

## **The Need for an Information Database of Resource Development Activities in the Torres Strait Region**

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### **Abstract**

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*Information is a tool for decision-making that effects community. People need information to understand the present or past situation of an issue or problem area. They need information to define a problem, measure the magnitude of a problem and to analyse the problem to find solutions to it.*

*Differing resource endowments and in some cases resource scarcity of groups concerned in the Torres Strait Region, as well as a greater degree of differentiation in development programmes within the region, will promote rather than dampen potential conflicts over social structures and the border. In such a situation, information gathering and its use is enhanced. Information on population, economic activity, education, social services and so on, should ideally be available to both countries concerned so that many obviously important rates of change for example, population growth and migration can be known to both parties.*

*Since major resource development inside the Papua New Guinea border will affect the people in one way or another, directly or indirectly, an information database should be established to identify their activities, the area and magnitude of their operations, and the area that these developments will affect the people, their environment, and their day-to-day activities.*

*Past information data on resource development activities such as mining, forestry and fisheries should be updated with the aim of educating the people of Australia and Papua New Guinea about the likely effects this will bring to the people in the region. Information should also be provided on the current resource development activities in the region.*

*Basically, what is needed is information provided for the people's basic needs for sustainable development in the region. Information collected for the region on any resource development should be disseminated to the people who are interested in understanding the problems and issues of sustainable resource development in the Torres Strait Region.*

## **Introduction**

The Torres Strait Baseline Study was instigated in response to concerns, expressed by Torres Strait Islanders as well as commercial fishermen and scientists, about possible effects on the Torres Strait marine environment from the current and future mining developments in the Fly River catchment area of Papua New Guinea.

These concerns gave rise to the following questions. What are the types of information required by possible user groups such as the Torres Strait Islanders, commercial fishermen and scientists or decision makers? How should the information collected be used and who should use it? How is the information collected going to be used by the decision makers and how are the decisions made on the information provided, going to affect the people in the region? Is information collection on resource development activities necessary to understand the present and future situation or practices of sustainable development in the region?

This paper will delve into some aspects of why both Australia and Papua New Guinea need to create an information data-base of resource development activities in the Torres Strait Region as well as in Papua New Guinea, that will directly or indirectly (in terms of planning and decision-making) affect the cultural, social, environmental and political stability of the people in the region.

It will briefly outline the strategies of government departments in Papua New Guinea involved in the renewable resources sector and some current issues of resource development in Papua New Guinea. It will also outline the primary objectives of the Department of Environment and Conservation in its rationalization of the development and exploitation of Papua New Guinea's natural resources. Lastly, it will point out some ideally important aspects of information needs and requirements for the region and attempt to mention the categories of specific information that are needed by various individuals, institutions, planners, policy makers and the people of the Torres Strait Region to understand the past and present resource development activities in the Torres Strait Region in which these resources can be planned to be sustained for the future generations.

## **The Definition and Concept of Sustainable Development**

The concept of "sustainable development", pervades contemporary environmental discussion of management of the interactions of humans with their environment.

It urges development that meets the needs and aspirations of the present generations without compromising the ability of the future generations also to meet their needs.

Sustainability must refer not only to maintaining and/or improving environmental quality and the productive capacity of ecosystems, but also to maintaining and improving the well-being of people and enhancing their capacity to utilize available resources effectively and efficiently over the long run to meet the needs of the present and future generations.

Fairclough (1990:89) mentioned that:

It is of great importance for developing countries that its approach to sustainable development and environmental protection are both essential and mutually dependent. The one cannot be achieved without the other. The concern for environment and natural resources must hence forward be an intergral part of every development project and program.

Since Papua New Guinea is a developing country, it is wise that its strategies towards sustainable development should be defined and understood by the interested individuals, multi-national corporations, planners and policy-makers both in Papua New Guinea and Australia. Common resources such as fish, wildlife, forests, suitable agricultural lands and water are all crucially important resources for sustainable development, but often suffer from over-exploitation. Important issues concerning resources development in the region should be identified and clarified on the government's present policies and strategies regarding sustainability of these resources in the country which might affect the people in the Torres Strait Region.

## **Strategies for Sustainable Development in Papua New Guinea**

The renewable resources sector in Papua New Guinea consists of Agriculture and Livestock, Forestry, Fisheries and Marine Resources and Tourism. Each of these departments and the Tourism Development Corporation have developed their own strategies for sustainable development. Several strategies have been devised by each department and the corporation to increase economic development in the medium-term period from 1990 to 1994.

### **Department of Agriculture and Livestock**

The Department of Agriculture and Livestock gives high priority to the following strategies: strengthen extension services; advance manpower development; increase food production; improve processing and marketing of agricultural produce; increase applied research activities; increase smallholder access credit; and to improve the quality of animal and plant health and quarantine services.

### **Department of Fisheries and Marine Resources**

The Department places emphasis on the development of provincial fisheries plans: provisions for more effective support services to provincial extensions services; and the development and promotion of markets and incentives for private commercial investment in this sector.

### **Department of Forest**

The Department gives priority attention to: long-term planning of forest resources to maintain an optimum balance between economic development and conservation of natural resources; afforestation and the acquisition of scientific and economic information about the different type of forest species in Papua New Guinea; local processing of forest products of which the walkabout (portable) sawmill is an example; and increased training for qualified Nationals.

### **The Tourism Development Corporation**

The objectives of this newly formed corporation are to encourage the growth of tourism and to involve more Nationals directly in the industry while at the same time it will help to protect the indigenous cultures which make the country such a unique tourist attraction. This corporation will act as a Commercial Statutory Authority. The corporation's strategies will consider: investor's incentive packages to attract national and foreign investment in tourism; a new transport policy to encourage the operations of more international air services into the country to generate more tourism traffic and increased revenue from landing fees, tourist expenditures and so on; and linkages between tourism and other areas to maximize the use of local goods and services.

### **The Department of Environment and Conservation**

The Department of Environment and Conservation is separated from the renewable resource sector because its primary objective is to rationalize the development and exploitation of Papua New Guinea's national resources – both renewable and non-renewable. The Department's strategies involve:

1. Application of a sustainable development policy, taking into account the social, economic, environmental and cultural aspirations of the population.
2. Providing revenue from the non-renewable resource development sector to develop, monitor and manage the renewable resources and related activities.
3. Adoption of a long-term perspective in planning because short-term gains will not be allowed to outweigh the long-term viability of the resource or the long-term welfare of the people in the area to be developed.
4. Making data on economic, social, technical and scientific information available to all relevant parties.
5. Local participation in resource development and a programme of public and community education to develop awareness of issues involved in resource development.
6. Consideration of the effect of population growth and pressure on the resources.

## **Some Current Issues of Resource Development in Papua New Guinea**

Papua New Guinea is endowed with many natural resources both renewable and non-renewable. However, great pressures have arisen recently for the exploitation of these resources by potential developers on the one hand and from the nation and people, for income, on the other. The desire to earn more foreign exchange seems to force the short-term exploitation of resources, sometimes in full recognition of the long-term costs involved. It must be realized that the people of Papua New Guinea live much closer to their natural environment than those in the industrialized countries such as Australia. Consequently, they are much more directly affected by any change in their natural environment.

Fundamentally, a country's capability for managing its resources and environmental affairs must be its own responsibility. The challenge for Papua New Guinea today is to properly manage these resources so that maximum benefits are derived from their exploitation (Polume 1988:204).

The only sure and effective way to achieve sound resource management and environmental protection in a developing country like Papua New Guinea is for those departments with responsibilities for resource development to have the information, skills, and financial support they need and the will to use them. They must coordinate their activities and cooperate with each other to obtain specific information required to develop a resource. They should not develop a resource independently. Otherwise, the purpose for one department to develop/exploit a resource will not be consistent with the other departments' priorities.

The general view of ordinary Papua New Guineans regarding resource development at present can be summarized in the following manner as reported in the Papua New Guinea Post Courier:

Parts of Papua New Guinea will benefit immensely from the petroleum and mineral projects now coming on stream. Other areas will sadly miss out on such dramatic experiences and benefits. They will have to be content with their traditional low priced cash crops of coffee, cocoa, copra, palm oil and betelnut ... Massive monetary benefits will go to landowners of the sites where there will be oil wells extracting crude, where the oil pipeline passes through, and where mines and new townships are sited. Cash will flow to them through royalties and spin-off benefits.

Those living on the outskirts of these huge projects will also benefit. These people will actually talk big money-amounts they have not handled before. They will walk around with bulky wallets and large cheque books while their countrymen in plantations will live much the same as they do today (Post Courier, 24 October 1990:23).

## **Information Needs and Requirements**

People need information to understand the present or past situation of an issue or problem area. They need information to define a problem, measure the magnitude

of a problem and to analyse the problem to find solutions to it. Information is a tool for decision making that might affect a community.

It is therefore necessary that careful planning for the use and exploitation of the natural resources must take into account the likely effects on the people of the Torres Strait Region from resource development in the Fly and the Purari River catchment areas of Papua New Guinea, as well as fisheries and oil exploration in the Gulf of Papua. This will require information on the type of resource development in these areas – information needed about the existing environment, the cultural, the local and provincial politics and socio-economic development of an area that will be exploited, as well as those islands and/or areas in the Torres Strait Region that will be affected from those development projects.

The information data-base needed must be adequate and comprehensive enough to suit the needs of researchers, decision makers and various people involved in the sustainable development of resources in the Torres Strait Region.

Additional research and development work is needed to improve the understanding of the various physical, biological, social, economic and political linkages involved in human exploitation of the natural environment in and around the Torres Strait Region. Past as well as present information on resource development activities such as mining, forestry and fisheries development should be updated with the aim of educating the people of Australia and Papua New Guinea about the likely effects this will bring to the people in the region.

Many Australians (away from the State of Queensland) do not know the status of the Islanders – who they are, their cultural and traditional beliefs, their relationship with the coastal people of Western Province of Papua New Guinea, and their ownership of the land or marine resources in the region.

The same can be mentioned of most Papua New Guineans. Do we as Melanesians know about the sharing of the marine resources between the Islanders and the Kiwais and other coastal villagers of Western Province of Papua New Guinea? How is this sharing of marine resources being determined? Who was or is responsible for this decision to share these marine resources?

Basically, what is needed is information provided for the people's basic needs for sustainable development in the region. Information collected for the region on resources development should be disseminated to people interested in understanding the problems and issues in this region.

Although, the information collected and disseminated to the public can effectively shape self-images, perceptions of reality, and indeed the interests of the people, one should also realize that information manipulation and distortion can have severe effects on a society or country's ability to define, understand, and deal with environmental problems. The denial and distortion of information is just acute in many developing countries, especially those anxious for foreign investment (Watt *et al.* 1977).

### **Categories of Information Needed for Sustainable Development**

The categories of information needed to provide a database for sustainable development in the Torres Strait Region could be divided as follows:

- (i) Land resources and utilization – the availability of land, the patterns of ownership/land tenure system, cultivation of food crops and dwellings. Classification of soils, land use, farming practices and techniques – traditional and modern.
- (ii) Marine resources – species of fish, traditional and modern fishing practices, operations of fishing companies in the area, their annual catch and the destination of exports.
- (iii) Other natural resources – potential areas for minerals and forestry development, the current developments and its likely effect on the local population.
- (iv) Demographic – birth and death rates, population growth rate, age and sex distribution, dependency ratios, rates of migration within and outside the Torres Strait Region.
- (v) Socio-economic – income distribution, employment levels, social activities, small business ventures involving landowners.
- (vi) Cultural – innate skills and technology, religious and social taboos, beliefs, traditional leadership qualities to make and impose decisions in the community.
- (vii) Educational – formal and non-formal, availability of schools, teacher/student ratios, adult education.
- (viii) Health – hospital beds, family planning facilities, mobility patterns, child nutrition, and types of disease.
- (ix) Transportation – types of transportation systems available, their linkages to major routes of services.
- (x) Marketing and supply – disposal of produce including marine resources, distribution network and its efficiency.
- (xi) Present environmental conditions – animal life, protection of fauna and flora, legislation concerning the protection of types of fauna and flora in the region.

Other relevant informations needed from other user groups can also be identified and included in this proposed database for the Torres Strait Region.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Past information on resource development activities, mining, forestry and fisheries in the south-west part of Papua New Guinea, should be updated with the aim of educating the people of Australia and Papua New Guinea about the likely effects these developments will have on the people in the region. There is an urgent need to carry out combine research in compiling information needs for policy makers involved in the sustainability of resources for the Torres Strait Region from both Papua New Guinea and Australia.

Research to collect information is almost limitless: on resources and their potentials; on historical, political and social change; demographic structure; education, and other areas that do not yet have the necessary data along the Papua New Guinea border. It is more important that an immediate and thorough inventory of present resources and their potential be undertaken, and that research and information networks be well-established. In Papua New Guinea, the National Research Institute and the University of Papua New Guinea in collaboration with relevant government departments should carryout a baseline survey to establish relevant information for the policy makers in Papua New Guinea which should also be easily accessible to other user groups who might be interested in the Torres Strait Border Issue.

Information disseminated to people on most subjects of interests would be beneficial, since correct and easily accessible information can decrease to a certain limit, the tensions in the region on the effects of resource development activities inside the Papua New Guinea border.



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