

“It’s a coffee with a purpose”: Perspectives on thinking and working politically in the Pacific

Accepted for publication in Development in Practice, August 2021

Kayli Wild,^{a,b} Linda Kelly^a and Chris Roche^a

^a*Institute for Human Security and Social Change, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia*

^b*Judith Lumley Centre, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia*

Thinking and working politically is an approach to manoeuvring within social and political realities to achieve development goals, which some see as a new orthodoxy (Teskey 2017). This research explores the practice of thinking and working politically in the Pacific, through in-depth interviews and observation with nine Pacific Islander staff working within a bilateral aid program in Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. The findings provide a rich description of what thinking and working politically entails in small, highly-connected island communities, with insights into how these processes can be supported in official aid programs.

Keywords: politics; relationships; Pacific Islands; political economy analysis; aid; development effectiveness

Highlights

- This research unpacks thinking and working politically from the unique perspective of Pacific staff working in a bilateral aid program.
- Thinking politically involves knowing the context, who to work with and when to act.
- Working politically entails good communication, intuition, flexibility, influence, connecting people and “playing different cards” at appropriate moments.
- Building and maintaining relationships is the cornerstone of thinking and working politically but is not always valued by senior managers.

- Moving away from political analysis as donor-led, intelligence-gathering exercises toward investment in locally-led processes, requires genuinely valuing the relational work that is required.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing recognition that development is an inherently political process (Carothers & de Gramont 2013) and that social change requires an understanding of the multiple ways that social, economic and political power shape institutional change (Kashwan, MacLean & García-López 2019). Consequently, many donors have sought to better incorporate political economy analysis to help them develop a more nuanced understanding of the contexts within which they work. Some scholars argue, however, that these analyses are limited when they are one-off, commissioned pieces rather than sustained ways of approaching development processes (Booth, Harris & Wild 2016; Fisher & Marquette 2016). Moreover, as Yanguas and Hulme (2015, 210) have pointed out, “political-economy analysis remains an insider’s game, the realm of governance advisers and consultants.”

More recently, there has been a shift in the literature and in development practice toward thinking and working politically. This has stemmed from the recognition that donors find it difficult to act on the insights and implications of political economy analyses (Rocha Menocal et al. 2018) and that thinking and working politically goes beyond formal politics to engage with the deeper workings of power however they are manifest. (Hudson & Leftwich 2014; Rocha Menocal et al. 2018). This has been particularly underlined by programs that have sought to address the gendered nature of everyday inter-actions in households, communities and organisations and how these shape and underpin more formal political processes (Derbyshire et al. 2018). Furthermore reviews of these programs also point to the central importance of locally-led initiatives with the knowledge, legitimacy and relationships that are

required to navigate the complexities of local power relations (Booth et al. 2016; Derbyshire et al. 2018). Although some of the literature highlights the importance of relationships, trust, and networks in building and supporting local reform coalitions (Eyben 2006; Corbett 2013; Bazeley, Brown & Rudland 2013), little has been written about how effective relationships and trust are constructed, and how influence is enacted. Nor is the amount of effort required to engage effectively at the local and national level well understood (Bazeley, Brown & Rudland 2013). Moreover, the literature to date has largely drawn on the views of international staff and senior bureaucrats. This has resulted in underrepresentation of the experiences of people who have been thinking and working politically on the ground for many years.

The research presented here builds on emerging insights into how local development practitioners influence decision-making processes (Faustino & Booth 2014; Kashwan, MacLean & García-López 2019). It aims to examine what thinking and working politically looks like in practice from the perspective of local staff working on a development program in the Pacific Islands.

Study setting

The Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) was established in 2008 with \$36.3 million in funding from the Australian government to strengthen leadership practice and political governance in the Pacific. The initiative was a response to the widespread view that past policies and programs focused on improving governance in the Pacific had not met with great success and was consistent with the 2006 ‘White Paper’ which sought to put a greater emphasis on building ‘demand for better governance’ (AusAID 2006). Implemented over ten years, the Program aimed to support influential Pacific leaders who were committed to local reforms and who would pursue it regardless of external support. PLP selected and supported specific local organisations and coalitions, both financially and through training and mentoring, based on a

partnership model These partnerships were underpinned by principles of local ownership, flexibility, responsiveness and trust which were seen as contrasting with more “transactional” arrangements (Denney & McLaren 2016, 4). The Program employed one local country representative in each of the partner countries Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, and a number of Fijian staff within its central hub in Suva, Fiji where the regional Program was based. The aim of this research was to capture the richness of the processes involved in thinking and working politically through in-depth interviews with Pacific Islander staff working within the Program (at both country and regional levels). By examining what local staff were already doing, we aimed to elucidate how the internal structures, practices and ways of working in an Australian aid program can support politically smart, locally led development at an organisational level, and ultimately shed light on the “craft” of social change.

Methods

This study used a rapid ethnographic approach to examine Pacific development practitioners’ perspectives on thinking and working politically in their everyday practice. Rapid or short-term ethnography can be characterised by focussed in-depth interviews, observation and reflection, in order to share stories and reveal insights (Pink & Morgan 2013). Permission to carry out the study was gained from PLP management and ethical approval was obtained from La Trobe University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (ID# E15/111). Eligible participants included staff from the Pacific who had worked with PLP for at least six months, whether current or previous employees, and included Fiji-based staff working on regional and country programs (who were all of Fijian origin), or country-based staff, who were all nationals of the countries in which they worked. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify key informants, with the aim of gaining a variety of perspectives.

The study was undertaken by independent university-based researchers from Australia. Qualitative methods included key informant interviews, informal discussion, observation and spending time with participants in their daily work over a relatively short period of fieldwork. In November 2015, the researcher (KW, an applied anthropologist) spent one week with staff in Suva, Fiji and one week in Apia, Samoa with telephone interviews conducted with staff in the other country offices (except Solomon Islands where the country representative had only been in the position for one week). Nine in-depth interviews were conducted, which included three of the four country-representatives, five Suva-based staff and one former employee. There were seven female and two male participants. Written consent was obtained from each participant. The average length of the interviews was 1 hour and 43 minutes. All interviews were tape recorded and professionally transcribed. To protect confidentiality, no identifying information has been included with the quotes. The data from formal interviews was supplemented with notes from discussion and observation over the two weeks of fieldwork. These methods were particularly important in the country office where the researcher was able to attend meetings, interact without a rigid framework (Vaiotei 2006) and observe approaches to 'thinking and working politically' in action.

At the end of each period of fieldwork, a discussion was held between the researcher and participants about the major themes that emerged from interviews and observation and to clarify the researcher's understanding and interpretation. All transcripts and field notes were entered into the software package NVivo (version 10) and data were coded according to the categories or lines of enquiry set out in the interview schedule as well as other themes that emerged during fieldwork. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis and an initial draft of the findings was shared with study participants for their feedback.

What is thinking and working politically?

When participants were asked what thinking and working politically means to them in the context of the PLP program, they consistently raised three main aspects: understanding the context; knowing who to work with; and knowing when to act. We conceptualise these as “thinking” politically.

Knowing the context

Understanding context was seen as much more than discerning the formal political landscape, it encompassed appreciating the social and cultural nuances that are unique to the setting and which underpin politics, including gender relations, morals, traditions and the social fabric that holds communities together. By having an intimate knowledge of these aspects of the context, they felt they were able to provide the right support for partner organisations, including enhancing the ability of both themselves and their partners to plan for different scenarios, read shifts in power, make good judgements and explore possible solutions. Understanding context meant generating collective learning and was particularly important when working on sensitive and controversial issues.

Knowing the players involved in a given issue was also critical. This meant knowing their agenda, what influences them and being able to read their behaviour. Being able to read other people was not straightforward and often involved good background knowledge, personal relationships, informal and direct communication and gaining information from multiple sources.

Put yourself in the other person's shoes. So when you're scoping an issue, be the other person for a moment. See things from everyone else's perspective, not just yours.

Understanding others' perspectives meant everyone affected by a proposed change or reform, not just the political players. It also necessitated knowing what change people were ready for, how they might respond to the change and what their losses could be. Participants noted that, given the complex and unpredictable nature of people and the fluidity of change, knowing the context was only the first step in an ongoing process of regular analysis, discussions and preparation for the unexpected.

Knowing who to work with

All donor programs that seek to enable locally-led politically savvy initiatives need to make decisions about who, or what, to support. Often this comes down to questions of the degree to which these initiatives contribute to donor goals; are likely to succeed; and whether they are 'value for money'. Local staff's responses indicate a richer set of dimensions are at play for them.

Aligning Values

Choosing who to work with and which partners to support was not only about having common goals. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of having *shared values*, which they described as thinking along the same lines, working in the same way, or having a similar approach to solutions. They described this as "working from the same heart" and having a common passion for what you do. Aligning values was important because people tend to generate solutions from within their own value system.

Similarly, all participants mentioned the importance of believing in the cause or the change they were pursuing. This applied equally to partners as well as PLP staff, underlining the fact that Pacific staff saw themselves as change agents and citizens, as much as employees of an Australian aid program. If people were passionate about and believed in the cause, they were

more likely to be intrinsically motivated to move the issue forward outside of their work life. Seeing people volunteering their time demonstrated that they really wanted the change and was therefore seen as a test of their values. Participants also emphasised that you can only get a real sense of someone's values through meeting with them face-to-face as well as informally.

Leadership

Working with individuals was just as important as working with organisations. While investing in individual leaders or “champions” was seen as somewhat risky, it was a critical element of success because ultimately it is people who “work collectively” and drive organisations. Supporting individuals within the ‘right’ organisations and connecting them to each other was therefore seen as a key component of supporting the emergence of the collective leadership required to achieve meaningful and sustainable change.

The two key features of effective leaders mentioned most by participants were that they have strong organisational and community networks and they are in positions of authority or influence to be able to push for the change. Other characteristics of leaders were that they take risks, are willing to challenge the status quo, know what they need to do, and have the right motivations. Participants described the role of a leader as smoothing a path, inspiring people, making them feel comfortable, and being a role model. There was a sense that anyone could be a leader but they must know the context, live and work amongst the people and lead from within.

Government

Initially PLP was not mandated to work with governments as the broader bilateral aid program worked in this space. Most participants pointed out that it was in fact important to engage with bureaucracies and politicians, and champions within them, as they were often in positions of

influence or had the authority to make the changes pursued by reform coalitions. Other reasons for working with government were to align PLP activities with national development agendas, coordinate with other donors, fill gaps and improve the visibility of PLP's support.

There were, however, significant challenges to working at this level. Participants mentioned the difficulties of creating lasting relationships within transient government staff, the tendency for government departments to work in silos, politicians looking after their own interests, political instability, and the sensitivities around an aid program not being seen to interfere in internal politics. Therefore, a continued focus on partnerships and collective action with civil society sectors and representative bodies was important because these networks provided indirect access and influence within government spheres, and PLP could continue to work in the background.

Community

Participants emphasised the importance of reform coalitions engaging with community groups when working on issues that attempted to change cultural norms. They viewed this as particularly important in the Pacific, where cultural values are strong and there is an increasing distance between urban decision-makers and the rural majority. Several participants pointed out that leaders needed to be engaging at the community level including getting their ideas for appropriate solutions as well as their buy-in.

Don't lose touch with the people that you're leading, and don't lose touch with the people that you think you're making changes for

In terms of engaging with the community, local leaders were seen as the people best placed to help address social issues and problematic norms. Inviting these leaders or potential leaders to training workshops or events and having change agents sitting on village councils were seen

as mechanisms for creating change from within. It also helped to work with community-based organisations. There was recognition, however, that this was a difficult space to work in and that there needs to be a balance between supporting social change and retaining certain cultural values and identity which provide the necessary local legitimacy. By engaging community leaders and encouraging locally-led change, people were reassured that change could happen while maintaining cultural roots.

If you really want to make change you have to go to the village community. If you want to change the perception of women, don't work with government, you go to the village communities and change the way people think about women. But it's a hard space to sit in because...it requires that you say nothing but sit there, and maybe for a long time you'll be just giving money to church events and women's teas, but it means you get in that space

Donors

The need to think and work politically within the broader aid program was highlighted by most participants. This became even more important after a restructure within the Australian Government which resulted in the development agency (AusAID, under which PLP was funded) being merged into DFAT. Participants felt that engaging extensively with DFAT was an essential part of their work and was important for boosting the profile and visibility of their partners' work, protecting their partners' reputation, maintaining funding, advocating for the PLP approach, and adding value to the work that DFAT was doing.

The ways in which participants worked politically within the aid program included building relationships with country posts and encouraging partners to do the same. This involved holding regular meetings and briefings, going to cocktail parties and events, providing training, sharing reports, inputting into reviews and generally working to improve the visibility of what

they do. This was particularly important given the challenges in succinctly capturing the benefits, outcomes and subtleties of the kind of work the program supported in written reports. There was consensus around the need to empower partners to talk about the impact of their own work and to encourage them to also think and work politically, particularly in their interaction with donors.

Knowing when to act

Participants noted that thinking and working politically involved knowing when to act and when to step back. It entailed an understanding of how and when to support partners to push the boundaries to create social change without losing people along the way, or causing them to become more entrenched in their views.

Knowing the right time to foster conversations or bring partners together was built on observation and information gathered on the ground, most often through informal conversations and existing networks. It involved knowing when an issue is ripe, aligning with political will and momentum, and being ready to jump when opportunities arise. It also involved shaking things up when people became too complacent in order to keep them motivated to want the change. Waiting for the right time to act was seen as particularly important in settings where resources are limited. Participants emphasised the need to be strategic and catalytic, bring people together, provide targeted training and create safe spaces for dialogue.

Participants talked more frequently about knowing when to step back than they did about when to be proactive. Stepping back when an issue was too sensitive was critical in order to avoid “ruffling feathers”, and possibly losing the actors required to move the change forward. In this sense, it was important to be able to read authority figures, know when their mind was made up and therefore when it was “not time for battle”.

Participants discussed the need to step back mostly in relation to threats posed to their partners and the issues they were working toward. They gave examples about letting sensitive topics rest to avoid creating divisions between coalitions, backlash to specific organisations and resistance to change on the issue. Stepping back often involved pausing, re-grouping, reflecting on the approach, letting the issue rest and having targeted conversations with individuals rather than groups. For local country representatives having outsiders, or critical friends not based in the country, was useful to gain perspective. In contrast to knowing when to step back on specific issues, the reasons for PLP as an organisation to step back, or to take a more proactive role, were more about when it was politically useful for local groups to be seen to lead and take ownership. This also meant avoiding actions that might be mis-construed as an Australian aid program pushing their agenda, or indeed which might be used politically to undermine local agendas. Whereas in other cases it was strategically useful for local reformers to be more clearly associated with the program.

How is thinking and working politically done effectively?

When participants were asked how thinking and working politically is done effectively, the main theme that arose was the importance of building relationships and how that facilitates all other aspects of the way in which they work, such as good communication, access to information, connecting people and issues, and being able to influence a situation. We conceptualise these as working politically.

Relationships

Relationships emerged as the foundation for understanding all aspects of how thinking and working politically happens in practice. Personal relationships and networks were the most important way in which people gained information and exerted influence. Most participants emphasised the existing networks and spheres of influence the country representatives and

partner organisations had, and how PLP staff explicitly drew on these relationships. Using the networks of these individuals gave PLP credibility, opened doors and dictated the spaces that were accessible.

To be really honest, half the time people come to the table, or the reason why we have access to some of the developmental leaders that we want to work with as a program, is because the local representative knows them personally.

PLP country representatives, program staff and the partners they worked with tended to have status in their own communities, through chiefly titles, serving on boards and councils, through family connections, and close personal relationships and organisational networks built over the years. People used these relationships and networks to raise issues with those in positions of power when the opportunity arose. They emphasised that it was easier to build relationships between people with a shared background and when facing common challenges. While the benefits associated with being local and based in the country were obvious, it was equally important for Pacific staff based outside the country to build networks and relationships on the ground through regular visits. Having other Pacific Islanders working on the program in the central hub in Fiji was advantageous because the similar historical contexts and cultural connectedness meant that understanding and trust were built more readily. Trust was important because it allowed people to open up, share information and have honest conversations.

While some participants said cultural background had little to do with an individual's ability to develop rapport and strong relationships, others mentioned that non-Pacific Islanders tended to be more extroverted, did not stay long enough in the country and needed to make an effort to work "with the grain" and in a Pacific style. Other important ways of working when building relationships included being authentic, being respectful but not in awe of those in positions of power, getting to know people as well as their family, and seeing relationships as offering

reciprocal benefits. For those who did not have established personal networks, and even for those who did, it was useful to continually invest in *strategic* relationships. It was important to establish connections within a range of sectors and with people at the national, sub-national and community levels.

The importance of relationships, the time and effort required to establish them, and the complexities involved in maintaining them meant this way of working could be extremely challenging and required investing more effort in fewer areas. Program staff noted the need to spend a lot of time in-country, not only attending meetings but also having downtime with country representatives to debrief. One participant described the “need to work slowly and gently”. All participants pointed out the extended length of time required to achieve broad social change and that most program timeframes “aren’t realistic”.

Once strong relationships were established, they often endured well beyond the life of a specific project and could be continually drawn upon. As much as personal relationships could facilitate access, they could also close doors if a relationship had soured. This was particularly challenging for country representatives who lived in small island communities, in that personal differences with key individuals could affect their ability to engage with organisations. Having both insiders (i.e. country nationals) and outsiders (i.e. Pacific staff based in Fiji) working on the program and some alternative strategies was helpful for managing those difficult relationships.

Building relationships through formal spaces

Participants spoke extensively about the ways in which they built relationships, both through formal mechanisms and more importantly, in informal spaces. Training was the most prominent formal mechanism of building relationships mentioned by participants. They used it as an entry point to engage with high-level people in country, and as a way of “giving back”.

Training activities were a way of sharing knowledge about effective ways of working and promoting the concept of working politically. However, it was not just about imparting knowledge, it was a learning process for PLP, and a structured space in which to think through issues and discuss common problems. Training was also used to bring people together within countries and across the region to both create and solidify networks.

Meetings were another formal way of building relationships. They were an opportunity to gain buy-in, and a way of keeping people informed and on side. Providing support for mentoring programs and larger events was a way of building relationships between key people, especially within elite networks. Some participants pointed out the need to invest appropriately in these events, particularly when they involved heads of state; however, the significance of this was not always appreciated within the larger aid program.

Building relationships through informal spaces

Informal spaces were the most important for getting to know people, understand their values and gain new information because people were more candid and were more likely to engage meaningfully with each other in these spaces. These informal connections happened most often over coffee, drinks after work, sharing a meal, while driving somewhere, at church, or just picking up the phone to check in. Participants noted the different dynamic these spaces created. They were more relaxed, reduced the awkwardness often felt in formal spaces, and were particularly important when connecting with high-level people who could be overwhelmed with meetings.

Sing with them, use their hymn books, and at the end of every service I'll make sure I go and say hello to the general secretary of the Church or the president, whom I've met through one of the partners.

Although these spaces were more casual and relaxed, participants emphasised that networking and consistent messaging were essential when meeting stakeholders and decision-makers. Connecting through informal spaces was therefore a very strategic approach, which helped to achieve work-related outcomes. It meant PLP staff were more approachable than in a traditional donor-recipient relationship.

Whether it's an email or a phone call or just having a coffee with someone, we talk about the purpose of that. It's not a coffee, it's a coffee with a purpose and what is the message we want to send.

Building relationships and connections was not only important with partners; it was essential for being able to bring a wide variety of people together and support collective action. However, connecting socially was not easy for everyone and it was advantageous to have a mix of personalities and people with different interests on the team. Similarly, it was sometimes strategic for participants to position themselves at arm's length from DFAT, so that they could cultivate relationships independently of the wider aid program and demonstrate that they were willing to work in new ways. Participants also felt the informal spaces necessary for building relationships were not always recognised by senior management, and that they needed to be careful about how they were perceived more widely in the community.

Communication

A large part of working politically was described as engaging in communication. This involved knowing how to communicate, with whom and when. Good communication was critical for maintaining relationships and building networks, knowing when to intervene, and ultimately was a source of influence and power. It also helped to increase communication when people were experiencing rapid change, for example as a result of new organisational structures or changed ways of working. The most prevalent types of communication were constant

conversations and contact with partner organisations, being able to bounce ideas and craft a response between PLP country representatives and program officers based in Suva, and strategic communication with DFAT posts on PLP activities. This was because action emerged through conversation as people strategized and planned, clarified their roles and shared responsibilities. Conversations could also prompt people to action by asking the right questions in a less formal and non-threatening way.

Participants highlighted the intense effort involved in the crafting and timing of communication. They pointed out that people were often short of time and did not answer emails. This meant they needed to put in extra effort to engage with key people, including grabbing a conversation when possible, putting a letter on someone's desk, listening (two-way communication), or just planting an idea and waiting for people to approach them. As with relationships, communication was often more productive in-person and in informal or relaxed spaces. In addition, useful discussions were seen as much more important than documenting detailed processes.

Participants shared many lessons they had learned over the years about communicating effectively with decision-makers who are the targets of reform. This included doing background research and asking informed questions, explaining things in a simple way, reading authority figures for clues (if their mind is made up it is not time for battle), and letting them feel they are in charge of decisions. It was useful to limit the number of issues raised to no more than three, not present large documents or go into too much detail with high-level decision-makers, and avoid delicate politics or too much small talk (especially on sensitive issues). Participants pointed out that communication, like relationship building, is resource intensive and takes time.

Connecting people

A central element of thinking and working politically, particularly in relation to specific issues and collective action, was the ability to “connect the dots”. This involved identifying gaps in action, capacity or activities, bringing individuals and organisations together to fill different roles, facilitating connections with regional and global networks, supporting cross learning between partners with similar initiatives in different countries, and increasing the visibility of partners and the issues they were working on to other donors.

PLP country representatives played a particularly important role as connectors. Their knowledge of the context, history, key players and their established relationships meant they were in an ideal position to identify gaps and link diverse organisations working on the same issue. The wider program played a connecting role by providing technical advice, resources, building the capacity of organisations to attract other funding, and linking with outside expertise. In this sense PLP local staff supported local reformers and organisations to act politically by enabling them to build and maintain broader coalitions and share strategies.

Influence

Being able to influence others was a key feature of thinking and working politically. The way in which participants spoke about influence was subtle and was exerted through personal spheres such as family connections, chiefly titles, professional position, and personal relationships. Reciprocity and obligation were often drawn on when seeking to influence a situation. It was seldom achieved through overt means such as advocacy or public demonstrations. Influence required access to and conversations with the right people and sustained involvement through the change process. Being able to influence others required intimate knowledge of the context, the players, and their perspectives. This enabled participants to maneuver beyond their immediate sphere of influence, through existing structures such as

the church and village councils and a wider range of high-level political networks. Some participants emphasised the importance of supporting those with authority to take the lead in order to improve the likelihood of being able to influence a situation.

Flexibility

Being flexible and adaptive were also valued components of working politically. They were seen as crucial to the program because implementation was necessarily unpredictable, particularly in new contexts and when countries were in social and political transition. Some examples of working in this way included being flexible with timeframes and tracking outcomes, having a budget that was able to support emerging opportunities, being able to fund organisations as well as support individuals within coalitions, being able to experiment in supporting new initiatives and not being tied to burdensome reporting processes.

You're starting to implement things, and anything can happen. But basically, you're positioned well enough that you're able to maneuver or change and adjust your program, or adjust your way of working to suit whatever situation will come up"

Flexibility was incorporated at a systems level as well as by individuals in their everyday work. At an organisational level, this could mean being able to change focus as new issues or opportunities arose, or political crises or natural disasters delayed normal programming. Flexibility was enacted through revisiting partnership agreements, providing funding in small tranches or diverting funds to new opportunities when required. An iterative approach facilitated flexibility and responsiveness. This included six-monthly reflection and refocus sessions, which meant trying new things, reflecting on progress and challenges, and then taking another few steps. On an individual level, participants were able to be flexible in the type of support they provided, sometimes being more suggestive, sometimes working behind the

scenes or taking an observational role. However, working in this flexible and unpredictable way was extremely challenging and was not always welcomed by the donor.

Intuition

Thinking and working politically involved a high level of self-awareness, intuition and instinct; some participants referred to it as a sixth sense. Intuition allowed participants to know when something feels right, to be able to gauge the “temperature” in the room, to be able to sense when things were left unsaid and to know when people’s guards were up. This intuitive knowledge often dictated actions, such as when to avoid a meeting or when to back off from an issue. It was integral to not “losing people” as change moved forward. Given the nebulous nature of intuition, participants found it difficult to describe and document what they did until after the fact, which highlights the importance of reflection. They also noted that intuition was built on information, not just instinct.

Attributes and “playing different cards”

Participants were asked how their individual attributes such as gender might affect the way in which they think and work politically. Living and working within largely patriarchal cultures in the Pacific meant there were different spaces women and men were able to access more easily. Some examples of spaces where women found it difficult to break ground were networks of men or “boys clubs” and boards made up exclusively of men. Being able to joke and use humour was an important way to break down social barriers, but it was not always appropriate for women to engage with men in this way.

Because of the barriers brought about by some customary gender roles and cultural protocols, female participants gave examples of where they had to be more thoughtful and strategic, recruit male champions when they were not being heard, develop a “thick skin”, and be

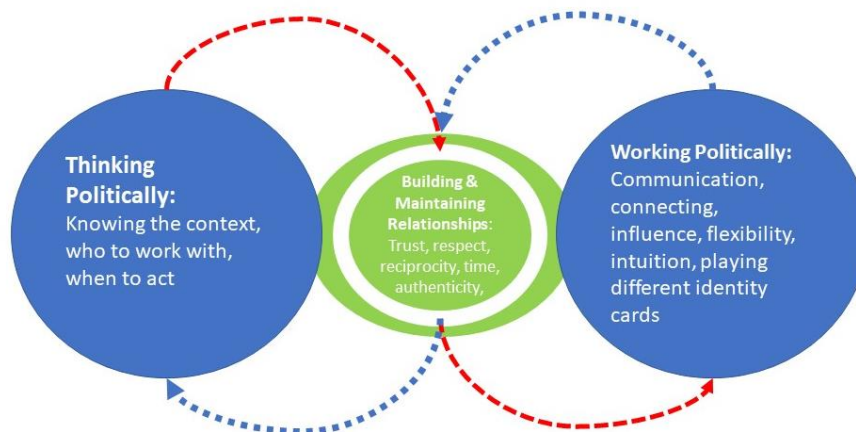
sensitive to the gendered context in any situation. One participant, however, felt she was able to maneuver more easily as a woman because she did not have male pride to maintain.

Despite some of the barriers and opportunities imposed by gender norms, participants largely felt that gender was not a major issue in the task of thinking and working politically and that other dynamics – including age, education, nationality, status, clan group and personality - were more significant. Participants described how they “played different cards” to break down barriers and maneuver more effectively in various situations. They gave examples of using their status or education to overcome limitations imposed by their female gender or young age, of wearing different hats in their work life (as an educated business woman) and in the village (with a chiefly title), and being able to be more up-front because they were an outsider or not from the same culture.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to understand thinking and working politically from the perspective of Pacific development practitioners. There were three key aspects which were consistently cited as important to *thinking* politically: a) understanding the political, social and cultural context, b) knowing the players and who to work with, and c) knowing when to act and when to pull back. *Working* politically was said to entail flexibility, intuition, communication, influence, connecting people, and “playing different cards” at appropriate moments. Building and maintaining effective relationships were in many ways seen to be central to being able to think and work effectively because they were the sources of information and influence that enabled all other aspects to occur (Figure 1). These findings are consistent with other studies emphasising the importance of relationships in the politics of development (Corbett 2013; Faustino & Booth 2014) and add weight to Eyben’s (2006) argument that it is the quality of relationships that can make aid programs succeed or fail.

Figure 1: The central role of relationships in thinking and working politically



By foregrounding the significance of relationships, this understanding of thinking and working politically moves beyond a political lens or a technocratic mapping of the socio-political landscape. It is defined by the ability to maneuver and influence, which is fundamentally embedded in shared culture and values and enacted through relationships. In contrast to the more overt ways of influencing such as advocacy or campaigning, the type of influence participants spoke about was often subtle and discreet, a way of ‘thinking and working culturally’ that facilitates development practice. Pacific scholars have long written about the importance of these connections, being socially and culturally aware and the value of and complexity of relationships (Hau’ofa 1993; Vaioleti 2006; Kabutaulaka 2015; Bhagwan 2020). Recent work on the characteristics of locally-led development in the Pacific shows the preference for informal ways of working, holistic ways of thinking, collective deliberation and maintaining good relationships (Roche et al. 2020). Yet this fundamental relational work appears to remain relatively marginal in the literature on thinking and working politically and political economy analysis. For example, The USAID guide on thinking and working politically (Rocha Menocal et al. 2018) identifies many of the same issues as our research participants, such as the importance of in-depth knowledge of context and actors, identifying

shared interests and forming partnerships. However, it is still framed as essentially about political action rather than the more subterranean relationships and connections that shape the politics of locally-led development.

While Small Island States have many shared challenges and global political objectives that can be advanced by a shared identity (see for example, www.aosis.org), they are vastly different in terms of demography, culture and politics (Hau'ofa 1993). By employing local country representatives with existing networks and a deep understanding of their own position and limitations, the Program was able to draw on their relationships and knowledge, and tailor its work to the specificities of the local context. However, the challenges of working in small island states and being embedded in an intimate set of local relationships, whilst at the same time being part of an international development program, is not without its own complexity. Having regional Pacific staff based in the program hub in Fiji allowed a greater degree of manoeuvrability as they could step in and out of different roles in order to have the hard conversations where appropriate, or to act as a buffer for country staff and partners when required. As Baldacchino (2008:37) highlights “the insider/outsider distinction does not work all that well when it comes to islands, where hybridity is the norm.” In particular the PLP staff based in Fiji might be considered ‘outsider-insiders’, although they are from the Pacific they are not nationals of the four countries where PLP ran programs. This hybrid identity allowed them to play roles that neither purely national staff or non-Pacific staff were able to play.

The findings of this research highlight how much effort and care was required for thinking and working politically *within* the Australian aid program. The need to justify this way of working, “protect” or buffer their local partners in order to sustain funding and create space to operate effectively, document their outcomes in particular ways, and prove the worth of the program was a challenge consistently highlighted by participants and has been documented in other research on PLP (Denney & McLaren 2016). While this is perhaps an inevitable part of working

within, or being funded by, a necessarily political entity, it does suggest that loosening internal bureaucratic pressures could provide program staff more time and energy for working strategically on the ground to achieve mutual objectives. This is consistent with Honig's (2018) findings, which point to the organisational barriers to more effective development programs, particularly those that rely on front-line autonomy and judgements.

Conclusion

Several authors have pointed out that the push to adopt a more overtly political understanding of development, the country context and power dynamics has as yet failed to really transform aid practice and cooperation (Carothers & de Gramont 2013; Yanguas & Hulme 2015; Booth, Harris & Wild 2016; Teskey 2017). This research contributes to our understanding of how a political economy lens that focusses on political elites, and an analysis of interests and power, can miss much of the local knowledge, practice and relationships required for working in more transformative ways. This suggests that if broader aid programming is to move away from political analysis as donor-led, intelligence-gathering exercises (Fisher & Marquette 2016) toward investment in locally led processes, then relational work needs to be genuinely valued.

References

- AusAID (2006). Australian Aid: Promoting Growth and Stability. A white paper on the Australian Government's overseas aid program. Canberra: AusAID.
- Baldacchino G (2008). Studying islands: on whose terms? Some epistemological and methodological challenges to the pursuit of island studies. *Island Studies Journal*, 3(1):37-56.
- Bazeley P, Brown T, Rudland E. (2013). *Thinking and working politically: An evaluation of policy dialogue in AusAID*. Canberra: Office of Development Effectiveness.

Booth D, Harris D, Wild L (2016). *From Political Economy Analysis to Doing Development Differently: A Learning Experience*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Bhagwan J, Huffer E, Koya-Vaka'uta FC, Casimira A. (2020). *From the Deep: Pasifiki Voices for a New Story*. Suva: Pacific Theological College.

Carothers T, de Gramont D (2013). *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Corbett J (2013). "Everybody knows everybody": practising politics in the Pacific Islands. *Democratization*, 22(1):51-72. Denney L, McLaren R (2016). *Thinking and working politically to support developmental leadership and coalitions: The Pacific Leadership Program*. Melbourne: La Trobe University.

Derbyshire H, Gibson S, Hudson D, Roche C (2018). *From Silos to Synergy: Learning from Politically Informed, Gender Aware Programmes*. Birmingham: Development Leadership Programme. Eyben R (ed). (2006). *Relationships for Aid*. London: Earthscan.

Faustino J, Booth D (2014). *Development entrepreneurship: How donors and leaders can foster institutional change*. Working Politically in Practice Series, Case Study No. 2. The Asia Foundation and Overseas Development Institute.

Fisher J, Marquette H (2016). 'Empowered patient' or 'Doctor knows best'? Political economy analysis and ownership. *Development in Practice*, 26(1):115-126.

Hau'ofa E (1993). Our Sea of Islands. In *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, ed. E. Waddell, V. Naidu, and E. Hau'ofa, Suva: University of the South Pacific, pp. 2–16. Honig, D. (2018). *Navigation by Judgment: Why and When Top-Down Control of Foreign Aid Won't Work*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hudson D, Leftwich A. (2014). *From Political Economy to Political Analysis*. DLP Research Paper 25. Birmingham: University of Birmingham.

Kabutaulaka T (2015). Tuhu Vera: My journeys, routes, places and identities. In *Oceanian Journeys and Sojourns: Home Thoughts Abroad*, ed, J. Bennett, Dunedin: Otago University Press, pp. 133-150

Kashwan P, MacLean LM, García-López GA (2019). Rethinking power and institutions in the shadows of neoliberalism *World Development*, 120:133-146.

Pink S, Morgan J (2013). Short-term ethnography: intense routes to knowing. *Symb Interact*, 36:351–61.

Rocha Menocal A, Cassidy M, Swift S, Jacobstein D, Rothblum C, Tservil I (2018). *Thinking and working politically through applied political economy analysis: A guide for practitioners*. Washington: USAID.

Roche C, Cox J, Rokotuibau M, Tawake P, Smith Y (2020). The characteristics of locally-led development in the Pacific. *Politics and Governance*, 8(4).

Teskey G (2017). *Thinking and Working Politically: Are we seeing the emergence of a second orthodoxy?* Governance Working Paper Series, Issue 1. Massachusetts: Abt Associates.

Vaiotei T (2006). Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12: 21-34. Yanguas P, Hulme D (2015). Barriers to Political Analysis in Aid Bureaucracies: From Principle to Practice in DFID and the World Bank. *World Development*, 74:209-219.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by La Trobe University's Disciplinary Research Program (DRP) competitive grant scheme. Thank you to PLP staff who gave their time to participate in the study and feedback on draft findings. We appreciate the input of Elisabeth Jackson, Lisa Denney and John Cox who provided useful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

Bios

Kayli Wild is a Senior Research Fellow at La Trobe University and holds a Discovery Early Career Research Award Fellowship. She is a medical anthropologist and health systems researcher and is interested in brining the voices of people with lived-experience to policy issues and health system change. Kayli's areas of expertise are qualitative research methods, reproductive health and gender-based violence, with a current focus on Timor-Leste, and previously in the Pacific and with Australian Aboriginal communities.

Linda Kelly has worked widely in international development and has held senior management positions in Australian based international NGOs (World Vision and Oxfam Australia). Since 2001 she has been the Director of Praxis Consultants Pty Ltd Australia, and in 2014 she joined the team at the Institute for Human Security and Social Change at Latrobe university, working on the interface between research and practice.

Chris Roche is Professor of Development Practice at La Trobe University where he is also the Director of the Institute for Human Security and Social Change. Chris is also Deputy Director (Impact) of the Developmental Leadership Program, an international research program which explores how leadership, power and political processes drive or block successful development. Prior to joining La Trobe in 2012 Chris worked for over 25 years for International NGOs as a project manager, evaluator, policy researcher and as a director. Chris is particularly interested in understanding the practice of social change processes and how those involved might be more effectively supported.