Dialogue and development *Storians* and community based action learning with chiefs in Vanuatu

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This paper presents a practitioner-researcher reflection on the '*kastom governance partnership*'; an initiative of the Vanuatu National Council of Chiefs, the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (ACPACS), the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and AusAid aimed at building capacity for sustainable and peaceful community governance within Vanuatu.

The paper presents a few of the 'content' lessons we have learnt from five years of community-based action-learning aimed at grassroots dialogue around the spheres of community, development, conflict, life-projects and governance. The core of the reflection outlines ACPACS 'methodology' or process for community-based action-learning as an outsider organization. This methodology has been guided by experiential, elicitive, dialogical and participatory processes. It is posited that these are useful methodologies for outsider organizations to consider when engaged in Pacific regional action-learning work that is guided by a decolonizing framework.

AUTHOR SUBMITTING ABSTRACT

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Disclaimer: this paper does not reflect the views of ACPACS, but the views of the author as a training practitioner and researcher within the ACPACS Vanuatu team.

I. INTRODUCTION

As with many other post-colonial states, Vanuatu is facing intense pressures of change in virtually every dimension of social organisation and experience, from the most intimate to the most collective. The country's people and institutions are negotiating the complex push and pulls between what remains a reasonably rich subsistence economy and the capitalist market economy (both legitimate and shadowy), and also between what are still vital customary governance processes embedded in that subsistence economy and the institutions and processes of a liberal state.

Vanuatu is thus in the midst of a dense and difficult dialogue of differences concerning the shapes of cultural, economic, social and political life. For ni-Vanuatu, (the people of Vanuatu) individual and collective identities are at stake in the most fundamental ways in this exchange. This 'dialogue' is marked by a lively history of accommodations and creative interpretations as well as conflict; it is certainly not a simple replacement of indigenous with introduced systems. Rather, ni-Vanuatu people and institutions are grappling with the deeply challenging, at times conflictual, but also potentially generative processes of reshaping the way community is lived and institutionalised. Ideally the result will be the gradual

emergence of a society and state that is able to make its way in the world but is rooted in and responsive to local values, aspirations and life ways.

II. Background

Vanuatu as a nation is a string of more than 80 islands once known as the New Hebrides but which achieved independence from France and Britain in 1980. For many policy makers the Vanuatu political system is at best a fragile state and at worst a potential 'failed state' – often described as 'unstable and fragmentary' evidenced in no fewer than sixteen changes in government in the 13 years leading up to the 2004 elections (Cox et al, 2007, ii). However, considering the length of time that the nation has been independent there are many positive things to consider particularly in relation to the resilience of community life and customary mechanisms of order (Boege et al, 2009).

The country has a population of about 221,000 with most people still living in rural island contexts (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2007). However, there are increasing processes of urbanisation with population growth within the two main centres of Port Vila (the capital on the island of Efate) and Luganville (on the island of Santo).

The document *The Unfinished State: Drivers of Change in Vanuatu* (Cox et al. 2007) presents many of the successes and challenges of the nation. Economically, while Vanuatu has experienced strong growth (estimated at nearly 7% in 2005), this growth is not impacting on the lives of most ni-Vanuatu (Cox et al. 2007, pi). It is focused on urban-oriented investment and tourism, which supports the 15% of people employed within the formal economy. Many powerful institutional agents such as the Asian Development Bank, AusAid and the Vanuatu state see the primary policy goal as that of economic growth. This is considered the key to alleviating poverty, although such institutions also include social protection activities alongside its growth strategies. It should be carefully noted that while most rurally based ni-Vanuatu communities have poor human development indicators, acute poverty is virtually unknown. It is because of this that ACPACS' primary policy orientation is that of development within a conflict prevention framework, which surely entails economic activity, but within a broader analysis of Pacific lives and aspirations. At ACPACS we therefore locate our analysis primarily with the social resilience of Pacific peoples, building on the strengths of their customary and community life and recognising that this must be the starting place for engaging with the challenges of transition (Brown, 2007).

III. The work

In 2004, the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (ACPACS) was approached by the secretariat of the national organisation of customary leaders in Vanuatu, the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs (MNCC), to work with them in looking for ways to assist customary leaders to respond to some of the intense change dynamics being experienced within communities. After a year of conversation, ACPACS and the MNCC entered into a 12 month Community Partnership Program with AusAID (the Australian Government aid agency) as partner and funder. For ACPACS, as a centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, and for the MNCC, as a body bridging customary and national governance, the focus was supporting customary leaders to work with the conflictual processes of rapid, chaotic change in ways that reduced the potential for violence. The focus on violent conflict prevention, however, entailed work across a range of themes, including enhancing local governance, around which all the partners concurred.

The initial pilot program consisted of three community-based action learning workshops held in Port Vila (the capital), and two outer islands. The workshops were understood as structured contexts for facilitated conversations around questions that customary and community leaders regularly faced but rarely had an opportunity to work through with each other in a reflective context, that is, they were understood as 'difficult conversations' that could lead to innovative action. The workshops provided an environment for customary leaders and members of grassroots councils (often the same people) to reflect on, discuss and at points plan around:

- Challenges and pressures facing communities and their role in working with these pressures

- How to support good development processes

- Peace-building and working with conflict

- The interface between 'traditional' and 'introduced' governance systems and how to create good community governance.

The workshops were organised by the MNCC Secretariat and were facilitated by members of the Secretariat and by ACPACS. Incorporating regular evaluation and review, AusAID have since funded two more phases of the Partnership, which built on and extended the pilot. These have included:

- Undertaking research that takes customary governance systems seriously, with topics worked out by the partners and also includes the Vanuatu Cultural Centre

- More in-depth community-based action-learning workshops on community governance, conflict resolution and community development – now renamed 'storytelling' (*storians*) - and action-plan follow up

- Supporting the organisational capacity of the MNCC

- Training local facilitators to work with ACPACS facilitators in the *storians*.

This work is currently in a phase of the partnership resourced by AusAid through to 2013.

At a fundamental level, ACPACS is endeavouring to help build the confidence of workshop/*storian* participants and others in working with 'introduced' systems and structures and with each other, whether they are from customary governance, NGOs or churches, youth and women's groups, or provincial governments. But the partnership is also an opportunity to undo some of our own deafness and defensiveness as Westerners and engage in conversations across differences of culture and of power, to get to know our neighbours better and to learn to listen more.

The rest of this paper is structured into two parts. The first part will present a couple of observations about the 'content' of the community-based action-learning intervention. The second part, the core of the paper, will outline the 'methodology' of community-based action-learning workshops that ACPACS has developed for guiding our partnerships in post-colonial contexts.

IV. SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION-LEARNING/*STORIAN* CONTENT

As inferred within my introduction it is into this complex space that ACPACS is attempting to learn, along with the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs, the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and AusAid, how to forge a way forward. We have been tasked to facilitate dialogue within the spheres of *kastom* governance, conflict resolution and community development. The rationale behind the initiative is that while the Vanuatu State receives most recognition in terms of governance capacity building – with a corresponding investment in administrative, judicial and financial arms of the state - over eighty percent of the country is still governed within the realms of customary authority (presiding over or within the customary subsistence and exchange economy, and customary social and cultural lives) where the 'reach' of the state is minimal, spectral and shadowy[1].

However, as would be clear from my brief overview of Vanuatu above, community life has certainly not remained separate from modernity's expansion despite the state's shadowy absence – there have been significant changes and challenges to customary authority. Non-customary agents such as churches,

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[1] For example – in terms of the administrative arm of the state the lowest formal level of government is instituted within 63 Area Councils – which only has a single employee each (focused on tax collection); in terms of the political arm the state is connected to communities through 'representatives' driven by patronage (Cox et al., 2007, pii-iii)

political parties, other religions, local business people (who have entered the cash economy successfully), outsider entrepreneurs (such as loggers, tourist operators, and plantations owners), NGOs, INGOs, state actors and other multilateral actors (such as regional training teams of UN agencies) are active within each level of ni-Vanuatu life (local, provincial and national). Each of these agents has their own agendas that contribute to accelerated transition. Also, the recent successful launch of DIGICELs mobile phone network, with almost full coverage of the nation has rapidly linked rural and remote communities to outside influences and market possibilities.

ACPACS has had to pause and reflect on where we sit within this complex array of agents, forces and agendas while listening deeply to the people we are working alongside. This part of the paper presents a few of the content lessons we have learnt from the six years of community-based action-learning aimed at grassroots dialogue around the spheres of community, conflict, and governance.

The first lesson within the community-based action-learning workshops was how to engage with the multiple understandings of community within the rapidly changing social and political context. Workshop participants were invited to talk about their own (*emic*) meanings for community. For the chiefs the starting point in conceptualising community was both within the geographical site of village but also within a more complex relational space known as *nasara* and *nakamal* (Huffer & Molisa 1999). *Nakamal* and *nasara* signify the whole interconnected web of relationships between people past (ancestors), present and future and other realities of life – flora, fauna, weather, spirits and so forth with the primary goal of harmony.

Participants were then asked to re-consider community within the context of the 'imagined' nation-state, modern forms of development, new kinds of migration and technology, easier access to the cash economy, and so forth - in which people now relate more easily to multiple kinds of geographical spaces. Many participants could see emplacement (Turton, 2004), defined as the process of making place home, as no longer only local, occurring within the geographical site of the village or the relational site of *nakamal* and *nasara*. People increasingly identified with other places and spaces. They had family on other islands or in urban centres. It was clear that many chiefs were struggling with the disorientation of being members of such new multiple communities beyond the village and reaching into island, regional, national and international spaces, which also has important implications for thinking about citizenship. There was recognition of the need for a more complex life project (Blaser et al., 2004) that encompassed a vision, strategies and organizational forms enabling community leaders to engage with the multiple levels of community within which different kinds of development needed to be engaged.

The second lesson central to community-based action-learning workshops in this context was considering conflict and peace making. Within partner meetings and workshops there were many discussions about the increasing difficulty of managing conflict peacefully across the multiple levels of community. From the beginning participants were clear that there were many challenges to customary conflict resolution. Some participants noted the strength of customary conflict resolution processes in maintaining calm but their corresponding weakness in not always dealing with the root causes of conflict, so undermining people's capacity or willingness to work co-operatively. Many participants suggested that communities might be at peace – maintained by chiefly decisions, custom fines and ceremony, but that this peace often left people scarred, aggrieved or withdrawn. An example would be *storian* discussions about how to re-think and re-construct customary ceremony processes such that they would lead to sustainable and co-operative peace.

Also, rapid social transition which displaced cultures and groups while bringing them increasingly into interaction with each other often left chiefs, as traditional peace-makers, feeling confused and disoriented as to how to deal with escalating conflicts. Within this complex space the workshops explored how customary and other models of conflict resolution could be utilised in new ways to deal with these challenges. While all discussions started through eliciting (Lederach, 1995) an understanding of customary conflict resolution models, they then moved onto exploring other possible approaches. People debated the

strengths and weaknesses of each for various situations. As one chief put it "*We have five arrows, ACPACS might have two or three more and theirs might be sharper, so let us try them out*".

The third lesson, clearly linked to the previous discussions, involved nurturing new forms of governance. Whereas in the past the order of village life was ensured through customary forms of governance and custom law with a chief wielding considerable authority, this is no longer the case. In the past chiefly legitimacy was based on various ontologies (ancestry or ceremony), but was usually also linked to capacity and performance. Chiefs now increasingly have to earn legitimate authority within a social context in which others in the community – successful entrepreneurs, government workers, NGO workers or educated women or youth – might be more knowledgeable and capable in various areas. Such authority is also rendered fragile by other governance and government-related processes such as elections or increasing competition amongst church groups. Increasingly effective order is therefore only elicited through chiefs working co-operatively with such others to develop a 'public mandate'. This is potentially creative. But it is also a challenge to structuring community processes, which to be sustained, need clear governance structures. How introduced forms of government (for example, a Health Centre's committee, a Women's Association, a Water and Sanitation strategy) interact with the customary governance processes and structures needs to be innovated and articulated. Hybrid governance structures that fit into local dynamics and are oriented towards 'people feeling able to grasp their contemporary environment' (Huffer & Molisa, 1999: 11) need to emerge.

While this discussion has identified some key content lessons learnt from the community-based action-learning workshops, the next part of the paper identifies the 'methodologies' that have guided our approach to community-based action learning as an outsider agency.

V. SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ACPACS METHODOLOGY OF COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION-LEARNING

These methodologies have been consolidated through our interaction with our partner organisations in many meetings, and also chiefs and other community leaders participating in the community workshops. They provide a set of contours in considering how to conduct community-based action-learning within the complex terrain of responding to the complex array of content issues such as outlined above. It is posited that these methodologies could be useful to consider for other organisations working with action-learning interventions in the Pacific region. The methodologies discussed include experiential, elicitive, dialogical and participatory.

Each will briefly be discussed in turn, although it would be true to say that the four methodologies while each bringing distinct action-learning steps also represent a 'family' of action-learning processes that are not in conflict with one another. They overlap in many ways. However discussing them separately enables facilitators to distil slightly nuanced and varied steps thereby bringing more consciousness to their praxis.

It should also be noted that within the community-based workshops the partnership has institutionalised the 'action-learning events' as *storians,* a Bislama word for story-ing. Community-based action-learning requires us to create platforms for participants to tell their stories – stories of how conflict is resolved using *kastom*, how customary conflict resolution processes are struggling within new socio-political-cultural-economic contexts, stories of concerns about community life – the loss of young people, the fault-lines of rapid changes manifest in gender and generational conflicts, the pressures of food security, exploitative tourist operators and so forth. Within the overall dialogue ACPACS facilitators have been able to bring stories of some 'outsider' approaches to community conflict resolution, or approaches to governance and development being used in other contexts.

Each of the four methodologies will now be discussed in turn.

A. An experiential methodology

Use of experiential methodologies has drawn on David Kolb's (1984) seminal work. His primary contribution was to name the experiential learning cycle – moving from 'experience' to 'reflection' to 'generalisation' and finally to 'application'. We have found this a useful starting point for all action-learning processes ensuring that when designing each and every workshop session we quickly consider the question 'what experience can we draw on (though asking *storian* participants' to reflect on a real-life experience) or create (through a simulation game, role play, case study and so forth) in the learning setting?' This approach ensures facilitators move away from any temptation to 'talk-to/at' participants. Examples include sessions that use pre-designed case studies of conflicts that occur within communities and then invite participants to consider ways forward in the actual case study – a process of reflection, generalisation and application. It should also be noted that a '*kastom* reference group' has been established by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre to pre-review proposed case studies, simulation games and so forth to ensure their appropriateness.

B. An elicitive methodology

The elicitive methodology of community-based action learning is central to our approach. This methodology is theoretically underpinned by the work of John Paul Lederach (1995) who works in the field of cross-cultural conflict transformation. The assumption behind the approach is that there is what can be conceptually understood as agonistic conflict (Mouffe, 2005) as opposed to antagonistic conflict between the *kastom* world and the new introduced systems. An elicitive stance of facilitation sees the primary mode of work as a mutual 'journey of discovery' between the community-based facilitators and local participants in which the cultural, communal and political resources available to local people, albeit disrupted ones, can be re-constituted, re-invented, re-cycled, re-patterned and re-structured in the new rapidly changing context. It is elicitive in that, new models of cultural practice, communal participation, community governance and political mobilisation have to be developed for the purposes of building and sustaining a meaningful life-project for the communities.

An elicitive process does this by facilitating structured conversations, which sits at the heart of effective community-based action learning. At the centre of elicitive processes is conversation – a conversation that requires deep listening and a willingness to let go of pre-desired or designed agendas. It is conversation that is willing to enter into an understanding of one another's *emic* worlds of meaning and resources. Within the partnership this has entailed processes of deep listening between ACPACS project staff and the national staff of the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs and Vanuatu Cultural Centre. This listening has enabled us to start moving beyond reified notions of either '*kastom'* or 'foreign' that can distort discussion and freeze creativity. Within community-based workshops the same processes of dialogue have enabled participants and facilitators to have conversations around the meanings and modalities of community, 'development', respect, *kastom*, governance, conflict and so forth. It is however a 'structured' conversation that moves through the normative elicitive stages of 'discovery', 'naming', 'evaluation', 're-creation', and 'application' (Lederach, 1995: 55ff).

C. A dialogical methodology

Within the community-based action-learning processes we have at times also opted to use Freirean (Freire, 1974; Hope & Timmel, 1984) 'dialogical' action-learning methodologies. By this I refer to the purposeful use of 'codes' that trigger dialogue creating learning contents whereby participants and facilitators can gain new consciousness about their life-situation understanding the many forces that impact and construct their world.

Codes that we have used include pre-drawn pictures and DVDs. For example, within the governance *storians* we have regularly used a Wan Smol Bag[2] DVD called *Eniwan I Luk Rose?* which tells a story of a

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[2] Wan Smol Bag is a local NGO working in communities around Vanuatu, with a particular emphasis on youth.

young woman from an outer island who 'flees' an arranged marriage that she does not wish to enter into. She escapes to the capital Port Vila and so the story unfolds. A secondary story line within the DVD also explores the challenges of national parliamentary election processes within communities. This DVD, as a code, triggers many conversations amongst participants, usually around topics such as the:

- Complex interface between customary and constitutional forms of governance, exemplified within the DVD story particularly as it triggers discussion around the tensions between 'freedom of movement' (as mandated within the liberal state's constitution) and customary forms of at-times legitimizing the restriction of people's movements (as forms of community regulation/punishment)

- Complexity of arranged marriages

- Impact of state elections on community life – with their contribution to, or amplification of many local divisions

- Different forms of corruption within state-based forms of governance.

Freirean dialogue also challenges those with 'power' to enter into the possibility that they might need to step out of their comfortable practices. For example, during the course of the partnership ACPACS facilitators have had several discussions with high-ranking chiefs in which they articulated their concern that some people practising 'introduced forms of governance' (for example people within the justice/courts system) need to work with them (that is chiefs practising *kastom* law). In principle, the chiefs had no problem with that. They often found however that people advocating such 'working together' really meant that the chiefs had to learn about the introduced system while the legal people did not take the time to learn about the *kastom* system. This lack of willingness to learn about the 'other' undermines the capacity for dialogue, deep listening and the possibility of forging creative new ways forward.

D. *A participatory methodology*

Clearly while each of the above three methodologies are participatory in many ways there is a distinctive literature on participatory training processes articulated most clearly by the likes of Jules Pretty *et al* (1995) and Robert Chambers (2008). While such literature addresses a broad range of issues and approaches what is particularly useful to highlight is ACPACS application of a distinct component called participatory curriculum design (PCD) (Taylor, 2003).

This participatory methodology involves as many stakeholders as possible in the design phases of community-based action-learning processes. For us this has involved several workshops at an organisational partnership level, and in particular involves circulating any 'draft' case studies to the *kastom* reference group. Furthermore all the local facilitators (trained by the partnership) are then involved in a review of all draft materials and occasionally a one week long pre-*storian* workshop is hosted involving all local facilitators in design process. The participatory nature of the design phase of the *storians* ensures relevance, appropriateness and ownership.

VI. CONCLUSION

As well as endeavouring to be a partnership amongst very different organisations and across different cultures, for ACPACS our work in Vanuatu is understood within a framework of dialogue and mutuality. Mutuality, conversation and respect require acknowledging others. There can be a tendency to approach the Pacific Islands as if the task of development was to teach them how to 'do' our institutions better. Appropriate community-based action-learning processes are one way of recognising communities and customary leaders' efforts to be self-determining – creating spaces that enable people to negotiate ways through the currents of rapid change that enable them to hold what they value.

Customary leaders are engaged at the most basic level in working and experimenting with new, hybrid forms of community, development, conflict resolution and governance in Vanuatu. This is messy, but also

potentially profoundly generative work that could complement efforts to support state and other governance structures.

ACPACS feels incredibly privileged to be working in partnership with two institutions within Vanuatu – namely the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre – that are at the centre of visioning new possibilities for ni-Vanuatu people. Neither institution's have 'bought into' the agenda/s or orientations of the Vanuatu state, or bilateral or multilateral actors. They are working with these agendas, but they are doing it in ways that reflect the multiple modalities of accommodation, assimilation and resistance. They are actively looking for 'an-other' way – one that neither marginalises nor reifies *kastom* and one that is re-thinking community, development, governance, and conflict resolution. From an outsider's perspective we are learning that our contribution to this process is to support community-based action-learning processes based on experiential, elicitive, dialogical and participatory methodologies. We still have a long way to go and much to learn.

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