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The EU in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific:
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Good Governance Pacific-style: The Role of Australian NGOs
in Assisting Pacific Civil Society

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Australian NGOs – Strong Engagement in Melanesia

Australian Non-Government Organisations, including church-based organisations and volunteer sending agencies have significant experience working with local Pacific partners. Australian NGOs working in the Pacific range from the large NGOs such as World Vision Australia, Save the Children Australia to the smaller NGOs such as the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance, the Fred Hollows Foundation, Live and Learn Environmental Education and the Marist Mission – to name a few. They especially have strong engagement in Melanesia, mostly focused on work in PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji.

Australian NGOs are financed by a range of donor governments and organizations with the majority of government funding for Pacific activities being provided by the Australian Government (some by the European Union) as well as funds raised through donations from the Australian community. Australians donate very generously. For instance, over $3 million in donations from the Australian community is channelled to PNG each year.

Australian NGOs involved in the Pacific work mostly through partnerships with Pacific civil society organizations, sometimes with Pacific Island Governments and in some cases with Pacific regional inter-governmental and regional non-governmental organisations. On-going relationships with Pacific partners based on respect for the Pacific way, form an integral element to the way Australian NGOs work.

In Solomon Islands, more than 16 Australian NGOs have long-established relationships working with 50 local partners. Ten of these Australian NGOs and their local Solomon Islands partners are currently designing programs under AusAID’s Australian Cooperation with Solomon Islands (ACSI) associated with civil society strengthening and community engagement (including activities associated with Peace and Reconciliation – Youth Vocational Training – Access to Basic Services) as part of the broader AusAID Solomon Islands Community Sector Strategy and also closely associated with the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

In PNG currently there are 40 Australian NGOs working on multi-level interventions across all sectors with over 200 partner organisations on more than 150 programs/projects – involving more than 400 staff and volunteers. The engagement by Australian NGOs with local partners in PNG relates to long-standing relationships that in the case of some of the church-based agencies extends back over 100 years and in the case of the volunteer sending agencies, nearly 40 years. The programs and activities range from small local community projects such as vocational training for young people, to larger-scale education and health delivery services. They focus on building local skills and capacity and have considerable provincial outreach. Currently several of the church-based NGOs are working with AusAID to design a PNG Churches Partnership Program (CPP) building on existing linkages and
partnerships with churches in PNG. This Program recognises the importance of church networks in delivery of basic services such as health and education.

PNG – Enhanced Cooperation Program. ACFOA and its members welcomed the announcement in December last year by Foreign Affairs Minister Downer relating to the new $800 million enhanced cooperation program. We recognise that whilst Australian and other donor aid has been effective in improving some basic social services in PNG, resulting in improved levels of literacy (illiteracy rates declining from 56% in 1975 to 36% in 2000) and life expectancy (48.9 years in 1975 to 58.6 years in 2000), it is clear that a key challenge now is to strengthen PNG’s capacity to provide a safe, secure and stable environment for all its citizens.

However, for this new Australian and PNG Government cooperation package to work in the longer term, it needs to be implemented in close cooperation and consultation with PNG civil society. While there is a shared commitment to the goal of ensuring PNG can provide security and affordable basic services to its citizens in the long term, turning this goal into reality is far more difficult than just sending in Australian police and public servants. It will also require the active, long-term involvement of the people of PNG in demanding more transparency and accountability of government – to ensure that the benefits of this new $800m package will be sustainable.

PNG - civil society self-help
Recognition of the role that PNG civil society can play is highlighted, for instance, by the successful work of the Kup Women for Peace and the Meri Kirak Sapotim group in Chimbu Province in the Highlands of PNG. There, women are successfully addressing the issues of endemic tribal fighting and conflict arising from the associated gun culture. In presenting the work of these Highland groups, Sarah Garap a community development worker and founding member, recently gave a very strong message whilst visiting Australia, about the importance of looking to the community for solutions to local problems – working through the local culture – strengthening the communities’ capacity to help themselves.

The challenges in PNG are far more complex and demanding than the short-term restoration of law and order that RAMSI has achieved in Solomon Islands. There are tough decisions ahead for the governments of both PNG and Solomon Islands if they are to translate the benefits of improved law and order and budget control into long-term improvements in basic social services.

Good Governance – Pacific Style

Much aid is delivered to the Pacific under a “good governance” agenda. The importance of striving for good governance – for transparency, accountability, equity, sustainability and responsiveness to people’s needs, is well recognized by donors and recipients alike. However, in delivering aid to PNG and other Pacific island countries, it is important to
recognize the need for adaptation of the conventional good governance agenda to more effectively suit Pacific island needs.

**Universal applicability?** Whilst many donors are sensitive to Pacific island specificity, some donors make the assumption that good governance principles can be universally applied, taking little account of the vast difference of specific local and national Pacific island circumstances of the 22 Pacific island countries and territories of the Pacific Islands Region. The sub-regional differences of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia are often not adequately recognised, nor the differences between independent countries and territories; nor the differences in natural resource based between high islands and atolls; nor the differences between countries adhering to a more traditional way of life and those more closely aligned to developed country status. Good governance principles that might be applicable in Vanuatu, for instance, bear little resemblance to what might appropriately apply in Kiribati and likewise what is applicable in Wallis and Futuna is vastly different from what might be relevant in Solomon Islands. All too often, the similarities of the region are highlighted at the expense of the differences. Even the regional intergovernmental organizations that together form the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP) and whose perspective is regionally focussed, are nevertheless very aware of the need to tailor activities to specific country and local needs.

**Linkage with democratic political process?** There is an assumption (implicit in the World Bank definition) “that democratic political process is …… the key to good governance and, in turn, to economic development and social justice”. But this gives scant recognition to the wide variety of Pacific traditional and cultural systems that operate alongside, and have an impact on, accepted democratic political processes – cultural and traditional practices that are an integral feature of the Pacific Way.

**The role of the State?** The appropriateness of the western notion of the State is to some Pacific island countries, questionable. The democratically elected Westminster system is appropriate in a context where people identify themselves with the State – where they think as a nation. In some parts of the Pacific this is relevant. For instance, in Samoa, there is strong national identity – evidenced by reference to “We are Samoans” and “Manu Samoa”. Yet in some other parts of the Pacific, identification as a nation is definitely not paramount. So, are these western principles appropriate?

- Is it appropriate to build good governance around the notion of the State in a context where people relate more to their village, identifying themselves as being from their specific place, from their specific clan group – for instance, from Lagi Lagi rather than from Solomon Islands?
- Is it appropriate to rely on decision-makers sitting in a distant parliamentary building in Honiara or Port Moresby in a context where decision-making has traditionally rested with chiefly leaders who are easily accountable by being located close by?
For instance, in looking for long-term sustainable solutions to the tensions in Solomon Islands, civil society leaders there have called upon the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and aid donors to reflect on the fact that Solomon Islands is not a “nation” but rather it is a “country of villages.”ii State-based and provincial-based solutions and centralized government political systems may not be a sustainable solution.

**Accountability and transparency?** In a truly transparent situation, those affected by decisions should be able to know who made the decisions and why they were made. In village-based governance, such transparency is inevitable – everyone knows who does what. Accountability, too, is inevitable – those making decisions are close by and readily accountable to the group. However, with the move by Pacific island countries to westernized governance structures, transparency and accountability have become further removed from their source. The decision-maker no longer lives in his village, accountable to sanctions by his group, his decisions known to all. He/she is now based at the distant government centre (in Honiara, Pt Moresby, Port Vila, Pohnpei) – the opportunity for effective constituent consultation is rare.

**Corruption?** Perceptions of dishonesty in government as a whole undermine confidence in its ability to achieve good governance standards. Corruption can infiltrate every aspect of government; it can undermine the capability of government to manage economic affairs, to provide basic services, to allocate and account for public resources and to provide for effective justice and security. If people believe that corruption is inevitable, they will do little to demand its eradication. Punishing corruption will work only if there is strong community opposition to it.

But what and who are regarded as corrupt? Whilst not wanting to excuse instances of corruption as culturally acceptable, it is nevertheless important to understand some perceptions of corruption within a Pacific Island context. For instance, in Melanesia societal expectations associated with the Wantok system – looking after those with whom you are closely associated, those from your own place – may in a western developed country context appear as corrupt. But the Wantok system is an integral part of Melanesian society – it serves the valuable purpose of ‘social security’. Without such a system a very heavy financial burden for provision of social services would inevitably fall to government.

In exposing corruption, **Pacific island advocacy bodies** have an important role to play. The Pacific Concerns Resource Centre (PCRC), Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG), Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECRA) and Tonga Human Rights and Democracy Movement, to name a few, work to raise awareness and ensure that Pacific island decision-makers are accountable for inaction or complicity in corruption. As Pacific advocacy groups that understand their own cultural mores, they are able to assemble and disseminate information on possible examples of corruption, and call officials to account, ensuring that any political or official culpability is exposed through an appropriate Pacific solution.
**Law and justice system:** Emphasis is placed within the *good governance* agenda on law and justice institutions and mechanisms. Support for the creation of laws, the creation of statutory bodies, Ombudsmen, strengthening of the judiciary, legal training and technical assistance; training of police and institutional strengthening for courts and prisons all form part of ensuring that a law and justice system is in place. Such assistance supports *good governance*. However, past examples of inappropriate 'introduced' legislation abound throughout the region. One questions what place “traditional” justice systems and processes play in this framework. How does the western developed country law and justice system mesh with village-based chiefly law? Who determines what is appropriate – who decides when a traditional process of reconciliation or restitution is implemented in place of the introduced legal processes. Who determines when the giving of fine mats or the giving of pigs might be more appropriate to make amends rather than court sentencing and prison? Who determines when traditional restorative justice processes should be used? The *Solomon Islands Peace and Reconciliation Commission* proposed by the Solomon Islands Civil Society Network and the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) Peace Office will be an interesting one to watch – a Melanesian solution to a Melanesian problem that it is hoped will not be overlooked.

**Civil society engagement:** An important prerequisite for *good governance* is the existence of a vibrant civil society – one that is able to effectively engage with government, to make use of the institutions and mechanisms that government provides to meet the community’s needs and to press government when these needs are not being adequately met. The recipient must be in the driving seat. Increasingly in the Pacific the importance of donor country consultation with, and aid delivery through, civil society engagement is recognised.

The definition used here of “civil society” is broad. It does not only relate to formal civil society “organizations” with constitutions, governing boards and formal meetings. It relates also to the broader community in its various formal and informal groups. The existence of women’s groups, youth groups and church groups who play an active part in village life, is long-standing and their strength and importance well acknowledged. Many essential community services revolve around these groups. What is relatively new, however, is the formal Non Government Organisation (NGO). Just as the Westminster system of government is an introduced concept in the Pacific, so too is the concept of a formal NGO. The embracing of an introduced concept has brought with it a price and time is required to enable the development of Pacific NGOs that integrate their own cultural standards with those expected by donors under good governance principles. It is important for donors to remain engaged. An increasing number of Pacific NGOs are emerging as important voices. Many now have regular meetings with government. For example, O le Siosiomaga Society has monthly meetings with the Prime Minister of Samoa; and Solomon Islands Development Services Exchange (DSE), Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT), Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) and the Solomon Islands Civil Society Network, have regular meetings with the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon
Islands (RAMSI). Very recently the Australian Government has recognized the importance of increased aid delivery of basic services such as education and health in Papua New Guinea and in Solomon Islands, through greater engagement with the community.

**Conclusion**

The above are considerations in creating *Good governance-Pacific style*. The importance of listening to Pacific voices, being sensitive to the full range of Pacific cultural practices and according due respect to “the Pacific Way” cannot be overstated.

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