

Program 10: Community Governance

Civil society has been promoted by aid donors as the saviour of, and compensation for, weak states. How do non-government and community organisations operate in a crisis situation (such as the Bougainville conflict) and how do they operate in normal day to day life? Is there a difference between what donors and Pacific Islanders view as civil society?

PEARSON VETUNA: Hello, I'm Pearson Vetuna from Radio Australia and it's 'Time to Talk'. Today we discuss aspects of civil society in the region.

The term 'civil society' seems to have gained prominence over the last decade in the global rhetoric about development. Its adoption by donor agencies in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union highlights the need to find alternatives to traditional state structures of governance.

But what is civil society in the Pacific? And what role does it play in governance?

HENRY VIRA: Well I think in Melanesia and in Vanuatu for example, the role of NGOs is to provide access for communities, for the public to be able to express themselves. So I think that's a very critical role especially in Melanesia.

HENK KRONENBERG: I think the church is part of life and has to be part of society, of civil society, and they are you know part of everything that's going on I think.

HELEN HAKENA: To us it means people themselves knowing what to do, being able to take care of their lives, being able to focus or to have their aims of where their lives are going to go.

MATTHEW WALE: Well I have to start with a qualification that civil society anywhere in Melanesia really at this stage is a very rubbery concept. But in the Solomons it goes back to August 2000 when we were confronted by all the issues that had to do with two militia on the ground and the government basically did not have the capacity to deal with the issues between them and out of the circumstances there was the need for a civil society to be organised and we saw the need and jumped to it.

VETUNA: Matthew Wale from SICA - the Solomon Islands Christian Association.

In the Pacific, Non-government organisations (NGOs) appear to dominate the civil society sector. In fact civil society is quite often equated to NGOs.

HENRY VIRA: I don't think it's just the NGOs. The NGOs have to work together with our traditional leaders, the church leaders, women's groupings and even government.

VETUNA: Henri Vira is the coordinator of PIANGO - the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations.

HENRY VIRA: I think while civil society covers anybody that's civilised I suppose. The NGOs do have a very critical role to play. Melanesian society is such that a lot of people have not been given the access to express themselves in manners that are acceptable. We have leaders like Chiefs and others who are used to talking on behalf of like the women, the children, so the majority of people never had, like they've never been encouraged to express themselves. A lot of decisions are made by 'ol big man', so I think in Melanesia and in Vanuatu for example the role of NGOs is to provide access for communities, for the public to be able to express themselves in a peaceful manner because I think what's happened in Fiji and Solomons and some of our Pacific brothers' countries. Part of the reason is that there's people that feel frustrated that their voices have not been heard for so long, that you know they tend to violence to express themselves.

VETUNA: NGOs certainly have become major partners in the implementation of aid donors programs. They are also playing an increasing role as a bridge between government and communities.

Merelyn Tahī, coordinator of the Vanuatu Women's Centre.

MERELYN TAHI: For Vanuatu it's very recent that the government has shown interest and recognised NGOs. I think it's the evolution of our country. Maybe at the start we didn't know what NGOs were all about and the government was all about, but I think at the moment as the international community is the governments are looking and are recognising and want to work with the civil society, I think Vanuatu is coming around that corner also.

VETUNA: It is often easier to explain what civil society does - or should do - rather than attempt to define exactly what it is. There are many definitions of 'civil society' and the concept - imported from Europe - has been evolving over time.

By and large it is perceived as 'anything that is not the State'.

John Liu is the Director of the Rural Development and Training Centres' Association, a Vanuatu NGO.

JOHN LIU: When I talk about working with civil society or representative of civil society I'm thinking of the people back there, the common people. Usually most of them are marginalised people, maybe they're the ones that are being forgotten, left out, normally call us grassroots or people out in their community. I mean they are really the ones that are contributing a lot to the development of the country, but people don't often realise and look at them as such because you know they may not be bureaucrats, they may not be politicians, they may not be somebody out there and they're just back there in their community - women, children, men, old, young - and the majority of the people are in that category.

VETUNA: NGOs are not only seen to counterbalance the State, in the Pacific region they are increasingly becoming service providers where the government fails to deliver.

Sister Lorraine Garasu represents the Inter-Church Forum established during the Bougainville conflict. The Forum brought together women from all sides, to advocate peace.

In consultation with the women about the community's needs, it devised small business development training, primary health courses, rehabilitation for ex-combatants as well as literacy programs.

SISTER LORRAINE GARASU: To me I feel that we are so loaded and overloaded with, you know, having to do what we can do for the people because the government is not providing the basic services that they are looking for. And in Bougainville today we can really feel it and see it. There's no services coming from the government, most of the things that are happening today is coming from like groups, NGOs or whatever, they are providing that, and aid coming from outside.

VETUNA: NGOs certainly are the most visible aspect of civil society. But they are not the only players. They are a new layer in changing societies, which still have vigorous traditional networks, where traditional leaders and the Church play a central role.

Alice Pollard is a member of the Solomon Islands Women for Peace Group.

ALICE POLLARD: For Solomon Islands the churches are very important because one maybe as a nation, over 95 per cent of the population goes to church. So churches hold the majority of the population. That's the first point. Secondly in every village that you visit there is a church and they are seen as a strength or an excellent network that we could utilise to get information and programs and activities to the community. I guess because within the church structure they also have their own leadership structure and that is kept intact and recognised by the community.

VETUNA: It's a similar situation in Bougainville. Sister Lorraine Garasu from the Inter-Church Forum.

SISTER LORRAINE GARASU: Also on Bougainville people do things within their church groups. The traditional women's organisations on Bougainville are church women's groups, like the Catholic Church has a very strong women's group, the United Church has and the SDA has and also the smaller churches. So women do many things within their church groups.

VETUNA: Indeed women played a vital role in the peace process both in the Solomon Islands and Bougainville.

Bougainville's Catholic Bishop, Henk Kronenberg.

HENK KRONENBERG: If you hear stories from these women you know sometimes you know you

say: "My gosh, you know, they really had courage". Just like one woman you know she told me the story that she went in the bush to get her son and her son was a guard and he wouldn't let her through. And she says: "I want to talk to you" and he said: "You go back otherwise I shoot you". And she says: "OK, OK, you shoot me", she said "but then the whole world will know that you shot your mother", you know? So then he softens up. But I mean you know these women they had great courage.

VETUNA: A courage also displayed by women in the Solomon Islands.

Alice Pollard again.

ALICE POLLARD: I think the common denominator here is we all have one common enemy, that is the guns in the hands of our sons and knowing very well that our life is in danger if those guns are not returned and if those guns are taking to the street as they have been, then the life for our younger generation is really at stake. And so to women it is a common enemy and we were able to pull together to fight.

AFU BILLY: Firstly we are mothers and we are women and in that sense we are not a threat to anybody. We're not going to try and get a lot of funding to assist our activities. We're going to do it the way that women always do it.

VETUNA: Afu Billy, a leading woman activist in Solomon Islands.

AFU BILLY: We are going to go and see the militants and we're going to take them food because we know they've been there for a long time and they obviously will miss the comforts of home. So food for a start and we'll take things that they need like tobacco, cigarettes, coffee and then we'll give them an opportunity to tell us how they're feeling and it's an opportunity too for us to plead to them so that they can hear that our children and our people are suffering, and they are sons of mothers who are also suffering from the actions that they are undergoing with the other militants. So that's the approach we took and women dug very deep into their pockets to be able to share food and other things that the men needed, and it gave an opportunity also for the spiritual side of women to come up. We prayed with them and sang and cried with them, and so it was a very effective kind of approach that the women took and that was quite different from how the men were handling it.

VETUNA: Both crises have shown the resourcefulness of people at community level.

Bart Ulufa'alu, whose government was deposed in June 2000 during the ethnic conflict on Guadalcanal.

BART ULUFA'ALU: Well it's out of crisis situation that people realise the need to be together and this has given rise to the civil society which include the churches, NGOs, unions, women groups, youth groups and those of the culture in terms of the Chiefs binding together to bring out awareness to contemporary leaders where in this case politicians are contemporary leaders, while those leaders

of churches and customs are perpetual leaders. They are really the legitimate leaders that even without the contemporary leadership the society will continue to function as they have done before.

VETUNA: A case in point is Bougainville, where communities had to rely on the strength of their traditional ways to survive a 10 year long war, including a blockade imposed by the Papua New Guinea government which deprived the secessionist island of basic services.

HELEN HAKENA: People during that period of blockade we were much more organised than what we are now today. We depended on each other, we helped each other, we did everything together as a community, as a family and it was really strong.

LINUS SARAM: We went into the bush with some other families. Bougainville is such a beautiful island that even if you're dying for food you can survive yourself with anything you find in the bush.

ANDREW TONANG: Oh yeah, I had myself I had about two taro gardens and five kaukau gardens and many fruit gardens like bananas, paw paws, they were so plentiful because we had nothing to do, no jobs to do but just to work in a garden. That's why I had a lot of garden for me to live because I didn't know how much we were going to wait for the service to come back.

LINUS SARAM: During the crisis, even though there was not enough medicine, we have some traditional ways of curing ourselves when we feel sick. There are trees where you can get those things, you burn them on the fire and then when it becomes hot you just drink it or you rub it on your body and you become cured.

HELEN HAKENA: Our strength was there, we didn't depend on other people to give us things. Our survival depended on what we were doing and it was really good.

VETUNA: Helen Hakena from the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency.

Sister Lorraine from the Inter-Church Forum agrees: self-reliance was a strong asset during the Bougainville crisis.

SISTER LORRAINE GARASU: We say let's not be dependent. In 1998 when we started the literacy program, 1998 to 1999 we supported that program on our own, even though there was already a lot of aid coming that was after the ceasefire, there was a lot of aid coming. We were not getting aid money for our literacy program because we wanted to help the people to understand that that's the way to go, that we have to be self-reliant, that we are not dependant on outside aid all the time. The thing that I find with donor agencies some is that when they come they already come with their programs in place, so if they had their programs in place you had to more or less move along with them and do what they had, some, eh?

VETUNA: This is 'Time to Talk' and today we discuss civil society.

The decline, or in some cases collapse, of state institutions has brought civil society to the fore. Civil society is increasingly seen as an advocate for democratic values.

Matthew Wale again from Solomon Islands.

MATTHEW WALE: I think civil society holds a lot of the answers to a lot of the problems that we are going through as a nation. Certainly insofar as our democracy is concerned, enhancing the mode that participatory democracy can really work in these islands. But insofar as governance generally is concerned I think the way forward will be with civil society. We have obviously a first-past-the-post system and I don't think I can remember from the last elections any single member of parliament gaining more than 50 per cent of the vote. Now obviously under the system they can say well, yes I did get a mandate but that mandate obviously is very limited however derived it is, and therefore civil society will play a much stronger role in tapping into people right down to the grassroots level and feeding that into the decision making processes in government.

VETUNA: Bart Ulufa'alu agrees civil society is an integral part of the nation's political life.

BART ULUFA'ALU: Electing a government to office is not the end, in fact it is the beginning to have an established body that is democratically elected to office, but the society as a whole must be alert to set in actions of the executive or the legislature that are not consistent with the wishes of the people. And the people must continue to band together to protect their democracy, to protect their sovereignty and to allow that democracy and sovereignty to prosper on an equitable base.

VETUNA: But to remain a credible guardian of democratic principles civil society must stay outside of the political arena and not compromise its role by sponsoring candidates at election time.

Mathew Wale again.

MATTHEW WALE: And I think this is a point that needs to be said loud and clear - civil society is not a political party. We are an agent for social change and given our political history here and the way politics is conducted here, at this stage in our formative stages I do not want to take the risk of losing credibility because we got an idiot in, only to discredit what we're trying to do. Because it's so easy for someone to sweet talk people on the basis on the name of civil society, get in and forget all about it and serve themselves.

VETUNA: There is no room for complacency ... civil society must remain vigilant at all times and make sure that the people's voice gets heard by the politicians who represent them.

And if recommendations fall on deaf ears, well, there is always the ballot box!

Peter Aitsi is from the Papua New Guinea Chapter of Transparency International, which brings together a coalition of community partners, including representatives from the private sector.

PETER AITSI: Perhaps what we all need to do as people who are concerned is to start to take a little bit of that back on to ourselves and create an environment where the politician is working for the people and not the other way round, not the people working for the politician. So ultimately I mean, I think we as a group of concerned community people need to be a bit more active, we need to be a bit more vocal, we need to utilise the media, plus we also need to utilise our community network to show the politicians that we are concerned and that there must be a change and if there isn't a change then the ultimate solution is to rely on our vote and that becomes what we protect.

VETUNA: Next week we explore the role of education and information in governance.

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'Time to Talk' is a Radio Australia production. I'm Pearson Vetuna. Bye for now!

Program Participants:

- Pearson Vetuna, Executive Producer of the Tok Pisin Service at Radio Australia
- Henry Vira, Co-ordinator of the Port Vila Secretariat of the Pacific Island Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO)
- Bishop Henk Kronenberg, Catholic Church in Bougainville
- Helen Hakena, Leitana Nehan Development Agency, a peace-building organisation in Bougainville
- Matthew Wale, member of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA)
- Merelyn Tahi, Co-ordinator of the Vanuatu Women's Centre in Port Vila
- John Liu, Director of the Rural Development and Training Centres' Association in Vanuatu
- Sister Lorraine Garasu, Interchurch Forum in Bougainville
- Alice Pollard, member of the Solomon Islands Women for Peace Group
- Afu Billy, leading women's activist in Solomon Islands
- Bart Ulufa'alu, former Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, whose government was overthrown in June 2000
- Andrew Tonang, mediator with the Restorative Justice Program in Buka, Bougainville
- Linus Saram, Strengthening Communities for Peace Program in Tinputz, Bougainville
- Peter Aitsi, PNG Chapter of Transparency International, and General manager of PNG FM