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Title: The Strengths, Gender, and Place (SGP) Framework: A new tool for assessing community engagement

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The Strengths, Gender, and Place (SGP) Framework: A new tool for assessing community engagement

Justin See, Katharine McKinnon, and Pryor Placino

Abstract

This paper introduces the Strengths, Gender, and Place (SGP) framework, a novel evaluative tool designed to assess community engagement in development programmes. Developed in response to calls for decolonised and locally-led development in the Pacific and beyond, the SGP framework comprises fifteen indicators across three dimensions. These dimensions evaluate the extent to which programmes leverage local strengths, address gender inequities, and implement place-based approaches that respect local knowledge and practices. The framework was applied to 30 project reports from four major development organisations in Papua New Guinea's Western Province. The study also incorporated insights from 20 semi-structured interviews with key informants, which further enriched the findings. The results revealed significant shortcomings in current community engagement practices in the region, with a heavy reliance on external resources and expertise, failure to achieve gender equity targets, and a lack of meaningful co-design with communities. The SGP framework offers a practical tool for donor agencies and practitioners, providing a robust measure to evaluate and improve community engagement in line with contemporary demands for strengths-based, gender-sensitive, and place-based approaches to development.

Key words: international development, Papua New Guinea, metrics, participation, gender, asset-based community development, place-based

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Introduction

Since the rise of participatory methods like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) in the 1980s and 1990s, community engagement has remained central to development practice. While terms such as ‘locally-led’, ‘co-designed’, and ‘place-based’ have gained traction, especially amid growing calls to decolonise development (Deciancio et al., 2022; Keahey, 2023; Plaatjie, 2013; Tawake et al., 2022), there is little clarity on what effective community engagement actually looks like. In the Pacific, where calls to prioritise Indigenous and local knowledges have become louder (Craney, 2020; Meki & Tarai, 2023; Vunibola & and Scobie, 2022), no shared criteria exists to assess whether development efforts are genuinely locally led. When our team reviewed development programmes in Western Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG), we found no framework to evaluate the quality of community engagement. This paper presents our efforts to fill that gap and reports on the tool we developed and tested. We argue that having clear assessment criteria is crucial for funders and practitioners to promote locally led initiatives.

Our work is set against the backdrop of Australia’s substantial Official Development Assistance (ODA) to PNG, a former Australian territory (1906-1975) and the largest recipient of Australian ODA in 2024 (AUD\$637.4 million), aimed at fostering “a peaceful, stable, resilient, and prosperous PNG” (DFAT, 2025, p. 8). While historically driven by strategic geopolitical interests (Wood et al., 2019), recent policy shifts highlight “listening, respect and genuine partnership” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 3) and support for “locally led efforts to drive change” (Ibid., p. 33). The conciliatory turn responds to Pacific demands for development efforts that respect local values and practices (Fletcher et al., 2013; Hughes & Scheyvens, 2021; Vunibola, 2023). However, translating these principles into on-the-ground programmes that genuinely engage with local ways of knowing and doing is not so straightforward.

In 2020, we were commissioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) to help tailor Australian development programmes to the unique geographic and socio-ecological contexts of Western Province. The project reviewed decades of development work to assess the potential of asset-based approaches for agricultural resilience, with attention to Indigenous agrarian knowledge and practice (Cargill & Mahalaya, 2017). Our scoping study sought to identify existing community assets and explore how external agencies could collaborate more effectively with local communities. We proposed to assess how past initiatives reflected place-based, strengths-oriented, and gender-sensitive approaches (McKinnon et al., 2024, p. 8). However, we found no existing evaluative framework that captured these dimensions, prompting us to develop a new assessment tool to fill this gap.

Our focus on strengths, gender, and place emerged during the research design phase in response to funder interest in exploring strengths-based approaches and broader policy priorities promoting gender-sensitive and place-based development. Critiques of deficit-based models caution against overemphasising community needs and shortcomings rather than recognising existing assets and capabilities (Cook & Melo Zurita, 2019; Sachs, 2022). In contrast, we drew on Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), which assumes that communities already possess valuable knowledge and skills to drive change (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2008). A gender-sensitive approach complements this by recognising the different roles and experiences of women and men and addressing barriers to equality (Akondeng et al., 2022; Gurstein, 1996; Moser, 1993). Finally, a place-based approach serves as a corrective to colonial legacies in development practice, emphasising the situatedness of interventions and ensuring that local knowledge, rather than external paradigms, shapes development processes (Hickey & Mohan, 2005; Hofer & Kaufmann, 2022).

To support our review of past development programmes, we sought a tool for evaluating strengths, gender and place. While metrics for participation or gender equity are well established, reflecting the idea that measurement can shape practice (Hauser & Katz, 1998), tools for assessing local strengths and place-based approaches remain underdeveloped. Foundational frameworks like Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation and Pretty's Typology of Participation (1995) have informed evaluations of community engagement across various sectors (Goodman et al., 2017; South & Phillips, 2014), while gender analysis tools such as the Harvard Analytical Framework and Gender Analysis Matrix (GAM) emerged alongside the Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm (Draper et al., 2010; Mosedale, 2005). While these tools often overlap, they primarily focus on participation and gender, leaving a gap in assessing how well programmes are seeking to identify local strengths or adopt place-based approaches.

Drawing on literature from community development and social work, we built a multi-dimensional framework that synthesises strengths, gender, and place-based perspectives to evaluate community engagement. We then utilised the evaluative framework to assess community engagement within the development projects of four development organisations in Western Province. Our proposed framework therefore serves a dual purpose: a lens to evaluate past initiatives and a guide to shape future development efforts towards inclusive and effective community engagement.

PNG's Western Province

Western Province is the largest province in PNG, strategically located between Indonesia to the west and the Torres Strait to the south (Map 1). In 2021, the population was estimated at 315,273, spread across three districts: Middle Fly, North Fly, and South Fly. With over half of the population under 18 years old and an estimated annual growth rate of 3%, the province's population is projected to double by 2050 (PNG National Statistical

Office, 2021). Its Human Development Index (HDI) was estimated at 0.260 in 2007, ranking it among the world’s poorest regions (Busilacchi et al., 2018). Livelihoods are primarily subsistence-based, relying on fishing, gardening, and hunting, and many communities remain disconnected from basic services (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2024). In the south, the Torres Strait Treaty (1985) allows free movement between Australia and PNG through a ‘Protected Zone’, though this applies only to 14 PNG ‘Treaty villages’ and 18 designated Australian Torres Strait Island communities (Moran & Curth-Bibb, 2020).

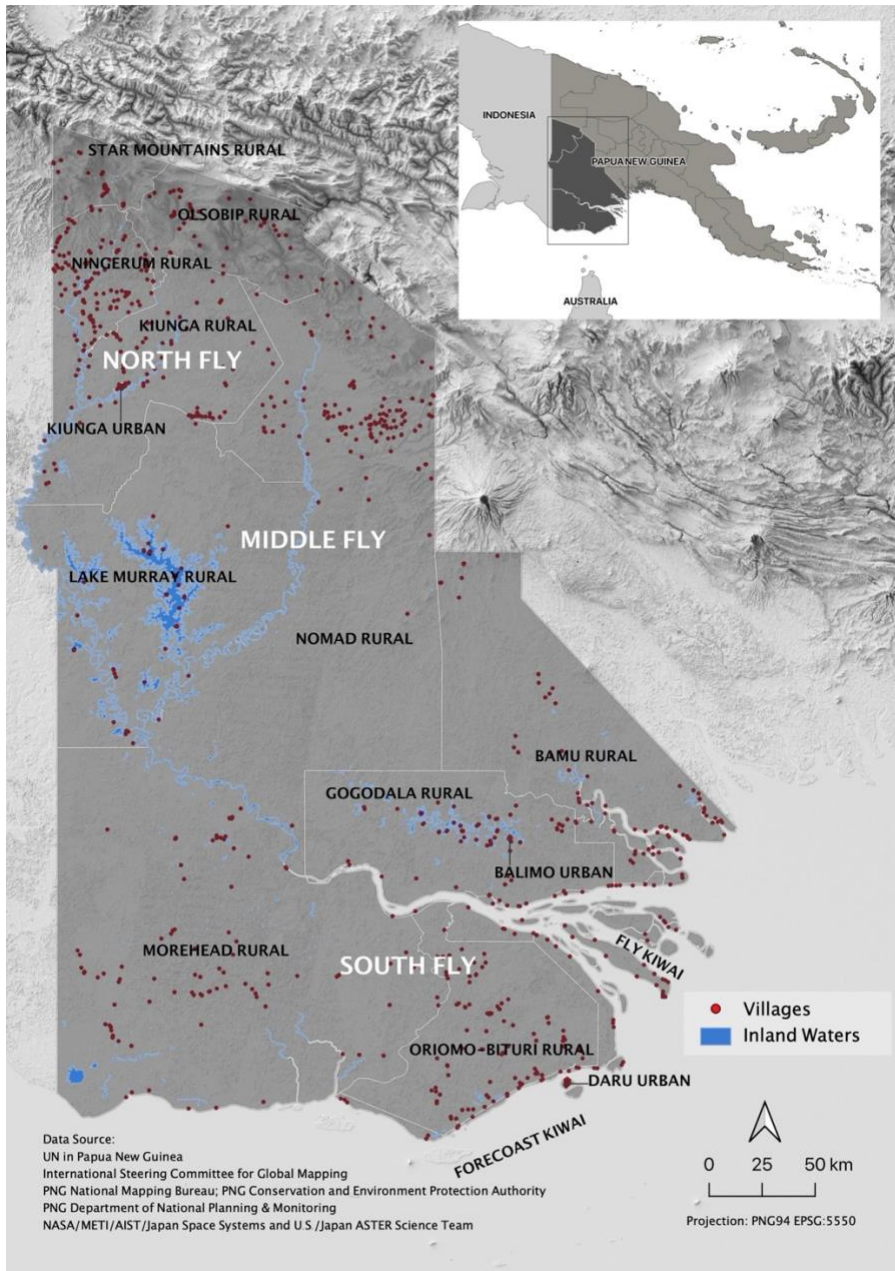


Figure 1: Map of Western Province, Papua New Guinea
 Source: McKinnon et al. (2024)

The northern part of Western Province is the site of Ok Tedi Mining, one of the largest copper and gold mines in the world. Since mining began operating in 1984, Western Province was able to contribute to as much as 15 to 25% of the country's gross domestic product, yet the wealth generated by this extractive industry has been unevenly distributed (Moran et al., 2021). The 1984 Ok Tedi tailings dam collapse remains one of the worst environmental disasters globally, severely damaging the Fly River system and displacing 95,000 people, nearly half the province's population at the time (Butler et al., 2015). Following the disaster, the Ok Tedi Development Foundation (OTDF) was established to manage and implement livelihood and development interventions for the 147,000 river residents of the Community Mine Continuation Agreement (CMCA) corridor (OTDF, 2020). However, environmental damage and socio-economic inequalities persist, and many communities continue to face displacement and degraded agricultural and fishing systems.

While Western Province receives a relatively small share of international aid, it has been the recipient of numerous development projects from NGOs and international aid agencies (Moran & Curth-Bibb, 2020). However, many interventions follow a deficit-based model, prioritising external technical assistance rather than community-driven solutions (Filer & Jenkins, 2017). Globally, the effectiveness of external technical assistance has been questioned, with critiques highlighting dependency on foreign aid, short-term 'quick fix' solutions, and a failure to build sustainable local networks (Green & Goetting, 2010). In Western Province, similar concerns arise: many development programmes prioritise external expertise and technology over community-driven solutions, leading to limited local ownership and long-term sustainability challenges (Kapi, 2021). In response, alternative approaches emphasising asset-based community development (ABCD), strengths-based, and place-based methodologies are increasingly seen as more effective ways to leverage local knowledge and build long-term resilience.

The SGP Framework

The Strengths, Gender, and Place (SGP) framework was designed to enable a historical analysis of the programmes delivered in Western Province by organisations like OTDF and others. Due to travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, the assessment had to be conducted from afar and was intended to be used in analysing the documentary evidence we were able to obtain from organisations active in the region. We developed the criteria for the framework through a comprehensive review of academic and grey literature, reviewing existing assessment tools as well as a broad literature concerned with the strengths-based, place-based, gender-sensitive approaches across the Pacific region and beyond. From this review, we distilled recurring themes in response to the question: *how do organisations practice strengths-based, gender sensitive, and place-specific approaches to community development?* We then narrowed the possible criteria down to 5 key characteristics for each of the three dimensions (Table 1).

We designed guiding questions for each indicator to elicit qualitative responses, helping assess how development interventions align with strengths-based, gender-sensitive, and place-based principles. Given the need for a workable and broadly applicable framework, we deliberately selected a limited set of indicators, prioritising clarity and usability over capturing every nuance of complex development processes. These indicators serve as prompts to highlight key aspects of practice while acknowledging that some depth may be lost in simplification. At the same time, these guiding questions were structured to generate quantitative outputs by incorporating categorical responses, such as yes/no answers (Appendix 2). This allowed us to systematically quantify trends, such as the percentage of projects that emphasised local assets over external resources or the proportion that explicitly recognised community expertise. By integrating this dual approach, we ensured that the framework could provide both rich qualitative insights and measurable patterns across development interventions. To operationalise this framework, we developed indicators that reflect the core principles of strengths-based, gender-sensitive, and place-based approaches. Below, we outline the indicators for each component of the framework, explaining their rationale and application.

Table 1: SGP Framework for Assessing Community Engagement

Indicators	Guide Questions
<i>Strengths</i>	
1. Builds Action from 'Inside Out'	<i>Is there evidence that the projects employ internal assets and resources before accessing external resources?</i>
2. Community Members are Experts	<i>Is there evidence that the projects regard community members as experts?</i>
3. Development Practitioners as Brokers	<i>Is there evidence that development practitioners act as brokers to assist people access external resources or engage with institutions such as government or NGOs?</i>
4. Identification of strengths and assets	<i>Is there evidence that development practitioners use a strengths-identification process? Are steps taken to reveal existing assets and strengths?</i>
5. Process of Envisioning	<i>Is there evidence that development practitioners allow participants to think beyond their concerns and towards their future desires and aspirations?</i>
<i>Gender</i>	
6. Gender diversity	<i>What is the proportion of women:men involved in the projects? Were there projects supported spaces organised by and for women?</i>
7. Sex-disaggregated data	<i>Are sex breakdowns available? Is the analysis of all variables disaggregated by sex?</i>
8. Gender equality objectives	<i>Is there evidence that the projects include gender equality objectives and/or messages?</i>

9. Analysis of Gender roles and distribution	<i>Is there evidence that women's and men's different gender roles are considered?</i>
10. Gender expertise	<i>Is there evidence that adequate gender expertise is deployed in the projects?</i>

Place

11. Type of Participation	<i>What is the extent of community participation?</i>
12. Co-design	<i>Were the projects co-designed with communities?</i>
13. Community leadership and governance	<i>Who has agency? Who is driving the initiatives?</i>
14. Respect for diverse ways of knowing, being and doing	<i>Is there evidence that the projects recognise Indigenous and traditional beliefs, values, and other ways of knowing?</i>
15. Diversity	<i>Is there evidence that the projects are tailored to the needs of different groups?</i>

Strengths-based approaches (SBA) focus on leveraging community assets, capabilities, and resources (Mathie & Cunningham, 2008). We proposed five indicators for the strengths component of the SGP framework. First, “**Builds Action from Inside Out**” assesses the extent to which projects draw from resources and assets internal to the community and location (Guarino et al., 2023; Ward, 2021). It highlights the need to take actions that focuses on utilising internal strengths first before accessing external resources (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Second, “**Community Members are Experts**” gauges whether community members were enabled to lead, implement, and manage their own projects (Close & Lohr, 2023). Third, “**Development Practitioners as Brokers**” evaluates the extent in which development actors forge productive and sustained relationships between community members and institutions. Brokering relationships is critical as it enables community members to make demands on services that are responsibility of the state (Sullivan & Rapp, 2009; Willetts et al., 2014). Fourth, “**Identification of strengths and assets**” looks for efforts to reveal strengths, resources, and other assets within a community either through asset mapping or similar tools (Blickem et al., 2018; South et al., 2024). Fifth, “**Process of Envisioning**” evaluates whether steps were taken to involve community members in articulating their aspirations and desired futures, helping them to identify goals and their own capacities to contribute to their community (Carnegie et al., 2019).

For the gender component, we proposed five indicators to help identify whether development projects take seriously the distinct concerns and aspirations of women and men. First, “**Gender representation**” assesses estimates how much space was given for the voices and experience of different genders to be heard. We assessed what proportion of males to females were involved in implementing projects, based on the expectation that at a minimum projects should be aiming for 50:50 gender balance in order to provide both men and women with equal opportunities to participate in development programmes (Ediae et al., 2024; Pandey & Midha, 2024). We also looked for evidence of whether

projects supported or recognised spaces intentionally organised by and for women. Women only groups, such as informal savings circles to formal Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and reproductive health forums, are widely used in development programming to build solidarity, enhance autonomy, and create safe spaces for dialogue and action (Desai et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2021). Second, “**Sex-disaggregated data**” checks if project documentation includes data disaggregated by sex to track equal access and benefits (Hawkes et al., 2022). Third, “**Gender equality objectives**” examines whether projects explicitly state aims and recommendations related to gender equality. As Hinrichsen et al. (2014, p. 1) explains: “only when gender-relevant aspects are explicitly mentioned in the objectives system and the indicators of the projects... can we ensure that gender equality is adequately taken into account”. Fourth, “**Analysis of Gender roles and distribution**” checks whether projects consider the different social and economic roles of women and men (McKinnon et al., 2016). Fifth, “**Gender expertise**” checks for the employment of gender experts to implement gender-sensitive activities (Gerard, 2024; Kunz & Prügl, 2019).

We acknowledge that the SGP framework currently operates within a binary conception of gender. This reflects the structure of the available documentary evidence which overwhelmingly adopts binary classifications. However, we recognise that this approach does not capture the full spectrum of gender identities present across Pacific societies that challenge binary models. A wide range of Indigenous genders such as takatāpui in Aotearoa New Zealand (Kerekere, 2017), fa’afafine in Samoa (Farran, 2010), and vakasalewalewa in Fiji (Ravulo et al., 2024) reflect longstanding traditions of gender-diverse identities, even as they have been marginalised by colonial and Christian norms that enforced heteronormativity (O’Sullivan, 2021). Globally, even where legal progress is made, community experiences reveal a persistent disjuncture between legal recognition and the realisation of substantive justice for queer and trans communities (Kumar et al., 2024). We thus stress the importance of incorporating this complexity into future iterations of the framework in order to better align with anti-colonial approaches to gender.

For the place-based element of the framework, our first indicator draws upon Pretty’s (1995) “**Type of Participation**” which captures a range of ‘types’ of power sharing from ‘manipulation’ (where almost all power lies with people external to the local community) to ‘self-mobilisation’ (where power lies with people in the community) (Appendix 2). Second, “**Co-design**” assesses the diversity of participants involved in developing and testing responses to shared challenges (Blomkamp, 2018; Dart, 2018). Third, “**Community leadership and governance**” seeks evidence about who has agency in the project and whether community members are driving the implementation of projects. It draws from the principles of participatory development which highlight the importance of “shared stewardship and accountability for outcomes and impacts” (Dart, 2018, p. 6). Fourth, “**Respect for diverse ways of knowing, being and doing**” checks for engagement with local knowledges and culturally appropriate methods (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003; Smith, 2012). Included here was an interest in whether the methods employed the use of storytelling such as *Talanoa* (Jackson, 2021). Fifth, “**Diversity**” looks for evidence of catering to the needs of various groups, including women, youth, elderly, and people with

disabilities. This reflects the place-based approach's emphasis on recognising multiple voices and needs (Crenshaw, 2017).

Research Methods

We applied the SGP framework to analyse development programmes in Western Province in two phases. In the first phase, we compiled a comprehensive collection of project reports and development projects from organisations operating in Western Province between 2011 and 2020. Our search targeted reports documenting basic service delivery, capacity building, infrastructure development, and livelihood projects. In total, we identified and reviewed 30 research projects and 160 development projects, subjecting them to close methodological analysis using this assessment framework.

For the purposes of this paper, we focus on 30 project reports from four major development organisations: OTDF, PNG Sustainable Development Program Limited (PNGSDP), Australian Doctors International (ADI), and the World Bank's Rural Service Delivery Projects in PNG (see Appendix 1). These four organisations were selected because they were the only ones with publicly available project reports. The reports provided comprehensive details on development initiatives, including project titles, locations, objectives, methodologies, and, in some cases, reported outcomes.

We then applied the SGP tool to systematically evaluate these reports. Two team members independently assessed each project using the SGP Framework (Appendix 2). Any discrepancies in scoring were discussed within the research team, and final assessments were reached by consensus. We tabulated the data and analysed it using descriptive statistics to identify patterns, supplementing our quantitative findings with illustrative quotes from the project reports.

The second phase involved online semi-structured interviews with key development actors in Western Province to triangulate our emerging results, validate findings, and enrich interpretations. We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews via Zoom with key informants who had extensive knowledge and experience in the region. These informants represented three sectors: government (n=5), NGOs (n=7), and community groups (n=8). Interviews were conducted in English, recorded with participant consent, and explored six key areas: project planning and design, implementation processes, community engagement strategies, effectiveness measures, monitoring and evaluation practices, and implementation challenges. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and we conducted thematic analysis using open coding to identify emerging themes.

Applying the SGP Framework in Western Province, PNG

In this section, we present the results from our application of the SGP Framework, with additional insights that were gained from our semi-structured interviews.

A. Assessing for Strengths

Our findings indicate that development projects in Western Province often focus on community deficiencies rather than existing assets. Of the 30 projects examined, 67% (20/30) did not attempt to ‘build from the inside out’, relying instead on external resources. For example, OTDF’s Mount Fubilan Agro-Industries Poultry Project sourced "the initial flock of 3,900 day old chicks (layers)" from New Zealand and established rubber programmes through international partnerships, signing "a contract with marketing partner OLAM based in Singapore..." (OTDF, 2017, p. 52).

Local community members were rarely recognised as experts, with only 70% (21/30) of projects acknowledging local expertise. Instead, projects often prioritised hiring external professionals and introduced new technologies. For instance, OTDF’s village model project established a deer farm "under the guidance of a commercial deer farmer from ... NSW, Australia" (OTDF, 2012, p. 4). All analysed projects also failed to identify community strengths or engage in visioning exercises.

Organisations consistently framed interventions by highlighting community limitations, such as OTDF's characterisation of Western Province as having "some of the lowest socio-economic indicators in the country" (OTDF, 2018, p. 21) or the World Bank highlighting that “PNG’s human development indicators remain low... and its lack of infrastructure facilities is a major constraint to economic development” (World Bank, 2018, p. 9). This problem-focused approach has fostered a 'negative mindset' towards development, as explained by a research coordinator for ACIAR in Western Province:

“so negative about projects, about the government, about everything. So if you have to come up with something for Western Province, you have to address the mindset issue first”. (Informant 1, March 2022).

The only notable strength was development practitioners' role as brokers, with 70% (21/30) of documents showing significant capability in helping community members access external resources and engage with institutions. OTDF, for example, strategically accessed funding from sources beyond mining operations and established relationships with various governmental and technical development partners (OTDF, 2011). ADI has a memorandum of understanding with PNG National Department of Health, the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga, North Fly District and the Western Province Provincial Health Authority (ADI, 2020). The World Bank (2018, p. 5) has a partnership agreement with the “DPLGA, Provincial Government, District Administration, and each of the participating local governments” to implement its rural service delivery project. However, our assessment for strengths reveals a pervasive deficit-oriented approach to development that systematically overlooks local

assets and expertise. The analysis demonstrates an overreliance on external resources and interventions, with limited attempts to leverage internal community strengths. This framing justifies a top-down approach to development, positioning external actors as primary agents of change.

B. Examining Gender Sensitivity

Our analysis of gender revealed a disparity between intentions and practical implementation of gender equity in development projects. Despite commitments to gender equity, only 30% (9/30) of projects even mentioned the number of women involved, and none achieved a 50/50 ratio of male to female staff. None of the documents we reviewed indicated that women-only groups had been established or supported as part of project implementation. Only 23% (7/30) of documents providing gender-disaggregated data. A project officer with a decade of experience in Western Province underscored the importance of women involvement, stating:

“If we do not empower the women, then we are missing out on a really good workforce and also the leadership qualities that they could bring”. (Informant 3, March 2022).

In its 2020 report, OTDF claims that its “staff numbers include 53 permanent staff – of which 42 are males and 11 females” (OTDF, 2020, p. 14). ADI provided a rare exception, reporting that 50% of their multi-disciplinary team and 41% of outreach patrol members were women (ADI, 2019, p. 27).

Some organisations demonstrated nascent gender equality objectives in the reports. Substantial gender equality objectives were stated in 37% (11/30) of projects, while 40% (12/30) gave minor attention to gender. For instance, OTDF developed a Women and Children Action Plan (2019-2023), while ADI explicitly positioned itself to “to make gender an important and deliberate objective of health outreach patrols to rural and remote communities” (ADI, 2019, p. 25). The World Bank’s project “aims to reach about 400,000 beneficiaries, of whom an estimated 200,000 would be women” (World Bank, 2018, p. 12). However, comprehensive analysis of gender roles and gendered distribution of work was entirely absent across all examined projects.

Gender expertise was also limited with only ADI recruiting a dedicated gender expert, who reached over 5,000 community members with public health education focusing on gender equity and social inclusion (ADI, 2019, pp. 25). The lack of resources being dedicated to gender expertise occurred even though most of our interview respondents indicated their high regard for women and their important roles in Western Province communities, for example a program manager for a church-based NGO said:

“one of our aims is to make sure that women are involved in all of these activities... and I tend to find that women are better farmers, anyway.” (Informant 13, July 2022).

The gender sensitivity assessment unveils significant limitations to gender-sensitive approaches in Western Province. Despite efforts to address gender inequities, the overall approach remains fragmented, with persistent structural barriers evidenced by low female representation, minimal sex-disaggregated data collection, and an absence of comprehensive gender role analysis.

C. Evaluating Place Specificity

Place-based approaches were scarcely evident in Western Province. Our analysis showed that: 47% (14/30) of projects had passive participation, 13% (4/30) involved consultation, and 40% (12/30) were driven by material incentives, suggesting a superficial approach to community engagement. OTDF’s agriculture project, the 'WestAgro Master Plan', exemplifies this, with its development process revealing a significant disconnect despite claims of alignment with community aspirations. The plan was developed externally, and its launch involved "80 participants representing all levels of government, development partners, private sector, and civil society" – notably with minimal representation from the communities themselves (OTDF, 2018, p. 19). ADI’s approach predominantly relied on information dissemination through aerial patrols, while PNGSDP adopted a consultative stance through meetings with trustees and village representatives.

The study revealed a significant lack of collaborative design, with 97% (29/30) of projects showing no meaningful co-development with community members. Despite organisations’ commitments to community leadership, the evidence predominantly showed external actors leading interventions. A case in point is OTDF’s advisory committee which is primarily comprised of experts from other urban centres within PNG far removed from Western Province, or even as far as from Australia. The committee members are described as “a second tier of governance providing advice, strategic direction and approval of impact and investment projects” (OTDF, 2014, p. 28). Furthermore, a local government officer in Daru highlighted the repercussions of this lack of co-design:

“If people see that they are not part of the project that you are doing, they will push it back... There was a time when one of the guys put dirt into the water. These things happen... things get damaged”. (Informant 1, March 2022).

There was also little effort to understand or engage with cultural diversity with 93% (28/30) of projects not respecting diverse ways of knowing, being, and doing. Some projects explicitly intended to replace traditional practices. OTDF, for example, appeared to celebrate the decline of the traditional staple sago crop with a featured quote: "Personally, I feel attitudes are shifting, especially in the Middle Fly communities, from sago-making to rice and this is a good thing. In the future, the Sago swamps will be dying out, and we want

to shift into Rice farming" (OTDF, 2017, p. 60). Attention to the needs of diverse groups was more encouraging with 70% (21/30) of projects showing attention to vulnerable groups. For example, World Bank claims that it held separate meetings with elderly, women, and youth "in order to enhance the engagement of traditionally less influential community members and their understanding of the processes" (World Bank, 2018, p. 16) with OTDF and Adi likewise claimed a focus on women and children. Overall, despite rhetorical commitments to local engagement, the projects we analysed consistently failed to centre local knowledges, cultural practices, and community-driven development, with the predominant model being externally driven intervention.

Conclusions: What did the SGP framework reveal about WP and how could it be useful elsewhere?

In the Pacific, as with other places around the world, development organisations are under pressure to do development differently. There is nothing new in the critique that development practice enacts colonising logics and too often offers solutions that are inappropriate to local contexts, at odds with Pacific worldviews, or give inadequate power to local communities in decision-making and design. For nations like Australia, however, (that continue to value the investment in 'soft power' solutions to regional relationships), such critiques have only recently prompted a shift in high level policy settings. While gender and participation have both featured in development delivery for decades, figuring out how to do development that is place-based and locally-led has not led ODA policy until now.

The SGP tool we explore in this paper offers one starting point for shifting to more locally-led practice. The tool suggests a practicable set of indicators that can provide a starting point for assessing whether development programs are working with what we suggest is 'best practice' in community engagement: foregrounding the existing strengths and capacities of local communities in project design; ensuring the complexities of gender dynamics are recognised; and working to implement power sharing with community members and adopt processes that fit with the social, cultural and political nuances of local places. We used the 15 criteria proposed to review the delivery of development programmes in Western Province. The limitations on the study were considerable, conducted as it was during Covid-19 pandemic travel restrictions. Additionally, implementing the framework revealed practical challenges, such as difficulties in obtaining detailed project data and reliance on publicly available reports online, which may not fully reflect on-the-ground realities. These challenges highlight the importance of co-designing the framework with relevant stakeholders to ensure its indicators are contextually appropriate and meaningful. Nevertheless, based on the SGP analysis of development practice, we were able to show that as a whole, development programmes have been falling short on many fronts, including well established criteria around gender equity and community participation. The picture that emerges of livelihood interventions to

date is that they are seldom shaped around a locally defined set of priorities and aspirations.

The reasons for adopting a strengths-based, gender-sensitive, and place-based approach are well documented. What is clear is that one of the challenges for donor agencies, however, is in knowing how to translate these aims into project design and delivery. The criteria we proposed captures a handful of essential elements that offer a focus point for measuring and reporting on community engagement in a holistic way. If what you measure shapes performance (Hauser & Katz, 1998), this framework provides a starting point for shaping development performance towards locally-led development that may be able to offer a decolonial (or at least less colonial) approach to development work. At the same time, we do not present the SGP framework as a final or universal model. Rather, we see it as a flexible tool designed to provoke discussion and experimentation among practitioners, researchers and policymakers. We invite others to trial and adapt the SGP framework in their own contexts, particularly through collaborative processes that centre the voices of local communities.

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