

## Symposium: Pacific-Asia partnerships in resource development in PNG

By Toni Bauman, Research Fellow, AIATSI

Between 18-20 October 2010, around 120 people attended a symposium titled 'Asia-Pacific Partnerships in Resource Development in PNG' at Divine Word University in Madang, Papua New Guinea. The symposium was coordinated by the Australian National University's Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, the University of Technology Sydney's China Research Centre, and Divine Word University. Sponsored by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), the concept for the symposium arose out of discussions a year before at Divine Word University concerning the quality of analysis around Pacific-Asian partnerships. Much of the literature tends to see Asia as a monolithic cultural bloc, and particularly Chinese companies, as single actors with shared, structured and questionable motives and significant political influence. In contrast, Asian companies might be better considered as complex and diverse actors, rather than controlled by States with grand plans for expansion.

The Madang symposium thus provided a forum for a range of PNG stakeholders engaged in a variety of development projects such as mining, gas, forestry and logging, palm oil plantations, fisheries and canneries (particularly tuna), to benefit from each others' experience, and to explore Asia-Pacific development relationships in a more nuanced way. Papers related to a number of Pacific and Asian countries, including Japan, Korea and Taiwan,

though often had an emphasis on China. They were presented by PNG nationals including students and lecturers from the Divine Word University, and a range of international relations specialists, anthropologists, historians and sociologists (including some Indigenous delegates) from a number of places including Hawaii, New Zealand, the Philippines, and the Federated States of Micronesia. China experts included Zhao Hongtu from the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations and Merriden Varrall who has been carrying out research in a Chinese semi-non-government poverty reduction organisation. A representative from the Ramu Nickel project spoke on the last day and there were also representatives from Marengo Mining.

International experts raised questions as to whether the origin of capital matters with comparative material from outside the Pacific including Africa, discussed issues such as the 'new' Chinese in PNG emanating mostly from Fujing and the implications of China's role as it expands its investment throughout the world. Papers also focussed on specific PNG projects such as China's Ramu Nickel mine, the sharing of revenue from the Pacific Marine Industrial Zone and the Bougainville conflict as a case study in the marginalisation of local resource owners by the resource industry, PNG government, academics and

financial institutions. Of particular interest were papers presented by the media section of Divine Word University which outlined their research findings in relation to the role of the media, representations of local people in development agreements and whether local people have a voice. I was invited to speak about the Australian native title agreement-making context and disputes. The



Toni Bauman delivering her presentation on the native title regime, agreement making and disputes at the Asia-Pacific Partnerships in Resource Development in PNG symposium

*Photo courtesy of Simon Reynolds*

paper noted significant exploration activity by China in Australia and used the Wik/Aurukun Chalco proposal as an example of where traditional owners seemed happy with the process, but also suffered significant social impact when the project failed to go ahead. Two afternoon discussions I facilitated considered questions arising from the papers such as: 'What does development mean to you?'; 'How can meaningful engagement occur with landowners, new and old Chinese, students, academics, and developers?'; 'Are Papua New Guineans racist?' and 'Why do people agree and sign agreements when they don't understand what they're signing?'

I was struck by the similarities in PNG local grievances and those of native title holders in Australia. For me, this reinforced the findings of the AIATSIS NTRU Indigenous Facilitation and Mediation (IFaMP) Project: the importance of skilled engagement (as opposed to 'consultation' as something which is 'done' to people, and, a term which is bandied around in both countries), of specialised communication skills, relationship building, trust and reality checking.

As is the case in Australia, a common complaint was: 'No one spoke to us, the landowners' and the importance of communication was repeatedly emphasised: 'Come and sit down and talk to us, the little people, laugh with us, win our confidence'; 'In PNG we are face to face people who want to share and be heard'; 'Sit down and talk it over...that's communication' and 'Sit down and talk is the only way to find out what people are thinking'. The role of women and their absence from negotiation processes was also raised on many occasions. The point was made that space must be created for people to decide what progress means to them, rather than discourses of deficit including dependency culture and hand out mentalities being the conceptual template through which development projects are conceived.

As is also the case in Australia, disputes amongst land owners are rife, often in PNG referred to in the dichotomous Tok Pisin terms: 'big men' and 'little people'. PNG terms which may also have some

resonance with native title claimants in Australia include 'bogus land owners' and 'ancestor gerrymandering' – but the latter as one presenter pointed out, does not imply inauthenticity. Rather, identities in PNG, as they are in Australia, are renegotiated and realigned in cultural processes of negotiation of meaning in conditions of possibility. Divine Word University has a plan to establish a National Indigenous Mediation Service, similar to the proposal arising out of the AIATSIS IFaMP project, but which, in Australia, is still having difficulty getting traction with the Commonwealth Government.

Whilst there are clearly significant similarities between the PNG agreement-making development context and that of Australia, there are also significant differences: PNG agreements involve far more people (in some examples up to 50,000); Papua New Guineans are a majority in their country; and the Australian industry is far more regulated than that of PNG, making it difficult for companies whether Asian or otherwise to have carte blanche.

Nevertheless, I am more convinced than ever, that not only Papua New Guineans are the victims of poor governance, as one speaker pointed out. It is good governance on the part of all parties, in particular, the business of informed decision-making and dispute management processes that is critical for sustainable outcomes in both countries. One mining company representative pointed out that differences between companies are driven by policies at high levels whether Asian or otherwise: all parties, Asian or otherwise, need the freedom to develop systems that meet both the needs of companies and of locals.

Indigenous Australians and PNG nationals have much to learn from each other in development agreement-making. I issued an invitation, in which there was much interest, for PNG representatives to attend and present at the AIATSIS Native Title Conference in June 2011 in Brisbane.