

The Social Dimensions of Economic Activity in Melanesia



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The way people produce, transact, arrange and remunerate labour, distribute, accumulate, possess, and consume is shaped by their social context. Whether in Melbourne or Moresby, the economic is not a separate domain upon which social considerations impinge, but is always embedded within social structures and relationships particular to a place. This is evident in how Melanesians have engaged with cash-earning activities.

Local engagements are diverse, but all have reconfigured and reinterpreted introduced ideas, practices and institutions through local practices and understandings (McCormack and Barclay 2013). This means, for instance, that although people are buying and selling, they cannot be assumed to subscribe to the same principles, or possess the same motivations, considerations and challenges as small business in Australia (Curry 2005). This *In Brief* points to the diverse influences on people's efforts to earn money in Melanesia, and emphasises that understanding these influences is an important starting point for development interventions aimed at improving livelihoods and cultivating entrepreneurship.

It is important to recognise that people's cash-earning activities are shaped by their place within larger livelihoods. A single business venture rarely engages an individual or household full time. Instead, people commonly engage in multiple activities simultaneously or sequentially. Allen et al. (2009:411–19), for instance, describe rural villagers periodically moving in and out of cash cropping in response to the economic returns on their labour determined by fickle commodity prices. Household cash requirements, which vary over time in light of the need to pay school fees or contribute to customary exchanges, also influence fluctuating participation in domestic and export markets.

This temporally flexible engagement in cash earning has, for example, frustrated certain fisheries development programs in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, which were planned with the assumption that their recipients would fish full time, and their financial returns would therefore be sufficient to repay the donor-granted business loans (Barclay and Kinch 2013). In practice, fishing

competed for people's time with other activities, including food gardening and social obligations. While livelihood diversification may present challenges to development programs, it is an important contributor to reducing household vulnerability.

Melanesian approaches to cash-earning activities also need to be understood in their cultural context and in light of people's social relationships. For example, in Melanesia the profit motive is often subordinated to, or in tension with, other concerns (Curry 2005). Achieving personal renown is a prominent social driver throughout Melanesia, and in this context trade store and vehicle enterprises have, for example, often provided a means for aspiring men to attain prestige. For others, business may be more about not being seen as 'rubbish', a person of no account (Sharp 2013). Monetary returns are not irrelevant but, in a region well known for the centrality of gift exchange to sociality and identity, profits may not be seen as an end in themselves but as a means to participate in social exchanges.

The entangling of cash-earning activities in social networks, however, presents challenges for small enterprises. Throughout Melanesia people are defined by their relationships with others, and in this context people are expected to redistribute wealth to those who have contributed directly or indirectly to their success. The more successful a person is perceived to be, the greater the expectations of their kin. However, pressure to redistribute wealth may also challenge the financial viability of businesses by depleting the operating capital necessary to, say, repair vehicles and purchase stock — although Curry (2005) observes that particular types of enterprises can better manage such requests.

In their cash-earning endeavours Melanesians must also consider their relations with others, including how they should conduct monetary transactions. With strong expectations upon kin to share, some groups express concern that trading among kin risks undermining critical family relationships. For others, buying from kin demonstrates solidarity and prevents wealth being leaked from the group (Sharp 2012:207–34). Paying kin for their labour also raises important moral considerations for people. Money given to kin

to acknowledge their labour, for instance, is often not a market-based valuation of that labour, but reflects the social relationships between the giver and receiver of labour (Curry and Koczberski 2012). To avoid the dilemma associated with paying close kin, and equally the social indebtedness created by recruiting close kin, Melanesians in their enterprises often recruit workers from their more distant social relations. This highlights the need for livelihood-focused development projects to carefully consider the place of kin within different enterprises.

Social relations are central to shaping differential access to land and other resources which affect people's income-earning opportunities. This is most evident in the differences between customary landowners and migrants (Curry et al. 2012). Migrants who have negotiated access to customary land may, for instance, be permitted to plant annual crops, but not perennial export cash crops which more permanently occupy land.

Similarly, the differential status of groups within a community commonly underpin claims to economic turf, such as 'my land, my work' assertions by landowners in the context of extractive resource projects (Bainton and Macintyre 2013). Identity and territoriality also lead particular local groups to claim marketplace space as theirs and to prevent outsiders from occupying selling spots. Even where people are afforded space in the marketplace, marketplace sellers emphasise that possessing good social networks remains critical to securing customers (Sharp 2012).

The gendered division of labour in Melanesia is also an important factor influencing the cash-earning opportunities available to people. Men may, for instance, be reluctant to sell vegetables in open-air marketplaces due to a perception that this is women's work. This means it is important for development projects to consider the extent to which different groups and individuals may be excluded from, or reluctant to participate in, particular economic activities.

The motivations, considerations and challenges that shape people's efforts to earn money in Melanesia are diverse — there is no single Melanesian way of doing business. Coming to grips with this diversity, and the associations individuals have with their kin and their home territories, is pivotal to the successful implementation of development programs that seek

to improve livelihoods, increase productivity and cultivate entrepreneurial skills. Importantly, the incongruities between Melanesian approaches and exogenous expectations should be perceived in light of these different motivations and considerations, and not as deficiencies.

Author Notes

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