

EWC BUILDS PEACE IN THE PACIFIC: REDUCING CONFLICT THROUGH DIALOGUE



The PIDP team arrives in Isabel Province, Solomon Islands.

Many countries in the Asia Pacific region have recently emerged from long histories of colonial rule or internal discord and are now embarking on the arduous process of nation-building — a process that often triggers points of contention amongst the various factions and ethnic groups within a country. During 2005, initiatives of the EWC's Pacific Islands Development Program (PIDP) addressed this critical issue of internal conflict, providing tangible

solutions and at times, directly facilitating the dialogue process.

Drawing on four years of successful unity-building *Talanoa* dialogues in Fiji, the PIDP expanded its ongoing conflict reduction efforts in 2005. The Solomon Islands and Tonga were the primary focus of these new initiatives. EWC Research Fellow Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, originally from the Solomon Islands, commented: "The process of post-conflict nation rebuilding is never easy...

"Peace-building is about fostering and strengthening social relationships. The EWC's work in the region, drawing upon the *talanoa* and *tok stori* processes, is helping to reestablish this crucial dialogue."

**TARCISIUS
KABUTLAULAKA**
EWC Research Fellow

because conflicts often destroy, not only a country's physical infrastructure, but also the social structures that facilitate and maintain relations between communities."

After 20 years of independence, the Solomon Islands broke out in civil unrest, culminating in a coup in 2000, which left the country with a deteriorating economy, weak government capacity, and law and order problems. Beginning in 2004, the East-West Center initiated the *Tok Stori* For Peace project in cooperation with the Solomon Islands' National Peace Council (NPC) to promote conflict resolution through dialogue and training. The project, funded primarily by the U.S. State Department, incorporates PIDP's strategy of using culturally appropriate methods of reconciliation, inclusion, honesty, and respect to address the difficult and complex issues driving the conflicts. In 2005, three *tok stori* sessions were held in the Solomons bringing together a broad spectrum of society, from the village to the national level. Unlike their previous work in Fiji where the focus was on creating a dialogue amongst national political parties and leaders, the *tok stori*



The late Sir Dudley Tuti, Paramount Chief and former Bishop of Santa Isabel, opens the tok stori dialogue with words of inspiration and insight.



Sitiveni Halapua, director of the EWC's Pacific Islands Development Program, facilitates dialogue on issues of community governance.

process in the Solomons reached out to traditional leaders, NGOs, church officials, local and provincial government officials, and other community leaders.

The first session convened in Santa Isabel Province in July, where local community leaders met with representatives from New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu together with PIDP researchers, to explore the role of traditional leaders (chiefs) in strengthening community governance. The late Sir Dudley Tuti, retired Bishop and Paramount Chief of Santa Isabel, opened the *tok stori*, addressing the participants:

“Tok stori is one of the greatest opportunities to advance ... a more meaningful governance arrangement in Isabel Province especially at the community level... together we can build a system that can improve and safeguard the integrity and legitimate needs of the people of Isabel.”

The other two dialogues, coordinated by the NPC with support from PIDP's Tongan-born director Sitiveni Halapua, were held on the island of Guadalcanal. The first session took place on the remote Weather Coast, home to notorious “warlords” and the site of high profile acts of violence. The Weather Coast *tok stori* proved successful despite the difficult logistics involved and the lack of roads or functioning airstrips. The last dialogue during 2005 was conducted in northern Guadalcanal, an area that suffered an economic collapse as a result of the on-going tensions in the country.

The PIDP also engaged in conflict reduction initiatives in the Kingdom of Tonga in 2005. At the request of the Princess Regent, PIDP's Halapua served as

the facilitator between the government and the country's Public Service Association who were at a deadlock after a public workers' strike shut down government services for over six weeks. After several days of intense negotiations, both parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding that ended the strike, improved salary equity, and committed the government to consider creating a commission to explore democratic reforms.

As one of the major goals identified in the EWC's new Strategic Plan, in 2006 PIDP will continue to play a key role in preventing, moderating, and resolving conflicts in the region.



At the closing ceremony, (l to r) Isabel Province women's representative and Isabel Premier James Habu present PIDP's director Sitiveni Halapua (right) with a mat in appreciation for his tok stori participation.