



Community Governance in Melanesia: The Impact of Long-Range Leaders¹

Miranda Forsyth and Sinclair Dinnen

DOI: 10.25911/16VW-QW58
23 October 2024

It is becoming increasingly hard to understand local level governance in Melanesia without attending to the role played by 'long-range leaders'. We use this term to refer to members of a village community who are living permanently or periodically outside their community, usually in a larger town or city. Unlike their Polynesian and Micronesian neighbours, few Melanesian countries (with the exception of Fiji) have significant overseas diasporas, so we are concerned primarily with in-country long-range leadership. Long-range leaders can be elites such as politicians, businessmen/women or senior bureaucrats. In some contexts, they can simply be individuals with a regular pay-packet living in an urban area. Their leadership claim may stem from their standing in the village including customary title, or status gained through education or employment. In recent fieldwork in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea (PNG), we have become increasingly struck by the profound influence exercised by such leaders.

For instance, a recent lunch with a local research colleague in downtown Honiara was punctuated by calls and texts from his mobile phone. Community members were urgently seeking his counsel and direction regarding a wayward youth who had run amok on his home island. In his role as customary chief, we observed our colleague seemingly expertly navigating micro-level village politics at long range, while simultaneously operating in his professional urban role.

On another occasion, we learned of the successful businessmen (and we only heard about men) living in Port Moresby who fund gun and ammunition purchases — and also pay for compensation for peace-making and medical help following a fight in their rural Highlands places of origin. As such, they exercise a crucial role in decisions about when to fight and when to engage in peace-making.

While there is scholarship on gatekeepers (see below) and patron-client relationships, this tends to focus on the role played by politicians, rather than this more generalised leadership phenomenon. It seems to us that the influence of long-range leaders on the governance and reshaping of communities — for better or worse — remains largely theoretically unexplored. Of course, their role is implicitly understood by anyone with any experience of the region at all.

Metaphors are particularly useful to conceptualise this phenomenon (see Lakoff and Johnson 1981), and indeed have always been a key part of Pacific ways of understanding the world.

Like the gravitational pull of celestial bodies such as the sun or moon influencing tides and life cycles on Earth, the presence and actions of long-range leaders are similarly felt in the Pacific. Though distant and often invisible to outsiders, these leaders can significantly affect governance and decision-making in their home communities.

Yet this metaphor only goes so far. Rather than exerting a constant, predictable pull, relationships between long-range leaders and their communities are subject to flux and depend on context. While we typically do not think of the influence of celestial bodies as either positive or negative, long-range leaders can be both benevolent, problematic and everything in between. The literature on diasporas more broadly similarly observes their varied potential.

One benevolent dimension of long-range leaders is their economic contributions to community, whether directly or indirectly by facilitating projects and brokering access to external funding. This can happen continuously through remittances or periodically for specific needs such as funerals, marriages, or community projects. While all Pacific peoples have family obligations to provide for kin, these community contributions go beyond such obligations. In addition, the professional skills of long-range leaders can be very helpful in guiding community governance decisions. These leaders are often the ones called to sit on contentious local school boards, or to help develop a set of written community bylaws.

Long-range leaders in Melanesia are predominantly male. Some of the few female leaders have successfully softened patriarchal norms by providing alternative role models and advocating for greater freedom for younger women. These positive aspects might be better understood by what Suzanne Simard calls 'mother trees' — older, larger trees that provide essential nutrients and support to younger saplings through underground networks.

Yet long-range leaders can also exert a more malevolent influence. More akin to long-acting poison, the connection between the input and the result is at a temporal distance and therefore hard to trace — but potent nonetheless. One very extreme example of direct negative influence is the funding of supplies of weapons, ammunition and payments for mercenaries in PNG's Highlands.

Less overtly, long-range leaders can play significant roles in fuelling and sustaining conflict and division in the home community, often for election-related political ends or for economic gain through land grabbing and dubious deals with foreign logging companies.

Some male long-range leaders keen on shoring up their masculinity can limit the ability of local women to gain influence, using their own influence in selecting/approving leadership positions in community *komitis* or to obstruct prospective local female candidates in provincial and national elections.

Less malevolently, but nevertheless with negative impacts, long-range leaders can render community governance institutions a lot more fragile and ineffective. Learned helplessness can arise, where communities become dependent on external decision-makers and unable to make decisions, or govern effectively on their own, without the official signoff of long-range leaders.

Of course, the reality is that long-range leaders are often both benevolent and malevolent. They can act as both gate-keepers and door-openers for younger or female leaders. As Theresa Meki discusses in her work on women candidates in PNG elections, male patrons can play a really important role. Perhaps in this way they are like sunlight: it is necessary for life, and yet overexposure can lead to sun damage.

Pressure can be exerted from the community as well, with either benevolent or malevolent effects.

In this way the long-range leader is like a conductor who orchestrates and coordinates community actions from a distance, but who is influenced by the feedback that is constantly being produced by the musicians. However, musicians are generally not as demanding as community members can be! A friend and colleague at the University of Papua New Guinea had a sign on his office door that read: 'God will save me from my enemies but who will save me from my *wantoks* [relatives]?'

This can be seen at a broader scale in the relationship between member of parliament (MPs) and their constituents in Melanesia, exacerbated by the rise of constituency development funds. For example, Solomon Islands MP Rick Hou laments that:

People call their MP in the middle of the night, they call early in the morning; they call anytime. They call on anything and everything. They call for assistance with funeral expenses of dead relatives, assistance with school fees, to attend a wedding, to follow up on their project application, to attend a meeting on

the local hospital project or just to ask for 'top up'. (Hou 2016:1–2)

This insight points to a feature of long-range leaders — they need to continually perform in order to maintain their role and legitimacy. Failure to meet the expectations of their community will result in their obsolescence over time.

The rise of mobile phones has significantly impacted the relationship between long-range leaders and their communities. Leaders are constantly on their phones, alert for incoming WhatsApps, scouring Facebook for messages they've been tagged in and, even more so, checking for posts in which they have not. Long-range leaders are far more immediately accessible — available to advise at a moment's notice. While providing a welcome stream of external perspectives, advice and support, this can also accentuate the lack of autonomy of a community itself.

There is a need for further research in this important but little understood area in order to capitalise on the potential benefits and minimise the risks of malevolent outcomes. After all, despite the intense focus by those outside the region on issues of geopolitical competition, electoral results for decades have made it clear that the local is what counts for most Melanesian communities.

Author notes

Professor Miranda Forsyth is based at RegNet at the ANU. Her scholarship centres on justice, violence and peace in Melanesia. Professor Sinclair Dinnen is based in the Department of Pacific Affairs in the College of Asia and the Pacific at the ANU. His research focuses on justice, policing, and conflict and peacebuilding in Melanesia.

Endnote

1. A different and shorter version of this In Brief was published as a blog in the Lowy Institute's *The Interpreter*.

References

- Hou, R. 2016. A Day in the Life of a Member of Parliament in Solomon Islands. *SSGM Discussion Paper* 2016/2. Canberra: ANU.
- G. Lakoff and M. Johnson. 1981. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



Pacific Research Program *An Initiative of the Australian Aid Program*



Australian
National
University

Department of
Pacific Affairs

Development
Policy Centre

**LOWY
INSTITUTE**

The **Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA)** is the leading international centre for applied multidisciplinary research and analysis concerning contemporary state, society and governance in the Pacific. DPA acknowledges the Australian Government's support for the production of the In Brief series. The views, findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Australian National University or the Australian Government. The Australian Government, as represented by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), does not guarantee, and accepts no legal liability whatsoever, arising from, or connected to, the accuracy, reliability, currency or completeness of any information herein. This publication, which may include the views or recommendations of third parties, has been created independently of DFAT and is not intended to be, nor should it be, viewed as reflecting the views of DFAT, or indicative of its commitment to a particular course or courses of action.

dpa@anu.edu.au

bellschool.anu.edu.au/dpa

[DepartmentofPacificAffairs](https://www.facebook.com/DepartmentofPacificAffairs)
 [@anudpa](https://twitter.com/anudpa)

[DepartmentofPacificAffairs](https://www.linkedin.com/company/DepartmentofPacificAffairs)

ISSN 2209-9557 (Print)

ISSN 2209-9549 (Online)