



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

# *State* **Society** and **Governance** *in* **Melanesia**

DISCUSSION PAPER

Discussion  
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## LOCAL-LEVEL GOVERNANCE IN THE PACIFIC

Throughout Melanesia and many parts of the Pacific, systems of government continue to be reviewed and restructured. Decentralisation of state powers and responsibilities from the national to provincial and lower levels of government is a recurring theme. The major rationale is that it is both more democratic and more efficient to locate decision-making powers closer to the people. A good deal of thought and effort by government planners and constitutional “engineers” has gone into central - local relations, particularly into the division of powers and financial arrangements between the two levels. From one country to another the resulting models of decentralisation have varied considerably.

In all of this effort however, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the nature and shape of local-level government. In the years since independence, it is clear that in many Pacific countries local-level institutions have decayed and the quality of their governance has deteriorated. Now - in light of the apparent inability of national governments to provide stability, consistent services and good governance - the demand for the reform and strengthening of government at the local level is increasing.

In May 2003, the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project hosted the *Local-level Governance in the Pacific Workshop* at the Australian National University. This discussion paper comprises the papers presented by two key speakers, Dr Penelope Schoeffel and Professor Mark Turner. Taken together they provide insights into models, structures and processes of local governance and how these might be developed in countries where governmental systems are under review.

### SMALL IS NOT BEAUTIFUL: CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND SERVICE DELIVERY IN THE PACIFIC

**PENELOPE SCHOEFFEL**

About a hundred years ago, in all Pacific islands, local level government was all the government there was. Those governments were rarely responsible for more than a few hundred people and comprised a group of around fifteen to twenty men representing all the kin groups in the village, whose leadership role came to them with age and achievement and in some instances

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inheritance. They were usually centered on men's houses, which were the largest and most important buildings in the village and were generally avoided by women. Village governments had five main functions:

1. To maintain village harmony and resolve disputes.
2. To socialise young men, and control women.
3. To mediate relations with the supernatural.
4. To organise external relations with outsiders by negotiating coalitions, matrimonial alliances and other forms of exchange.
5. To organise defense against attack by outsiders, or to plan attacks on them.

In most parts of the Pacific most of these functions have been abandoned to the church or the state, but village governments continue to operate to a greater or lesser extent. In multi-cultural Pacific states such as Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, village governments were formally sidelined in government processes, whereas in indigenous mono-cultural Pacific nations they have generally been incorporated, in modified form, into the system of national government (Fiji, Samoa, Kiribati, and Tuvalu provide some examples).

Today citizens throughout the Pacific tend to be disillusioned with their governments, which have failed to meet the high hopes and expectations held at independence twenty or thirty years ago.

- Some citizens - those who know about it and think it is wrong - are angry about corruption, inefficiency and the waste or pillaging of national resources.
- Some citizens are also angry that other citizens, perceived as outsiders, have migrated into their area and are doing better than the local people, or that they are using resources or enjoying powers that local opinion holds that they have no right to.
- In some countries there is great disparity between developed and underdeveloped regions and resource-rich and resource-poor regions. The citizens living in the resource rich areas, or the developed areas, ask why they should share their wealth with the citizens in the poor areas.

- Most citizens are disappointed and angry because of the declining quality or availability of government services and economic opportunities in rural areas compared to the benefits enjoyed by those who live and have jobs in towns. "Where is our share?" rural people ask and so do the urban unemployed.

So an angry, dissatisfied, disillusioned public responds by looking for answers to these problems, and the answer that comes is to break up the government into smaller regional and local units where maybe the benefits will be shared more evenly and where more people can have more of a say about how the country is governed and who gets what.

While citizens throughout Melanesia are calling for governments to be carved up into smaller units, many mainstream development theorists and aid donors are also calling for decentralisation, devolution and participation. The theory holds that the closer government is to the people it is supposed to serve, the more efficient and accountable it is likely to be. The smaller the area and number of people served by local level government, the better informed citizens will be and the more able they will be to demand the services they need. In arguing for decentralisation, mainstream development theory draws a contrast between responsive local governments and a remote, uncaring, self-serving central government. It argues that by decentralising and devolving many of the functions of central governments to local governments, central governments will become smaller and more efficient, concerned with maintaining the national system of rules and processes, and with specialised functions requiring high level expertise.

This influential agenda arises from another mainstream development orthodoxy about the need to reform bad governments. The reform agenda arises from concerns about cost effectiveness and the amount of national and donor resources required to support the cost of government in developing countries. Further, it is argued that the private sector is stifled by the intrusions of the state into every sphere of activity. The underlying question is this: How can a poor country grow and develop when the lion's share of resources are going to a dysfunctional government, while the private sector, that should be generating economic growth, is languishing? The answer, into which much faith, effort and aid is currently invested, is the standard recipe for reform, which has three main ingredients.

First, reduce public expenditure by reducing the size of government. This includes cutting jobs, privatising state-owned enterprises, contracting out government services, abolishing government subsidies and all other state mechanisms that, as Mr. Grass Roots would put it, encourage lurking and perking.

Second, encourage better performance of civil servants by subjecting them to corporate mechanisms and market forces and pressures.

Third, initiate a program of devolution of powers to regional and local governments who must answer to the electorates that, being closer and thus better informed, will demand and receive accountability and better governance. Services will be more appropriately targeted, because officials must answer to their clients. In culturally diverse countries, local perspectives and local knowledge can be brought to bear on government to make services more cost-effective and to overcome the problems of one-for-all policies.

NGO development agencies, although they tend to vigorously oppose mainstream development theory and donor approaches to development, also strongly advocate de-centralisation and devolution. This is not just because they are critical and suspicious of central governments, which they are - and often with good reason, but also because they espouse a counter theory of development. They argue that *real* development is people-centered and can only occur through transformative local-level social action based on community empowerment and participation involving the poor and excluded - and women. The counter theory holds that only self-generated local-level development is truly sustainable. Therefore decentralisation and the devolution of the powers of government to smaller units representing communities is essential to the achievement of the alternative vision.

So, if we have the disgruntled citizens of many Pacific Island states, powerful donors and influential NGOs united in faith about the merits of decentralisation and devolution, who would dare challenge these ideas? This paper discusses six sceptical propositions:

1. The conditions that create governance problems at the top are the same lower down, so the same problems occur.
2. Cutting the pie up into smaller pieces doesn't make the pie any bigger.
3. People often don't want what is good for them.

4. Fundamental changes are needed before government can achieve development goals at any level.

5. Local government can be strengthened without much devolution of state powers to smaller geographical units.

6. To improve conditions at the local level, the priority must be to strengthen and improve the efficiency of centralised national bureaucracies.

**The conditions that create the governance problems at the top are the same lower down, so the same problems occur.**

Throughout the Pacific, the public sector has been used as a means of wealth distribution and job-creation and in many countries it is organised in ways that allow politicians excessive powers of intervention. This is the crux of the governance problems that beset so many countries in the region (see Schoeffel 1997/8).

Many Pacific island countries have serious problems with corruption, associated with collusion between politicians and bureaucrats involving the misuse of public funds and other resources. The collusion of the bureaucracy in corrupt practices - or their active initiation of such practices - is entangled with systems of patronage. Lower down the ranks, petty corruption and inefficiency is often encouraged by miserable working and housing conditions, sometimes erratic wage and salary payments, chaotic management practices, and general demoralisation.

In most Pacific Island countries, patronage and corruption are fed to a large extent by the cultural attitudes of voters. Political support is attracted and elections tend to be won by those who can demonstrate power to attract and amass wealth and to share it in some form or another with supporters or clients, in a modern enactment of older political processes. Even well educated and principled would-be politicians must stifle any ethical qualms they may have about the expectations of their electorates in order to recoup the costs of their campaigns.

Donors have knowingly or unknowingly colluded with official corruption by turning a blind eye to the systematic abuses that beset many aid projects because of the geopolitical agenda that underlies aid. Hughes (2003) cites economic theory that aid creates pernicious economic distortions and perverse incentives and argues for the elimination of aid, claiming that this would force governments to adopt

rational economic policies and rational use of resources. However, the governments that provide bilateral aid and the multilateral donor and finance institutions (which must answer to aid-giving governments) fear that countries with dysfunctional government may further disintegrate if aid is cut. Further, there are humanitarian concerns for the poor majority who lack basic services in Melanesian countries.

Donors are responding to the declining capacity of governments in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to provide basic services, by funding 'community' driven development programs which bypass government and provide funds through 'community-based organisations'. At best, this strategy sidesteps the central problem of governance capacity and has the unfortunate side effect of further weakening public faith in government. At worst, such programs, by providing resources open to capture, may inadvertently feed petty warlordism.

**Cutting the pie up into smaller pieces doesn't make the pie any bigger.**

From the earliest colonial period, out of geographical necessity, all Pacific island countries have had decentralised government operations. When the provision of social services was added from the 1950s onwards, operations became more expensive because government services had to be channeled through several administrative layers in order to serve scattered populations divided by sea, rivers and mountains, where there are few roads and limited transport services. But these decentralised operations were tightly centrally controlled and run on slim budgets before independence.

Most, if not all, Pacific island countries were ill-prepared for independence. Colonial governments were not required to build national institutions and when the need for them to do so was realised it was too late. Even twenty or thirty years after independence there are still shortages of people with technical skills who are qualified and willing to provide services at provincial and lower levels. At the same time Pacific island countries have suffered many economic set-backs. Some are the result of external events, but some are self-inflicted and are a direct consequence of the declining capability of governments. In a vicious circle, state revenues are declining, so capacity continues to decline.

There are widespread grievances in Melanesian electorates. Voters may become

exasperated with central governments because the government in their province works better than at the centre, or because provincial-level government doesn't work. In both cases the electorate suspects that resources are being diverted by central government and this feeds demands for further devolution or secession. However, because poor governance is systemic, the devolution of state responsibilities - and aid projects - to smaller geographical units is unlikely to provide solutions. These frustrations are usually accompanied by a very poor understanding of where the State gets its money which feeds the belief that local control will solve the problem of poor government services.

The locally perceived solution to these problems is to devolve the powers and functions of the State to smaller geographical units via a federal system (currently seen as the solution to the crisis of government in Solomon Islands, for example) or to clamor for secession (as is currently happening in the more developed East New Britain province of PNG). Is the national government not perceived to be working well? Then devolve powers and responsibilities to provinces or states, creating another layer of politicians. That's not working? Devolve further to local governments and 'communities'. None of that works? Lets try and get our man elected so he will get to the source of the wealth and share it with us, his supporters. Such putative solutions inevitably increase the cost of government and the demands on aid donors. The cost of setting up smaller units of government will mean that there is less money to provide basic services to rural populations and this will lead to further decline. But even if this money was there to be passed down, would services improve? This brings me to my third proposition:

**People don't always want what is good for them.**

There is a strong belief in donor circles, mainstream and NGO alike, that if you give communities more choices about development services and more say over expenditure they will make choices that are in their own collective best interest. This view seems to overestimate the wisdom of the users or "clients" of public services. If there are major structural weaknesses in the public service and local-level organisations, where is the evidence that greater consultation with local level institutions and greater local participation in decision-making makes a difference?

Most village governments in the Pacific are based on what sociologists have called

“traditional authority” which often conflicts with the modern legal kind of authority which is needed to promote the idea of public good and give priority to local-level service delivery. Traditional authority is all about personal power, and those who have it can use it to reward their supporters and deprive, or punish their opponents. In contrast, legal authority is not based on the person, but on the offices that are held by government employees. The offices define and enforce rules about what they should and should not do, not the office holders. Ideally, this kind of authority exists within a bureaucracy based on a legal system with the power to resist arbitrary political interference.

Village leaders who rely on the traditional kind of authority don't necessarily have much interest in the kinds of development that are good for people, they are more attuned to what people want than what they need. Preventative health is a good example of this. Most of the illnesses that people in the Pacific suffer from are preventable, but people tend to resist prevention and demand cures. In Australia, we read in the papers and hear on TV that most of us are overweight and that this makes us sick; we need to exercise and change our eating habits, but we don't want to. We do, however, want the government to give us free miracle drugs, coronary bypasses and organ transplants when we need them.

Similarly, in the Indian villages I worked in earlier this year people were much more interested in building religious shrines than digging drains to prevent the chronic diseases that afflicted them. In a small district of Indonesia where I stayed a few years ago an influx of wealth from migrant workers was spent on television sets, not on the water connections and lavatories people needed to improve their health. In several Pacific island countries where I examined the causes of failed water supply services (e.g. Schoeffel 1995), no one was willing to pay for repairing and maintaining their water supply system. They wanted the government or aid donors to fix the problem. In Samoa, unless the central government organises the free collection of rubbish, people continue to throw their rubbish in the sea and kill the fish, despite public awareness campaigns.

There is much talk of civil society and ‘social capital’, but civil society is too often seen as development and issue-and-advocacy NGOs, which in the Pacific are usually urban based, transient in nature due to their reliance of charismatic leadership and heavily dependent on external donor funds. NGOs have

benefited greatly from donor disillusionment with government and have proliferated in response to orthodox development theories. Some NGOs are run by people with a background in the churches, but most of them are run by former public servants. And, despite some anti government rhetoric on the part of some, most NGOs are subject to many of the same weaknesses found in government. Yet, if we look at the organisational affiliations of most Pacific Island citizens, the most institutionalised and sustainable Pacific NGOs are the churches which are closely linked to voluntary associations at village level such as the village councils, and women's and youth groups. The churches in most countries have no difficulty siphoning large sums of money to finance their own operations and expansion, money that is voluntarily given by the citizens of Pacific countries. What is being done to get the churches interested in good governance and local-level development? Do they have a role? This brings me to proposition number four:

**Fundamental changes are needed before government can achieve development goals at any level.**

Without viable institutions development programs can only be *ad hoc*. Where do we see models of local government in the Pacific that are not beset with many of the problems that are found at the top? In most countries, local government works as well as national government and if there is so-called ‘community development’ in villages it is fortuitous or aid-driven and not the result of strong national institutions that operate consistently in all areas.

To give an example of the problem, a few years ago I evaluated an NGO health project in Sepik Province, PNG. The project was to provide village-level services, a task which had been abandoned by the provincial health department which was able only to deliver services, after a fashion, at the provincial centre and a few sub-centres. About 90 per cent of the people in the province live in rural villages, but everywhere my team and I went we saw that aid posts had fallen down, there was no medicine, no preventative health measures were being practiced, there was no safe water in most places, most people had chronic illnesses, the mortality rates among young people were high, the schools were dilapidated, lacked teaching resources and were infrequently attended by the teachers and pupils. Crimes, including murders, were being settled in the traditional manner, which often gave rise to more crimes and murders.

One village, far away up a small tributary of the Sepik River, stood out, however. It was clean, orderly and peaceful. It had a functioning public water tank, latrines, a well kept men's house and church, neatly mown public spaces and clean well maintained houses. The aid post had fallen down, but the villagers had re-built it and stocked it with medical supplies delivered by the NGO. The village looked after the primary teacher in the nearby school, which encouraged him to do his job. So why was this such an exceptional case? The leader of this unusual village was an elderly charismatic individual, a retired government aid-post orderly, motivated by religious belief. He called himself the 'council', although the local government system in the area was not functioning and he received no pay. No doubt there were active leaders in all the villages we went to, but developing their villages in the ways I have just described was not their priority.

The province was a text book example of institutional failure. Local government and services in the area had almost completely collapsed. (I know this because I worked in the area as a volunteer 36 years ago when the local government system operated under both local and colonial officials and the health and education services, though basic, were run under government-contract by the Catholic mission.) Now, where health services are provided at all in rural areas, the province depends on an externally funded, foreign managed agency working outside government to provide village people with basic health services. The collapse of government services occurred because of the lack of an institutionalised management system, motivated staff and provision of funds for local services. The problems were compounded by a general lack of maintenance leading to the disintegration of roads and government property. The resources needed to provide and maintain rural services had been sucked up by the provincial government in the provincial center, and by another layer of predatory politicians. All too often, as my example illustrates, where there has been devolution of bureaucratic and political authority the cost of government has increased but not its effectiveness.

Local government in the province followed a model in which councils formed the bottom level of a three tier system of administration, but this system did not reach directly to village level and was thus less institutionalised in people's lives (see May, 1999). This raises my next proposition; that village government can be strengthened without creating a local government system of mini-bureaucracies and elected councilors.

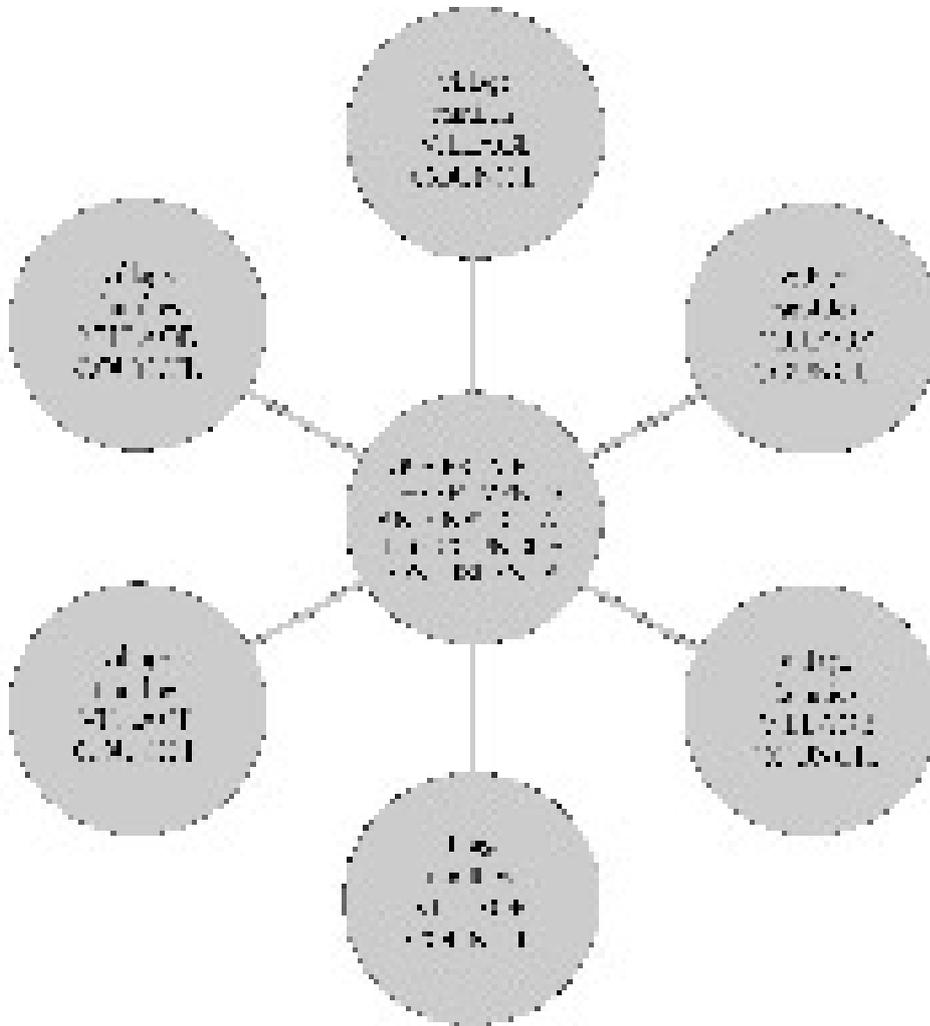
### **Local government can be strengthened without much devolution of state powers to smaller geographical units.**

In multicultural Melanesia, colonial administrations appointed intermediaries between the village and the colonial state and later allowed villagers to elect local government representatives, but village governments were not formally recognised in most cases. New structures were created for administrative efficiency, based where possible on culture areas, and these typically encompassed large areas and numbers of villages, and involved the establishment of small local level bureaucracies for tax collection and enforcement of local regulations. In contrast, most monocultural Pacific island countries have local government systems based on neo-traditional village councils. These operate with minimal devolution of state powers, as in the case of Samoa's two-tier system.

In Samoa, between 1914-1962, the New Zealand colonial administration decided what citizens needed and made every village government accountable for enforcing the rules they devised. Village councils had to make people pen up their pigs, bury their dead in cemeteries, guard water sources to keep them pure, clean the village monthly and inspect houses to remove insect and rodent breeding places. From the late 1940s, the councils had to construct simple school buildings and houses for teachers, provide food for locally based teachers, doctors and nurses, provide labour for public works and raise money for water supply systems.

The councils are democratic. Villages typically have populations of between 200-500 people. Every village family elects its chief, and every chief has a seat in the village council where, regardless of traditional rank, all have an equal say.<sup>1</sup> In the old days, groups of village councils elected representatives (*Faipule*) to the Legislative assembly. It was a one-way system at first; the Legislative assembly made the decisions and village councils made sure they were obeyed. Today, in a country of 170,000 people, the system and the country have changed a lot. Now everyone over 21 may vote for their parliamentary representatives, so to compensate the village chiefs for the loss of their exclusive electoral privileges, the councils were given limited powers to make village by-laws. The relevant Act clearly defines the powers of village councils.

Figure 1. Structure of Local Government in Samoa



Many of the old village rules, including some really useful ones, have now been abandoned because they were unpopular and many council functions have been modified or handed over to the central government. However, village councils are still the major agency for the dissemination of government policy and represent every household in the country, urban and rural alike. They have no support staff and no fixed state financial allocations, except occasional small grants for special purposes such as maintaining village access roads; nor do they collect taxes, although they can levy small fines, mainly in kind. Each council elects a representative (*Pulenu'u*) who attends monthly meetings held on the main islands of Upolu and

Savai'i and is paid an honorarium by the central government.

The essential function of village councils is to maintain local order in the sense of preventing criminal offenses as far as possible; to liaise with, and where appropriate to support, the local level operations of government agencies; and to make their villages aware of state policies. The monthly meetings of *Pulenu'u* and the meeting agenda are organised by the Ministry of Home Affairs Meetings and the meetings are attended as appropriate by representatives of line departments who want to share information. The meetings facilitate a two-way consultative process on state services and other matters of concern at village and district levels (Figure 1).

I have spent time on this example to illustrate that there is no reason why fairly effective village-based government should require the devolution of central state powers to finance and manage the provision of local level services. Of course, Samoa is smaller (population 170,000) and more compact than any Melanesian country, so it is easier to manage a system like this, but this system worked back in the 1940s and before, when there were virtually no roads or modern forms of communications.

In this model, from time to time, there are still abuses of the limited powers given to local governments, some of which are checked by the justice system. Other abuses, such as the practice of school committees paying themselves meeting attendance fees (which are paid out of school fees and impoverish local schools), remain unchecked, as does occasional misuse by the members of village councils of government grants for village development. The very fact that abuses do occur, even within the very limited scope of powers given to village councils, argues against any further devolution of state power to local level bodies.

This brings me to my final point, which concerns the nature of those fundamental changes needed before government can achieve development goals at any level.

**To improve conditions at the local level, the top priority should be to strengthen centralised national bureaucracies.**

States succeed or fail on the capabilities of their bureaucratic systems and poor developing countries will face even greater problems in the future if they are subjected to fashionable agendas to roll back the state by shrinking it, while at the same time trying to devolve many of its functions.

In a policy environment in the Pacific in which public sector down-sizing agendas are being promoted, is bureaucratic reform which aims to build performance and inspire employees possible? Are there any success stories from which we may learn? My observations of public sector reform programs in Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa and Federated States of Micronesia suggest that they have been based on very superficial prior studies and one-size-fits-all agendas. There has been too much emphasis on pushing through macroeconomic policy reforms which threaten powerful interests who then try to obstruct them. But there has not been enough sustained effort to strengthen the performance and morale of the public service so that government departments may lead the charge in

promoting policy reforms.

In Tonga, for example, the public sector reform process was thwarted from its inception by an all-powerful and self-interested cabinet. But, in neighbouring Samoa, public sector reforms won praise because Cabinet and senior bureaucrats considered that they were setting the agenda together. The Vanuatu Comprehensive Reform Program put some interesting experiments in place – even though the program was disrupted by too many donors pushing competing or conflicting agendas and too little political continuity. One experiment was to place “super-secretaries” over the directors of groups of government departments whose role was to deal with Ministers and minimise their interference in departmental operations.

Judith Tendler (1998) argues, from the analysis of case studies of successful local-level service programs in the poorest region of Brazil, that development and governance theories are based on too many untested assumptions and are over-influenced by models of poor government performance. She suggests that more may be learned by looking at *what works* in developing countries. Further, she argues that development practitioners ought to be paying more attention to the literature on industrial performance and workplace transformation, which has many lessons for reforming state bureaucracies and motivating public employees.

Improvements in local government in all of Tendler’s case studies resulted from “a three-way dynamic between local government, civil society and an active central government”. In each case an effective public sector worked flexibly to achieve clearly defined objectives for the public good, interacting with civil society (local civic associations) where appropriate for the task at hand. Paradoxically, effective decentralisation was shown to demand *more*, not less centralisation and increased management capacity, together with sophisticated political skills at the national level (Tendler 1998:143-5).<sup>2</sup>

Pritchett and Woolcock (2002) note that poverty reduction depends in large measure upon effective delivery of core public services but that there is widespread disillusionment after many failed attempts to create standardised, centralised civil service bureaucracies in poor countries. They point to an array of alternative participatory and “bottom up” approaches now debated in development circles and conclude that while all have worked in certain contexts, all have problematic aspects and none provide universal solutions. Their conclusions are

not dissimilar to those of the authors of the forthcoming World Development Report 2004, who express reservations about bypassing government with alternative mechanisms aimed at achieving improvement in the delivery of public services. It concludes that donors need to pay more attention to the problems inherent in service reform, to strengthen rather than circumvent critical relationships among policymakers, providers and clients; and, in aid dependent countries, support institutions by evaluating innovations and linking support to service delivery with a focus on outcomes and results. Wherever possible, the Report recommends, aid should be integrated with national development strategies, budgets and service delivery systems.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has expressed scepticism about the long-term viability, in the face of growing government failure in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, of devolving state responsibilities to smaller geographical units (including 'communities'). What is needed is a two pronged aid focus on the problem by donors. First, efforts to reform and strengthen the civil service should be pursued, despite the difficulties, frustrations and past failures, as a long-term program using staffing assistance where necessary and employing carrot and stick mechanisms wherever possible. Public service reform and strengthening activities should be preceded by careful study and analysis of the issues and problems to be addressed. Efforts should be made to devise performance incentives and ways of protecting the civil service from political interference. Renewed attention should be paid to improving the key functions of government; the collection of revenues, management of public finance, and delivery of key health, education and law enforcement services to the public. Secondly and simultaneously, efforts should be made to encourage civic awareness and responsibility. This might best be done by encouraging systematic village-level representation that feeds into the process of government service delivery. Village councils should have limited, legally defined responsibilities to assist with the provision of government services and to monitor and report on the outcomes of government services and the performance of government employees. History demonstrates that a state that is responsive to the needs of its citizens and accountable to them is the only proven mechanism for sustainable development.

## **ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> The Samoans call it the matai system. Matai are 'chiefs' or titled representatives of extended families. It is thought of as 'traditional' but in fact developed over the past century since the adoption of the Christian religion
- <sup>2</sup> Tendler is quoting Rudolf Hommes, an ex-minister of state from Colombia

## ISSUES IN THE DESIGN OF DECENTRALISATION

### MARK TURNER

Decentralisation is a development strategy that has gained universal popularity in recent years. It is not, however, a new strategy and it has a 'chequered history' (Stren 2002). In colonial times, the authorities sometimes introduced local governments as tools for democratic socialisation but more frequently they deconcentrated authority to field officers. Post-independent governments also experimented with decentralisation in the 1970s and into the 1980s when it was described as the 'latest fashion in development administration' (Conyers 1983). Shortage of finance, a reluctance New Guinea, which had introduced a system of provincial government in 1977, amended the legislation in 1995, ostensibly to devolve powers further to local-level governments (May and Regan with Ley 1997).

There are two basic sources for the arguments used to justify decentralisation. First, there are political arguments which focus on democratisation and enhanced participation of citizens in making decisions which affect their lives. Decentralisation can even be equated with human rights. A more pragmatic political approach is that decentralisation can be useful for creating and maintaining political stability. Secondly, decentralisation is promoted on technical efficiency grounds. In this view, local government is seen to possess managerial and economic advantages in providing the services people need and want in an efficient and responsive manner. Such pro-decentralisation arguments are often linked to the notion of good governance which has been strongly advocated by multilateral and bilateral donors. For example, the World Bank (1993) sees good governance as involving efficient public sector management, an effective system of accountability, the rule of law, and improved availability of information and transparency in decision-making. In theory these desirable qualities are associated with a decentralised system of participatory governance.

#### The Benefits of Decentralisation

Decentralisation has been credited with the potential to provide an impressive range of benefits. For example, Rondinelli (1981) cites fourteen specific benefits that accrue from decentralisation while Smith (1993) offers nine. On the managerial side these benefits usually include:

*Accessibility of officials:* officials are available for consultation, advice and complaint. As local officials can exercise decentralised authority, they make the decisions and do not need to pass them up the line to distant central offices.

*Mobilisation of local resources:* it is easier for locally based officials to identify local resources, both human and physical, and then mobilise them in the pursuit of locally determined developmental purposes. Officials should also be familiar with specific local constraints and the dynamics of local politics.

*Rapid response to local needs:* officials are better placed to respond rapidly to local needs as they are resident in the territory and fully aware of local conditions.

*Orientation to the specific local needs:* because officials know the local conditions they are well placed to make decisions and allocate resources which fit with the specific conditions prevailing in a particular territory. Each subnational territory may have unique features which can be taken into account when planning and allocating resources.

*Motivation of field personnel:* appointed government officials are more motivated to perform well when they have greater responsibility for programs they manage.

*Inter-office coordination:* coordination between offices dealing with different functions is more easily achieved at the local level where officials are physically close together and are often familiar with each other.

*Central agencies:* the decentralisation of service functions relieves central agencies of routine tasks. Responsibility for these has been passed down to the local level. Central agencies can thus focus on improving the quality of policy. Monitoring local-level performance and providing assistance to subnational units are key elements of this reformulated central government role.

From a political perspective the major benefit of democratic decentralisation is enhanced participation. People are able to influence decisions on matters that directly affect them. Smith (1985) has identified a range of additional political gains which can be derived from democratic decentralisation. These

include political education, training in political leadership, political stability, political equality, accountability and responsiveness.

However, implementation of decentralisation has often disappointed (Turner 1999). Local elites may capture the benefits while poor people see no welfare gains. The latter's voice may still be inaudible to officials. Parochialism may be inadvertently promoted while spatial inequities can be exacerbated. Local management and technical capacities may be insufficient for new responsibilities. Finance may also be inadequate to cover the costs of decentralised functions. Central agencies may be reluctant to support decentralisation and try to claw back authority and resources. In some instances, weak and collapsing states are unable to sustain a coherent system of government spanning national and subnational levels.

While it is impossible to eliminate negative experiences from decentralisation initiatives, it is possible to reduce them. Uncertainty can be lessened by paying greater attention to the design process. The World Bank (1999, 107) agrees in its pronouncement that 'the success of decentralisation depends on its design'. However, it should be appreciated that initial designs are not necessarily the final products. The implementation of decentralisation raises new issues and involves renewed political competition over how the planned arrangements will actually work. Nevertheless, a well-considered initial design does go a long way towards achieving success. There is a set of fundamental questions which designers should consider when embarking on a mission to reengineer the prevailing system of central-local relations. If these questions are not thought through properly then the chances of decentralisation success are considerably reduced. The questions are set out below.

### The Design Issues

#### *What sort of design process is required?*

The traditional model of the policy process is linear. There is a logical succession of stages starting at the agenda phase, moving through the decision phase and on to implementation (Thomas and Grindle 1990). This is orderly and neat, but it does not reflect reality. In practice, the policy process is messy and politicised. A realistic policy process accommodates flexibility. It recognises that environments are turbulent, that situations change and that stakeholders enter and exit the process in unpredictable ways. It is useful to adopt the rational linear

model of the policy process as a rough guide to the policy process, but it must not be mistaken for reality. First, it is too rigid for the unpredictable environments which characterise many developing countries. Secondly, it assumes rationality in the policy process when political considerations are frequently more important than technical matters. Thirdly, it does not include enough appreciation of risk analysis. An embedded element of the policy process should be the anticipation of failure. That is, participants must constantly ask the question, what could go wrong? This helps to identify problems and devise ways of overcoming them. Such risk analysis is an essential part of any policy-making process on decentralisation. Ideally, the planning arrangements for decentralisation should involve feedback from a range of stakeholders. The advantage of such a consultative process is that it is inclusive and seeks to take account of everybody's views. The disadvantages are that it may be time-consuming and could reach deadlock if there are opposed views and no agreed method of determining their relative merit.

#### *What is the purpose of decentralisation?*

This is the most basic but most ignored question concerning decentralisation. All too often there is inadequate consideration of what governments and citizens expect when authority is delegated from the centre. If the purpose of decentralisation is not spelled out there is the danger that it will come to mean all things to all people. High but unrealistic expectations will be generated. When decentralisation fails to satisfy all these expectations, popular support is likely to decline and political squabbling will take over. Appointed officials will lose interest and failure is likely. This scenario can be avoided by asking and answering basic questions at the outset and publishing the results in a White Paper or similar document that is widely available and subject to debate among multiple stakeholders. Fundamental questions on decentralisation would include asking whether democratisation and participation are the most important goals or whether improved service delivery is the principal objective. Perhaps national unity is a major concern. Equity and balanced development may be seen as desirable characteristics. Whether local governments are to be important service providers or mainly concerned with interest articulation is another critical issue that requires clarification from the outset. When the purpose of decentralisation has been

clearly established and communicated widely the business of detailed planning can begin. Modest expectations should be encouraged as the benefits of decentralisation may not be immediate. Where the state is weak this is particularly important as in such circumstances the state has limited capability to introduce and sustain new arrangements for local governance.

*What are the territorial divisions?*

Local level governance requires the division of the state's territory into areas. These are the local government areas. In many instances there will be a hierarchy of subnational units. For example, in the Philippines there are provinces and cities, municipalities and *barangays* (communities). In Indonesia there are provinces, regencies and cities, sub-districts and villages. In small compact states such as Singapore there may be no local government territories. In nearby Melanesia, Vanuatu is divided into 6 provinces. Each province is further divided into Local Area Councils, with urban areas such as Luganville and Port Vila being governed by municipal councils. In Papua New Guinea there are provincial governments and local governments as well as district administrative structures (corresponding to national electorates) in between these two levels.

Smith (1993, 18) has suggested five criteria for defining subnational territories:

*Settlement patterns*, where social geography suggests political or administrative boundaries

*Efficiency*, when areas are defined according to assumptions about the scale of operations necessary for optimum performance;

*Managerial*, when an area is defined according to the management structure of the decentralised organisation;

*Technical*, where the optimum area for a government activity is topographical or economic;

*Symbolic*, where areas define themselves regardless of administrative rationality.

How much attention is paid to the division of territory into subnational units varies between countries. Sometimes there is historical inertia and states simply maintain the status quo by continuing with old, often colonial, divisions. In other cases culture rather than technical considerations will strongly influence

the delineation of boundaries. However, when moving from efficiency criteria to symbolic or cultural determinants of local government boundaries there should be consideration of whether such territories are sustainable. An issue of particular importance is whether they can perform the functions devolved to them. With small territorial divisions, whatever the basis of their boundaries, there are diseconomies of scale which result in inefficient service provision. However, there may be political dividends from using cultural boundaries and diseconomies of scale could be dealt with through alternative mechanisms.

The delineation of boundaries also impacts on other decentralisation design issues. First, there should be consideration of the equity implications. Subnational territories will have different economic profiles and varying revenue-raising capacity. This means thought must be given to fiscal arrangements, specifically whether there should be mechanisms to boost the budgets of poor territories. Experience shows that there will be strong opposition to radical plans for fiscal redistribution. A second factor concerns the size of a territory's population and the implications of this for politics. Some evidence suggests that larger populations are likely to elect candidates with broader appeal whereas the smaller the constituency the lower the turnout for elections and the greater the likelihood that narrow interests will be elected. Whether such observations are applicable to Melanesia requires empirical demonstration (though comparative examination of provincial/regional and open electorates in Papua New Guinea suggests that it holds there). Thirdly, there needs to be a risk assessment of whether the boundaries are popularly acceptable. Boundary disputes can be debilitating and distract attention from service delivery and welfare improvement. A final issue is whether there should be strict guidelines for the formation of new subnational divisions. For example, in the Philippines financial, geographical and demographic specifications are set down in law relating to the establishment of a new subnational territory at each level. This reduces the ability of power-holders to reorganise subnational boundaries according to their personal preferences and interests.

*Do you have to choose one type of decentralisation?*

Decentralisation comes in various shapes and sizes. For example, the World Bank recognises political, administrative, fiscal and market decentralisation and further subdivides

the administrative type into deconcentration, delegation and devolution (Rondinelli 1999). However, decentralisation design is not a matter of choosing one type of decentralisation, although one kind may dominate. The varieties of decentralisation allow mixtures of central-local relations. For example, Cambodia has recently commenced a program of devolution and deconcentration (Turner 2002). Elected commune councils have been established for the purpose of interest articulation and to plan and implement minor public works. Service delivery is being decentralised through deconcentration by line ministries. Each ministry determines the nature and speed of its deconcentration program. The advantage of planning decentralisation as a mixture of types is that it should encourage efficiency. Different decentralisation arrangements are chosen according to their perceived efficacy to accomplish particular tasks. A danger is that a highly complex system emerges when simplicity should be the desirable characteristic.

*What are the institutions of local governance?*

The foci of decentralised local-level governance are the institutions established to make decisions and allocate resources. In most contemporary cases decentralisation means devolution, and this entails some form of elected council. For example, in the Philippines all persons over 18 years are entitled to vote for leaders and councillors at the community, municipal and provincial level. For such political decentralisation several sets of interrelated questions must be addressed in the design. The first concerns the electoral system. Decisions need to be made on who votes and how often, whether first-past-the-post or proportional representation is appropriate and what should be the qualifications for candidacy. There may be a need to include sectoral representation and traditional leadership. Designers might also wish to consider how to broaden political recruitment to include marginalised groups. Whether the chief executive should be drawn from the ranks of councillors or elected separately is another important matter. Certainly, more attention should be given to leadership recruitment than has often been the case in the past.

The procedures of elected assemblies are extremely important. Ensuring transparency, clearly delineating the extent of authority and ensuring an appropriate distribution of authority between executive and council are typical design concerns which have a strong bearing

on the efficacy of the local policy process. Questions also arise about how much of the detail of council procedures should be specified in legislation. Should councils have the latitude to determine the way they operate? This would accommodate differences between subnational territories and in weak states will probably be the reality regardless of what official documents state. The advantage of standardisation is that it should provide clear advice to both elected representatives and their constituencies about how local level government should be run and what are the limits of elected officials' powers.

Institutional design is not confined to elected bodies, it also concerns public administration. Even deconcentration is supposed to facilitate greater participation, improved responsiveness and enhanced mobilisation of resources. Such attributes do not occur automatically but must be encouraged and engineered. It is a fallacy to believe that giving authority to appointed officials at the local level necessarily provides participatory and technical benefits. If officials lack skills, have poor relationships with the centre, command few resources and are imbued with 'normal professionalism' then deconcentration will provide few gains for the local population.

*What functions are being decentralised?*

Determination of what functions are to be decentralised is one of the most important issues involved in decentralisation. In Indonesia, Law 22/1999 decentralised all service delivery functions from education and health through to agriculture and environment to the district level. Radical decentralisation on such a massive scale was feasible in Indonesia where adequate technical capacity existed in many regions and where funding for existing operations was guaranteed. The Indonesian example highlights several important design matters. First, there is no point decentralising functions for which there is inadequate capacity either in terms of human resources or physical assets. This leads to service breakdown. Secondly, functions need to be matched with finance. If local government institutions are to provide specific services then it is essential that there are funds to pay for them. This is a simple but often overlooked matter. Thirdly, thought should be given to whether it is government which should perform the decentralised functions. Are NGOs, the church or private businesses better equipped to provide particular services? Fourth, there should be consideration of how much freedom of choice is given to local government units as to their

resource allocation for particular services. Can they stop providing a particular service if people think it unimportant? What mandate would a local government need to reduce funding on health or education? Alternatively, should higher levels of government impose performance measures for particular activities? Should they prescribe minimum levels of funding and performance standards? If so, what courses of action will be taken when local governments fail to reach the recommended levels?

*What is the timeframe for decentralisation?*

Changes in central-local relations can be determined and implemented according to different timeframes. At one extreme is the 'big bang' approach in which everything is done at once. If there are many changes involved in the initiative then big bangs carry many risks. Indonesia adopted an approach near the big bang end of the continuum. The laws were drawn up and implemented in under two years for a program involving the devolution of numerous functions to districts and the transfer of 2.4 million public servants from central to local control. By contrast, the Cambodian government has adopted an incremental approach in which ministries determine the content and pace of their deconcentration programs and elected commune councils are starting with very small budgets and limited activities. The idea is that a decentralised system of governance will evolve over the next decade. The crucial temporal issues are to judge the urgency of the need for changes in central-local relations and to relate that to the capacity of institutions to implement the changes effectively. Even where changes are urgently needed because service delivery has collapsed, the capacity to undertake the desired changes may be lacking. Moving rapidly to introduce comprehensive transformations in such circumstances will bring certain failure.

*How much participation is needed for effective decentralisation?*

Participation is viewed as one of the major objectives of decentralisation. Indeed, participation and decentralisation are frequently portrayed as enjoying a 'symbiotic relationship' (Seddon 1999, 15). Successful decentralisation is seen to require participation while participation is believed to be enhanced by decentralisation. Participation is usually judged to be a good in itself and also as the key to many desirable developmental outcomes. It is held to empower, give voice to the poor, and improve

management efficiency. But decentralisation designers are faced with a choice of participation possibilities (Chambers 1993 and 1997; World Bank 1996; Nelson and Wright 1995). Elections are a basic participatory institution, but there are also such things as community forums, participatory rural appraisal, participatory budgeting, consultative councils and people's organisations. There are traditional forms of community consultation and action, new initiatives and hybrids. Everybody, from multilateral aid agencies through to communities, seems to be in favour of enhanced participation, but in Melanesia there has been much disappointment with a variety of forms of participation.

The designers of decentralisation must address several key interrelated issues on participation. There is the question of how much participation. Should participation be an integral aspect of all decision-making? What organisational forms should be encouraged and developed? A critical consideration is which organisations and institutions have legitimacy both in the eyes of the community and of the state. This relates to whether the recognised participatory forms are weaker or stronger. Some modes of participation provide little voice to communities and disadvantaged sectors while at the other end of the spectrum there are self-mobilising forms of participation which are based on community initiatives (Pretty 1995). When determining what forms of participation are appropriate and will work it is important to maintain a focus on the purpose of decentralisation and what participation is supposed to achieve. What decisions are being influenced? For example, if participation is supposed to enhance service delivery and managerial efficiency then it is important to demonstrate why particular modes of participation are appropriate. It may be that there needs to be a division between participation where interest articulation is dominant and participation which determines the allocation of resources. Communities and governments will need to reach accommodation on such matters.

A final note on participation is a warning. If managed badly, participation leads to conflict or decision-making gridlock. Organisations, factions or other groups may become disenchanted with the participatory process and opt out or simply try to disrupt it. It should be recognised from the outset that communities have not only developed mechanisms for cooperative action they also

generate oppositions and competition which can be debilitating in terms of decision-making and communal action. There is a long history of development interventions which utilise an idealised notion of community instead of researching the reality of community power structures and the relations between communities and external agencies.

*What financial arrangements should be put in place?*

Financial arrangements lie at the core of decentralisation design. The key issue is to match finance with function. Subnational governments need to secure the level of funds necessary to cover agreed expenditures on decentralised functions. This ideally entails some precision in describing the decentralised functions and the level of performance that is expected. For example, what are the minimum standards for staffing and running a health centre? How many books per student should there be in primary schools? While a complex system of performance measurement is not desirable some indication of performance standards is most useful for ensuring that a given level of service is provided and for promoting accountability. Systems of accountability are also vital to prevent funds from being squandered or diverted to satisfy private ends.

The source of funding is an important factor. In Melanesia, the capacity of subnational governments to raise substantial sums from local taxes is severely circumscribed. The economies of many subnational territories do not present much opportunity for taxation. Thus, central government transfers will be the major source of income for most subnational governments. The degree of control over these funds is of interest to the designers of decentralisation. For example, should the system involve earmarking specific amounts to particular sectors or activities? Alternatively, should there be block grants and local-level autonomy in expenditure allocation? In such cases what systems of accountability need to be put in place to ensure communities receive value for money. If local-level government is not directly responsible for the provision of major services such as education, health and public works then financial flows to local-level governments will be greatly diminished thus potentially making local-level financial management a simpler exercise. This could be desirable where capacities in financial management are limited and where powerful local leaders can alter agreed expenditure patterns to suit their

personal interests. But for many Melanesians the local-level issues in financial management are less about management and more about whether any funds at all reach the grassroots.

*What provisions are there for accountability?*

Accountability has become a buzzword among decentralisation designers. It is no longer simply a matter of satisfying central governments that money has been received and that expenditures have been made, although this would mark a considerable advance in some Melanesian cases. Accountability should be seen as serving three purposes:

The first is to *control* abuse of and misuse of public authority. The second is to provide *assurance* in respect to the use of public resources and the adherence to the law and public service values. The third is to encourage and promote learning in pursuit of *continuous improvement* in governance and public management (Aucoin and Heintzman 2000, 45).

Decentralisation design should try to satisfy all three purposes. The importance attached to each purpose may vary with context but all should be considered. Accountability mechanisms such as transparent decision-making or concern with outputs and outcomes can simultaneously satisfy multiple purposes. There should be efforts to ensure that accountability devices combine simplicity with effectiveness. For example, sophisticated systems of performance measurement are likely to break down. Systems consisting of a few well-chosen and widely known measures have better chances of success. It is an area in which community should certainly participate but central government also has a role. There are numerous examples of accountability institutions (Hayllar 1991; Goetz and Jenkins 2001). The objective for decentralisation design should be to choose and modify a few devices which have authority and are likely to be effective in the context of Melanesian societies. Traditional institutions may be particularly useful in this regard, not necessarily in their pristine states but in forms modified to suit the demands of the modern world.

*What are the equity implications of decentralisation?*

A risk in decentralisation is that it can enhance the possibility of inequity between different subnational jurisdictions. This will depend on the functions decentralised, the local organisational capacity, financial arrangements,

and the level of, and potential for, economic development. If decentralisation entrenches existing patterns of unequal resource allocation there is likely to be a tendency towards increasing inequality between subnational territories and perhaps within them. Central government has a particularly important role to play in attempting to ensure that disadvantaged regions receive special assistance. If leaders and followers in such regions feel neglected, then political discontent and disorder are more easily fomented. However, a policy of putting extra resources into poor territories can meet opposition from wealthier ones which feel little or no obligation to support their poorer neighbours. Political skills are needed to negotiate a compromise in which the interests of equity are served and the claims of wealthier territories are addressed. If questions of equity are not properly addressed then secession and state collapse are extreme scenarios which can no longer be overlooked.

*What are the inter-governmental arrangements?*

Decentralisation is not simply about giving out authority, finance and functions to lower-level territories. It is essentially about how different levels of government will share the tasks of government and how societal actors at each level can contribute to overall governance. Decentralisation is above all a cooperative venture. This means that engineering the appropriate inter-governmental relations is of great importance. It is unfortunately an area that has frequently been neglected in decentralisation design. Of particular concern is the role of central government in a new decentralised order. While it is relieved of responsibility for various functions it must fulfil more complex requirements. A monitoring role is essential as is ensuring compliance in particular activities, such as finance. Central government should also be a facilitator, providing both policy and technical assistance. Too often central government fails to perform any of these tasks efficiently, thus leaving weak local-level governments to fend for themselves. It may even allow powerful local leaders to hijack political positions for personal gain. The key to effective inter-governmental relations is to specify the procedures for supervision and control for each function decentralised. Some of these may be bundled for administrative convenience while similar procedures may apply to many different functions. They must be set within 'a wider network of relationships between levels of government'

(Smith 1993, 61). Designers should follow the principle of simplicity as far as possible in determining inter-governmental relations, as excessive bureaucratic regulations will undoubtedly result in a malfunctioning system and may even offer enhanced opportunities for corruption.

*What training is there for officials?*

Organisational capacity is a leading concern for decentralisation design. Do the local-level governments have the capacity to perform the functions that have been decentralised to them? Can they manage the finances? Do they have the qualified personnel? If organisational capacity is weak then organisational performance will suffer and the promised gains of decentralisation will not materialise. There will be disillusionment with local-level government, perhaps government in general, and local support and trust of the formal institutions of government will decline, perhaps even disappear. Services will not be delivered efficiently or perhaps not at all. Thus, having good organisational capacity is a crucial requirement for an effective decentralisation program. It will not ensure effective decentralisation but it can make a vital contribution to it.

One of the most important ways in which organisational capacity can be improved is through training, but training can also be a way to waste resources. Poorly targeted training using irrelevant materials and taught by staff out of touch with the reality of local-level government is of no use to the populations of decentralised territories. Training needs to be directed to addressing identified problems in administration and the policy process. There should be priorities, both in terms of the subject matter and the personnel to be trained. Training requires coordination, and for Melanesia that means national government. Both appointed and elected officials at all levels can benefit from training. Curricula need constant review and updating. New demands should be addressed rapidly. Trainers need a range of pedagogical skills. None of this is new, but these known lessons have often been ignored. As a result, organisational capacity has suffered. Training is vulnerable to budgetary cutbacks as its practitioners and promoters rarely wield power in government. However, a system of training is vital for building and maintaining organisational capacity.

## CONCLUSION

This excursion into the design of decentralisation has not been exhaustive. The intention of the exercise has been to identify some of the leading questions which decentralisation architects must address when drawing up their designs. There are numerous additional questions, some of which will be specific to particular cases. Many of the questions posed in this paper have a managerial or technical focus but it would be self-deluding if decentralisation designers believed that they need only concern themselves with the mechanics of decentralisation. Their task has strong political components. Decisions concerning the configuration of central-local relations are the outcomes of political processes. Political management and risk analysis thus become important components of negotiated settlements. But powerful interests can influence decisions relating to the design of decentralisation so that bad rather than good governance prevails. It is mistaken to believe that everybody is in favour of good governance. There are individuals who occupy powerful positions who benefit greatly from bad governance and who may view decentralisation as an opportunity for accumulating more power and wealth or alternatively see an accountable democratic order as a threat to their current positions.

Two other matters that go beyond the technical are vital for decentralisation design. First, it is essential to understand the lessons of history. Too often history is overlooked or subjected to extraordinary interpretation. It should be mandatory to have a long and hard look at what systems have operated and what were their good and bad points. In some Melanesian countries the lack of historical investigation has proved calamitous for public sector reforms of all types. Secondly, decentralisation is not a matter of designing a blueprint which then acts as a straitjacket for central-local relations and the operation of local-level governance. What is needed is a clear framework within which there is room for manoeuvre. While some features of the system may need to be fixed, others may be negotiable thus giving appropriate consideration to local needs and aspirations. The danger is that designers may create blueprints which are unworkable from the start and which do little or nothing to achieve the stated objectives of decentralisation. Services remain

poor, people have 'voice' but nobody listens and disillusionment prevails. Good decentralisation design processes which address fundamental questions and are fully aware of political realities can help to avoid such situations and lead to developmental gains. Furthermore, the initial design is only the first step, albeit a highly important one, in the process of decentralisation and the promotion of good governance at the local level.

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