

# Past, present and future: Building on Papua New Guinea's customary strengths in resource management

*Hartmut Holzknecht, Resource Management in Asia-Pacific Project, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University*

## Introduction

Papua New Guinea's national constitution sets out the foundations of Papua New Guinea's belief in itself as a nation. It also sets out the principles whereby it will conduct itself, not only with other nations, but also internally with its own citizens. The nation's founding fathers understood clearly that one of the major elements common to all Papua New Guinea (PNG) societies was the control and management of rights over specific natural resources, and that major elements of such resource rights were accessed through the customary kinship systems operating from place to place. Thus the national constitution recognises and endorses the critical importance across the country of customary rights over resource control and management.

Despite such affirmations and its rhetorical repetition, much has taken place since independence in 1975 which has actively undermined PNG customary resource systems to the point where elected leaders (and others), most often in collusion with entrepreneurs and foreign interests, have sold rights to resources (for example, forests, fishing rights, mineral resources) for little long-term benefit for the majority of the customary resource rights holders. In contrast, any significant financial and/or material benefits have been for such individuals and their small support groups. Such actions would certainly lead in the long term to poverty for a majority of PNG's citizens while a very small proportion of the elite, often the political and educated elite, become very wealthy, safe in the cities and towns behind barbed wire fences and security guards.

Is this what Papua New Guineans understand by the term 'development'? Is this what ordinary Papua New Guineans think they are going to get when, after lots of promises and inducements (mostly the former), they agree to go along with plans for a logging project (for example) promoted and pursued by a particular political and/or entrepreneurial leader. The majority goes along with such plans because it wants not only some promised cash injection but also the supposed infrastructure accompanying such developments. Essentially, the majority wishes to enhance its quality of life and standard of living by means of such developments. In virtually all such cases, communities wishing such broad changes are left with a diminished and degraded environment, bush or forest characterised by poor regrowth from which little can be collected in terms of bush foods, for housing materials or as wildlife.

Such communities are usually also left with a legacy of mistrust, recriminations and divided communities as other outcomes of such resource 'development' projects.

On the basis of such manipulation, exploitation and lack of concern for not only the immediate economic but also the longer-term socioeconomic future, I outline in this paper some thoughts about Papua New Guinea's strengths and weaknesses, using a general SWOT analysis – strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats. I discuss the opportunities and threats that these strengths and weaknesses bring with them, focusing in particular on natural resources and their control and management. This discussion assumes that Papua New Guinea as a nation does have a vision of the kind of society it is striving towards; in this regard the national goals and directive principles set out in the national constitution remain in force as statements which articulate this kind of vision.

## Strengths

Papua New Guinea's most neglected strength is its many customary social systems and their associated customary resource use, management and inheritance systems. These social systems have much better knowledge of the kinds of resources and their customary uses and the physical and cultural constraints needing to be observed in the long-term use of these resources. The levels of social groupings at which final decisions on resource use and management are made (for example, clans) are widely known, recognised and accepted at each local level. There are built-in customary avenues for the inheritance of resource-related rights, but there are also avenues to allow others to make short-term use of such resources. While there are some likely difficulties emerging in modern times with some aspects of such resource systems, there are relatively simple methods available for building new aspects onto such strong customary institutions.

The fact is that some 97 per cent of the country's area is governed by such customary systems and that the major resource rights are directed through particular levels of social groupings (for example, sub-clans, clans) which are widely known and respected within every local context across the country. This means that people prefer to keep such systems in place and operating to the benefit of the great majority of the population. In mid-1995, when rumours emerged of either

the World Bank or the state of Papua New Guinea taking over all resources in the country, there was a huge outcry – large demonstrations in a number of cities and towns across the country (including some deaths in the highlands). This depth of feeling was strongly in favour of retaining the current customary tenure systems, not for the kind of radical change which had been rumoured.

Such customary tenure use and management systems show a depth of knowledge and understanding of geographical and other variations by communities within any one locality. They also show the kinds of resilience and flexibility needed for such systems to adapt themselves to changing conditions and internal as well as external pressures which are being brought to bear on local communities and their resources.

## Weaknesses

Customary resource use and tenure systems are now also exhibiting some characteristics which are becoming more evident in the modern Papua New Guinea. These include major problems in dealing with representation, that is, who can speak for or agree on matters on behalf of other individuals and/or social groups. This has become particularly evident in the forestry sector where deals made behind closed doors between a few individuals from an area and outside natural resource developers give short-term benefits (usually financial) to these few individuals but little if any long-term benefits to the majority of the other resource owners and significant long-term negative benefits to these communities.

A side effect of such concerted and targeted activity, as has been seen across PNG over the last 20 years or so, is the gradual separation of a small, often political, elite from the remainder of the population. Such an elite is tending to become much more urbanised, focusing almost entirely on its own benefits, its own security, its own advantages and leverage, to the detriment of broad based social and economic development for either fellow citizens and country generally, or for fellow clans-people from people's own home area.

Further, such natural resources are taken out of the project area, and most usually out of PNG, with no or very little commercial value added, with very little proper training of Papua New Guineans, and with very little (if any) long-term employment locally or other income-earning opportunities from such resource exploitation exercises. In other words, there is no long-term view in this kind of exploitation or resource owner manipulation exercise. Despite there being such a stated national goal, there appears also to be no interest in, or fostering of, sustainability so that there might be ongoing bases for improving services and infrastructure for the majority of the population, providing employment or income opportunities and thus improving lifestyles and living standards for the majority of the PNG population.

## Opportunities

PNG has the opportunity to bring about improved standards of living for the PNG population. First, PNG as a state, and its constituent communities, need to have a vision of what is or is not possible. This vision can be articulated and realised in various ways.

Second, PNG societies have strengths within them which should be fostered and built upon. By such an approach modern PNG societies are able to take better advantage and make use of modern structures, sharing of information, technology, communications, and markets in order to build such livelihoods, which will depend to a very large extent on sustainable management of the various natural and human resources within its borders. Thus the second task will be to find appropriate strategies to use to put into practice such an overall vision, as well as inclusive ways of implementing such strategies in transparent and equitable ways.

PNG's various kinship systems, which regulate relationships between people in local societies as well as the practice and inheritance of natural resource and other rights, is one such strong system, an 'opportunity' to be built upon. Customary natural resource tenure and use systems are another such system to be fostered and developed further, as is the evident strong relationship between people and land. PNG does not need to replicate Western systems of individualisation of land and tenure systems in order for land or other natural resources to be used productively and sustainably. Is the Western focus on individualisation and the commoditisation of all manner of things a trend which will be of unquestioned benefit to PNG? What values do PNG as a nation, and communities within it, wish to maintain and work towards? Current PNG customary social systems pay much attention to responsibility for, and care of, other people; the young and very old are part of such systems and not segregated out and institutionalised.

PNG as a nation, and locally based customary societies within the nation, may choose to retain what elements and values they wish to retain and have the opportunity to build upon those in the development of a Melanesian way. The Land Groups Incorporation Act, which came into law in 1974, is one avenue whereby such building on strengths can take place. This Act, through a specified process, gives modern legal recognition to customary social groupings (such as 'clans') which operate at the level at which major resource management decisions are made. Further, since customary resource use, tenure systems, and the rights and responsibilities inherent in them are invariably based at the local level, to further strengthen such locally based approaches and strategies is common sense and should develop a synergy of its own with other recent top down developments. These locally based approaches and strategies, in addition, coincide very well with recent reforms of PNG's Organic Law which not only reinstate and strengthen local-level government but also are intent on devolving more responsibility to the local level.

Such devolution, however, needs to be handled with care and should arise out of a community's (or a group of communities') stated concerns of better managing their natural and human resources within the framework of a modern PNG which is itself subject to not only internal but also external pressures brought about by globalisation. One critical element of this is the area of information and communications (see below).

## Threats

As noted above, one of the threats facing PNG as a nation is the gradual stratification of society. This has begun to take place, partly through education, through the effects of corruption at various levels and by differential access between urban and rural areas to resources, infrastructural support and communications. Thus the gap between rural areas, where the vast majority of people live, and the urban areas appears to be widening. This gap is symptomatic of the problems of PNG as a state being able to provide support and infrastructural development across the nation as a whole. A major danger lurks behind arrangements in the recent past and in the present by which a few individuals manipulated larger groupings of people (for the individuals' own short-term benefits). Attention needs to be paid to maintaining the integration of the rural and the urban spheres of PNG society.

In addition, a focus on short-term goals – a characteristic which has stood PNG's customary societies in good stead in the past – has also become problematic. In the past, individuals and groups had, for their own survival, to take advantage of whatever was available from time to time, that is, a large harvest of yams or bananas, a large pig kill, and so on. This is certainly one way of dealing with natural resources. However, with increasing populations and increased modes of harvesting natural resources, the approach of quick, short-term and often individual benefits needs now to give way to developing longer-term benefits which can provide a much broader benefit to a larger group of people. Thus individuals arranging for a foreign logger to come in and log out an area now need to take a much broader, long-term and sustainable approach to such a development. Questions asked and answers worked out need to include: who will benefit, how will they benefit, what spin-

offs are there in terms of health, education, living standards, local value adding, local employment, and so on.

## Conclusion

There are a number of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in Papua New Guinea at present in relation to the management of natural resources. Strengthening and building upon customary strengths offer more equal benefits in the management of natural resources.

A critical element of such an approach of strengthening the customary institutions which exist at the local level is that of information and communications. Often, the mode of development undertaken has been on the basis of one particular kind of development (for example, 'our' logging project) rather than local communities being able to make their own choices across a range of natural resources in their area. Promotion of a single type of resource development can therefore be seen to be not for the development of a particular community or area but in the interests of a few individuals and their foreign partner(s).

Natural resource management options can range from a one-resource exploitation (for example, logging) to conservation of particularly scarce or threatened species, to the combining of a number of different options. All of these have their own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. So communities – who, after all, control the rights to, and must exercise the responsibilities for, these resources – need to have access to such information in order to make educated decisions about their natural resources and how best to manage them in sustainable ways for the benefit of their own communities and for their descendants.

The question is how to develop a body of relevant information on natural resource management options and how to find ways of enabling communities across PNG to get regular access to such information. Further, effective communications systems are needed so that interested communities can follow up on the basic information presented and find good markets for what they do produce themselves.

Underlying this paper is a subtext of re-empowerment of communities across PNG to understand and manage their natural and human resources in such ways as to best benefit not only individuals but also communities.