

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a coastal village in the Solomon Islands. Several traditional houses with steeply pitched, thatched roofs are built on stilts over the water. The water is calm and reflects the sky and the structures. The sky is a clear, pale blue. In the foreground, the water is slightly rippled, and a white buoy is visible in the distance.

## CO-PRODUCING LOCAL PUBLIC GOODS IN RURAL SOLOMON ISLANDS: EVIDENCE FROM MALAITA

CLAIRE MCLOUGHLIN, GORDON NANAU,  
TONY HIRIASIA, LINDA ETERI, ERICK IROSAKI,  
PETER MAENI, NESLYN FOARARA MALOSI,  
AND CHRIS ROCHE

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[dlprog.org](http://dlprog.org)

[dlp@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:dlp@contacts.bham.ac.uk)

@DLProg

Developmental Leadership Program  
International Development Department  
College of Social Sciences  
University of Birmingham  
Birmingham, B15 2TT  
United Kingdom

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Jeffrey Aluta / shutterstock



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# INTRODUCTION

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In rural Solomon Islands, where the state is weakly embedded into people's everyday survival strategies, the ability of local communities to generate sustainable livelihoods and wellbeing may hinge on local leadership and problem-solving. A variety of actors - from churches, tribes, clans, political institutions, or government agencies - claim power, legitimacy and authority in these spaces. But across the country's diverse cultures, languages and terrains, the relational dynamics between these actors varies, with significant implications for the achievement of shared goals.

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## KEY FINDINGS

- Successful cases of co-production of local public goods are anchored in shared ideas of progress and realised through collective effort, negotiation, and the development of translocal, relational ties.
- Leaders drive this change. When trusted, they can rally communities around a unifying vision, ameliorate the significant costs of individual contributions, and provide assurances against free-riding.
- While material resources are necessary, they are unlikely to ever be sufficient to ensure the successful production of local public goods.
- Resources, time, commitment, and co-operation are only unlocked through vital relational work that follows a locally legitimate institutional script.
- A fixed model of leadership, based on roles and status in institutions, does not neatly map onto the people who can really make change happen on the ground.
- Land tenure is not an insurmountable obstacle to development in the provinces. In the successful cases we studied, the fundamental difference was that disputes were resolved intra and inter-tribally before discussions on funding.

This study explores the conditions under which local leaders and communities collaborate to enable positive progress in service delivery. Specifically, it examines the relational dynamics behind the production of local ‘public’ goods. Public goods are significant because, in theory at least, they deliver a *collective* gain, with potential to improve the lives of everyone living in their vicinity. Examples include community projects that (re-) generate physical or social infrastructure, such as schools, clinics, meeting spaces, agricultural land, roads, or walkways. Particularly in rural settings, such goods are often co-produced via a collective endeavour that may, for example, draw on community mobilisation and fundraising, local labour or resources, and financial contributions from patrons both within and outside of the constituency. In this way, co-production operates within a complex institutional melange, and the relationships formed across the three salient domains of culture (or *kastom*), church and government are pivotal to its success.

Co-production is notoriously challenging in any social setting, however. When individuals seek to work together to generate public goods, they confront the so-called collective action problem – that is, the challenge of harnessing or sometimes foregoing individual interests in the pursuit of collective ones (Olson, 1965). In practice, this means that local communities must first agree what their common interest or purpose is, provide assurances that individuals will not ‘free-ride’ on shared goods without contributing to their production, and establish mechanisms to co-ordinate community action to produce them (Mayer, 2014).

In the socio-economic and political environment of rural Solomon Islands, these obstacles can be particularly acute. Wherever there is scarcity and precarity, meaning individuals must strive daily to meet their basic needs, the opportunity costs of devoting time to contribute to shared projects are high. The motivation to do so must be formed in a political marketplace otherwise characterised by the personalised exchange of individual goods in return for political support. Even where shared goals are identified, achieving them is made complex by the sheer remoteness of many villages, and the physical and infrastructural barriers to accessing material resources. Land ownership, in addition, has been viewed as a longstanding constraint to the development of shared infrastructure, particularly where it cuts across tribal areas.

Nevertheless, rural communities can and do overcome these obstacles to collective action. This report explores how this was achieved, in practice, in four positive cases on the Province of Malaita, in the constituencies of Lau/ Mbaelelea and East Malaita. The cases were:

- a community-constructed meeting place for social and religious gatherings (Rame’ai Community Kings Table House)
- two feeder roads connecting remote communities to markets (Mbaelelea Feeder Road and Faumamanu Feeder Road)
- a project to rejuvenate local cattle production (Atori Cattle rehabilitation project).

*co-production operates within a complex institutional melange, and the relationships formed across the three salient domains of culture (or kastom), church and government are pivotal to its success*

Together with local communities, leaders, and wider stakeholders, we explored the stories of how these local public goods were produced. We asked who led these efforts, how they gained the legitimacy to act, how disputes were reconciled, and obstacles overcome. Collectively, the cases shine a light on the intrinsic motivations behind collective action, the vital roles played by local leaders in ushering change, and the dynamics of co-operation, contestation and communication between church, state and customary institutions in this process. By learning about what has worked, where and why, we aim to inform local debates about how communities can successfully address local needs and improve people's everyday lived realities.

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# METHODOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

In a context where research and analysis has tended to focus on the structural barriers to development, this research purposefully set out to identify and learn from positive ‘outliers’ – cases where progress was unexpected, and in many ways against the odds. In practice, such cases were identified through a three-step verification process. First, the research team analysed key statistical datasets to identify provinces that were outperforming others in key development indicators. Second, within those provinces, we used constituency-level data to identify pockets of progress. Finally, the researchers visited those constituencies and talked to local leaders to gather stories about village-level cases that were recurrently noted as significant examples of progress.

The field research was completed in August 2021. We initially conducted 14 Key Informant interviews with leaders at the central and provincial levels to explore perspectives on what causes variation in outcomes across provinces, the barriers and enablers of development, and the roles of different leaders in the process of delivering public goods.

1. In Honiara and Auki, we interviewed key provincial and government representatives, including the Provincial Secretary, President of Malaita Women’s Council, and representatives from Provincial Government including the Rural Development Program and Planning Division).

2. On Malaita, in the identified constituencies of Lau/Mbaelelea and East Malaita, we interviewed key local leaders engaged in each project, including church pastors, school leaders, community elders, tribal chiefs, Provincial government administrators, and Ministry field officers.

To capture the lived experience of these projects through the communities’ eyes, we used tok stori – ‘a Melanesian term for what Solomon Islanders do everyday – telling stories, creating a joint narrative, and making sense of life’ (Sanga and Reynolds, 2020). We conducted 18 tok stori discussions in villages, with the average involving between six to eight people. We ensured gender inclusion: half of the research team were women, and overall, women made up between 40–60 percent of participants. All participants were adults, although we did not ask them specially for their age. Tok stori was conducted in line with ethical guidelines produced out of reflections by experienced researchers from Solomon Islands. All interviews/tok stori were recorded, and later transcribed and coded in NVivo, to help ensure a balanced analysis and, more importantly, that the voices of participants are accurately represented in the findings.

It is important to note that organising logistics to access these communities was time consuming. These communities are remote and they struggle with connectivity as some of these places do not have phone coverage, let alone internet (People's Survey Report, 2013). We visited at a time when the roads were in very poor condition, and the costs of transport increased exponentially. We were also constrained by Covid-19 and the various regulations imposed by the government during the time.

Aside from these logistical barriers was the challenge of engaging rural communities sensitively and meaningfully. Across remote areas, where there is sometimes a deep and longstanding distrust of authority, people can be quite reserved about giving information and sharing their knowledge. When undertaking the field research, it was important to show and maintain respect for and in the communities we visited. Apart from official permits granted by the national and provincial governments, communicating with communities concerned and getting their permission and support was paramount. Time is precious in these environments. In village level discussions, and when interviewing individuals, we ensured that the timing was acceptable and the atmosphere accommodating, for example, by providing tea and biscuits at the end of a session.

As part of our ethical research approach, it was also vital that the local researchers (two males and two females) came from Lau/ Mbaelelea and East Malaita constituencies and were native speakers of the local languages. Having people within the research team from those communities helped to bridge the gap between the local people and the research team and enable them to be accepted into communities to facilitate a trust-based dialogue. Our entry into local communities, who we talked to, and our ability to convey our purpose to the communities was spearheaded by these local researchers. When making arrangements to go to the villages, for example, local people recognised and could identify the researchers as "Tony's group".

In these ways, our conversations with the local community were embedded within the 'relational space determined by the cultural understandings of reciprocity and governed by the rules of engagement that this negotiation demands' (Koya-Vakauta, 2017). We approached the research on the understanding that, 'leaders of that community hold the prerogative to establish the extent to which they (the community) will engage based on perceived benefits for the greater good of that community, rather than benefits to the researcher'. As Sanga and Reynolds (2020) stress, it was important to recognise that kin-lines can dictate access to 'secret knowledge' in Melanesian societies. Subsequently, our tok stori allowed us to generate insights and findings that may not otherwise be uncovered in a conventional survey and interview setting.



## THE CONTEXT

Malaita is one of the larger provinces in the Solomon Islands with a population comprising 24% of the country's population in the 2019 national population and housing census. 3.9% of this population is urbanised while 96.1% are rural dwellers. It is also a province with communities in remote islands such as the Malaita Outer Islands, the artificial islands, coastal areas and highland. The two constituencies where fieldwork was undertaken are highly populated and have coastal and inland communities. Malaita was home to many indentured labourers (Moore, 2017) taken to Fiji and Queensland during the colonial era and also home to the anti-colonial movement called the Ma'asina Rule Movement that gave way to the creation of the local councils and ultimately provinces in the country.

Malaita communities are organised around tribe, clan or kin group and extended family 'where social cooperation and collective participation starts for most individuals' (Hiriasia, 2016). Relationships, loyalty to the kin group and respect for each other is central to day-to-day interactions. It is this loyalty that explained why researchers attempting to get realistic data on Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF) projects often found it difficult to access reliable information from recipients of the fund. For instance, in the Australian National University (ANU) election observation report (2019), it was stated that when asked whether they or their family received Constituency Development Fund CDF funding, respondents in Lau/Mbaelelea are much less likely to report that they have than other provinces. Such information can only come when the relationship between the keepers of that knowledge and researchers is developed to a level where they trust each other and can share freely as friends or wantoks (Sanga and Reynolds, 2020).

Like other communities in the country, Malaita and in particular the two constituencies and the respective communities visited, there are different organisations present. Although the state may not always be seen as present, the support provided by MPs in cash or kind towards the construction of roads, the community hall and the rehabilitation of the cattle project are acknowledged as the presence of the state in the communities. There are other sources of development funding by donors, a history of failed government projects, encounters with other sources of income such as logging and timber milling activities that affect livelihoods and influence citizen-state relations in rural Malaita communities. Moreover, various Christian denominations and non-government organisations have programmes and projects in some communities that adds to the political economy dynamics. Even with these modern institutions, including NGOs and the influence of churches, relationships, respect and loyalty as prescribed by *kastom* (culture) determines the success or failure of collective action in Malaita specifically and Solomon Islands more generally.

Several aspects of the political economy of Solomon Islands are significant for understanding the prospects for collective action. Low population density across divided and difficult terrain can render the unit costs of community infrastructure prohibitive (World Bank, 2017). Previous studies have found that externally funded infrastructure projects can falter when they air pre-existing divides around resource allocation or customary land disputes, or succumb to local capture or accusations of favouritism (Allen et al, 2013). In some instances, lack of transparency and consultation or the bypassing of community governance and traditional institutions has led to outright hostility (Allen et al, 2013). Certain projects proposed by the national government (e.g. Suava Bay and Auluta Oil Palm Project) have suffered continued land disputes.

Also salient is the political climate in which MPs are granted significant discretionary funds (Constituency Development Funds (CDFs)), which some argue has personalised the state and skewed development towards individualised transactions rather than collective goods. As Baker and Barbara (2020) describe it: ‘where local-level development responsibility primarily lies with individual MPs through CDF programs,

the idea of development is narrowed’. The extent to which communities receive CDF funding for community projects (e.g. water tanks, iron roofing, schools, health clinics, agricultural inputs) varies significantly across constituencies, and the prevailing perception among citizens is that this is tied to the way people vote (Wiltshire et al, 2019). Each of these conditions makes the environment to produce community goods particularly challenging.

## **CO-PRODUCTION OF LOCAL PUBLIC GOODS – WHAT, WHERE AND HOW?**

Before examining the dynamics of co-production in this specific political economy, it is important to briefly sketch out the nature of the specific goods provided in each case. Below (and summarised in Table 1), we describe what was produced, who was involved, where the resources came from, and how the community perceived the benefits – in other words, why these cases are perceived as relatively successful.

### **Local public good #1: Rame’ai Community Kings Table House**

Rameai community is located in Ward 10, Lau Mbaelelea Constituency in the north eastern part of the island of Malaita. People in the area speak the Mbaelelea dialect, one of the dialects spoken in north Malaita. Rameai Community consists of three major tribal groups, Loru, Kwalumasu and Malasi. The community belongs to the South Seas Evangelical Church, although they are strong adherents to the teachings of Rev. Michael Maeliau. The current population is approximately 500.

The community sought to physically manifest these teachings by building a ‘Kings Table’ – what local people describe as a culturally and relationally important space for holding community gatherings, major events, and feasts. The decision to build a new facility was reached via Throne Room Council (TRC) – a prayer and singing session. Co-production

in this case was facilitated by money from local ‘offerings’ and financial and material ‘tributes’ from Honiara-based families. Key people involved were community leaders (church, teachers), and community members (carpenters and plumbers). The community also successfully secured CDF funding from their MP for the supply of roofing iron.

### **Local Public good #2: Mbaelelea Feeder Road**

The Mbaelelea inland road runs for 15 kilometres through three tribal lands (Beuthabina, Malasi and Aeseni) on the northeastern coast of Malaita. The people of the region had long wanted a road to connect the inland communities to the coastal villages and the main road that connects the northern part of the island to urban centres like Maluu and Auki. The road was therefore a local initiative, taken on by the land-owning groups and their leaders. It was funded largely via the local MP, through the Constituency Development Fund (CDF). The funds for the machines was provided by the National Transport Fund (NTF) under the Ministry of Infrastructure Development (MID). The community report that the standard of living has improved through regular visits to Honiara and Auki, the road has been vital for access to services (schools, clinics, hospitals) and access to markets increased the production of kava, and locals are able to operate retail shops that supply inland communities.

### Local Public good #3: Atori Cattle Rehabilitation

Atori is in the Eastern region of Malaita Province. The community living here had a cattle farm that went out of operation in the 1980s. The rehabilitation program is part of Malaita Provincial Government (MPG) MPG's commitment to revive and rehabilitate its cattle farms in the province. The project was identified and recommended by the Malaita Provincial Assembly Ward Member. In this sense, and distinct from the other cases, this was a government-led initiative. The project provided labour for activities such as brushing, cutting of tress, and planting of grasses and fencing. People received payments for participation. Although various allegations of misuse of funds surface in the social media pages, the community people see the project as successful. Tribal and church leaders

played a role, alongside an Agricultural Field Officer and Senior Administration Officer (SAO) from MPG.

### Local Public good #4: East Malaita Feeder Road

This three kilometer feeder road was constructed to connect Faumamanu to Taba'akwaru. The funding came from the CDF, via the local MP. The impetus was connectivity of this inland community to vital services and markets. The Provincial Ward member, who was also the tribal leader, also played a role in facilitating the project. Similar to the road in Lau/Mbaelelea, the community value the road because it covers long distances that they used to walk in the past. It gave previously hard to reach communities transport access to the goods and services available at Auki, such as banking and Kilufi Hospital.

**TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF CASES OF PUBLIC GOODS**

Community Good	Funding/ resources	Actors & roles	Perceived benefits
Rame'ai Community Kings Table House	Local 'offerings' and financial and material 'tributes'	Church (mobilisation) Support from MP, Relatives, and church members	Spiritual worship Health and hygiene Move away from heathenism (pagan practices)
Mbaelelea Feeder Road	MP/CDF	Youth (labour) Inter-tribal and intra-tribal (land negotiation, dispute resolution) Leaders at different levels (church, landowning groups, communities)	Connect inland community to vital services and markets; Access to urban areas Physical improvement of life & livelihoods.
Atori Cattle Rehabilitation	Provincial Government under the auspices of Ministry of Agriculture & Livestock.	Church (mobilisation) Provincial government officers (technical assistance, outreach) Community/family groups	Revive cattle livelihoods Engage young people in production Beef for future church feast days, etc.
East Malaita Feeder Road	MP/CDF	Church (mobilisation) Tribal (land negotiation, dispute resolution)	Connect inland community to vital services and markets Access to urban areas Physical improvement of life & livelihoods.

# OVERCOMING COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEMS: THE DYNAMICS OF CO-PRODUCTION

It would be misleading to suggest that the journey towards progress in our relatively successful cases was entirely straightforward, or conflict-free. In these constituencies, resources are limited, people's daily survival strategies are often labour-intensive, and it was acutely challenging to engage individual time or resources in collective activities. In addition, hidden costs of collaboration were borne by these communities – for example, providing volunteer labourers with meals during their working days. Co-operation in pursuit of shared interests was sometimes difficult to co-ordinate due to contestation between individuals and tribal groups.

Like many projects in Solomon Islands, these projects stumbled over the negotiation of land rights and land usage, although in these cases the barriers proved surmountable. In these ways, the collective action challenges were real. What is therefore instructive about these cases is how they were overcome. Below, we discuss the dynamics of progress through three lenses: the material, relational and ideational.

## MATERIAL

People's willingness to participate in co-production is thought to depend partly on how relevant and salient the benefits are to them personally (Pestoff, 2012, p. 24). In all of the cases we examined, the goods had potential to make an immediate impact on the lives of the people engaged in producing them, in the short term. Indeed, long-felt and often neglected hardships in living conditions were reported as a root motivation behind community mobilisation. Many described how they had previously struggled to access vital health clinics, schools, or bring their goods to markets. Frustrations were palpable where expectations of change had been unfulfilled for generations – discussed by forefathers, promised by successive MPs, but never delivered. Constituents in Mbaelelea described how, for example, before the road was constructed, farmers would carry their products to market on their shoulders and backs, while sick villagers would die on the way to Malu'u, Auki or Honiara because they could not reach help in time.<sup>1</sup>

Instrumental motivations were most evident in the case of the Atori Cattle Rehabilitation, where community members described wage labour opportunities as the key incentive for co-production. As one *tok stori* (TS) participant described it, 'in this part of the island, it is not really easy to find economic opportunities, so we want to be able to find

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money through cattle farming. This will help us meet commitments like school fees or even community contributions'.<sup>2</sup> 'It is the economic gain than anything else that motivated individuals to be part of the project.' The key reason, and the distinction between this and the other projects, was that Atori was developed on alienated land. There was no sense of ownership of the project, beyond having a contract, clearing your plot, and getting the money.

Atori aside, it would be misleading to characterise participation in co-production solely as the pursuit of short-term, material rewards. Equally striking was that many villagers articulated a more holistic, inter-generational notion of wellbeing. Communities were evidently exercised by a sense of obligation to future generations, in order to remove the hardships they themselves had endured: As one villager in Mbaelelea described, 'the challenges and difficulties we encountered had been our motivation. We do not want our kids to go through the same struggles. Therefore, we participated to give them a better future.'<sup>3</sup> Even in the Atori community, where the benefits of the cattle production were largely in the form of individual wage employment, there was nevertheless a clearly articulated, long-term, collective benefit: 'Besides, people also see the long term economic benefit of having cattle farms in the area. Beside the opportunity to own and raise cattle, farms will also provide beef for future events that surrounding communities will host.'<sup>4</sup>

The ability of communities to source sufficient funding and resources, whether in the form of labour or materials, was of course vital to the production of the local public goods. Pertinent when thinking about collective action, though, is less the scale or origins of these resources than the collaborative processes via which they are secured. Crucially, in the three community-initiated projects (not Atori), the prospect of securing funding was not guaranteed at the outset. Communities first established a common vision, as noted below, and then inched forward on limited resources secured, over time, through the process of presenting and negotiating this vision to potential enablers/opposers. Road construction began on East Malaita with only a small up-front grant of \$50,000 SBD, for example (approx. \$6,000).<sup>5</sup> Hence, the availability of resources hinged on the problem-solving and negotiating skills of local leaders: indeed, relationships were strategically vital for tying communities into joint ventures, beyond mere financial contributions.



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## RELATIONAL

Securing material assets, whether funding, resources and/or labour, ultimately depended on the capacity of local leaders to advocate and mobilise such contributions. To leverage this, leaders drew on their social capital, inside and outside of their communities. Internally, tribal and church leaders played the crucial role in mobilising voluntary labour. Externally, they raised resources by calling on connections with distant relatives or ex-community members employed in public or private sector wage labour in urban and provincial centres.

These trans-local ties, built on norms of reciprocity and exchange, attracted financial tributes and free labour beyond the village. In the Rame'ai case, in particular, the strength of the connections forged among the wider spiritual 'movement' offered a network via which to secure youth voluntary work. The relative remoteness and poor transport links to rural communities amplifies the value of connections beyond the village for the sourcing of material resources, while at the same time making these connections more complex to operationalise in practice. Trees and timber need to not only be sourced, but transported, so even once resources are secured, their passage through tribal areas needed to be agreed and facilitated. Addressing these challenges was not a material pursuit, but a fundamentally relational one.

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*As important as having the distinct legitimacy to fulfil a certain role was co-operation across these (in practice, fluid) domains, both locally and translocally.*

In a hybrid institutional setting, co-production demands a clear division of labour. In each of the cases, leaders were actively engaged in the allocation and co-ordination of tasks within the community. The roles ascribed to church, kastom and state institutions appeared to capitalise on the culturally embedded expectations of each domain. Ethnographic research elsewhere on Malaita paints a picture of communities expecting certain leaders to play distinct roles in village life and exchange relations: Clan chiefs should ambitiously advocate for and negotiate development projects, Church leaders should be scholarly in their pursuit of Christian principles and prescriptions, political leaders ('gavman') are expected to spread their wealth to clans and villages (Hobbis, 2016).

Our findings reinforce the idea that there are distinct roles for different types of leaders, with particular legitimacy in taking on certain responsibilities. Due to their inter-generationally accumulated knowledge of the land, Chiefs, tribal or clan leaders traditionally resolved land disputes that occurred in the production of the collective goods. Chiefs also provided security around materials and properties - thereby playing a crucial part in providing assurances against free-riding. School leaders were also significant in ways that are reflective of their status and embeddedness within the community and their particular skillset (e.g. recording minutes of meetings, due to their literacy). As educators, they were particularly well positioned to mobilise young people and role model change among them.

As important as having the distinct legitimacy to fulfil a certain role was co-operation across these (in practice, fluid) domains, both locally and translocally. Crucially, effective leaders cannot be entirely inward-looking; extending their relational ties beyond the village or constituency is crucial for fulfilling expectations and therefore accumulating legitimately within it. A stark demonstration of this occurred in the Rame'ai case, when church and tribal leaders travelled together on frequent missions to nearby constituencies and urban centres, including Honiara, to source and negotiate fees for resources with other local chiefs and leaders. This substantial outreach role requires considerable time commitment, as one Church pastor in Rame'ai described it: 'In the initial stage, I led community members to Suava resource owners. We negotiated for trees and milled timbers. We camped for 2 weeks in the forest.'<sup>6</sup>

In the Lau Mbaelelea case, inter-tribal, trans-local negotiations were pivotal, since the road passes through three different tribal areas. Forefathers had made a promise not to allow access up into some of these lands. Yet tribal chiefs successfully negotiated the passage by following customs, and arranging a reconciliation at the church. It helped that the tribal chief was also a pastor – who used this joint position to bring about this resolution. Both of these illustrations reinforce that effective local leadership takes the needs of the village beyond the village – bridging customary and institutional domains.

Another recurring theme that speaks to the theme of bridging domains was the critical role typically played by local chiefs as the interlocutor between communities and their elected representative (MP). Though Members of Parliament are rarely physically present in rural Solomon Islands, distancing it from people's everyday systems of meaning-making, success in the roads projects in particular required local leaders to highlight local needs and appeal for financial support from their MP. In practice, in another costly venture, this usually entailed church and tribal leaders visiting Honiara. In the case of the Lau Mbaelelea feeder road, for example, a delegation of church and tribal highland leaders was successful in convincing their MP to repurpose an existing grant towards the achievement of local priorities: 'We appealed to Hon Auga to use the shipping grant to purchase road machines and construct a road into the highlands. Thus, MP responded positively and used \$5million dollars for payments of road machines'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in Rame'ai, 'The kings table building need roofing iron. As a polling station chairperson and a Pastor, I spearheaded a community delegation to Honiara and appealed to the Member of Parliament for assistance and support. The MP decided to provide the roofing iron and community members were happy and we supported him in the last election.'<sup>8</sup>

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7 KI #8

8 KI #7

As the above illustrations suggest, the involvement of the MP was typically contained and carefully managed by community leaders. It was not the case that the impetus came initially from the MP, but that the MP responded to local stimulus. In this regard, the nature of MP engagement could be interpreted as transactional, rather than transformational: echoing the wider political economy in which goods and assistance are exchanged for political support. Community leaders in our cases were clearly savvy to the political drivers of MP investment in their areas: The highland people in Mbaelelea described how they had unsuccessfully lobbied a succession of MPs who came from the coastal parts of their constituency, for decades. They reflected that, their efforts were only successful when the MP's place of birth changed: 'we were only able to build now because the current MP is from the highlands'.<sup>9</sup> In this case, the community was acutely aware they had to elect an MP from the highlands, otherwise their need for a road would be forgotten for another 50 years. This suggests leaders understand the political economy of resource allocation, even if they cannot always work it in their favour.

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*Relational work relies on effective interpersonal communication, and in our cases, this was performed via customary processes of dialogue and negotiation and grounded in spirituality and ritual.*

## IDEATIONAL

Relational work relies on effective interpersonal communication, and in our cases, this was performed via customary processes of dialogue and negotiation and grounded in spirituality and ritual. Disagreements over access to tribal land, a key barrier to collaboration elsewhere on the islands, were resolved through prayer. As one participant conveyed to us: 'The church leaders took the lead and helped tribal members to deal with aspects of the project that needed prayer and reconciliation. For instance, it was believed that ancestors of the tribal groups had offered sacrifices to their ancestors and forbid access into Aeseni land boundaries. Tribal leaders therefore had to come together and prayed as well as made collective decisions on what to do.'<sup>10</sup> As this story tells, tribal chiefs' negotiations with landowners sought consensus and conciliation by evoking shared ideas, listening and being present to facilitate dialogue. One tribal chief, also a school chairman, described it thus: 'If someone disputed the use of these resources, I would go to the tribe and talk with everyone. Usually, I wanted collective decisions rather than negotiating with a single tribal member.'<sup>11</sup> These insights tell us that the costs of collaboration are attenuated when the appropriate cultural script is followed. There is a cultural currency of negotiation (prayer, gifts, compensations) that can only be legitimately traded between leaders embedded within it.

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10 TS # 7

11 KI #12



Critical within this cultural repertoire is the ability of leaders to provide community members who have limited spare capacity to themselves invest time in collective activity. Elsewhere on the islands, this impetus is stimulated where people coalesce around a specific idea of place, or identity, or progress: what could be understood as a 'collective subject' (Stuti et al, 2021). Likewise, in our cases, there was a notable continuity in the articulation of narratives around the value and meaning of the projects to local communities. In each of the translocal infrastructure projects, people shared a common vision of progress and, within that, a narration of change that people could locate within their own lived experiences. Crucially, the material rewards offered by collaboration were rarely sold as a purely instrumental outcome: leaders amplified their richer meanings to the community. In both the Atori and Rame'ai cases, it was particularly striking that material rewards were interpreted through an identity lens, including the history of the geographical and spiritual space, and people's sense of belonging to it, which shaped the characteristics of the people living in it.

Even in the case of Atori, where people told us that opportunities for wage labour were their major motivator of engagement, project also represented a deeper rekindling a lost potential: a centre of cattle commerce enjoyed by previous generations. Again, past and present inter-generational links were vital to making meaning. In the present, too, the wider social rewards of providing youth employment – beyond wage labour, but in terms of reducing anti-social behaviour, were repeatedly mentioned.<sup>12</sup> This shows that, overall, meeting basic needs (food,

employment) is rarely seen a singularly instrumental: it is symbolic of social values such as harmony, and cultural faithfulness to people's origins and purpose in life.

In line with this, spiritual and material goals often become intertwined, as communities seek ways to mutually fulfil them. The RKTH provides a striking illustration of how the church, and spiritual beliefs they promote, can materialise the tangible enhancement of community development. Based on the teaching of Rev. Michael Maeliau, followers see themselves as royals (decedents of David) who must raise their standards of living to reflect their spiritual status. These teachings evoke a sense of obligation and duty to uphold this status, as one community member described: 'we are God's people, princes and princesses, and the place we eat and serve food must be clean and healthy'.<sup>13</sup> According to those who join what is commonly known as the 'Movement' (more tied to Rev. Maeliau), adherents must actively demonstrate their relationship with God by being part of tangible developments that give glory to God. Because of this, financial and labour contributions were motivated by religious conviction: 'people were part of the project not because of personal interest but their involvement was a form of worship'.<sup>14</sup> This case shows religious beliefs may be reified, but at the same time generate impetus to amend traditional practices – in this case, a desire to develop traditional practices of serving food on grass towards 'more hygienic methods and ways'.<sup>15</sup> This spiritual conviction was the fundamental driver of community motivations.

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12 TS #12

13 TS #3, Rame'ai village

14 FTS #3, Rame'ai village

15 TS #2, Rame'ai village

While shared motivations clearly matter, they are not a given. Leaders must cultivate participation in communities that are not linguistically or culturally homogenous, and where people within them are variably motivated to engage. Even in the case of Rame'ai, where faith played the pivotal mobilising role as described above, church leaders acknowledged the need to appeal to and convince community members with different degrees of religiosity to work towards the common goal. Even though the collective goods we studied had potential to benefit the lifestyles or livelihoods of the wider community, these benefits are of course never evenly shared in practice, and were not always perceived to be. In the roads cases, for example, those community members engaged in farming or retail stood to benefit more than those who were not. In the Atori cattle rehabilitation project, there was a pronounced perception of distributive injustice, related to the allocation of plot size and level of

compensation offered: 'workers complained about unequal sizes in the allocated plots. Some groups said that although some plots were bigger than others, the money allocated was the same for all.'<sup>16</sup> These perceptions of unfairness had to be resolved. Government leaders did so by disseminating information and timely payments, but they also showed awareness of the need to tackle underlying perceptions of unfairness, which may or may not in practice reflect actual distributions. As the Senior Administration Officer described it, 'I did mindset breakers which permit people to see their problems, challenge developments via trainings. Thus, people understood and agree to participate'.<sup>17</sup> In these ways, effective leaders showed awareness of local perceptions, and willingness to confront them where they were barriers to project success. In the next section, we examine how leaders accrue the legitimacy to perform such vital communicative roles, and how they lead co-production, in practice.



16 TS #13

17 KI #11

# LEADING CO-PRODUCTION

## WHO CAN LEGITIMATELY LEAD?

We use the term ‘leaders’ in this project not as a top-down, ascribed role, but as a heuristic for people who are viewed within their community, from below, as change agents. As such, they are always navigating within and shaped by community expectations of them. Our cases shine a light on the criteria that rural people themselves identify and evaluate leaders by, and therefore what leaders need to demonstrate in order to carry out their vital ideational and relational work. All communities expressed a strong desire for ‘honest leaders to manage the funds properly’<sup>18</sup>, noting that trust is ‘very important when dealing with money’<sup>19</sup>. A powerful theme that emerges out of focus groups was that trustworthiness is vital, but also, that it must be earned. It is not ascribed automatically, by virtue of mere status or hereditary connections. Rather, communities are acutely attuned to what leaders *deliver* in practice. Where leaders lack credibility in their commitments, this is a barrier to progress: ‘sometimes people oppose development projects because leaders are corrupt and selfish’.<sup>20</sup> In simple terms, ‘people will not help if you are not trustworthy and responsible’.<sup>21</sup>

On the flipside, trust unlocks co-operation between leaders and communities. Effective leaders are themselves sensitised to their communities perceptions. As one leader of a local women’s group noted, ‘leaders lose respect because they talk but do less for the community. Talking does not make you a leader but you have to show your capability to do what you say.’<sup>22</sup> Another commented ‘people were willing to work with us because they trusted us and we were honest in our dealings. It is always good to be honest with people and tell the truth, even when there are problems. Telling the truth is the key to winning trust and support from the people.’<sup>23</sup> The significance of trust is perhaps attributable to the propensity for development to be promised and not delivered in these areas. In contexts where there is a lived memory of failed development plans, leaders reported that generating trust was especially challenging, but consequently essential. The importance of transparent leadership - revealed through timely information dissemination - cannot be overstated for addressing this barrier to engagement.

*In contexts where there is a lived memory of failed development plans, leaders reported that generating trust was especially challenging, but consequently essential.*

18 TS # 10

19 TS # 11

20 TS # 11

21 KI # 8

22 KI # 8

23 KI # 9

While trust is a common denominator in how communities expressed good local leadership, it is also evident that expectations are different in relation to MPs. *Tok stori* participants portrayed a scenario in which MPs are cast as a distant benefactor rather than an active participant in local change. This aligns with findings elsewhere that suggest the authority of the MP in village decision-making processes is of a relatively low order, compared to chiefs, elders or village men (Hobbis, 2016). In the case of the East Malaita Road, most of the community discussions were held without the MP, who joined by invitation only. Accordingly, one village chief described how: 'we talked by ourselves and reached agreements before informing the MP'.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, this transactional engagement seems sufficient to generate political support. As one interviewee surmised: 'Here, people do not really care if you are carrying out your parliamentary responsibility well. They only care about what you do for them and if you are the kind of leader that help them with small needs. The MP has been good with these small assistances, and I believe people will vote for him again.'<sup>25</sup> This suggests that in the same way different leaders have different domains of legitimacy, they can be evaluated against different criteria within them. As Wood (2016, p. 39) has previously noted, voters' relationships with their MPs 'bear little semblance to relationships associated with traditional community governance'.

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*Connections between what people perceive to be in their immediate interests and what developments are being proposed have to be made in people's minds.*

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24 KI #13

25 KI # 6

26 TS # 11

## HOW DO LEADERS LEAD?

As noted above, the co-production of public goods was anchored in shared ideas of progress and continuity, held in collective imagination, and realised through collective, translocal ties. Understanding how this conception of the public good is formed – that is, 'how groups come to have common beliefs about consequences and common valuations of them' (Mayer, 2014. p. 27) – is therefore crucial for understanding collective action. This process is unlikely to happen automatically; connections between what people perceive to be in their immediate interests and what developments are being proposed have to be made in people's minds. Leadership is vital to this cognitive link. As others have observed, 'it is no accident, therefore, that much of what leaders of collective action do is raise the salience of issues and 'educate' followers about their interests' (ibid, p. 28).

In Melanesian societies, leaders make meaningful connections between lived realities through reflexive orality, in keeping with the ontological traditions of *tok stori* (Sanga and Reynolds, 2019). In our cases, oral traditions in which stories are constructed, and truths are shared, enabled leaders to narrate the connections between everyday hardships and how the community could address them. Participants described how: 'Leaders constantly reminded our people about the hardships, struggles and suffering we had when there was no road. Therefore, people supported the project knowing that a road would ease some of these problems.'<sup>26</sup> Another how: 'one of the things I noticed during those times was the need to explain ideas and concepts clearly to our people. Some of these ideas are foreign

and sometimes we had to properly explain clearly in order for them to understand. If they understand what we are trying to do, they are always willing to assist or even allow land and resources for development.<sup>27</sup> Significantly, leader narratives aligned with the existing ideational repertoire but generated new meanings of progress.

While as noted above, the domains of leadership are broadly ascribed particular functions, in practice this is more fluid, especially where individual leaders wear multiple hats. Our findings identify the particular significance of 'boundary-spanning' leaders: those who can perform multiple roles across institutional domains, and are well situated to amplify and reinforce the coherence of common-purpose narratives. In Rame'ai, for example, the early and ongoing participation of a local School Principal who was also a Church Secretary and Youth Impact Group Leader for World Vision, was strategic for influencing young people and sharing messages across domains (e.g., via school assemblies and church gatherings).

Overall, the observation that many leaders we interviewed fulfil multiple roles simultaneously (tribal chief, church pastor, school chairman) illustrates that leadership domains are blurry, which can facilitate co-ordination and coherence in a complex institutional landscape. In the case of the East Malaita Feeder Road, a local Chief and School Chairman was also Chairman of the Ward Development Committee. Interestingly, he describes his approach to dispute settlement as hybrid – straddling both formal and informal institutions: 'Sometimes individuals demand compensation for certain things and I had to look at these and verify claims. I am also part of the chiefs' council in

Malaita, so I have powers to deal with issues and try to settle disputes in my area. We have guidelines given to us by the provincial government and we often use it to guide our decisions and settle disputes.'

Just as crucial is that local leaders provide assurances against free-riding, or at least in principle have authority to sanction it. In all cases of collective action, the benefits of co-operation depend on the cooperation of others. Where the risks of defection are considered too high, individuals may themselves defect. Tribal and community leaders can help to resolve this uncertainty by sanctioning rule-breaking (e.g. petty thefts of machinery or fuel) and addressing cases where individuals seek to extract unilateral, irregular rewards or profiteer on the production of public goods. For example, in the East Malaita Feeder Road, landowners would occasionally block the road and demand payments from truck owners for the movement of goods.<sup>28</sup> In the Mbaelelea Highlands Road, 'chiefs put very strong regulations and penalties for those found guilty of stealing any machine parts and fuel. Perpetrators would pay compensation comprising of a pig and traditional shell money (tafulia).<sup>29</sup> In effect, then, leaders are social guarantors of community co-operation. Through these actions to safeguard collective rewards, they help to resolve the potential trade-offs between the costs and benefits of collaboration.

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*Our findings identify the particular significance of 'boundary-spanning' leaders: those who can perform multiple roles across institutional domains, and are well situated to amplify and reinforce the coherence of common-purpose narratives.*

27 KI #13

28 TS # 17

29 TS # 9

## WHAT MOTIVATES LEADERSHIP FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION?

Traditional models of collective action that originate in Western scholarship and are grounded in rational-choice theory posit that collective action will occur when people perceive the material benefits outweigh the costs (Alford, 2009). Our findings better align with the appreciation that motivations can also be intrinsic, social and normative (Verschuere, Brandsen & Pestoff, 2012). In our cases, motivations often arose out of sense of obligation. Some leaders reported they were not compensated, financially, for the significant work they undertook in the co-ordination of projects, even when those projects were funded by the state (e.g. via CDFs). 'The reason for my involvement in this road project although I'm old is the future of my families who reside in the highlands. I felt that my children and grandchildren shouldn't experience the same struggles and hardships we had been through. So I prefer to see change. This is the ultimate reason for my engagement in praying, advocating and discussing with leaders and young people in the highland communities. Therefore, when I was asked to join the road committee, I felt obliged.'<sup>30</sup>

Obligation has not only societal but religious origins. The RKT was initiated and discussed during a Throne Room Council: a prayer and worship session wherein ideas are put in the open for discussion and debate. Adherents believe that during TRC, God is physically present. An empty chair is often placed in front to present His presence at the venue. Once a decision is reached, it is binding and everyone feels obligated to be part of it. At this stage, leaders have no option but to be part of a project, and the involvement is often seen as mandated by God.

There is also a sense of capturing a moment, a coming of age for a generation. A local chief, community elder and teacher involved in the East Malaita Feeder Road, who gave over part of his cocoa plantation to the road, described how people agreed that damages resulting from the construction would not be compensated because those individuals affected were the ones demanding that the road be built. 'These things could be replaced but we only have one chance to build the road.'<sup>31</sup> In all of these ways, the motivations of leaders are situated within their own life stories and beliefs, rather than prompted by rational pursuit of material rewards.

*In all of these ways, the motivations of leaders are situated within their own life stories and beliefs, rather than prompted by rational pursuit of material rewards.*



30 KI # 9

31 KI #13

## TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLICATIONS

In the places we visited, the difference that co-production makes to people's lives is tangible. For example in the same village in Northern Malaita, crossing the stream you see a visible difference between the quality of housing in communities linked to the Movement, and those the other side of the river supported by another church.

The localised and culturally appropriate research processes applied in this research have helped uncover often hidden dynamics behind this often stark variation in local conditions. Our conversations with communities and leaders reveal that while material resources are necessary, they are unlikely to ever be sufficient to ensure the successful production of local public goods. Resources, time, commitment, and co-operation are only unlocked through vital relational work that follows a locally legitimate institutional script – in other words, ideas, norms and 'rules' which have local resonance and are broadly shared. Leaders are the agents of this change – their trustworthiness is the foundation for overcoming the collective action problems that can hinder development. When trusted, leaders can translate shared hardships into common interests, and rally communities around a unifying vision of change. They can ameliorate the significant costs of individuals working for collective gains, essential in the context of resource scarcity and uncertainty, by mobilising wider participation that distributes the burden of participation. And they can provide assurances against, and sanctions on, the potential for individuals to free ride on collective benefits.

These findings have implications for how leadership is understood in rural Solomon Islands. A fixed model of leadership, based on roles and status in institutions, does not neatly map onto the people who can really make change happen on the ground. Legitimate leadership evolves out of trust-based relationships, not formally ascribed labels. It is dispersed between institutions: churches mobilise and provide ideational impetus, tribal and customary leaders negotiate and co-ordinate collaboration and resolve disputes, provincial governmental agencies provide technical assistance, while MPs pitch in later as brokers of CDF funding.

Nevertheless, the three domains – church, state, custom are not so distinct in practice. Many leaders straddle them by playing multiple roles, and the critical act of dispute resolution is often hybrid – as in the example of the tribal leader using provincial government rules to decide appropriate compensation for land use. In terms of how people evaluate leadership, seeing is believing: People in the villages believe in what they see; they need social proof that leaders' intentions are true.

*While material resources are necessary, they are unlikely to ever be sufficient to ensure the successful production of local public goods.*

The findings also challenge some assumptions about prospects for community-led development in Solomon Islands. One of them is that land tenure is an insurmountable obstacle to development in the provinces. In the successful cases we've seen, landowners are supportive. The fundamental difference is that in the projects studied, people themselves see the need for change and work among themselves using their own system to negotiate and agree on certain things intra and inter-tribally before discussions on funding. When one starts off by talking about funding and projects, the local dynamics also change, and land disputes usually emerge to block implementation because of different expectations.

The idea that informal institutions matter in overcoming collective action obstacles is not new. The question for agencies seeking to promote development in these spaces is how to understand and engage with them, while avoiding distorting their potential by co-opting or disrupting them. As a starting point, the term 'informal' is unhelpful where it detracts from viewing them as the operative rules in place: they are not a diversion or distortion, but the way things get done.

A strong finding in our cases is the *importance of trans-local connections and the ecology of their development*. Particularly in the infrastructure cases, leaders based outside the community played an important advisory role and connections to sources of funding. A appropriate metaphor here is the rhizome: a plant where the roots spread horizontally, at ground level, but generates 'seed that takes root and thrives

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*the ideational and relational have to come first, not the other way around.*

because it falls on home soil, and spreads underground into places an outsider knows nothing of' (Global Fund for Community Foundations, 2017). These connections are the underground nodes and links that give rise to the visible changes at the crossing of a stream. There is hidden work invested in growing these vital roots. The burden of time and energy falls on leaders themselves. In his work in Papua New Guinea, Bruce Harris (2007) argues providing incentives for the expansion of effective trans-local initiatives could assist with the achievement of national goals. A similar conclusion can be drawn for Solomon Islands.

There is a further lesson in the *sequencing of the ideational, relational and material dimensions of community projects*. Our most successful cases were inspired ideationally, and negotiated relationally, to facilitate the sourcing of material goods. In other words, the ideational and relational have to come first, not the other way around. One implication for agencies is to work with this sequence, build on and support local ideas and shared goals, and let communities do the relational work to facilitate the necessary groundwork that has to happen for development to take place, before injecting funding. Otherwise, there is a risk that the injection of resources will disrupt or hijack these processes, detracting from the local legitimacy necessary for the communities to collaborate. In some senses, this echoes the calls made by promoters of local problem solving, collective action, flexible-adaptive, and learning based processes. On the other hand they arguably don't start with alternative worldviews of what the good life or well-being might be - and how it can be known - in some senses they reify a western notions of change rather draw out the specific characteristics of locally led development in different places (see Roche et al 2021).



Finally, there is a clear need to better understand how *values and ideas both mobilise and scaffold action*. The reasons why people engage in collective endeavours are certainly instrumental for some (rectifying hardships, improving life prospects) but these gains always conjure deeper meanings of identity, sense of place and faith. Economic and social processes are interdependent in our cases. Collective development can happen when more humble survival goals, embedded in everyday community life and wellbeing, are tied to larger community development goals. The implication is to see community goals – the ultimate driver of co-production – in this more holistic sense: one that incorporates notions of time, inter-generational obligation, and relational reciprocity.

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**dlprog.org**

**dlp@contacts.bham.ac.uk**

**@DLProg**

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Developmental Leadership Program  
International Development Department  
College of Social Sciences  
University of Birmingham  
Birmingham, B15 2TT  
United Kingdom

Design | [squarebeasts.net](http://squarebeasts.net)



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