

Contribution of Higher Education Institution in Post Conflict Recovery and Development: A Case Study of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea

Prof. Dr. Abdul Mannan and Mr. Albert Nukuitu, University of Papua New Guinea Open College, mannanma@upng.ac.pg and Albert.Nukuitu@upng.ac.pg

INTRODUCTION

The recovery of social institution such as education is one of the major tasks in societies that have suffered armed conflict. Peace building represents an extraordinary set of social and political experiments focusing on the creation of politico-legal structures and development projects. Very often peace process is focused on rebuilding basic education with little focus on higher education that require long time frames and extended engagement with local community and social institutions.

The University of Papua New Guinea maintained a University Centre in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (former North Solomon Province) before the crisis, ceased functioning early in the war, but re-established during the war. Delivery of educational courses at different locations of the Region has been difficult due to tension between conflicting groups, lack of infrastructure, logistics and communication. This paper examines how the University of Papua New Guinea through its open and distance learning program created a positive impact to the post-conflict recovery and development in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. The paper further reported how the University Centre delivered courses, seminars, workshops, training; organized conferences and lectures; and conducted research that contributed to the establishment of functional political institutions, building civil society, and enhancing economic development and government capacity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Post armed conflict recovery and reconstruction represents a set of social and political experiments and focused on the creation of national politico-legal structure, such as constitution, development projects and economic governance (Boyce, 2003). In most cases, donors and funding bodies focus on re-establishing basic education. Relatively little is known about the role of higher education and open and distance learning in post conflict recovery and development. This study provides a case study of the role of the open and distance learning in post conflict recovery and development in the Bougainville Province of Papua New Guinea.

Lederach's (1997) theoretical framework of post conflict recovery comprises three main components: replacement and rebuilding of infrastructure; re-establishment of social institutions; and reconciliation among conflicting parties. This paper examines the impact of the war on the Buka Open Campus (BOC) - an open and distance learning study centre of the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) and its re-establishment at its present site, its emergence as a social institution and perceptions of the leaders, managers and community leaders about the contribution of the BOC to the reconciliation process and development of the Bougainville province.

THE UNIVERSITY OF PAPUA ANEW GUINEA

The University of Papua New Guinea is the oldest University in the country founded in 1965. It is a dual mode university enrolling about 12000 students at main campus in Port Moresby and other 17 study centres around the country. Buka Open Campus is one of the study centres located at Kubu on Buka Island of Autonomous Region of Bougainville.

The first University Extension Studies Centre of the UPNG was established at Arawa, on the island of Bougainville (which is locally known as mainland) of the former North Solomon Province in 1982. UPNG maintained another Centre at Kieta on the island of Bougainville, which was ceased operation early in the war. The Arawa Centre maintained its presence during early stage of the war and was mainly involved in negotiating a ceasefire. The escalation of the hostility forced the Arawa Centre to close in 1990.

In response to the request of the local chiefs and initiative from the PNG Commission for Higher Education, the University Centre was re-established on Buka Island in 1992 during the height of war between PNG Defence Force and Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). The Centre was initially operating from a Primary School and continued at the same location until a ceasefire was negotiated in 1998. The Centre moved to its current location after construction of a two storied building for classrooms and offices in 1999. The infrastructure facilities were further extended by construction of another building. Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) including its Assembly has been housed in the new building.

During the war the Buka Centre which is currently known as Bougainville Open Campus (BOC) provided Adult Matriculation (Grade 11 & 12 equivalent) and Diploma in Commerce courses. BOC has subsequently phased out the adult matriculation program with certificate in Tertiary and Community Studies Program which aims to either prepare students for college and university studies or to prepare them for gainful employment or to return to community for self help. Furthermore Buka Open Campus delivers a range of diploma and degree programs in business studies, management, public administration, policy and planning, education, accounting and law. In addition to the degree and diploma programs, BOC offers short courses, workshops, seminars according to the local needs.

THE BOUGAINVILLE CONFLICT

North Solomon is one of the nineteen (19) provinces of Papua New Guinea comprising dozens of islands including two main islands namely Buka and Bougainville. Prior to the conflict in 1990, Bougainville had a population of 159,000 and ten years later according to the 2000 national census it now has an estimated population of 200,000. The closing down of the Panguna Copper Mine in Central Bougainville in 1989 triggered an armed struggle between the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) and Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) (Regan, 2001a). The fighting was also between the estranged groups that supported and opposed BRA, and those supported PNG authorities (Howley 2002, Regan, 1998). The PNG Government imposed an economic blockade on Bougainville between 1990 and 1995 which further disrupted essential services and lives of people (Dorney, 1998). A peace agreement was brokered in 1997 and a Truce Monitoring Group monitored an initial ceasefire and peace process until year 1998. A permanent ceasefire was possible after the UN Sponsored Peace Monitoring Group (PMG) took over responsibilities of disarmament activities (Regan, 2001b) and a peace agreement was signed between warring factions and the PNG Government. The agreement covers the disposal of weapons, drafting of a constitution, elections of a government and a referendum on independence 10-15 years after autonomy is achieved. Bougainville is currently governed by Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) headed by an elected President and Ministers. The Legislative body is Bougainville House of Representatives.

METHOD OF STUDY

The study used analysis of document to address the background and interviews people to assess the role and contribution of the UPNG in recovery and development of Bougainville. One of the authors of this paper is the Director of BOC and has better perception of the people who are reliable and competent to provide honest views and perception. A sample of twenty one (21) members of the community was interviewed concerning their perceptions of the roles and contribution of the UPNG in past-conflict recovery and development of Bougainville. The persons interviewed are the President and Ministers of ABG, community leaders, chiefs, public servants, women leaders, youth leaders. Information collected through interviews is presented in descriptive and summary forms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS.

The education services in the mainland Bougainville collapsed during the decade long unrest and conflict while few educational institution including University Centre was functioning with sufferings and abuse.

Establishment of a centre during a period of all out war presented a dilemma for the University from socio-political situation. There was a considerable level of uncertainty in delivering courses through distance mode with fragile communications, limited or no security and financial uncertainty. However, UPNG focused on providing opportunities to young and matured people who were willing to continue study which would benefit the Province during and after the war. A good number of students completed matriculation and moved to UPNG main campus and other higher education institutions outside the province. Although, establishment of the centre during the war was not supported by the BRA, they did not strongly oppose its operation.

However, the role of UPNG's distance education during the war was subsequently appreciated because students who passed through the centre during the war and graduated from UPNG returned to Bougainville after ceasefire to participate in reconstruction and development.

According to the majority respondents, the single most contribution to the recovery and development was the role of UPNG distance education through BOC to educating Bougainville population. BOC was the major alternative pathway for school children education during ceasefire period and there were not enough places available in the traditional school system which was destroyed during the war. In addition, a large number of teenagers including combatants who missed education for a decade had the opportunity to undertake further education in some cases without having to formally enroll in a school.

The CTCS courses provides maximum flexibility for these group of people to choose courses either to prepare for tertiary studies, or to gain skills for gainful employment or to return home for leading post-conflict reconstruction and development in the community. The program was also helpful for them to remain within community and to continue study according to their own pace. The community member also pointed out that the ODL opportunity helped the teenagers to withdraw from combatant life and change attitude to normal civil life.

Some community members commended the role of BOC in providing facilities and support of the Bougainville Interim Provincial Government (BIPG) and subsequently Autonomous Bougainville Government. The BOC at Kebu in Buka Island became a centre of activities for negotiations, meetings, seminars, conferences for peace and formation of Interim Government. The staff of BOC extended their services in facilitating meetings, seminars, conferences etc. The academics

and professionals from the UPNG main campus were readily available to participate and facilitate the peace process, election of ABG and reconstruction.

According to the respondents, another major contribution of BOC to the post-conflict recovery was in the domain of professional development for teachers and public servants. According to the peace agreement the elected ABG would gradually take over the powers and responsibility of governance and administration from PNG Government. Implementation of the peace agreement and success of the ABG was substantially dependent on the development of a cadre of administrators and managers in the public services. BOC organized short training courses for a large group of public servants. Professional degree in management offered at BOC through the distance mode contributes to the development and efficient delivery of services. During the post conflict period, the BOC organized about 1200 person days of formal training for public servants and private organizations. Some courses were attended by the Government Ministers and Assembly Members for upgrading management skills.

Some community members commented that prior to the conflict Bougainville was considered as an attractive place for teachers. Post conflict education system in Bougainville suffered from acute shortage of teachers because teachers from other region were reluctant to return or take up teaching for fear of security. In absence of a teacher college in Bougainville, untrained teachers and new recruits were reluctant to go to other region for fear of revenge from other Papua New Guineans who lost kin as a result of conflict. The provision of teacher in-service programs at BOC from the UPNG and the University of Goroka, contributed to overcoming of teacher shortage and untrained teachers. The teachers were able to teach in the schools and continue to study BA (Ed) courses and attend Lahara during school holidays. About 150 (43% female) teachers were trained in various teacher training programs during post conflict period of two years.

The ODL of BOC helped teachers and public servants who were either suffering from trauma or returned to the community after war to remain in the workplace and community and to upgrade their skill and knowledge and thereby increase productivity. This has tremendous positive impact on the recovery a development of post-conflict Bougainville.

The women and girls have been the worse victims of violence during and after the war in Bougainville. The security concerns of women and girls force them to live with family and did not travel beyond their district boundaries. In addition, a group of teenagers and combatants found it difficult to sit in a classroom with junior girls and boys with 10-20 years difference of age. Some responded, recognized that women, girls and combatant preferred studying individually from home rather than in classroom. Distance education was worth while option for this group of people. Most significantly, distance education through BOC increased the participation of women and girls in education in post-conflict Bougainville.

The average enrolment of the Extension Studies Centre during pre-conflict period was about 300 of which 17 per cent were female. The enrolment was reduced to 150 during the conflict period with 10 per cent female students. The students enrolment during post conflict period increased from 260 (female 43%) in 1998 to 750 (female 58%) in 2006. All respondents commended the BOC's contribution to the gender balance in the Bougainville.

Buka is in the northern part of the province, and its location presents problems for students who need to attend the centre for tutorials or examinations. For example, transport from the Southernmost Districts of Bougainville (Siwai and Buin) cost about K200 for a return fare to and from Buka by truck-cum-bus is K200 which is equivalent to one week salary of a primary school teacher. UPNG established Sub-Centres in Buin and Siwai in collaboration with local schools and community. Several respondents pointed out the contributions of the sub-centres toward social reconstruction and suggested to set up similar centres at Arawa in Central Bougainville.

The community members' perception about the BOC contribution in post conflict recovery and development was the human resources development for employments and to a lesser extent for personal healing from trauma. The UPNG did not take leading role rather preferred supporting role in the reconciliation process. This was mainly due to their inexperience and institutional incapacity to deal with post conflict reconciliation. The members of the community suggested that other higher education institutions of Papua New Guinea should also offer their courses and preferably in technical areas through the BOC. The respondents also suggested that studies in counseling, peace, conflict resolution, interpersonal relationships, leadership, human rights etc. although embodied in various courses, more emphasis could be given to deliver short and user friendly courses at community level. However, some prominent members of the community perceived that the open and distance learning program of the UPNG through BOC contributed to develop visionary, innovative and creative thinkers, provided vital knowledge and understanding of the role of leaders in the post conflict recovery and development and promote 'good governance'.

CONCLUSION

The educational institutions including UPNG's distance learning centres in the Bougainville were destroyed during the war. A high school and few primary schools at Buka Island were running under the protection of PNGDF. Students' attendance to schools was irregular due to fear of reprisal from BRA. It was an impossible proposition to establish any institution to deliver tertiary education face to face during the war. However, UPNG was able to re-establish ODL centre in Buka because of the availability of courses for delivery through the distance mode with assistance from locally available personnel. Delivery of education services at Buka during a civil war demonstrated the role of ODL in maintaining education services in war torn areas where main stream education system did not exist. The young generation who does not understand the right and wrong of a war and its consequences, are prone to becoming young soldiers. BOC helped to keeping young people busy with studies during armed conflict, and prevent them to join the fight.

The Buka Centre was established in 1992 and was operating from a primary school. A number of buildings were constructed at Kubu site of Buka Island immediately after the ceasefire in 1998. The Buka Centre was transferred to a new building in Kubu. Development of infrastructure facilities made it possible to re-invigorate the operation of the Buka Centre which played a vital role in post conflict recovery and development. This has fulfilled one of the conditions of post-conflict recovery as defined by Lederach (1997) – re-establishment of infrastructure.

During the post-conflict, a coincidental development was taken place within UPNG through the establishment of a Open College replacing the Institute of Distance Education. With assistance from donor funding the Open College developed its capacity for course materials development to offer most of the University courses and established four regional campuses in four regions with required student support facilities and a network of centres in all provinces. However, Buka Centre was upgraded to a campus status in order to demonstrate UPNG's commitment to the recovery and development of Bougainville. The development has enhanced institutional capacity to delivery newly developed certificate, diploma and degree courses through the Buka Open Campus. Coincident initiatives of UPNG contributed to the several conditions of post conflict

recovery of re-establishing social institutions as defined by Lederach (1997). The re-establishment of an ODL institution in Buka contributed to the training of public servants and teachers, leaders and community members. This development has also helped to withdraw teenagers and combatants from the street/hideouts and absorbed them into the mainstream social system. Most importantly ODL made it possible for these groups of people to continue studies while at work and living at home with community.

The study provides less understanding of the respondents in respect of the contribution of BOC and ODL programs towards reconciliation among conflicting groups – the third aspect of Lederach's (1997) post-conflict recovery framework. However, the people who attended studies through the distance mode and participated in seminars, workshops, conferences better understood the peace, conflict resolution, interpersonal relationships, human rights, leadership and over and above democracy – the pre-condition for development.

The emergence role of ODL in social reconstruction and building knowledge society for promoting democracy and consequent development has been recognized both in literature and practice. The role of ODL in delivering education in a war zone and post conflict recovery and development is yet to gain widespread recognition. The case study of the UPNG's contributions to the post conflict recovery and development of Bougainville underpins the powerful and boundless role of open and distance learning in providing peace, democracy and development in unstable developing countries.

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