
EDITOR'S FORUM

**THE NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION FACTOR
IN DEVELOPMENT: A VIEW FROM
THE SOLOMON ISLANDS**

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Over the past forty years development efforts have focused on national economic growth. In the early years development was conceived of in terms of a nation's achieving rapid industrialization. By the mid-1970s this mainstream argument--that economic growth was at the heart of development-- was being discredited, not on the grounds that economic growth had not occurred but more importantly that it was not alleviating poverty. A World Bank report stated: "It is now clear that more than a decade of rapid growth in underdeveloped countries has been of little or no benefit to perhaps a third of their population. Although the average per capita income of the Third World has increased by 50 percent since 1960, this growth has been very unequally distributed among countries, and socio-economic groups."¹

A more recent and stronger criticism of conventional development wisdom comes from the Club of Rome's informal grouping of government leaders, scientists, economists, and businessmen who seek to influence national policies by recommending new strategies. A recent report by Bertrand Schneider, the club's secretary-general, focuses on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as the new agents of change. His book, *The Barefoot Revolution*, calls upon governments and financial institutions to recognize NGOs as fully committed agents of development and to support them with appropriate funding. It asks the major development decision makers to recognize the NGO presence: "This new trend

Pacific Studies, Vol. 14, No. 1--November 1990

is radically changing the tenets of development that have prevailed until now, for it entails a complete overhaul of 20 years of economic strategy that has not fulfilled its promises."²

These authoritative statements say in effect that the past forty years of development efforts patterned on Western industrial society models have been failures and it is clearly time to change, to try less ambitious and more pragmatic approaches. Engineers and water experts now say most of the giant water projects undertaken in the Third World since 1960 have been disasters and have had devastating ecological effects (Egypt's Aswan High Dam is an example). The Tanzania farming project in Arusha was far too intensive for the valley's delicate tropical ecology. Brazil's debt has been aggravated by enormous construction projects. The Club of Rome report says that in Africa, as in Latin America, food self-sufficiency has been undermined by spending scarce cash on huge agroindustrial schemes to grow cash crops for export.

But NGOs ask that the analysis go a step further. They do not see themselves as new agents of change simply by pushing self-help, grass-roots projects. It makes little sense to them to seek funds for poultry projects when villagers' very life sources--forests, streams, rivers, reefs--are being destroyed by logging companies. It is not that the motto "Small Is Beautiful!" is wrong, but inadequate. NGOs are becoming more and more interested in "Strong Is Beautiful!" They define development as "empowerment" rather than the now-discredited notion that North/South resource transfers are the solution. Empowerment means increasing villagers' capacity in relation to the surrounding world. In the village-oriented Pacific empowerment takes the form of instructing villagers to use the political, bureaucratic, and economic systems to better their lives. A major goal of the Solomon Islands Development Trust, a local NGO more fully explored later in this essay, is to engage village people in public discussion in which problems, difficulties, and issues they now face become the agenda items of public debate.

The NGO Era

Recent studies recognize that the emerging Pacific era has already burst upon us. Of course their focus is primarily on economics and military might, and on Pacific rim countries, not the island nations. Adapting to this major shift from a North Atlantic preoccupation to a Pacific focus, however, poses unprecedented challenges.

Many Pacific Islands nations have long histories of what is now called

the nongovernmental organization presence. Christian churches in fact sometimes preceded government structures and before them were village and chiefly organizations. Since the advent of national government structures, however, sports clubs, economic organizations, civic groups, and now the nongovernmental organizations (sometimes called people's organizations, citizen groups, or voluntary organizations) have increasingly become part of the public scene.

The most recent players, the NGOs, have jumped into the development scene with both feet. In just a few years some of these groups have moved from a peripheral to a more central role in providing leadership for national and international development. The Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT), for example, is an indigenous nongovernmental organization working especially in the village sector of the Solomon Islands since 1982. A recent evaluation team from the International Science and Technology Institute of Washington said that SIDT was "by any standard a resounding success. After only three years of operation, it has an annual budget of about \$250,000 from diverse sources, a dedicated, highly respected, and competent director, a well established purpose and program, an effective and appropriate operational methodology, a well-developed and dynamic system of training and re-training over 100 villagers who staff its mobile teams in all the far-flung islands of the Solomons."³

The SIDT Story

The winds of political change blew strongly in the Pacific in the decade of the 1970s. Many new nations were born (Fiji, 1970; Papua New Guinea, 1975; Solomon Islands, 1978; Kiribati and Vanuatu, 1980) but few had the foresight to realize that an independent government should also be matched by local, independent developmental groups as well. In early 1980 the first meeting of people interested in beginning a local developmental body in the Solomon Islands met in Honiara, the national capital.⁴ SIDT was conceived at that time. It was the second such organization in the Pacific; the first, Nasonal Komuniti Development Trust, began in Vanuatu in 1979.

Only in mid-1982, however, did SIDT actually begin to function, after the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific interested the development group Private Agencies Collaborating Together in funding the new organization. In its first two years (1982-1983) the young institution formulated a development philosophy, instituted a training program, and recruited staff. Its Board of Trustees directed SIDT to be

involved in development education and awareness building, not project funding and implementation.

By early 1984 SIDT had grown from handful of people stationed in Honiara to more than seventy-five men and women working in villages in many parts of the country. The newly formed organization welded disparate individuals--five dozen island trainees, ten recently arrived Australian volunteers, and an untested training staff--into a working group. Their initial task was formidable. SIDT worked closely with the government's Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Program, adding an educational component.

The following two years (1985-1986) deepened team members' understanding of development issues. They went out to villagers and worked closely with government personnel in health, education, and water supply. Training, retraining, and training again of Mobile Team members (MTMs) became the critical factor in its village outreach program. SIDT's main goal of strengthening village life and empowering villagers put a special emphasis on recruitment of women and building bridges between and among other NGOs nationally and internationally.

Cyclone Namu in May 1986 became a watershed for SIDT. The organization responded quickly to the government call for a disaster survey, supplying more than half the personnel needed to carry out the nationwide survey. Further government requests--for a nutrition research survey, home gardening program, and housing rehabilitation awareness program--were also carried out. SIDT's strong involvement increased government acceptance of the organization.

The events of 1986 also prepared SIDT for a new, three-year program--Disaster Awareness and Preparation 1987-1989. Development education now included ways to better prepare villagers for natural and man-made disasters. Using the same outreach methodology, the MTMs toured the many scattered, small-population villages. In the first three years of work (1984-1986) these teams had conducted more than twelve hundred village-level workshops. The program had grown: 115 field staff (villagers all) organized into thirty-two teams operating in all seven provinces.

A major event of 1987 was the publishing of *LINK* magazine, a bimonthly dedicated to giving villagers a voice in the decision-making process. Many village problems have direct links to decisions made in Honiara. *LINK*, a magazine for and about village life, is a way for villagers to make known their thoughts, aspirations, and plans for the country's future. Copies of the magazine were also used by the Mobile Teams in their village outreach program. By the end of 1989 thirteen

issues had been published, each having a print run of over three thousand copies.

Theater has also become a highly successful tool for sharing information and bringing fresh perspectives to villagers. In 1988 SIDT, with the help of a CUSO volunteer, began the SEI! Akson Team, a group of young people who toured villages and performed prepared skits about the effects of logging, the value of local rather than imported food, and medical practices such as immunization. It would be hard to exaggerate its power. As one young mother said, "Now I know why my child needs three injections. I always thought that one was enough!"

The success of the theater group led directly to the publishing and use of comics as outreach tools. By the end of 1989 SIDT had published six small comic books in Pijin English, called *KOMIKs*. More than fifty thousand copies have been distributed throughout the country, covering such topics as family planning, logging, life in town, and planning a feast. The nation's secondary-school teachers requested that *KOMIKs* be sent to each school for use as textbooks in the social science curriculum.⁵

SIDT's efforts have not been confined to its internal well-being. The organization has sparked a local umbrella NGO group, the Development Services Exchange (DSE). At present DSE has more than thirty-two members, with twenty-four of them paying members of an organization that acts as an informational clearinghouse for NGO activities as well as a lobbyist for its component members.

On the international scene, SIDT has been in the forefront of NGOs wishing to join forces across national boundaries. At present SIDT functions as Secretariat to the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO). Great effort is now focused on helping Pacific Islands NGOs establish national liaison units (NLUs), which could function as a country's NGO representative body at PIANGO and other international meetings. Some countries such as Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu already have strongly functioning NLUs, while other countries are in the process of establishing them. At the October 1989 meeting in Melbourne where PIANGO's Steering Committee met, other country representatives detailed their efforts to establish NLUs in their respective countries.

Has SIDT's Work Changed Anything?

What changes have come about from SIDT's village outreach program? Have the time, effort, and funding been worthwhile? Have the work-

shops and village discussions produced better patterns of living, changed minds to new ways of thinking, strengthened institutions, and rooted beneficial structures? Good changes have come about. Some are only now surfacing and will need years of work to bloom. Other trends are more clearly seen.

The national development debate has been broadened from an economics emphasis to include the social and cultural concerns of villagers. A recent government initiative, for example, focuses on rural human resource development, the first of its kind for the country. Funding worth SI\$9.4 million came from the European Economic Community.

Villager participation in the development process has changed from rhetoric to reality. The Constitution and the Provincial Government Review committees recently toured villages to consult and involve villagers in the review process.

Cooperation between government and the private sector has grown appreciably. The participation of NGO personnel in governmental projects such as the nutritional research survey, home gardening project, and so forth are signs of the increasing acceptance and cooperation between the two.

Personal growth of SIDT personnel is a striking feature of a program changing people. SIDT's village personnel are "dropouts" from the school system. Coastal dwellers often judge "bush" people as inferior, second-class citizens. Eddie, a field-worker from North Malaita, recently reported after a trip to Malaita's interior, "We talk about self-reliance but they are doing it." With training, village involvement, and a supportive organization these dropouts become productive and responsible rural citizens.

Enabling villagers to ask the right questions and use the political and bureaucratic systems empowers. The team members' ability to share information and bring new ways of thinking enriches both giver and receiver. In Guadalcanal a Mobile Team conducted a workshop deep in the bush. On the last day of the workshop a participant revealed he had recently chased away a helicopter and its crew doing unauthorized explorations on his land. He had wrestled with his feelings over the last three weeks: Had he acted correctly? Was what he had done right? Would the police come after him? When he shared his feelings and was informed that his actions were entirely within the law and that he had done the correct thing, the weight of his action left him and he became a free person once again.

Certain program results--attitudinal change, skill enhancement, individual accomplishments--are the more obvious fruit of the village

outreach program. Other results such as awareness building are only beginning to root. If allowed to bloom, greater change will occur in the future. Table 1 gives an overview of SIDT's 1988 program of outreach activities and is representative of a year's work.

Financing the Program

To organize, direct, and train personnel for a national outreach program calls on many resources. SIDT's major resource base, however, is the group of rural workers who train, tour villages, and share their development insights with other villagers. Without their frequent and continuous personal contacts, SIDT's work would remain locked up in the capital city. But running a national village-outreach program of more than 130 workers is not a shortcut to development. Creating and sustaining a community education pattern from the ground up is an expensive but necessary step to engage the backbone of the nation, the village person.

Funding sources come mainly from people's organizations in other countries. Some of these nongovernmental organizations are as close as Australia: the Overseas Service Bureau, Australia Freedom from Hunger Campaign, and Community Aid Abroad. A major contributor, however, lies at a distance, Holland's Interchurch Coordinating Com-

TABLE 1. SIDT Touring Program, 1988

Province	Disaster Awareness and Development Workshops	Special Workshops ^a	Participants
Central	48	6	2,425
N. Guadalcanal	49	8	2,125
S. Guadalcanal	12	42	1,500
N. Malaita	79	3	1,474
S. Malaita	53	4	2,409
Temotu	62	3	2,419
Makira/Ulawa	42	3	1,732
Western	41	0	1,434
Ysabel	44	6	2,395
Total	430	75	17,913

Source: Adapted from Solomon Islands Development Trust, *Annual Summary 1988* (Honiara, 1989), 3.

^aSpecial workshops include: logging and resource reviews; kitchen gardens; women's interests; raising village quality; communal education; leadership courses; and, especially, political education.

mittee for Development. This one group financed almost 29 percent of the village outreach program in 1989.

Despite the great assistance received from overseas, SIDT's own efforts to become more self-reliant have grown. Proceeds from sale of services, publications, and subscriptions supplement the support that comes from more than seven hundred villages housing, feeding and working with the MTMs as well as government contributions in the form of transport, use of facilities, and the work of extension officers. Last year's expenditures and sources of income are detailed in Table 2.

Lessons Being Learned

Development Involvement

Some people balk at the NGOs' having assumed certain leadership roles in development work, roles thought to be those of elected officials. Development is government's prerogative, contends conventional wisdom. Governments are installed by a public, more or less democratic selection process, for which everyone understands the rules. Who gives the NGO its authority to be working in this field? Should not a properly elected government official be worried about the idea that NGOs are and ought to be moving into a more central role in providing development leadership?

This fear relates to the fact that NGOs can be used and manipulated by outside interests. The outsiders may not be the ones who originally conceived and created the local development organization, but their generous support has a great effect in determining which of them will live and which will die. "Indigenous" NGOs may become so dependent on external support that these external agencies become their effective constituencies.

These contrary views of government's and NGOs' developmental roles lie at the heart of the present-day development debate. The two views crystallize the fundamental conceptual problem. Are the significant resource transfers favored by the large donor groups and governments themselves the essential key to stimulating a sustained development process? Or is it the more effective use of personal, physical, and financial resources to develop human and institutional capacity that holds the key to authentic development, as the people's organizations insist?⁶

The population issue comes to mind. The Solomons' dramatic population increase, 3.5 percent annually, is currently a hot subject. Govern-

TABLE 2. **Financing SIDT's Outreach Program: Analysis of Funding and Expenditures, 1989**

Source	Amount (SIS)	Percentage	Activity Funded
Total	\$624,358	100	
By Country:			
The Netherlands	195,119	31	
Interchurch Coordinating Committee for Development	178,038		Administration
Dutch Bishops' Lenten Campaign	17,081		MTMs training
Australia	167,587	27	
Overseas Ser. Bureau	75,363		Volunteers
*AIDAB	31,940		Women's program
Community Aid Abroad	26,874		MTMs: S. Malaita
Freedom from Hunger Campaign	22,404		MTMs: N. Malaita
Asia South Pacific Bureau of Adult Ed.	11,006		KOMIKs, Travel
European Community		19	
*European Economic Community	115,949		LINK magazine, administration
United Kingdom	75,160	12	
Christian Aid	49,446		MTMs: Western & Central
Foundation for the Peoples of South Pacific	14,414		MTMs: Guadalcanal/ Ysabel
Isle of Man	11,300		LINK magazine
United States		6	
Catholic Relief Services	35,380		MTMs: Makira & Temotu
Solomon Islands		6	
Solomon Islands Development Trust	35,163		Travel, administration, scholarships
By Sector:			
*Government Sources	147,889	24	
Nongovernment Sources	441,306	70	
Own Sources	35,163	6	

Source: Adapted from Solomon Islands Development Trust, *Summary Report 1989* (Honiara: Provincial Press, 1990).

ment red buttons are flashing and danger flags are flying. Urban planners and decision makers are detailing the additional classrooms, new clinics, and required infrastructure investment needed to cater to the alarming population growth. Yet the villager, the essential decision maker when it comes to having or not having additional children, has yet to be fully brought into the picture. Yes, radio messages about the problem are aired. But these are communiques, not communication--the two-way flow of information so vital to such a subject. Mass media attempts, such as they are, are confined to the Honiara area. No one doubts that the villagers must be involved. If villagers increase their understanding of the major issues bothering them, then there is a reasonable hope that they can begin to address them in a creative manner. Without adequate, timely, and continuous information they are unable to fully define and analyze the problems, much less act on them.⁷

Some evaluators, when examining SIDT's village outreach pattern, ask, "What is the next step once villagers become more aware of their problems?" What the questioner assumes is that once awareness of development issues has come about, the real "meat and potatoes" of development--doing a project--must be the next step. But raising awareness sets loose new energies. SIDT has found that sometimes a project proposal may be the next step. Frequently, however, villagers--who up until this stage had missed out on the information revolution, being the last to be informed of what is happening in their own country--show great interest in grasping and wrestling with the deeper issues: questions of land tenure, natural resources ownership, and the relationship of resource owners to local government councils and the central government.

Social Movements

To bring about the people-centered development we have been speaking to requires people-accountable institutions.⁸ People-accountable groups, a fair description of the Pacific NGO movement, help respond to the fears of government officials and politicians about the NGO sector's seeking to become more deeply involved in development leadership roles. But these same people-accountable institutions are responding to other needs as well.

The world economic crisis has reduced the efficiency of, and popular confidence in, the nation and its customary political institutions. The recent Eastern Bloc vaporization presents a sober lesson. The major transformational forces of village lives--modernization, technological

change, cash economy, economic development--were and are processes hardly driven or directed by social movements or state institutions. These processes have reduced popular confidence in the nation and in the ability of its customary political institutions to defend and promote villagers' interests.

In the recent past the unwritten social contract whereby Solomon Islanders felt that the government apparatus was basically on their side has been jolted. They have begun to doubt that their "big-men" in government know what is best for the villager, for the country. In April 1988, for example, the Solomon Islands prime minister was presented with written petitions produced at two public demonstrations; parliamentary no-confidence motions have become endemic in the Solomons (and in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea as well). An Australian journalist's statement about Papua New Guinea probably summarizes what has happened since independence in all Melanesian countries: "On average, today's national citizen is poorer than in 1975, the year of independence; but in towns affluence is more and more conspicuous."⁹

Given this atmosphere rural and urban villagers are turning to groups, movements, organizations offering new interpretations and solutions to the problems of conventional development efforts. Some people, for instance, turn to strongly religious movements such as charismatic prayer groups. Others prefer organizations like SIDT that carry a nonmonetary message, stress ideals such as self-respect and a spirit of unity, and favor a new type of *wontok* (literally, "one talk"; a blood relative). As a nationwide organization SIDT has made friends among people who were traditionally strangers, if not enemies. Team members from Temotu, for instance, speak at ease about their work with those from Malaita and Western provinces. They have become friends.

Internationally the PIANGO movement seems to strike a responsive chord. NGO communities across the Pacific seek to forge links, if not coalitions and networks, with other Pacific Islands organizations. In 1950 many island national leaders met for the first time under the South Pacific Commission's auspices. Twenty years later, at the first meeting of the South Pacific Forum in 1971, they took a second critical step in Pacific Islands togetherness. In 1988, however, island leaders seem to be breaking up into a Melanesian and a Polynesian camp, but the NGO sector pursues a unification theme. PIANGO strives to create an institution that reflects commonalities rather than accenting differences. The former governor of American Samoa, in a letter asking if it could host PIANGO's inaugural meeting, made the point that "I am also pleased to note that the PIANGO effort has effectively dismantled the concept of

political boundaries in its organizational planning which is truly representative of the NGO sector."¹⁰

Problems

NGOs write their own scripts for the most part. They represent a complex mosaic of local organizations and groups, each with its own agenda. The bulk of the NGO community remains focused on particular aspects of development: small-project funding, income generation, women's issues. Others have gradually moved to a program mode. The water supply program of Vanuatu's Nasonal Komuniti Development Trust, for example, is becoming an entry point for establishing adult and ongoing education patterns. At a third level, a handful of NGOs interpret their role in terms of influencing policy making or acting as a catalyst. They have traveled from projects through programs to playing a role in policy formation. In 1988 and 1989, for instance, SIDT's director, Abraham Baeanisia, was closely involved with senior government personnel in the process of forming government policy on AIDS, population education, and youth.

However, the traditional or even newly created NGO rarely has the strategic competence, organizational forms, or management methods to cope with this new workload. Kortin's words of warning must be heeded: "But when NGOs position themselves to be systems catalysts, their technical weaknesses become more apparent. Some of the most important of the organisations with which they work will be large, influential, and staffed by highly credentialed professionals. Needless to say, the NGO that presumes to help such organizations become more effective must be guided by more than good intentions."¹¹

NGOs also have a critical role to play in providing feedback and advice to government officials. With their effective communication links with village groups, they can introduce new ideas and initiate change at the local level. But at the same time they have public and social responsibility. Development education must flow both ways: to the villager as well as to the government policy makers and administrators.

Conclusion

Two awarenesses seem to be emerging at the same moment: a deeper Pacific consciousness and a recognition of the worth of the NGO sector. The Club of Rome's report calls the nongovernmental organizations the

new agents of change. Large and powerful funding groups--AIDAB, the UN family, USAID, and EEC--are increasingly focusing attention on reaching out to village populations. Island governments' growing inability or unwillingness to touch their grass roots in a sustained and creative way has forced these major development agencies to call more frequently on people's organizations. They are looking for convenient and inexpensive alternatives to government for seeing that resource transfers get more reliably to those in need.

But some of the newly formed NGOs see themselves not so much reflecting a "small is beautiful" philosophy but one of "strong is beautiful" --strong not in power over others but by empowering villagers to go from "cannot" to "can," to democratize the development process. They wish to move from a peripheral to a more central role in providing leadership for national and international development. The growing Pacific NGO presence in the development field and in people's movements hastens the day. The NGOs recognize the importance of networking and coalition building in order to continue the dialogue between government and themselves and to insure more informed participation in policy formulation by villagers.

NOTES

1. Hollis Chenery, "Redistribution with Growth," in *Redistribution with Growth*, ed. Hollis Chenery et al. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).
2. Bertrand Schneider, *The Barefoot Revolution* (London: IT Publications, 1988), xii.
3. Richard Huntington and John Oleson, *PVO Institutional Development Evaluation Series: Field Report 8* (Washington, D.C.: International Science and Technology Institute, 1987), 12-13.
4. The following section draws on information from *Quarterly Reports*, vols. 1-29, Solomon Islands Development Trust, May 1982-June 1989.
5. Social Science Teachers' Curriculum Panel/SIDT, 21 June 1989, Teachers Training College, Panatina Campus, Honiara. Each secondary school has now received the KOMIKs.
6. David C. Kortin, "Third Generation NGO Strategies: A Key to People-Centered Development" (MS prepared for *World Development*, Oct. 1987).
7. George Kent, "Empowerment for Children's Survival" (Department of Political Science, University of Hawaii, draft, 3 Dec. 1987).

8. Some of the ideas in this section were drawn from Andre Gunder Frank and Marta Fuentes, "Nine Theses on Social Movements," *IFDA Dossier* (International Foundation for Development Alternatives, Nyon, Switz.) 63 (Jan./Feb. 1988), 27-44.

9. Gabriel Lafitte, "Papua New Guinea: The Politics of Renown," *ABA Newsletter*, Spring 1987:5.

10. Lutali to Abraham Baeania, 11 Feb. 1988.

11. Kortin, "Third Generation NGO Strategies," 15.