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**STEPS IN A LONG JOURNEY:
COMMUNITY PROJECTS
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
IN WEST KWAIO AND CENTRAL KWARA'AE
MALAITA, SOLOMON ISLANDS**

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Abstract

This study attempts to evaluate whether development projects could be means to the end of sustainable development in the Solomon Islands context of a subsistence economy in transition to a cash economy.

Literature on development often emphasizes theory over practice, global over local, project design and implementation over project evaluation, and failures over successes. This research intends to reverse these tendencies and determine, in the evaluation of highly participatory, highly local, small-scale community projects, whether development projects could be means to the end of sustainable development. The evaluation is based on the assumption that community projects can only be truly successful if they contribute to maintain and/or improve the condition of both people and the ecosystem.

It is proposed here that sustainable development may be realized through the cumulative effect of development activities that may be individually minor—at a local or a higher level—but collectively significant. What is inherently difficult is how the collective result of many disparate local development initiatives in the present may result in a desired state of affairs in the future—not just locally, but at a national or regional level.

It is concluded here that community projects may contribute to progress towards sustainable development but are not a sufficient means to this end. Projects may have a *tactical* role in development, but should be integrated to an overall strategy for sustainable development. Ultimately these needs may lead to a new development practice paradigm that replaces *the project*. A new paradigm should be inclusive of emerging initiatives at the grassroots level, but also fit in a broader strategy for sustainable development. The search for a long term development strategy, however, should not impede local action to address more immediate needs.

On line with research by others in this issue, it argued here that in the Solomon Islands the notion of community is interwoven with the land through present use and history in the notion of *fanua kem*, “our place”. The notion of *fanua* could provide a cultural foundation to the notion of sustainable development. It is suggested that the value of *fanua* results not so much a matter of awareness of superior goals but rather, it is in the quotidian quality and ubiquitous use in Solomon Islands villages that the notion of “our place” does provide a sense of identity and belonging to a place, a community, a common past, and a common future.

Preface

This research originates in fieldwork conducted in 1994 in the Solomon Islands for an Australian youth and community development organization. At that time, there were a number of community initiatives (or projects) in their beginning stages. I was fortunate enough to work with these communities and with a group of young volunteers. Whilst I had a definite interest for development issues, the fieldwork was largely unrelated to any theoretical academic consideration of development. Years later it was a matter of personal and academic interest to find out what had happened to those communities and whether their initiatives had succeeded or failed, why, and what the consequences for the future would be.

This work attempts to analysis why people's development initiatives succeed or fail, and ultimately what viable, realistic strategies for sustainable development in the South Pacific would be. By "realistic" strategies, however, I do not mean compromise with the powers that be, but real life actions that represent a modest but viable contribution to the defined or undefined goals of creating a better place to live, "in comfort and dignity"¹, in the near future and on into the distant future. To a greater or lesser degree these are everyone's goals, in the Solomon Islands as elsewhere.

I have tried to find out the answers by trying an eclectic mix of approaches, which is the reason why this thesis is so long and not necessarily better. If I were to do it again I would do it much shorter, and I would make an additional effort to delve into the non-English development literature as well as on what has been written by people from the Pacific. In compensation, to the extent possible I have tried to reproduce what Solomon Islanders have to say: "What people say is real, even if it is not written in the books".² My apologies for any misrepresentation of their opinions, languages or cultural beliefs I may have made. Perhaps the main result of this research will be to bring back a message from the people who are at the "frontline" of development to us who have a more secure life in the North and the West. What people say may resonate in our own lives, help our reflection and encourage our actions. What people in the Solomon Islands experience in their struggle for life is after all a different version of our own struggles. Our cultures and circumstances may differ, but we share the same journey.

Ricardo Roura
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¹ Foanota 1989 – see Chapter 12.

² Balu'u pers. comm. 2000.

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'If you think that education is expensive, try ignorance'

(Attributed to André Malraux)

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