Bismarck Ramu Group

Four broad lessons can be drawn from the Bismarck Ramu Group and its approach to community development and conservation. The first two—the self-reliant model and indigenous community empowerment—have greatest direct relevance to indigenous communities and developing countries. The second two—the challenge to 'desocialised' conservation and certain elements of group process—have much wider relevance.

The self-reliant model

The BRG model could be summed up as developing indigenous partnerships with villager-landowners, assisting villager-landowners to develop self-reliant strategies based on customary land tenure, and finally,

assisting villager-landowners in community planning, including resource management and conservation options. How widely applicable is this model?

This approach clearly relies on villagers having recognised title to land; land that is rich enough to support their communities in most of their basic needs, and certainly as regards food and housing. This is not the case in many indigenous communities and developing countries, in post-colonial areas, where dispossession and marginalisation are widespread. However, in Papua New Guinea almost all people have kinship access to some customary title, there is a lot of highly productive land, and only in some areas (particularly in some crowded islands) are there serious resource constraints and overcrowding.

However, even in the Madang Region, Flip Van Helden raised questions about possible partisanship in BRG activities. He argued that the organising successes in Foroku and Sepu were due to BRG organisers offering a voice to Upper Ramu clans against the encroaching Jimi migrant community from the Highlands. He suggested the Bismarck Ramu Group may have found a 'fragile middle ground' between the competing interests of two communities. These clans realised that a conservation arrangement could help them assert their rights as landowners in the face of Jimi migration and competing claims within the floodplains (Van Helden 2001:321).

Barry Lalley says that the Bismarck Ramu Group talked at length about this possibility but, in the event, the Jimi settlers unexpectedly supported the Upper Ramu clans' conservation areas, as a hedge against further settlers in the area (Lalley 2003b). That still leaves open—as a matter for judgment in other situations—the question of whether the BRG approach would aid one group of landowners against another dispossessed, migrant or landless group.

The self-reliant model is therefore contingent on a region where there is secure title to productive land, and is subject to some competitive pressures. It addresses the other end of the spectrum to liberal 'employment building' policies, which demand intensified investment and commodification, and which typically fail in regions with large informal and subsistence sectors—often mainly adding to landlessness and poverty (Mazoyer 2001). But the self-reliant approach is also a survival technique, which does not set itself up as a universal model. Yanny Guman says the BRG approach simply fills a gap between very limited government services, church charities, and other community develop-ments (Guman 2003b).

Indigenous community empowerment

The BRG approach to indigenous community empowerment is a broader theme, with broader relevance. It is also a 'Melanesian synthesis' of international influences and traditional practices. Structured facilitation processes seem to have been valuable, particularly in a context where a wide range of outside activities, including aid, have been failing communities.

The BRG approach of disciplined facilitation, refusing to make ultimate decisions for communities and encouraging them with a 'you can do it' message, seems well appreciated. Although it has potential beyond indigenous communities and developing countries, this approach has particular relevance to the imposed inferiority complexes of post-colonial societies. Powerful ideological forces lead people to believe that they have no voice and no ability to oppose powerful interests. Community development thinking has challenged this, and the BRG synthesis offers some inspiration.

The BRG approach to indigenous community empowerment has been one of organised facilitation, and helping communities make decisions over the form

of community organisation, development and conservation. Even when this is at odds with the corporate development model—and perhaps because of that fact—their committed decisions may well prove successful.

Challenging 'desocialised' conservation

It is the obverse to 'ownership' of a development or conservation project that imposed projects are highly vulnerable. While this may be recognised in theory, the Bismarck Ramu Group has experienced the failure of imposed conservation projects, and demonstrated the success of those generated by traditional communities. This gives them a powerful position from which to criticise conservation projects and processes that are cut off from traditional communities. There is a lesson here for western conservation groups. Traditional communities have a wealth of ecological management resources. Protected-area proposals that attempt to bypass these communities and their stores of knowledge, and simply focus on bio-diversity, do so at their peril. These could be considered 'desocialised' conservation projects. As well as failing in nature conservation, such projects may often offend and damage the interests of local communities. The most obvious example of these bypassing strategies is the engagement of international conservation groups with mining companies and international agencies, against the interests of indigenous communities. New possibilities for nature conservation could be looked for in partnerships with these communities. The lesson here is that conservation must be seen as an enduring custodianship issue, and not a desocialised process.

Group process

Finally, some features of the Bismarck Ramu Group's internal processes should be of interest to a wide range of other groups. Like indigenous community empowerment, this is probably best understood as a 'Melanesian synthesis'. It introduces the value placed on relationship building, traditionally found in kinship systems, into a structured social organisation. The result is a group which does not ignore goals, but stresses process; and which actively organises opportunities for collective participation in group plans and evaluation. Very few groups meet for one week to evaluate the past three weeks' work. Very few listen with such intense respect, and allow long silences so that no opportunity to engage is denied, and in case a new viewpoint may emerge. This approach challenges widespread notions of efficiency. Yet the Bismarck Ramu Group is a dynamic organisation, and as some have hinted (Eagles and Jones 2002:6–16), its future problems will most likely have to do with a proliferation of activities and a reorganisation of priority areas.

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