Why do setbacks and problems for development projects tend to be interpreted as failures?

Opening Story

In April 2001, the Disobai Naori project was established by clan elders and other individuals living in Vanapa West, a resource-rich area north of Port Moresby, in an attempt to find alternatives to the commercial logging of their customary forests. Elders from the Disobai Naori clan—which includes around ninety-five households from the Koiari tribal group—were being pressured to sign a logging agreement, but the community had witnessed the negative social, cultural, environmental and economic impacts of large-scale logging in nearby Vanapa North, and were reluctant to proceed. So they contacted a relative, Julie Smith, who lived in Australia and worked there as a consultant. She brought a team of Australian consultants over to Papua New Guinea, who worked with the community to establish an incorporated landowner group, the Disobai Naori Land Group Inc., and produce a comprehensive business plan detailing an alternative strategy for the sustainable management of the Vanapa West forest resources. Ultimately, however, the project fell apart before the plan could be implemented, the victim of interpersonal disputes and family politics. In seeking to paint a picture of the Vanapa community, the story of how the Disobai Naori project developed, and ultimately how it failed, is an illuminating one.

The vision of the Disobai Naori people ... is to care for the forest as our ancestors did and pass on this knowledge to our children. In the traditions of our ancestors we will wisely use our forest and all our resources to sustainably provide for a stable social, cultural and economic future for our whole people. We will learn from the past and work for improvements to our lives step by step, so that we can achieve a relaxed and happy life.

The aim of setting up an incorporated landowner group and preparing a business plan was to create a framework for effective management of the forest resources, and create an organizational structure which would ensure that the benefits of resource use were spread throughout the
whole community. An initial two-day planning workshop for the project brought together forty-five community members. The workshop served to illuminate key priorities and areas of concern for the Vanapa West community, which then informed the development of the business plan. Community members articulated a wish for economic development and increased income generation through use of their forest resources, while simultaneously stressing the importance of environmental and cultural sustainability. They also identified social issues they felt needed to be addressed, including women’s workloads and poor health, children’s wellbeing and education, problems around alcohol and drug use, and the management of household incomes. People also expressed a desire to protect the many sacred and magical places within Vanapa West, particularly in the mountains, and create opportunities for sharing knowledge with the younger generations who are increasingly oriented towards Port Moresby and the promises of city life. In short, then, the community was looking to the Disobai Naori project for a plan which would address the social, cultural and environmental, as well as the economic, dimensions of community well-being and development.

In response to these concerns, the Disobai Naori business plan was created by the team of consultants from Focus and Associates. It identifies and maps the location of different resources located in the Vanapa West area, but extends this to include heritage sites as well as sites of cultural and spiritual importance. For instance, the plan details the important story-places which connect people to their land, such as the cave where a man turned into a snake, and a stone statue of a pig which is believed to be the origin point for all pigs. These story places number amongst the resources of the forest. Economically, the plan establishes a framework for community-controlled ventures including commercial harvesting of rattan for sale to the Small Industry Development Centre in Port Moresby, and a block-making business using the stone, gravel and sand resources in the area, which would provide work and training for community members. A walk-about saw mill is proposed as an alternative to commercial logging, and opportunities are identified for limited commercial cropping alongside managed food gardens. Eco-tourism is proposed as a means of generating income, employment and training opportunities for community members. Plans for a community banking system are developed as a means for effective income management and community-wide investments, which also address women’s concerns about the misuse of income within families and the community’s desire to fund the education of their children. In all these instances, sustainability is a central concern, and the plan takes as its basis a multi-faceted understanding of development and well-being which moves beyond the strictly economic.

The Disobai Naori project was potentially truly significant. It secured funding from the British High Commission to prepare the business plan, and AusAID, the European Commission, the Canada Fund, and PNG government agencies all expressed interest in supporting its implementation.
Prior to the formation of the Disobai Naori project, people within the area had only known to go to churches for funding and support. This was one of the first times that a traditional landowning group was to be given money to initiate projects that would let them self-manage their own resources, and in this sense the project was a radical departure from the entrenched norms and practices of the dominant development paradigm.

In the end, though, the project collapsed before it could be implemented. Inter-personal conflicts emerged between key figures in the Disobai Naori and a member of the Disobai Naori clan who held a position of customary leadership but resided in Australia. Some of the people involved in the project in PNG have accused this individual of sabotaging the project to assert her own authority within the clan, while she in turn made allegations of self-interested behaviour on the part of the consultancy group. Accounts of the conflict are murky and contradictory, but what is clear is that the project ultimately was shelved for the foreseeable future. Funding agencies were simply unwilling to release any funds unless the dispute was resolved. The dispute lingered; the money never came and the plan was never implemented.

More interesting than the minutiae of the inter-personal conflict are the broader themes which the dispute tapped into. The development and collapse of the Disobai Naori project took place in the context of intersecting forms of organization, and ideas and assumptions relating to social mobilization and agency. The language and structures which the project used—business plans, incorporated landowner groups, boards, constitutions and funding partnerships—often diverged markedly from the structures of chiefly authority, clan organization and decision-making which still operate within the Vanapa community. While the Disobai Naori Land Group took measures to engage respectfully and meaningfully with the chiefdom system, the conflict which was the catalyst for the collapse of the project can be seen, in part at least, as a result of a clash of two different authoritative structures. And, ultimately, the funding agencies and governmental bodies involved in moving towards the business plan’s implementation were unable to accommodate the complexity of the relationships involved in customary tribal leadership and decision-making processes.

The collapse of the relationships with the funding agencies meant that none of the plans and dreams laid out in the Disobai Naori document have been realized. A small group of people from the original Disobai Naori group have now signed agreements with a logging company, and commercial logging has begun in parts of the mountainous area. The collective vision articulated by the community is no closer to reality than it was in 2001, despite all the promise of the project and the work and energy of those involved.

When the Disobai Naori produced their business plan for their community, they wrote that, ‘We believe our experience has much relevance to other
communities throughout the country.’ Indeed, the key challenges which the Disobai Noari project identified in the Vanapa West community are those which face communities around the country, and there is much to learn. The eventual deferral of the project serves to illuminate some of the many potential challenges and pitfalls which are experienced in trying to realize sustainable, community-led development throughout Papua New Guinea. But the project also highlighted the wealth of resources within Papua New Guinean communities, and possibilities which emerge from an alternative approach to development which embraces the importance of the cultural, social and ecological dimensions, and not just the economic. The vision of the Disobai Naori people still stands as a powerful image of strong, resilient, sustainable community-life.

Place—Past and Present

The Vanapa area is a large region north of Port Moresby and the National Capital District, adjacent to the coast of the Coral Sea. It is in the Hiri District, and falls under the jurisdiction of the Hiri Local-Level Government. The community is bordered by the Veimauri River to the north-west, the Laloki River to the west, and the Brown River to the south. The main Vanapa River runs through the middle of the area, and the Hiritano highway connects it to Port Moresby. The Vanapa community is in turn made up of numerous smaller communities which range in size and composition and are scattered throughout the area, including the villages of Kuriva, Kerea, Vekavu,
Kanobaba and Badiroho. Most of the communities are found near the banks of the Vanapa River, and on either side of the highway. In addition to the local landowners, there are smaller groups of settlers from Goilala, Mekeio, Berena, the Sepiks, Morobe and the Gulf. Many settlers occupy small areas of land within the area, while others have married into the villages and communities of landowning clans.

Driving into the Vanapa area, the vegetation along both sides of the Hiritano Highway is primarily savannah grassland. As you move away from the highway—up and down the Vanapa River, and further inland—it changes to dense tropical rainforest. Mountains dominate the northern part of Vanapa, and continue down through the eastern part of the area. Particularly in the north, there are large areas of deforestation due to significant commercial logging which has left the natural environment noticeably damaged. Rainforest vegetation predominates in the south, along with areas of swampland. The area of Vanapa West, which belongs to the Disobai Naori people of the Koiari tribal group, includes 70,000 hectares of largely virgin rainforest, bounded by the mountains and the Vanapa River. Action by the Disobai Naori group has largely stemmed the onslaught of commercial logging activities here, but there are reports of incursions, and some landowning groups have recently allowed logging to commence.

Materials from the forest are utilized in constructing houses and other buildings, but the community’s relative proximity to the city means that it is also quite easy to source modern materials and transport them back. Many of the villages are clustered around the point where the Hiritano highway crosses the Vanapa River. A steel bridge here is a key piece of infrastructure for the community, and a central point of transit for those travelling to and from Port Moresby. There is a school building in Kerea, and both a school and health centre in Kuriva. A network of roads and paths runs through the area, but the roads are in very poor condition. This is a major point of grievance within the community, and makes travel and accessibility difficult, especially for the more remote and isolated villages.

Organization and Governance

There are two major landowning groups in the Vanapa area, the Toura and Koiari. Both speak their own language, and are distinct ethnic groupings. Land is passed down within the two landowning clans on a patrilineal basis. These tribal groups have extensive relationships with other tribes in and around the Vanapa area. The Toura (sometimes also known as the Doura) are scattered up and down the Hiritano highway, while the Koiari are the traditional landowning group of Vanapa West. The Koiari are also traditional landowners in areas outside of Vanapa, including in Kokoda and other areas within the Owen Stanley Ranges. A number of settler communities are also part of the broader Vanapa community. These include families from Goilala, Berena, Mekeiou and the Gulf. Some of these settlers have been in the community for up to three generations. They have houses
and gardens in the community, but no land rights.

Villages are organized around family groups and clans. Kanobaba, for instance, which is located on the Hiritano highway near the main bridge over the Vanapa River, consists of the families of five brothers. The community in Vekavu village, which is further down the highway south of Kanobabo, is made up of the people of the Naumaniaha clan, who live there with their clan chief. Households include parents and children, and often grandparents or other extended family members. Eighty-six per cent of respondents to the Community Sustainability Questionnaire lived in households with five or more people, and 23 per cent lived in households with ten or more people. Living in family groups provides important social and economic support structures, and is also a way for family groups to claim and look after their land. Within villages, children are raised with the support of immediate and extended family, and that of the broader community.

Across the Vanapa area, there is a multi-layered governance structure which brings together traditional chiefs, elected community leaders and religious authorities. Some people in the community have suggested that the chiefdom system is effectively broken down. While chiefs do exist and are recognized as such, they claim that the system of authority and decision-making is not working. This is a point of contention, however, and others stress the ongoing importance of chiefly authority. Such debates can be understood within the broader context of rapid change in Papua New Guinea. The colonial powers were the first to disrupt tribal structures of leadership and authority, followed by the project of state and nation-building which was launched with the country’s Independence in 1975. The PNG state is, in many ways, still struggling to consolidate its power across the country, and its bureaucratic structures of local-level, provincial and national authority often sit in an uneasy relationship with the chiefdom system. In addition, the major Christian churches which are now entrenched in Papua New Guinean society have introduced their own models of leadership including elders, deacons, ministers and church fellowships. And finally, village and clan-based models of organization are being acted upon by the forces of urbanization, increased movement between villages and urban centres, and a recent boom in mobile communications technologies which allow increasing connectivity between communities which were previously much more self-contained.

Within Vanapa, all of these factors are at play. The Catholic Church entered the region in the 1950s, and occupies a strong place in the community. It runs adult-literacy classes, women’s fellowship programs and other community activities. The United Church and the Assemblies of God are also present within Vanapa, and co-ordinate other community organizations. Church leaders are respected as leadership figures. Vanapa’s proximity to the National Capital District also means that it has semi-regular contact with
government services and officials, and is connected to the political and social structures of the urban centre through a back-and-forth flow of people and communications. At the same time, the Disobai Naori experience shows the continuing importance of the major families and traditional landowners, who carry particular status and authority and are central to the social and cultural fabric of the community. The elected community leaders often come from these families, and one of Vanapa’s strengths is the enthusiasm of these leaders who have actively sought out engagement with experts from the National Agricultural Research Institute (NARI) and the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) in an effort to implement projects to improve livelihoods in the community.

Still, many attempts at initiating community-wide projects have ended unsuccessfully. Particularly, efforts to establish agricultural improvement projects and water-supply systems have struggled to get off the ground. An example of this is found in the rice harvester project which was begun several years ago, and abandoned after one season. The project was an attempt to set up a small-scale commercial rice-growing enterprise which would generate some income for participants from the community. The rice was planted successfully, but before it was due to be harvested the slasher broke down and wasn’t able to be repaired. By the time people were organized to manually harvest the rice, most of it had fallen from the plants into the water and was lost. Ultimately the return for those involved was far less than what had been hoped for and expected. The difficulties which were faced in finding an adequate response to the crisis suggest the dangers in a reliance on machinery and technology-driven projects, but also point to problems in co-ordinating a community-wide strategy within Vanapa.

Strategic conversations with community members suggest possible reasons behind this. In the first instance, it has often been hard to secure co-operation between the many different villages which together make up the Vanapa community. Villages can be relatively self-contained, and there can also be practical difficulties in organizing community-wide efforts when a community is spread out over a large territory, as Vanapa is. Differences in ethnicity, culture and background may also be factors. It has been suggested that the absence of a shared main language is a factor in the lack of cross-village cooperation. The main ethnic groupings—the Toura and Koiari—both speak different languages, as do the Goilala settlers and those from other areas. Communication is possible in Tok Pisin, but not in people’s primary language. Whereas shared local dialect is a uniting factor in many communities in PNG, the sense of communal identity in Vanapa needs to accommodate the reality of considerable linguistic diversity.

The results from the Community Sustainability Questionnaire offer some insight into the way that community operates in Vanapa. Eighty per cent of respondents to the questionnaire indicated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with feeling part of their community, which is on par with
the average across all research sites. Similarly, 79 per cent said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their life as a whole. One instance where the Vanapa results did deviate considerably from the overall results was in response to the statement, ‘I feel comfortable meeting and talking with people who are different to me’. Seventy per cent either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, compared to an overall average of 79 per cent, and 10 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed. Significantly, 20 per cent of respondents from Vanapa disagreed with the statement, nearly double the overall result of 11 per cent across all the research sites. These results seem to corroborate the view that while people living in the Vanapa area do consider themselves part of a broad community, there are also underlying points of tension around perceived differences between villages.

Livelihood and Provision

People in Vanapa are mainly subsistence farmers, hunters and gatherers. Some used to be employed in the city and have since retired back to their villages, while others have lived and worked in the community their whole life. A small number of people in the community are employed in the city and have a regular wage, but by far the main source of income for households is from family members selling garden produce at markets, particularly Gordon’s Market in Port Moresby. Forty-four per cent of respondents to the questionnaire said that they sold goods at market as their main way of making a living, with another 40 per cent indicating that they work within the household, including making gardens and looking after animals. Gardening is also the main source of provision for families in the community, with 75 per cent of respondents to the questionnaire indicating that they get most of their food from work done on their land or by fishing. Any income earned is used to supplement this diet with products like rice, tinned fish, tea and sugar, and is also used to pay for children’s school fees, clothes, transport, medical and other basic living costs.

Gardens are passed down patrilineally within clans, and newly married couples establish new gardens with the approval of clan group members and the village chief. They are planted with kaukau (sweet potato), corn, cassava, bananas, tomato, pumpkin, watermelon, taro, aibika (tree spinach), peanuts, cucumber and greens. Companion planting is used to maximize the productivity of gardens, which are made according to a five-to-seven year rotation, and allowed to fallow after this period. Crops will generally be planted at different times in a garden’s life cycle. So, for instance, corn and kaukau are popular first crops for a new garden, while bananas are frequently planted in the last cycles of the garden. There is also some commercial planting of cashew nuts, coffee, cocoa, citrus and rubber. Regular crop irrigation is difficult, however, due to the long dry season which affects Port Moresby and the area around it. Ensuring a reliable water supply, for gardens and for household use, is a big challenge for the community.

Much of the labour which goes into subsistence gardening is gendered.
Yam farming, for instance, is exclusively done by men who establish large gardens in which only yams are planted, and which have yam houses built in the middle. During the period that they are preparing the gardens, the men are required to abstain from sexual activity, and may also fast and perform rituals. Aside from yam farming, however, women overwhelmingly provide most of the labour in gardens, and they perform this difficult work in addition to running their households, preparing meals and looking after children. As a result, many women experience periods of physical exhaustion, and sickness caused by fatigue and malaria. The burden of women’s work is one of the issues being taken up by women’s groups in the community, which are now voicing a desire for tools, equipment and new processes which can assist women in their work—and in doing so improve their health.

There are ongoing debates within Vanapa about agricultural methods and practices used in the community. When the research team visited in October 2007, there were extensive discussions around the use of agricultural machinery such as tractors. Tractors would make a huge increase in the productivity of farming, and would reduce the labour time currently needed to plant and harvest gardens. At the same time, however, previous experiences such as the failed rice-harvester project have made others wary of a reliance of machinery. Tractors and other pieces of agricultural equipment are expensive to buy, and can be expensive to repair and maintain. Expected returns from the use of farming machinery are often thwarted when equipment breaks down, is stolen, or not maintained properly. In a similar vein, there are divergent views on the use of agricultural techniques such as grafting, or the use of chemicals to control pests. Taro beetles are causing problems for taro crops, while fruit flies are damaging capsicum plants, beans and eggplants and other vegetables. Outside experts from NARI and the DPI have been brought by community leaders to run workshops on pest control, and have recommended particular chemical solutions. Through demonstrations, they have shown how the chemicals work, and how the plants grow bigger and stronger. But the chemicals, fertilisers and pesticides cost money, and they create situations of dependency where crops will fail without them. Similarly, techniques such as grafting can require the purchase of particular species of crops, often at significant expense. Because of this, other people in the community have been advocating alternative strategies for increasing agricultural productivity. Problems with pests can be addressed with traditional methods such as pesticide solutions made from neem trees, and companion planting with marigolds and garlic. Behind these debates—about pesticides, chemical fertilisers, machinery and farming equipment—is the much broader question of the relationship between customary and modern forms of knowledge and production. The community is keen to access the benefits which these technologies and products promise, but there is a recognition too of the value of the traditional and cultural ways of knowing and doing.
Outside of the areas where houses and gardens are established, the natural environment in the Vanapa area is another important source of food and resources. People within the community, particularly those in the traditional landowning clans, have an intimate knowledge of the forests, mountains and river systems which surround their villages. The forests provide food...
sources including ferns and edible leaves, three varieties of *pit pit*, or bush asparagus, as well as gingers, edible bamboo, wild yams, figs, bananas, breadfruit and other fruits. Timbers are used for construction and crafts, and the forests also contain perfumed trees which have medicinal and ceremonial uses. The forests are also home to wild pigs, *magani* (wallabies), deer, cassowaries and game birds. The rivers and creeks contain eels, prawns, crayfish, crabs, barramundi, mullet, black bass and catfish. These resources also provide opportunities for income-generating projects. For instance, the perfumed trees which grow in the forests also carry significant commercial value, while hunting and selling wild pigs is an important livelihood activity for many people, and others earn income through harvesting and selling rattan. However, while rattan is bought for K0.50 per metre by places such as the Small Industry Development Centre in Port Moresby, local people are generally paid much less than this because of the role of middlemen. And while timber is a valuable resource, the villagers in Vanapa North can attest to the devastation which can be caused through large-scale commercial logging. The walk-about sawmill proposed by the Disobai Naori group was one attempt to ensure that use of the area’s resources remained sustainable, and in the control of the community itself. Projects like this have the potential to improve livelihoods within Vanapa, without compromising the health of the natural environment and the rights of traditional landowners.

**Learning and Education**

Education within the Vanapa community includes both formal and informal aspects. In terms of formal education, there are two primary schools within the Vanapa area, and secondary schools outside the area which are accessed by some students. Informal training programs and workshops are run by the local churches, and by agencies such as NARI. In addition, there is a rich pool of traditional skills and practices which are held by individuals and families and passed down to the younger generations according to tribal custom.

Traditional practices, sacred beliefs and relationships with their customary lands have an ongoing centrality in the day-to-day lives of the Vanapa people. In conversations with the research teams, individuals spoke of people in the community who possess knowledge in such things as healing snake bites, building canoes, making and stopping rain, hunting and making gardens. People in the community learn these customary and traditional skills from their fathers and grandfathers, while other skills are passed from mother to daughters. Sacred forms of knowledge are carefully guarded and can only be shared with particular people, but they are used for the benefit of the community at large—so too with knowledge related to ceremonies and sacred rituals.

Levels of formal education in the community are not high. Forty-one per cent of people surveyed by the had completed primary school as their highest level of formal education, which is about on par with the overall
average across all the research sites. However, 22 per cent had not completed any level of schooling, which is much higher than the overall average of 9 per cent. The percentage of those who had completed some or all of a secondary school education—27 per cent—was also lower than the overall average, as was the figure for those who had some form of trade training. There are two primary schools in the area, in Kerea and Kuriva, however these are some distance from some of the villages. Students in Years 9 and above need to travel out of the area in order to attend school. These factors, together with the difficulties many parents have in paying school fees, mean that levels of education are often low. For instance, almost all the Koirari people at Badiroho village have no formal education, save for a few young people and children, as fees are simply too expensive for the people there. The desire to be able to fund their children’s education was consistently voiced by people within the community, and was often given as a motivating force for people seeking to improve their livelihoods.

Opportunities for skills training are available from a number of sources. Church-run educational programs offer opportunities for learning for those who are not accommodated within the formal school system. The Catholic Church runs adult literacy classes, and women’s fellowship programs are a source of training for women. The National Agricultural Research Institute and the Department for Primary Industries also run workshops, as discussed above. Still, people within the community have expressed a strong desire for more training opportunities. Forty-three per cent of questionnaire respondents felt that they did not have sufficient training to get the kinds of jobs that they wanted, and 92 per cent said that they would like to learn to do their current work better. When asked what sort of training they would like, 67 per cent nominated agricultural training as desirable. Twenty-eight per cent wanted training in income generation, and the next most sought-after training was in family life, which 15 per cent of people identified as something they would like.

A strong desire for educational and learning opportunities is found throughout Vanapa. While the rice harvester project or the Disobai Naori projects were unsuccessful a few years ago, people still discuss the prospects of learnt of establishing similar projects, taking into the account the lessons they have learnt from past experience. They talk too of fish-farming projects and other initiatives which could generate some income for families, to use for their children’s schooling and raise their standards of living. As the Disobai Naori project made clear, there are many options for community-controlled, sustainable initiatives within Vanapa. Still, the difficulties in realizing some of these plans have dampened the hopes of some people within the community, and the lack of co-operation between villages remains something to be overcome. The challenge will be take the willingness of people to seek out and attempt new initiatives, the enthusiasm of community leaders, and the traditional skills and knowledge present within the area, and bring these strengths together in a community-wide effort.