

WHO NEEDS WHAT & WHEN FROM A CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORK SECRETARIAT

Brief Analysis and some Recommendations

Change and the Community

It is obvious that the process of change takes place unabated whether desired or not, whether welcome or otherwise, whether beneficial or negative. Sometimes it is slow, sometimes fast depending on who perceives change and all it entails and sometimes it is radical. Change either takes place organically, generationally, because of upheavals, conflict, pestilence, famine, stock-market crash etc or it can be planned and directed. For planned change to take place successfully, the leaders and planners need accurate and up-to-date information.

However after nearly 30 years of political independence people continue to make critical decisions on the basis of rumours, outdated news, old prices, reactions, fears, misinformation a deficient education system and outdated mindsets. They are prone to abuse and exploitation by the small group who have up-to-date information who are able to use peoples' ignorance to their own benefit. This is true in the logging industry, in national elections, governance and commerce. The result is a nation of people with low self-esteem because most people have lost more than they have gained over the years and they believe this will continue.

Today in Solomon Islands there is a type of 'leader' (actually I cringe in realization that they do lead in a way) who uses lack of information (ignorance), distorted information, dishonest information and money (often stolen) and the influence this brings to lead, influence events, get elected and re-elected, to stay in office, to 'rip off' the system, to coerce good people to follow them, to get rich, to prop up their minimal egos or who just want to be difficult! Some end up being knighted and give their cronies high honours. Some move their ill-gotten gains offshore. Others have already found ways to launder their collection of funny money. Most however have eaten or drunk it all.

Whatever the case, it is clear that leadership is ineffectual without the leaders having access to up-to-date as well as historical information and different perspectives.

Agents of Change

The main agents of change in any country include opinion leaders who are inventors, researchers, risk managers and commercial investors who initiate change or react quickly to the signs of change. Usually these come from the cutting edge of commerce and academia. Some however have been criminals, warmongers, despots and tyrants but increasingly these are rare. Not all who create new ideas and information act immediately upon their findings. Usually a host of other factors must come into play before the ideas 'fly'. Otherwise Leonardo da Vinci might have flown a helicopter many hundreds of years ago!

Usually it is a second, very dynamic group often described as 'movers and shakers' who test creative ideas and drive new initiatives. Often they are young followers of fashion as well. They all fall easily into the global 'pop' culture and market. I think Bill Gates falls into this group. In Solomon Islands where leadership ability is traditionally premised on physical power, many people follow the young and brash leader than the wise, middle aged or elderly.

Most people however - the majority - delay, procrastinate, ponder, discuss etc and take some time to change their minds and use the new information. They, like doubting Thomas, need to have it confirmed that planned change is beneficial and not otherwise before they act. Usually they go with the flow and end up being victims of change. With a lot of information, counseling, motivation and access to finance, many eventually become beneficiaries of change.

Then there is a group who are cynical and very difficult to persuade. These are mainly the 'naysayers' whose interests are threatened, or those who have other agendas not served by the new ideas. If the first three groups mentioned move ahead, this group eventually follows grudgingly, slowly as though they are dragged into the future.

Then there is the last group whose numbers are small and who have no interest in change at all. They will not change their mindset, definitions, perceptions or conceptions. They are adamant that what happened in the past was best. Whatever change takes place inevitably leaves them feeling victimized. Some of them however can be bought. Drop a bag of cash on them and some can suddenly change their views but not their habits! Happens in areas where loggers come visiting.

I believe all the above shows what we already know; that people anywhere are very complex. Continental people are complex having learned many centuries ago to forge steel, capitalize land, read, write, calculate and invent mechanical devices to make life easier.

Islands people are no less complex. They have survived thousands of years in isolation by using highly developed highly ways of living without steel, reading and writing skills. Sean Dorney's book on a brief history of PNG tells of Highlander culture being able to store and preserve food for use in the next season when cultivation is not possible. The Reef Islanders store nambo and in many islands cultures fish is salted for storage but that is about all.

Diving into Life

Where continental people are able to delay gratification of their human needs, we islanders have great difficulty. Mollycoddled as children (and I loved it!), we have the run of the reefs, the rivers, the village and the hinterlands youth. There are few restrictions – the only one being that girls and boys follow the women and men to separate toilet sites mainly in mangrove or rocky areas. Maybe in other islands there were more restrictions.

After passing through childhood very well cared for, in adolescence we immediately begin to gratify our bodily needs. We find food everywhere we look and eat to our hearts' content. Shelter is no problem. The security of the extended family is at once a safety and support network which helps us at every turn. There are no great strictures regarding sexual activity in youth except in very strict societies whose Christian traditions are very conservative. That strictness results in aberrant behaviour such as incest in two countries I know.

The Pacific has several stories of training in love-making (Arno, Tuangaona,) of orderly courtship (creeping and love sticks). In this vital area of human development, gratification is taken very early and by the time a young person has reached about 20, he/she is used to that.

It seems we have no instinct that tells us to wait, store, save, accumulate and prepare to do great things. We dive into life straight away enjoying every little burst of pleasure we get immediately! We soon get to believe that the 'old people', anyone over 40 or so, are disabled by age and not to be relied upon. These people 'elders' or 'olo' are cautioning the young about enjoying life as liberally as they did because now, the world is more complicated, more crowded and more expensive. But to no avail.. it is in the genes, and the young still dive into life as we did at the same age!

Today however, thought processes are noisy instead of reflective and internal. We discuss our thoughts as emotion driven propositions, not in a posture of give and take or dispassionate debate. When our views are not driven by emotions, we set them aside and ignore their importance. Because we feel that our personal thoughts or desires are always right, everyone must agree with us. We don't realize until much later in life that if everyone agreed with everyone, there would be utter pandemonium in which no one got their way at all.

Information is obtained from what is commonly known as the 'coconut wireless', the informal networks through which information is transmitted. Where once this was the only network available, now it is full of disinformation and misinformation. It is as much abused as used.

The Need for Information

In a country such as ours, in the situation at hand, it is imperative for leaders throughout the country to help their people understand what is happening and why, what other options and approaches are available and the related data and budget information. To do this they need regular supplies of information from various sources so that they (the community leaders) themselves can analyse, synthesize and interpret the information for the many people they must influence if change is to become a positive factor in the community.

The media should be providing this but the cost of providing media services to a large number of people in an archipelagic nation such as ours is inhibiting. Although English is the official language, the literacy rate is less than 40%. There are 65 indigenous languages used by 450,000 people living on several hundred inhabited islands. Pijin, used by most people, is a spoken and imprecise language without a standard orthography. It is impossible to read Pijin if you do not know how to read English or an indigenous language and most people find it easier to read simple English than Pijin. There is no widespread electrification and the economy is fragile. With few exceptions, the quality of elected leadership is such that there is no political imagination, no courage, no vision.

Media

In the western world, access to media is a daily necessity, a critical part of the culture that influences planning and choices in private, community, commercial and national affairs. In SI, media is considered a luxury because of its paucity. Solomon Islanders may be resource rich but they are all information poor.

Newspapers. The only daily newspaper has a circulation of c. 5,000 5 days a week and is mainly read in Honiara although perhaps close to half of this reaches provincial capitals. A weekly colour publication, having just started, has a distribution of some 3,000. While the papers are well designed, the grammatical errors and superficial analysis detract from what should be national standards.

Online Publications. There are several websites that contain up-to-date news and analysis but these do not impact in any significant way in the national community. With time and increased use of the internet, this will become important.

Radio. The national broadcaster covers most of north and east Guadalcanal, Gela, Savo, Russels, Isabel, parts of Makira and the western Malaita coast well with its medium wave transmitter. Its shortwave transmitter (in fact a long range transmitter) reaches most islands mainly from 6 to 8am and from 6 to 10pm. Most rural dwellers are asleep by around 9pm. During the daytime, it has a limited range. SIBC has another shortwave transmitter which can reach the length of the country adequately during daylight hours. This frequency was once used for schools broadcasting. Now however, SIBC does not have the funds to pay for power and the transmitter lies idle. Two regional stations, in Gizo and Lata which once covered their immediate areas, are no longer operational due to unavailability of funds for transmitter power.

Television.

In the form of video, television has been here for some 25 years, but this form of TV is uncontrolled and all kinds of programmes find their way into the community. Only recently has local production capacity been introduced, and this is mainly for commercial marketing on Television.

Two TV transmitters serve the people of Honiara and environs with relays of the ABC (Australia) Asia-Pacific service and the International BBC news channel. There is a possibility of a 3rd channel being commissioned by the end of the year. The single potential advantage is that good information seen on these channel can influence leaders who live or pass through Honiara. The current TV services are provided by a joint venture between Government, the NPF and a multi-national telecommunications company. There is, however little or no local content. A religious TV group provides round the clock imported religious programmes. A locally registered media company capable of producing local programmes has been trying to apply for a TV license since 1998 without success.

Leaders.

There are different types of leaders. There are those who pro-act, plan and work ahead to clear the way and inspire others to follow. To do that they need access timely and correct information including different views about opportunities, threats, issues, events and trends. They are the change agents, opinion leaders who mobilize and motivate others.

There are others who wait, as it were, for the crumbs to fall from the table and they show others how to feed from that. These are usually ineffective people but still they lead. Their conception of raising standards is usually non-existent. They usually follow the next group.

Opinion Leaders and Information Gatekeepers

What is common to all these groups is that they have opinion leaders and gatekeepers. These are the people who can be serviced by a civil society network secretariat. They condition and facilitate the flow of information in and out of their communities. It would be very useful if the kind of information they are receiving is trustworthy, well researched, have different perspectives etc. Only then will they be comfortable in regular dialogue. Right now people hold back because they fear they will upset each other. If we give them the same information platform to work on, they should find it easier to express themselves with confidence.

Who are these opinion leaders and gatekeepers? Where are they and what are their information needs?

This approach is an attempt to obtain information about what community leaders need from the secretariat. The list is not exhaustive. This is why the matrix below asks people in various sector of the economy to describe their information needs.

First however, we need to canvass our friends and acquaintances in the network to have their views and needs or the analysis will be superficial. I think the matrix proposed is a useful start to analysis and we can test the model by filling in our responses to the question. For everyone to write an essay is boring. We need to capture the information and re-package it and distribute it. In doing so we can demonstrate ways and means of networking information.

This paper has been in circulation for nearly six months. A couple of people have commented on 'how interesting' it was. None have offered to take it further. From that I have to understand that most people don't think we have a communication problem.

If you have time, please complete the matrix below and return yours to me. The example I give is my own.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- The questions: i. what are your information needs that are not being met by the media or other communication networks?
 ii. how will you use the information you receive?
 iii. what information can you share with other community leaders?
 iv. would you pay for such information to be provided to you? Is it valuable?

Are we agreed on the Sectors?

Dev. Workers eg Educators NGOs Academics	Religious Bodies individual churches	Private sect. Exporters Manufacturers Tourism Operators Publishers ICT users	Women NCW NGOs	Trad. Leaders Isabel Council of Chiefs Kwaio Fadanga
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Sector	Need	Usage	How valuable?	Notes
Private Consultant in Media, Education & Management	summarized views from community leaders on reform of gov't system	For use articles explaining what's going on here	\$8	Concern for the future
	regular summaries of political currents and how these affect different sectors.	To guide reports in the wantok networks	\$10	Concern for immediate projects
	Summary reports of governance issues in provinces	To help in discussions on national governance	\$8	To be able to help provinces as well as the authorities in central Gov't.
	summary of peace & reconciliation moves elsewhere and here	To be able to help moves towards these.	\$7	Keen to help those who take the lead in reconciliation
	regular updates on what the academic world is saying about SI.	To keep up-to-date with new realizations and understandings	\$10	Ongoing education shared with family and friends and influences my articles.

Note 1: Value refers to whether or not I would pay for this service.

On a scale of \$1 to \$10, the higher the number the more valuable.

Note 2: What is referred to are summaries that must be referenced so we can get to the original source ourselves. They do not have to be full-fledge essays.

Note 3: Just on my needs alone it seems we need a 'reader' researcher (someone with a wide reading capacity who can make connections and synthesize). He/She would need to be supported by someone attending to mechanics and administration. Perhaps postgraduate students can be hired as 'interns' developing summaries and annotated bibliographies and distributing these by email and snail mail to all opinion leaders in the country.