

Prof Ioan Fazey

Professor of Social Dimensions of Environmental Change and Acting Director of the
Centre for Environmental Change and Human Resilience
University of Dundee

What does it mean to respond to change? Insights from the Solomon Islands

Summary

Change is all around us but seems to be increasing in complexity and speed as we enter a new era dominated by significant global forces and challenges. This presentation seeks to examine issues around change, and how people respond to change, using a case study from the Solomon Islands. Here, rural communities are facing rapid and significant environmental, social, economic and health-related change which is mediated both by external processes but also by the way people adapt and respond to that change. This case study highlights the need for improving our understanding of change and how desired change can be brought about. What kinds of things might need to be considered if we are to facilitate transformative shifts that assist societies, including our own, to work within the new normal of rapid and extensive change?

Introduction

Prof Fazey is Director of the Centre for Environmental Change and Human Resilience at the University of Dundee. Much of his work focuses on issues such as how we adapt and are resilient to change in the context of sustainability. Prof Fazey comes from what he describes as an “undisciplined” background. Starting off as a zoologist he became interested in questions such as: “How do we understand what we know?”; “How do we engage with understanding what environmental change might be?”; and the concept of experiential knowledge as opposed to scientific knowledge. This journey took him to looking at the environment and development and led him to the Solomon Islands.

Prof Fazey addresses, not so much the scientific aspects, but the story of what he found in his work in the Solomon Islands. It is a story about change. An alternative title for this talk would be “Change is Changing”. This is what the local communities in the Solomon Islands are experiencing. How does this relate to how we are responding to change at the moment, for example in work that is looking at resilience in communities?

Setting the scene

We know the world, the planet is changing. We have major challenges that are starting to affect us in terms of climate change. Climate change and other contemporary global challenges such as obesity and addiction are products of the current way society is organised. If we really want to address these things, we have to be thinking in transformative ways about how we address society. Tweaking around the edges and using the same tools and methods that created them in the first place is not going to address these challenges.

The world is changing. We don't know what the future is going to look like. We have some interesting opportunities to shape this, but how do we go about doing that? This is the

backdrop to this talk, that these processes of change are affecting everybody around the world.

The experience of the Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands are about 2,500 miles north east of Brisbane in Australia. They are six large islands next to Papua New Guinea. It is not a well-known place. The population of about 650,000 people live in a relatively large area so the population density is about one tenth of the UK. There are around 70 different languages. It is the second most culturally diverse country in the world. There is a massive diversity in language and culture. The way people interact and depend on the land is a critical part of understanding what is going on in these places.

People have been living in the Solomon Islands for 30,000 years, much longer than in the UK. Complex cultures, tightly woven with practices of warfare, tribalism and very close communities emerged. This is mirrored by lots of biodiversity and species that you only find in the Solomon Islands.

In the 19th century things started to change with the arrival of Europeans as traders, whalers and missionaries. William Rivers, an anthropologist at the beginning of the 20th century, describes the decline in population and the culture and how it operated and the affect this had on local communities. There were further changes during the second world war. More recently between 1999 and 2003 there was effectively a civil war. Overall it is a very peaceful place but you get these sudden eruptions of tension mostly based around resources and land use and ownership.

The communities are very basic. They don't have a lot of material goods. People depend on subsistence livelihoods. They are reliant on the resources they have around them from the sea, the forest and their food gardens. They live in huts that are well built, flexible and very well ventilated. There are schools but they are very basic and with very limited resources, perhaps a book if they are lucky.

The team worked in an area called Kahua on Makira Island one of the poorer islands. They worked through a local association called the Kahua Association which is trying to bring people together from different communities to address some of the challenges they are facing such as resource use. The model they used was to engage with local people and get them to do the research in their own communities drawing on the expertise they have in their own understanding of their situations.

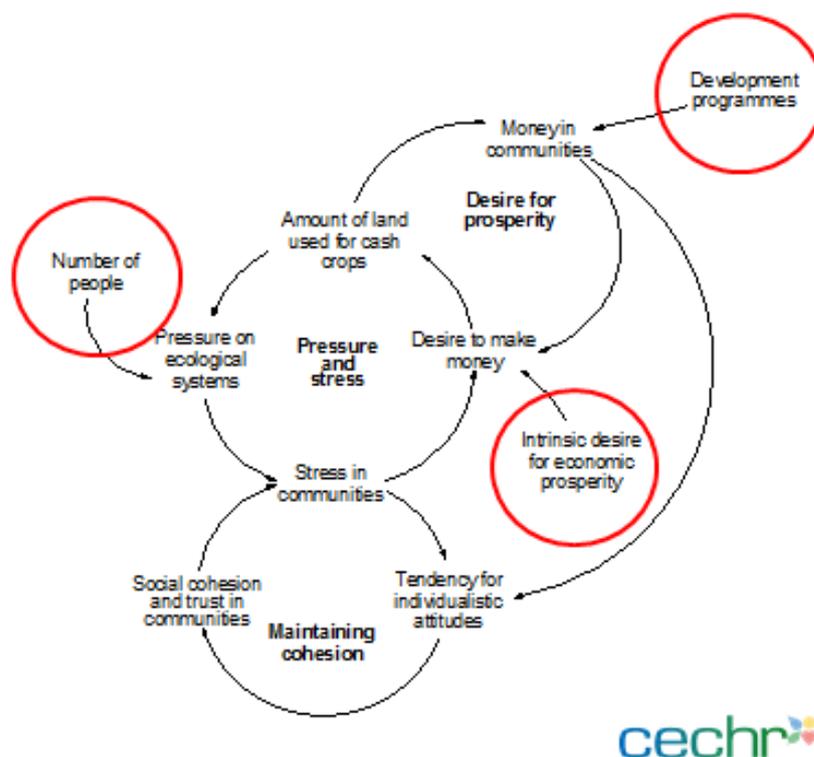
On first view the area looks lush, green and pristine but it is in fact a highly, highly modified environmental system. The only trees remaining are those that have a high value such as nuts. There are patches cultivated for food gardens and then the villages themselves. The communities are experiencing lots of change such as reduction in yields from their gardens and reduction in space for the gardens. Building resources are also declining as are marine resources. One of the ways local people are responding to these environmental changes is to try and generate some income from cash crops in the hope of sending their children to school and buying some imported food. This is the only real option they have. The two possible crops are dried coconut which earns a pittance and cocoa which has a higher value but needs flat fertile land to grow and this is very limited. The other big change is that for the last 30-40 years the population has been growing dramatically. This is putting a huge pressure on the availability of resources.

Another part of the story is the strong reaction to money and material goods which to Western eyes appears strange. This has been described by anthropologists including Ross Macdonald who wrote a book called “Money makes you crazy”. There are a complex set of factors which explain these behaviours. But the increased amount of money coming in to communities is, according to the local people, increasing jealousy and desire, and therefore the ability to work as a collective is declining dramatically.

The increase in money coming in to communities is enabling increased access to education and health services. However, there is also an increase in individualistic attitudes as opposed to the previous very strong sense of community. A priest working in the area described this notion of collective actions of people as the most important thing to understand about the area: Rather than ‘I think therefore I am’ it is ‘I think because I am part of a group’.

So what local people described was a decline in social cohesion and trust, increasing disputes and that the old way of bringing communities together and solving problems is no longer working. The chiefs did not know what to do, how to cope with these massive changes happening very quickly.

These changes are summarised in this simplified diagram which shows a set of reinforcing interactions.



Counterintuitively development programmes focusing on community income generation are also reinforcing the changes and challenges that are happening. In one focus group where people were describing all these changes they suddenly clicked and said: “we really understand now, change is changing. The speed of change is getting faster, we can’t cope with this. We are running to stand still and we are trying to keep up but the change is

changing. We can't deal with it. We can't cope with it." Just like in Alison in Wonderland you run to stand still but you run faster and start reinforcing the speed that everything is happening. This is exactly what is happening in the Solomon Islands.

Reflections on the insights this provides for our own contexts

So what does this mean in our own contexts both here in Glasgow and Scotland or in the global context? Will Steffen and others are doing ongoing work about change in the *Anthropocene*, the current era in which humans are starting to affect the global geological and biological processes of the planet. This shows that from the 1950s onwards lots of different variables in the Earth's environmental system have been increasing dramatically including carbon dioxide emissions, methane levels, domesticated land, terrestrial biosphere degradation and many others. Similarly, socioeconomic trends are showing an acceleration of everything that we are doing globally. They are calling this the 'Great Acceleration'.

The Solomon Islands are a microcosm of this process of accelerated change. Prof Fazey has been considering for a while what it all means. We know that change is the norm, things are always changing. But we are not very good at accepting that; we like to keep things as they are. Many of the innovations we put in place accelerate the change in various ways. We have technological advances that keep running ahead of us. We have the sense that we have got to keep up with everything that is happening and there is just too much, we can't deal with it. Many of the ways people were adapting to change in the Solomon Islands were not getting them off the treadmill they were just reinforcing it. The responses to change were solving some problems but were also creating more problems as well and accelerating the change. What does this mean for our society?

Human beings are quite good at adapting to change. We are quite good at responding to something like a flood when it actually happens. We are not very good (but are getting better) at preparing for the flood. We are certainly not very good at preparing in ways that will alleviate the problem happening in the first place. Most of the resilience work we are doing at the moment is just propping up the existing system that we are currently in. We are effectively propping up the economic system that we have become so dependent on but which is the source of much of our unsustainable activities on the planet.

So there is an irony in terms of resilience: resilience to move faster or to stand still? Are we trying to bounce forward or to bounce back? What are we actually doing here? Where is the deeper thinking about what change might be required? So this leads to another question: what kind of change do we need? Do we just want to tweak the current system enough to deal with things as they occur, like much of the resilience work people are currently doing? Are we trying to reform things significantly in some way, perhaps some reforms of major legislation and things like that, that can have a really big impact? Or, are we looking at some much, much deeper kind of transformation in the way in which we operate?

If we are talking about the change of change, we have to ask ourselves what kind of change do we need? What kind of change do we want? Karen O'Brien talks about three spheres of transformation:

- Practical – the practical and technical elements which we can do well but often don't.
- Political – the systems and structures that influence the practical. We are not really very good at changing these.

- Personal – the values, beliefs, world views, assumptions. The norms that are in society and are influencing everything. We are definitely not very good at changing these.

These changes to societal norms come more slowly but if we really want to address things like climate change and other global challenges it is at this level we need to be hitting. We are not very good at knowing how to do this. There are some examples but they are relatively limited in terms of significant changes that happen at scale, large scale population change. Mark Pelling who has done a lot of work on resilience says: *“Perhaps the most profound act of transformation facing humanity, as it comes to live with change... requires a culture shift from seeing adaption as managing the environment ‘out there’ to learning how to reorganise relationships, procedures and underlying values ‘in here’”* Pelling (2010: 88). It is this kind of personal shift that is going to be incredibly important if we are to address some of the global challenges we are living with.

In conclusion, what might we learn from the people of the Solomon Islands if they came and pointed their finger at us? If they said “your world looks pretty crazy too, what are you going to change? How are you going to deal with the amazing inequalities that you have?” In many ways the people of the Solomon Islands are far more advanced than we are in terms of their ability to look after their own communities.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.
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