Pacific Islands Stakeholder Participation in Development: Kiribati

Barrie Macdonald
DISCUSSION PAPERS PRESENT RESULTS OF COUNTRY ANALYSES UNDERTAKEN BY THE DEPARTMENT AS PART OF ITS NORMAL
WORK PROGRAM. TO PRESENT THESE RESULTS WITH THE LEAST POSSIBLE DELAY, THE TYPESCRIPT OF THIS PAPER HAS NOT
BEEN PREPARED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PROCEDURES APPROPRIATE FOR FORMAL PRINTED TEXTS, AND THE WORLD
BANK ACCEPTS NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR ERRORS. SOME SOURCES CITED IN THIS PAPER MAY BE INFORMAL DOCUMENTS
THAT ARE NOT READILY AVAILABLE. THE WORLD BANK DOES NOT GUARANTEE THE ACCURACY OF THE DATA INCLUDED IN THIS
PUBLICATION AND ACCEPTS NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR ANY CONSEQUENCES OF ITS USE.
PACIFIC ISLANDS
STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT
KIRIBATI

March 1998

A Report for the World Bank
Prepared by: Barrie Macdonald
Funded by the Government of Australia under the AusAID/World Bank Pacific Facility
The views, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this study are the result of research supported by the World Bank, but they are entirely those of the author and should not be attributed in any manner to the World Bank, to its affiliated organisations, or to members of its Board of Executive Directors or the countries they represent.

For further copies of the report, please contact:

Mr. David Colbert
Papua New Guinea and Pacific Islands
Country Management Unit
East Asia and Pacific Region
The World Bank
1818 H Street, NW
Washington, DC, U.S.A. 20433
Fax: (202) 522-3393
E-Mail: Dcolbert1@worldbank.org
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land, People and <em>I-Kiribati</em> Identity</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Encroachment</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decolonisation and Independence</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Traditional Domain</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and Kinship</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The <em>Maneaba</em> in <em>I-Kiribati</em> Society</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role and Status of Women</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Church</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Government and Village Organisation</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Activity</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Public Domain</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Structure of National Government</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Nature of Public Leadership</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral Politics</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary Politics</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parties and Issues</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sectional Interests</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Formation</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy-Formation in Practice</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy and the Public Service</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation of the Public Service</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption and Accountability</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Economy</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutional Review</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE PRIVATE SECTOR DOMAIN ................................................................. 47
  Background .................................................................................. 47
  Government Corporations ......................................................... 47
  Private Traders ........................................................................... 49
  Trade Unions ................................................................................ 50

SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUPINGS ............................................................ 53
  Background .................................................................................. 53
  Rural Traditional/Subsistence ....................................................... 53
  Modern Elites .............................................................................. 54
  Urban and Migrant Workers ......................................................... 55

DEVELOPMENT ISSUES ........................................................................ 57
  Women in Development ............................................................... 57
  Urbanisation and Public Health .................................................... 59
  The Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund .................................... 61
  Migration and Remittances ......................................................... 62
  Aid Donors and Policy Formation ............................................... 63

FURTHER READING ............................................................................. 67
FOREWORD

As in all societies, prospects for economic and social development for Pacific Island economies are conditioned by the country's social fabric, cultural heritage and traditions, all of which exert a powerful influence over the pattern and prospects for development. Recognising this, when providing analytical advice and support for policy makers in Pacific economies the World Bank is obligated to move beyond a perspective that focuses merely on economic factors to one that incorporates each society's social and cultural dynamic and which acknowledges the influence these aspects play in social change and economic decision-making.

The series of Stakeholders studies was initiated in 1996 in order to provide a basis for this broader approach and, over the ensuing twelve months, reports have been prepared for Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Tonga and Kiribati. For each country the form of the study has varied, reflecting differences in the social and organizational characteristics of each culture. In some, the role of traditional or customary organizations is stronger and more pronounced; in others, formal community structures and organizations may be less defined or play a different role in various parts of the country and in relation to different spheres of social life. The linkages between traditional and introduced structures of power are also different in each country: in some, the boundaries may overlap quite clearly; in others, the functions of the government, the role of the church and the strength of traditions, for example, may continue to be quite distinct.

We also wanted to consider in more detail the social patterns as well as the political dimensions at work in influencing social change and to understand better how Pacific Island societies function. Who are the important players in a community or society and how do they interact formally and informally? What are the structures that define their roles and how do they manage the interface between the needs of the in-group and those of the wider society? How do different social groups define their values and set their priorities and to what degree does the articulation of traditional or customary values influence decisions about economic development and the distribution of the benefits of development? These are some of the questions we wanted to explore.

Each country study has been prepared by a consultant who has extensive familiarity with and knowledge of the social and political dimensions of that country and who could readily provide information about the culture and analysis of the issues surrounding key aspects of the society, such as leadership, decision-making and community perceptions of government and development. The studies have provided timely and valuable input into the economic and sector analyses undertaken as part of the World Bank's program in the Pacific during 1996 and 1997. I hope they will continue to be critical in informing such work in future years.

Klaus Rohland
Country Director, Pacific Islands
# GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I-Kiribati</td>
<td>a citizen of Kiribati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unamane</td>
<td>an elder male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maneaba</td>
<td>community meeting place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maneaba ni Maungatabu</td>
<td>House of Assembly, Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kainga</td>
<td>family based hamlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kain Kiribati</td>
<td>original land-owning i-Kiribati</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SUMMARY

This review of stakeholders in development in Kiribati follows earlier surveys of Samoa and Tonga for the World Bank. In general, the same approach has been followed and the same qualifications apply concerning analysis using ‘domains’ and similar imprecise but over-lapping categories. Those qualifications aside, this review attempts to identify the stakeholders in the development of Kiribati, together with the relationships among them and the qualifications and exceptions that must be considered. It has been assumed that the reader will be sufficiently familiar with economic policy and the major economic indicators to minimise coverage of these areas. Following a discussion of the main stakeholders in the traditional, public and private sector domains, an attempt has been made to draw out broader themes in discussions of socio-political status and selected development issues. Throughout, the emphasis has been on setting the perspective of stakeholders in a broad context. Such an approach is necessary to an understanding of the cultural context within which development must take place, and the socio-political processes that must be recognised and engaged if strategies and projects are to succeed. The approach has also been driven by a conviction that the future can only be built on the foundations of the present, and that the present can only be comprehended in terms of cultural context and historical influences.

Kiribati is a republic of 33 coral islands of the Gilbert, Line and Phoenix groups, and extends from Banaba (Ocean Island) in the west to the Line Islands in the east. It has a population (1995 est.) of 80,500 people, a land area of 810 square kilometres, and claims an Exclusive Economic Zone of some 3.5 million square kilometres. Thirty-seven per cent of the population is found on the southern part of Tarawa atoll which is the capital, administrative headquarters, and the site of all major social services and facilities. As well as being small and widely scattered, the islands of Kiribati are remote from suppliers, markets and major transport routes. Kiribati has one of the lowest standards of living of Oceania but, despite its relative poverty and poor economic performance, has a strong sense of participatory democracy, a highly literate population, and its government provides a substantial level of services to even remote populations.

Although there are powerful continuities between the I-Kiribati present and the past, there are no I-Kiribati who still live a purely traditional lifestyle. Even in remote rural areas, the traditional culture has been modified by nearly two centuries of contact with the outside world, and notably by the adoption of Christianity, participation in the cash economy, almost a century of colonial rule, and overseas travel for an influential minority. It is the selectivity and manner of this cultural adaptation that provides the basis of what would be regarded as the ‘traditional’ domain in Kiribati today. In urban society, as in rural, traditional values and practices remain strongly in evidence. Despite the encroachment of colonialism, Christianity and the cash economy, there remains a strong sense of I-Kiribati identity and values based on the strength of family relationships, the sharing of resources, and a co-operative rather than individualistic approach to economic activity whether within the traditional domain or private sector activity. Leadership is expected from elder males, though in the public sector this role is falling increasingly to the educated ‘modern’ politico-bureaucratic elite that dominates
politics and the public service. Economic and socio-political status reflect a spectrum from a heavy dependence on subsistence in a remote rural setting, to almost total dependence on salary and imported food on South Tarawa with a wide range of variants in between.

In the public domain, leaders are expected to conform to traditional standards of character, which has the effect of personalising politics and inhibiting the growth of political parties. In the past, however, this has not proved a barrier to political stability. The country is governed under a mix of Westminster principles and customary values within a structure that still gives considerable influence to the elder males (unimane) of the traditional domain. While governments might differ in their approach, there is little place for Western ideology in the politics of Kiribati. Just as the status and role of women was circumscribed in traditional society, so it is in the public domain with, at present, no female Members of the House of Assembly and few holding high positions in the public service. Women have a limited voice in policy formation, though substantial influence in village society. The structure of I-Kiribati politics and weaknesses in public sector management and administration limit the capacity of the government to formulate policy, maintain policy stability, and implement projects. Cultural restraints create barriers to effective management while a skills shortage undermines the capacity of the public service. Government policy favours the provision of services through public corporations, yet restrains their activities in key areas. Any thrust towards privatisation of government services or to encourage individualisation of economic activity in the private sector thus meets resistance in terms of government policy and I-Kiribati cultural preference. It is one of the ironies of Kiribati’s current situation that any moves towards economic or public sector reform is in conflict with local perceptions of government accountability and emphasis on participatory democracy reflecting I-Kiribati cultural values.

It is therefore local preference as well as the given realities of smallness, remoteness and poverty that make for a small private sector domain in Kiribati. Small local businesses are growing in number and in their share of the economy but economic activity remains under the domination of government activity in wholesale import and export, transport and communications. Much of the retail activity is in the hands of co-operatives that enjoy a degree of government support and protection. Since the exhaustion of the Ocean Island phosphate deposits in 1979, Kiribati has had an adverse balance of trade. Aid flows account for half of GDP. Per capita incomes are among the lowest in the region.

Kiribati faces major issues in planning for its future. Over the past two decades, urbanisation and the growth of government services on Tarawa has seen the growth of an urban area that now accommodates about 30 per cent of the population. Statistical indicators of public health, morbidity and mortality are of as much concern as the apparent inability of successive governments to address the planning issues involved. Women are the subject of de facto discrimination as well as social disadvantage. Although representative agencies for women do exist, projects for the empowerment of women are not given a high priority. Increasing urbanisation, and the long-term social implications of a migrant labour force may pose difficulties for the future. The government has significant funds in the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund accumulated from phosphate revenues, as well as access to aid funds for major projects. It is, therefore, not so much access to funds as the capacity to develop long-term strategies and to implement them that will inhibit development in the medium term. Recognition of the significance and role in the process of the various stakeholders within Kiribati and in external relationships with it, will be crucial to any attempt to overcome current barriers to successful planning for development.
INTRODUCTION

LAND, PEOPLE AND I-KIRIBATI IDENTITY

The Gilbert Islands, which lie in a chain near the intersection of the Equator and the International Dateline, were settled as part of a series of migrations into Oceania beginning some 8,000 years ago. Coming from Asia, the Austronesian-speaking peoples were horticulturalists with a strong maritime culture who developed sophisticated canoe-making technology and ocean-going navigational skills. As part of a population movement that eventually embraced all of the major island groups of the Pacific, the first settlers reached the Gilbert Islands perhaps 4-5,000 years ago. Banaba, a small island to the West of theGilberts and now part of Kiribati, was similarly settled and later became subject to cultural influences from the southern Gilbert Islands. The Line and Phoenix Islands, some 3,500 and 2,000 kilometres respectively to the east of the Gilbert chain, had no permanent populations in pre-European times though archaeological evidence of transitory occupation has been found.

The 16 Gilbert Islands are all low coral islands—some lagoon atolls, others reef islands—with sandy soils, low rainfall, limited vegetation and an altitude of less than five metres. Freshwater supplies depend on rainfall catchment or a narrow freshwater lens that lies some metres below the surface; apart from a lake on Teraina, there are no lakes or rivers. While crops like bananas can be grown on larger, more fertile islands like Butaritari and Abemama, there is a heavy dependence on coconuts, pandanus, babai (the taro-like cyrtosperma chamissonis), fishing and reef-harvesting. The islands of the Gilbert group range in size from the relatively large but arid Tabiteuea (area 38 square kilometres) through the more fertile Abemama (27.5 square kilometres) and Butaritari (13.5 square kilometres) to the small and drought-prone southern Gilberts, including Tamana and Arorae (5 and 9.5 square kilometres respectively). Banaba, a raised atoll with an altitude of some 82 metres has an area of 6.3 square kilometres, while Kiritimati (Christmas Island) in the Line Islands is the world’s largest atoll with an area of 388 square kilometres representing some 48 per cent of Kiribati’s land area but having only 3.5 per cent of its population. It is estimated that in pre-European times the Gilbert group, including Banaba, supported a population of some 30-35,000.

Ancient I-Kiribati society was probably based on village-districts under the control of clan leaders although land tenure studies would suggest that there was also a strong emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities. Samoan invasions, generally dated to the 14th century, saw the introduction of hierarchical, chiefly principles, and the division of most islands into districts which lived in a state of endemic rivalry and warfare across fluid boundaries. In a series of battles in the 17th century, the principles of ‘meeting house democracy’ with power vested in councils of old men—each of them clan leaders—was firmly imposed on all islands south of the equator, and had a modifying influence on chiefly power on the islands to the north. From that time, the maneaba—in its physical sense a large,
rectangular, thatched community meeting house—became the focus of village life and, beyond that, the embodiment of the fundamental principles and values of I-Kiribati society.

In general, then, the societies of the southern Gilbert Islands were strongly egalitarian and gerontocratic, with power in the hands of maneaba councils of elder males (unimane); these traditions were much weaker in the northern and central Gilberts where maneaba councils were less firmly imposed on a local chiefly structure, and land was less evenly distributed. Within the maneaba, each clan had its own sitting-place, or boti and, for formal occasions, each boti or clan had a senior male as its designated spokesman. Maneaba councils resolved disputes, many of them over land boundaries and ownership, controlled and maintained community assets (like the maneaba itself), provided hospitality for visitors, and acted as a community court and social centre. In effect, the maneaba was arbiter over all relationships beyond, and sometimes within, the immediate family.

The relationship of the individual through the family to the community was the basis of identity and social standing and obligation. Individual interests were subordinated to those of the family and community, and a high value placed on conforming to community norms. Personal aggrandisement led only to community censure. The harsh atoll environment helped to create, and reinforced, these values. Houses, canoes, specialist skills, genealogies, magic spells and even trees were valued as possessions, but the fundamental possession and resource around which all others revolved was land.

On islands under strong chiefly rule (especially Butaritari, Abemama and their dependencies) individuals and families occupied lands at the pleasure of the chief, and provided produce and services in return. Elsewhere, defined areas of land, the lagoon or reef might be community-owned but, for most lands and food pits, the emphasis was always upon individual ownership of defined, and named, plots of land. A 'land' might be several hectares or only a few square metres; ownership of land might be separated from the ownership of trees growing upon it. Lands and food pits were inherited by males and females from both mothers and fathers though, generally, sons received more than daughters, and older children more than younger. The pattern of land inheritance, combined with restrictions on marriage to any relative closer than a fourth cousin and a preference for residence within the husband's kainga (family-based hamlet), meant that the land-holdings of any individual might well be scattered across several islands and, therefore, difficult to use on a regular basis. Land could also be gifted for adoption, marriage, or special services, or seized by the community as punishment or compensation. Working the land and gathering food and other resources was a fundamental family and community obligation.

The control of family assets and community behaviour was largely the preserve of the unimane. While women had a degree of independence over the use and disposition of their own lands, their role within the community was strictly prescribed. Virginity at marriage was highly prized. Pre-pubescent girls were secluded in a 'bleaching-house' to lighten their skins and married shortly after puberty. Upon marriage, they were usually domiciled within their husband's household and were permitted only limited contact outside their own or their husband's immediate family. In former times, a women seen even talking to a man from outside these circles risked, at best, a severe beating and, at worst, divorce or having the end of her nose bitten off as a mark of shame. Women seldom spoke in the maneaba, though might take part in informal family councils. A women who was divorced, bore illegitimate children or flaunted community norms became nikiranroro (remnant of her generation), which brought a degree of social and sexual
freedom, together with a commensurate taint of notoriety and distancing from the family.

While communities and families shared some activities—house or maneaba building, for example, or a fish drive—there was also provision for reciprocal services and the sharing of skills. While a primary goal of both individuals and families was to be independent, services like healing, canoe-building or, in modern times, a cash loan could be sought from another family member through bubuti, a request not lightly made that carried an obligation that exceeded the value of the service itself. A bubuti had to be delicately assessed in terms of its value, the closeness of the blood relationship between the parties, and the capacity of the person approached to meet the request—to even make a bubuti request imposed an obligation; to decline meant shame for both parties.

Traditional I-Kiribati society existed in a delicate balance with the marginal atoll environment. A scarcity of resources discouraged the emergence of hierarchies or dynasties on most islands, and the frequency of drought made land a precious resource and led to the use of both infanticide and abortion as a birth control measure under some circumstances. Independence, frugality and a capacity for hard work were admired qualities; reputation was defended; loyalty to the family was both demanded and prized.

Western Encroachment

Although the Gilbert Islands featured on European charts from the 16th century, it was not until the establishment of the British convict settlement at Botany Bay (in Australia) in the late 18th century and the discovery of the 'off-shore' Pacific whaling grounds in the early 19th century that there was significant contact between Euro-American vessels and Gilbert Islanders. Strategically placed near the equatorial migration route of sperm whales, the Gilbert Islands were drawn into the whaling industry through the provision of supplies, women and crew for the whalers while, at the same time, adopting new crops, iron utensils and tools. Pigs and chickens, neither of which the islands had before, were raised for market and eventually adopted into local diet. Providing a side-line for whalers, the Islanders sold handicrafts for the Euro-American market, and produced increasing quantities of coconut oil and later copra leading to shore-based trading by European firms. Although there was a steady demand for tools, weapons, utensils, novelties and cloth as the basis of trade, the primary demand was for tobacco—to be chewed as much as smoked—for which there was soon community addiction, a development that the Islanders themselves put down to tobacco's capacity to dull the constant hunger pangs that were part of life on infertile atolls. From the 1850s, Islanders from the central Pacific were in demand as labourers for plantations and mines in New Caledonia, Fiji, Samoa, Queensland and as far away as Central and South America. Although there were incidents of kidnapping and violence, the Gilbertese often proved to be willing recruits, both men and women seizing the opportunity to escape their impoverished islands even if only for a short period.

This growing commercial presence drew missionaries to the islands. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which already had an involvement in Hawai’i and part of Micronesia, established its first mission at Abaiang in the northern Gilberts in 1857 but then withdrew after some decades with little to show. By contrast, the Samoan-based agency of the London Missionary Society wrought fundamental changes in the socio-political structures of the small southern islands, creating virtual theocracies within a few years of its arrival. Roman Catholic missionaries, though not establishing a permanent mission until 1888, gradually developed a large but not universal following in the northern and central islands of the group and divisive minority support in the south. District rivalries and warfare that had characterised
pre-contact times were sometimes pursued in the name of the religion or its constituent churches.

Imperial forces were also drawn to the islands—partly to mediate in the relationships between Islanders and Euro-American nationals, but as often to pursue competing national interests. Disputes over labour recruiting, religion and trade were common enough, as were the incidents of theft and violence that attracted the attention of naval commanders with their gunboats. There were also larger issues at stake, including the protection and promotion of great power economic and strategic interests. There were few such interests of major proportions in the Gilbert Islands but sufficient to make future jurisdiction of the islands the subject of Anglo-German negotiations in the 1880s. With German interests paramount in Samoa, and in the Marshall and Caroline Islands, the Gilberts fell within the British sphere of interest, as did the Ellice Islands to the south, leading to the declaration of British protectorates over both groups in 1892.

In 1900, the discovery of phosphate deposits was followed by the annexation and inclusion of Banaba (Ocean Island) within the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorate. Formal annexation in 1916 brought the formation of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC) including, for administrative convenience, the Line and Phoenix Islands. The Tokelau (or Union) Islands were also administered through the GEIC from 1916 to 1925. Though considered insignificant at the time, the inclusion of the Micronesian Gilbertese and Polynesian Ellice Islanders within the same colonial territory had major policy implications for both groups and, in the post-war years, engendered inter-racial hostility leading to Ellice secessionist demands culminating in separation in 1976 and the creation of the state of Tuvalu, formerly the Ellice Islands, two years later.

Within the context of an imperial framework that expected colonies to pay their way and to enjoy only those services that they could afford, the GEIC was regarded as one of the Cinderellas of the British Empire. Under these circumstances, the parsimony of the Colonial Office was alleviated only by revenue from the phosphate industry which also became a major employer of migrant Gilbertese labour. Within the Gilbert group, education was left largely to the missions; health services were provided through a single colony hospital and by government doctors as occasional shipping services allowed. The major preoccupations of a paternalistic and authoritarian colonial administration were the elimination of warfare and personal violence and the ‘good order and cleanliness’ of newly created villages laid out with geometric precision. Churches soon became a feature of village life while the minimal colonial presence allowed church leaders considerable authority. During the colonial period, chiefly authority was steadily and deliberately eroded as a matter of policy to the point where, by the late 1960s, chiefs were no longer given statutory recognition though some land-holding privileges remained. The colonial administration did attempt to grapple with endemic land disputes within and between families, and established a rudimentary judicial and administrative structure that placed responsibility with community leaders under the supervision of its peripatetic officials from headquarters first at Tarawa, then at Ocean Island once it became the main port of entry for the GEIC.

During the Second World War, Tarawa and other northern islands were occupied by Japan, then wrested back under Allied control by the Battle of Tarawa in 1943. In the post-war period of Colonial Development and Welfare schemes, aid funds were used to develop infrastructure and social services, notably in health and education where the government now assumed a much greater role. The headquarters was moved back to Tarawa where the process of linking the several islets of South Tarawa with causeways
was initiated. With the port at Betio, administrative headquarters at Bairiki, and government education and health services concentrated at Bikenibeu, South Tarawa became the main focus of government activity (and expenditure). Later, commercial developments, the establishment of the Marine Training School and the development of educational and administrative centres by the major churches further enhanced the importance of South Tarawa as the main destination for internal migration.

This movement of people was controlled by government ordinance until the 1960s when controls were abandoned as being incompatible with international conventions on Human Rights. This rapidly growing urban population both reflected and accentuated the government’s policy of centralising services on Tarawa, partly for administrative and supervisory convenience, partly for the infrastructural economies that would occur.

The dominance of Tarawa thus became a major issue—both for those in the outer-islands who sought access to equivalent educational and other services, and those within government who have had the responsibility for dealing with the consequences of largely uncontrolled urbanisation in a context of limited land and water supplies. South Tarawa—a strip of land some 25 kilometres long, and nowhere more than a few hundred metres wide, has a total area of only 15.76 square kilometres. Its current population of about 30,000 gives a density of 1600 persons per square kilometre (but 5,400 on the islet of Betio) which is among the highest in the region.

**Decolonisation and Independence**

The decolonisation of the GEIC began with the establishment of an Advisory Council in 1960 and proceeded through the usual Westminster style evolution, leading to independence in 1979. Decolonisation was complicated by the concurrent exhaustion of the Ocean Islands phosphate deposits that had been the economic mainstay of the GEIC, the demands of the Banaban people for compensation for the destruction of their lands, and the secession of the Ellice Islands. Britain’s desire to withdraw from the region brought a willingness to provide budgetary support in the post-independence era. The new Republic of Kiribati also earned more than it had before from philatelic sales, and signed fishing licence deals with foreign operators including, for a brief and controversial period, the Soviet Union. The Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund, created in the 1950s from phosphate royalties to provide a long-term cushion against the exhaustion of mining, provided some protection for an economy that was largely subsistence-based and aid-dependent.

Schemes to resettle part of the population in the Line Islands have alleviated population pressure in a small way (though not on Tarawa) but with consequential implications for the cost of providing shipping and other government services. The years from independence until 1994 were dominated by the government led by President Ieremia Tabai and its successor led by Teatao Teannaki which pursued policies of fiscal austerity and established a reputation for robust independence in international and regional affairs.

Kiribati in the present is a reflection of its geographic reality, indigenous culture, and colonial history. The effects of all have been modified to a degree by time, technology and diverse external influences but the essence of *te katei ni Kiribati* (the *I-Kiribati* way) remains an idealised reference point for personal belief, political behaviour, economic organisation, and government policy. The traditional domain, though modernised in many respects, still sets the parameters for both public and private domains.
THE TRADITIONAL DOMAIN

DEFINITIONS

Although there are powerful continuities between the I-Kiribati present and the past, there are no I-Kiribati who still live a purely traditional lifestyle. Even in remote rural areas, the traditional culture has been modified by nearly two centuries of contact with the outside world, and notably by the adoption of Christianity, participation in the cash economy, almost a century of colonial rule, and overseas travel for an influential minority. It is the selectivity and manner of this cultural adaptation that provides the basis of what would be regarded as the 'traditional' domain in Kiribati today. While I-Kiribati are fully aware of cultural change, there remains a strong sense of what it means to be I-Kiribati, and what it is that distinguishes this culture from others in the region—a perception that was sharpened in the 1960s and 1970s by the debates on Ellice secessionism and the future of the GEIC. For the purposes of this discussion, 'the traditional domain' will be taken to cover those generic aspects and values of I-Kiribati culture that inform all political and economic activity, and the lifestyle of those, effectively outer-island dwellers, who live a traditionally-oriented life of affluent subsistence—growing, catching and making most of what they need, but participating in the marketplace to some degree.

FAMILY AND KINSHIP

I-Kiribati identify primarily with family, village, and island; national identity remains a fragile concept introduced under colonial rule and nurtured by a common administrative structure and the economic dependence that ties the archipelagic periphery to central government. A sense of continuing loyalty to kin and locality is reinforced by distinctive local histories, diversity of custom, variation in dialect and, within the overall parameters of a common island world, significant differences of island size, geography and climate. Even so, such diversity can be seen as variation on central themes, and some common principles can be defined even if they require qualification for specific contexts.

The family remains at the centre of I-Kiribati identity and social organisation. Despite the tendency to provide modest houses for government workers, households in the urban area, as on the outer-islands, remain firmly based on the extended family. In traditional terms, the extended family household would normally extend over three generations and form part of a family hamlet or kainga. This kainga would normally have been on family lands but, during the colonial period, there were strong pressures to concentrate residence within defined village boundaries. Over time, this shifted the residential focus to extended family households spread over multiple but adjacent buildings. On outer-islands, the average household size is 5.8 persons. While some families now live permanently on lands outside their nominal village, most maintain at least temporary accommodation near their major garden sites. On South Tarawa, the average household size is 7.7 but with a different composition. Here, where much of the housing is provided by government, the churches or other major employers, the core of the household tends to be the nuclear family of the person(s)
employed, supplemented by parents or siblings and their families who share household tasks and costs.

Families mean much more than households, however. Family is defined broadly with descent, like land-holding, traced through both male and female lines. The reputation of the family is paramount, and the shame of any individual is felt by all. Within the family, authority and the control of assets is exercised by elder males who may find their position increasingly challenged by wage-earning children. The ideal model of family organisation has traditionally rested on common residence within land-owning and occupying extended family households within which leadership is exercised and obligations are met. In practice, however, urbanisation and the modernisation of government over the past half-century has created an anomalous sub-society that is urban-dwelling, removed from direct involvement with its own land and beyond the day-to-day control, if not influence, of its traditional leaders. The strength of family control has been weakened as sub-groups and individuals, especially young adults, have moved to the urban centre. Even so, all family members are expected to contribute to the welfare of the family as a whole, and to protect its community standing. Although lands may be individually owned, the deployment of these, like other family assets, is still generally left to the unimane. In an interesting contrast with the principles of land-holding, there is little place for, or tolerance of, individualism in economic matters. While it is no longer expected that young adults, both male and female, will necessarily contribute to household tasks or even maintain residence in a traditional sense, it is expected that they will still contribute in other ways.

Since the 19th century, for example, labour migration has been established as an acceptable way of meeting family obligations, as long as the wages and goods acquired are shared. Thus there was a steady stream of sewing machines, bicycles, and other goods from phosphate workers at Ocean Island and neighbouring Nauru. The 'Telmo', or telegraphic money order, became an integral part of working away from the home-island. With the growth of urban employment, the trend has continued, though urban living costs are so high that average remittances by those employed in the capital seldom reach the level of those from merchant seamen or phosphate workers. Remittances and gifts are only one of the ties that retain strong links between those in wage employment and their outer-island relatives.

Ironically, perhaps, young men and, increasingly, women, are expected to seek wage employment and yet remain largely unaffected by it. Individual wealth, conspicuous display, any action that brings shame to the family, or a failure to remember and provide for other members of the family, not only leads to family tension and an accusation of ignoring family obligations, but diminishes the wider reputation of both individual and family. Inevitably, with urbanisation and the high level of overseas employment, unimane power has remained strongest on the outer-islands; in the urban area, affinity with land and kin is acknowledged and reinforced through home-island associations, but other factors have assumed increasing significance in determining individual political, economic and social behaviour.

The Maneaba in I-Kiribati Society

While the strict, traditional maneaba protocols might be little used on a daily basis, the underlying values have remained and, in the northern and central islands, have been strengthened as chiefly power has declined. The collective, informal power of the unimane remains a potent force in the political life of the outer-islands in particular. After some early forays into national politics in the 1970s, village elders soon realised that,
without a Western education, a facility in English, and experience of government, they could neither participate effectively in debate nor secure the advantages (a higher copra price, better shipping, more teachers, a new clinic) that a constituency expected. Parliamentary representation thus became the preserve of the younger, more educated men (only rarely women) who had the confidence of their elders. The old men retained sufficient influence on some smaller islands to secure the return unopposed of a given candidate, or the defeat of one who was seen to have failed in his community duty. This is not to say that family, village and religious rivalries might not determine election outcomes on occasion, but to identify the idealised values that would be used to justify a given course of action.

*Unimane* status implies not merely age, but age combined with appropriate behaviour, sound judgement, a knowledge of family and community history back into antiquity (necessary to the defence of land and other community rights), and demonstrated leadership within the family, village and wider community. Ideally, leadership should be exercised consensually, diplomatically, and without causing embarrassment even where deficiencies are evident. It is important that there be discussion before decisions are taken; leaders must be seen as expressing and giving substance to a community view, rather than pursuing a personal agenda. Leaders should be modest and self-deprecating. The oratory of persuasion is acceptable, even admired, it is still expected that elders will speak on behalf of families; the young, even if well educated and professionally qualified to speak on an issue, will be hesitant to come forward, and may be criticised if they do.

While it is accepted that those in politics, the professions, business and the senior public service will earn much more than the average family even, or especially, on South Tarawa, this in itself is not the cause of public criticism or concern. At a personal level, however, high income earners will be censure if they are seen to be extravagant or self-indulgent; if, in other words, they consciously set themselves above prevailing community conditions and standards. Moreover, those earning high salaries are expected to be generous with their wealth, especially in their dealings with relatives and in their support of church or community causes. A degree of discrimination in favour of close kin, and even those who come from the same home-island is not only acceptable, but expected, especially in such matters as casual employment, access to housing, places in schools or training programmes. This is not to say that these attempts must always be successful but it is important that the exertion of some effort is seen. For many, there is a constant tension between the demands of their cultural heritage and the expectations of a government and bureaucracy with Westernised values and controls.

In other respects, the *maneaba* also continues to wield influence. On some islands, especially in the southern Gilberts, it controls a community fund that has been accumulated from levies and fund-raising activities, and more recently business activities. It will also arrange for the rebuilding and maintenance, especially regular re-thatching, of the *maneaba* and other community buildings. It also retains some informal role in the resolution of land disputes which, because of the extreme fragmentation of ownership and discretionary powers of succession, create difficulties within and between families. To some extent, tension over land disputes may be exacerbated by court delays, but there are also benefits in that disputes may be resolved without coming to court through the mediation of *maneaba* discussion. There is also a modern tendency not to divide lands and pass them on to individuals, but to hold them in collective ownership to maximise the benefits to the family at large. Such strategies are now common on South Tarawa where they also generate difficulties because of the extent of land sales to outer-islanders, the consequent number of interested parties in any given piece of land, and the
weakness of the *maneaba* structure on Tarawa where local *unimate* have little influence of those who do not come under their traditional authority.

**THE ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN**

In traditional times, women were generally subordinate to men—first to their fathers and male elders, then to their husbands, though with their daily tasks and domestic training the responsibility of their mothers. This trend was reinforced by both missions and by colonial government, though with the more oppressive features being removed over time. It was not until 1959 that the possibility of post-primary education was established with the creation of the Elaine Bernacchi School for Girls. In a parallel development, the churches established similar schools, though with emphasis on religious and vocational education. Even so, the pattern of education, while allowing new opportunities for women, tended to orient their education to nurturing and support occupations like teaching, nursing, clerical and secretarial work. Until the 1980s, few women were sent overseas for higher training and, until 1990s, no *I-Kiribati* woman served at the highest levels of the public service. In 1990, women represented only 26 per cent of formal sector employees. The proportion is increasing, however; between 1985 and 1990, the percentage of women participating in the labour force, as distinct from those whose role was confined to domestic duties, rose from 48 to 68 per cent.

Within island communities, there are women's committees organised through the agency of local government or the churches, but these are expected to confine their activities to issues like education, public health and village services. Since their inception, the committees have served as a conduit for development programmes on such issues as birth control, maternal and child health, and nutrition. Of particular importance in this regard are the Kiribati Women's Federation (better known by its *I-Kiribati* acronym of AMAK), first formed by the Ministry of Health and Community Affairs in 1976 and its successor, the Advisory Board on Women's Affairs. While these committees and local branches of international programmes like the Girl Guides (with racially-sensitive Sunbeams rather than Brownies in support) and Red Cross have provided a form of adult education and managerial experience, there are limits to what has been achieved.

The Women's Affairs Division of the Ministry of Environment and Social Development is under-resourced and minimally staffed and, though it plays a minor facilitating role, it can do little more. Educational surveys show that female students enter post-primary and secondary education outperforming males in academic terms but that subsequent completion rates are lower for females than males, and that their academic performance falls off markedly, meaning that they are penalised in the competition for scholarships. Various explanations can be offered, including the demands made on teenage girls to care for younger siblings and to undertake domestic duties, the lower value placed on female education by parents who are less supportive than they might be, and a community expectation that undervalues female employment and education for higher positions. Fewer than 10 per cent of women have their first child when under the age of 19, which suggests that unplanned teenage pregnancy is not in itself a major factor. It is also argued that in many cases it is the limited aspirations and expectations of the young women themselves, rather than external pressure or lack of support, that causes them to underachieve in high school. Females secure only a quarter of the available scholarships, but those who are successful in winning scholarships for higher education overseas perform as well as males. (For further details, see Section 7.1)

**THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH**

Historically, Roman Catholicism has had
majority support in the northern and central Gilbert Islands, while the Gilbert Islands Protestant Church, successor to the London Missionary Society, has been dominant in the south. Religious rivalry was a feature of the colonial period, and remains a factor in post-independence politics. Villages often share strong kinship ties and, reflecting the pattern of conversion in the 19th century, will be dominated by either Catholic or Protestant affiliation. This provides solidarity within the village, and brings close co-operation between the local church and village authorities. In larger villages, however, there may be two or more churches represented with adherents of all coming together in the village maneaba. The churches provide the basis of much social activity, the assumption being that all villagers will belong to one or other of the churches. Adherents are expected to give financial support to the church, with the Catholic church tending to emphasise fund-raising activities (as distinct from direct donation) more than most. It is not uncommon for the contributions of each family to be publicly announced and recorded, a practice that ties family reputation to public participation in the church. Remittance income may be applied to church projects and, on occasions, those working off the island may be asked to donate the wages for a week or month to a special home-island project. A high level of church attendance and participation is anticipated. On South Tarawa, villages have emerged around the headquarters and schools of the main churches but elsewhere on the island there is less correlation between residence and church adherence than would be expected on the outer-islands. Overall, Catholics outnumber Protestants by 53.5 to 39.3 per cent with the next largest following (Baha'is) having only 2.4 per cent. There are even smaller numbers of adherents of Seventh Day Adventism, the Church of God of North Carolina, and Mormons.

In determining political behaviour, religion is important, especially in communities where there is a history of inter-church hostility, or where a candidate or party is seen to be sectarian in its approach to politics. In the 1991 elections, for example, the Catholic church campaigned actively for Catholic candidates partly because the Tabai government was seen as being dominated by southern Protestants, just as the pre-independence Ratieta government had been seen as being dominated by northern Catholics. Such analyses should not be pushed too far, however. Although Ieremia Tabai is southern Protestant, Teatao Teannaki, his Vice President and successor, was a northern Catholic; Tabai himself in presidential elections regularly won many more votes than there were Protestants in some constituencies. And in the 1991 presidential election, both leading candidates were Catholic without any noticeable drop in voter turnout on overwhelmingly Protestant islands. Even so, all post-independence presidents have taken care to ensure a balance in Cabinet between northern Gilberts, southern Gilberts and Line Islands, Catholics and Protestants, as well as catering for the various factions or 'parties' expected to support the government in the legislature.

**Local Government and Village Organisation**

Traditional power is seen most obviously in local government where, from within or outside the formal Island Council, the unimane might well control membership and set priorities. Councils that have failed to meet expectations have effectively been dismissed, though it might appear on the surface as the mass resignation of a council or an unpopular faction; alternatively, the withdrawal of unimane support might simply lead to an inactive, dysfunctional council. Although local government might properly be regarded as part of the public domain, the reality of Kiribati is that traditional and public domains are almost indistinguishable on outer-islands because of the strong influence that is exercised by the unimane on most islands—sometimes to the point that the elected council is little more than an executive, tasked with carrying out community decisions that have
already effectively been made in the maneaba. Local government is regarded as the preserve of the unimane, or of mature but not ‘old’ men who have the confidence of their seniors; on outer-islands, women seldom seek election to Island Councils. In the smaller southern Gilbert Islands, there are strong links between community, the Protestant Church, and formal local government. Here, community funds, built up from levies over generations, may be applied to either government, church or community projects without any particular differentiation, depending on the needs at the time. Some outer-island communities have gone a step further, and have established fishing co-operatives on Tarawa as a way of generating income for outer-island projects.

Formally, local government is in the hands of Island Councils (one per island, or major island division on larger islands where communication and distinct communities of interest would make a single council unworkable). Councillors are elected on a ward basis by universal adult suffrage for a three-year term. The size of each council varies according to population and in recognition of population distribution among villages. Each council elects its own president. Councils raise rates on land-holdings and also on a per capita basis, the latter sometimes being differentiated by age and gender and referred to, informally and in full colonial style, as a ‘head-tax’. Councils are expected to maintain local roads and public buildings including medical clinics and public schools. Police officers are posted to all islands but most councils also employ wardens (kaubure) to handle minor matters of public order and the organisation of minor community works that are performed through levies of materials and labour.

South Tarawa, the capital and major urban area, has a population (1995 est.) of 29,500. Here, urban councils have wider responsibilities than the Island Councils in some areas but with utilities being left to central government. Local government comes within the portfolio of the Minister for Home Affairs and Rural Development though many officials posted to outer-islands have responsibility to central government managers as well as to the local Island Council.

In practice, there are serious difficulties with the administration of local government. Councillors have little formal training in administration and lack technical expertise; their activities are constrained by informal community pressures; and many of the so-called Island Council staff have multiple reporting lines which make them largely responsible to ministries and agencies on South Tarawa rather than to the Council that employs them. In addition, working for local government is generally seen as being of lower status than working for central government, and it is lower paid. While family pressures or individual preferences may retain some able employees on their home-islands, other public servants generally have little enthusiasm for an outer-island posting. In addition, and as to be expected, communication is difficult; in-service training and supervision are difficult to organise; performance and standards vary from island to island.

**Economic Activity**

It is difficult to draw a clear distinction between households where economic activity is based primarily on cash income and where subsistence is the dominant activity. Rather, there is a continuum, ranging from households that are almost exclusively cash-based, and those where there is only minimal cash to alleviate subsistence. Nor are households consistently located at the same point on the spectrum; rather, they move as their composition and individual circumstances change. Moreover, at all points on the continuum, there is often co-operation across households but within families in the performance of subsistence tasks and in cash-earning activities. As urbanisation on South Tarawa increases, and resources there
are placed under greater pressure, there are commercial opportunities for those living on outer-islands. While it may be difficult to sell to neighbours, and impossible to sell to family, the detachment offered by shipment to Tarawa for sale in the market comes easier. On South Tarawa, the traditional domain remains strong and, even where households include one or more wage or salary earners, they are also likely to include a number of other family members who may be sharing domestic duties and subsistence cropping or fishing, but also making a cash contribution through commercial fishing, the manufacture of handicrafts, the sale of flower garlands, or part-time domestic work. On outer-islands, and excluding government officials and church employees, it can be assumed that virtually all households are primarily dependent on subsistence agriculture and fishing supplemented to varying degrees by cash income.

A sense of economic activity and of relative wealth can be gleaned from the capital goods owned by households. In so doing, it is important to remember that most households on South Tarawa, even those in government housing complexes have a 'yard' with a few square metres of cultivable land and a few trees, or they can arrange access to these minimal subsistence requirements through relatives. A few households, however, have only nominal access to traditional foods. Excluding some two hundred non-indigenous households nationally, 80 per cent of all households manufacture coconut toddy. ‘Sweet’ toddy is the sap tapped from the fruiting spathe of the coconut palm; it is collected twice a day (usually a task for young adult males if there are any in the household, and seldom for women of any age) and is either drunk in that form, or boiled to a concentrate for dilution with water as a drink, or for culinary purposes. Toddy left unboiled will quickly begin to ferment, becoming ‘sour’, gaining in alcoholic strength the longer it is left. In this form, it is a popular, though strong drink, or can be mixed with flour for bread-making. Three-quarters of all households cultivate the taro-like babai in pits dug to the water-table, and have one or more breadfruit trees; some 60 per cent grow pawpaw. Reflecting different climate and soil conditions, however, only a quarter grow bananas, most of them on islands north of the equator. It can be assumed that all households have, or have access to, coconuts. Some 85 per cent of households own one or more pigs; about half have 2-5 pigs at any one time. More than 60 per cent of households keep chickens, with a quarter of all households owning ten or more.

In addition to this subsistence activity, and the production of these and other crops for cash income, household capital goods help to round out the picture. Now, only about a quarter of households own a fishing net (usually a throwing net for the lagoon or ocean shallows), and only 40 per cent of households own a canoe. Both items would have been a household standard a generation ago. It is noticeable that while the households of South Tarawa about reflect the national average for canoes, it is only half of that for fishing nets—a reflection, perhaps, of the range of canned foods available in the shops and the low yield from net-fishing on the reefs of the heavily polluted Tarawa lagoon. It may also be significant that fish is now more readily available for sale on Tarawa than ever before. Some three hundred households on South Tarawa own boats with outboard motors, and several one-boat fishing ventures provide tuna for sale in an urban environment where the sale of food by one household to another has become acceptable in a way that would not have been possible in former times and is only now being gradually accepted on islands other than Tarawa. The figures may also be slightly misleading in that expensive items like canoes, nets, and sewing machines might be shared across households but still within families, with ownership not being a true reflection of availability. Even though more than half of all households own sewing machines and radios, it can be assumed that other households could borrow on a reciprocal basis; to
be always on the borrowing end of such a relationship would cause a significant loss of face. The same would be true of items in more limited supply, like motor cycles and handcarts which are owned by fewer than 20 per cent of households.

While levels of household cash income are hard to ascertain, about a half of all households have employment or self-employment as a major source of cash income. A similar proportion receive income from the sale of copra (the basic, almost universal, source of cash income for outer-island households), and about a third receive some cash income from the sale of fish. Most households have multiple sources of cash income including land rents (especially on South Tarawa), interest on savings, and the sale of fruit, vegetables or handicrafts. Perhaps a quarter to a third of households receive remittance income from family members working on Nauru, in the merchant marine, or in government service. Even so, with GDP per capita estimated at $A617 ($US475) in 1995, and allowing for subsistence, cash incomes are modest and subsistence activity remains important even for those living in crowded conditions on South Tarawa.

While cash incomes are growing and showing greater diversity, it remains the case that most I-Kiribati would see their own lifestyles as basically shaped around subsistence activity. The household independence that was once a basic feature of I-Kiribati households has been steadily eroded since trade followed from the first Western contact; it has been accelerated by the growth of South Tarawa which has made traditional practice more difficult and, at the same time, has undermined the cultural values that protected the status quo. Employment in the phosphate industry at Nauru and Ocean Island moved the transition a further stage and, from the late 1960s, the establishment of the Marine Training School provided further impetus. The development of improved communications, especially the internal air service from the 1970s, provided the means of moving perishable goods to the urban market on a regular basis. The idea of one I-Kiribati selling subsistence goods to another was also undermined over time by the government’s willingness to buy building materials, and of expatriate officials’ eagerness to buy fish and other food. From an I-Kiribati perspective, commerce is made easier in a ‘traditional’ context if it is collectively organised and the profit is not seen as accruing to a specific individual. Thus the development of co-operative stores (based on villages, islands or churches) has a history dating back to the 1930s and still provides the framework for the marketing of copra and the distribution of consumer goods to the outer-islands. Entrepreneurial activity, developed in the urban environment of South Tarawa, has developed over the past twenty years and is gradually winning acceptance on the outer-islands with, for example, commercial fishing, bakery and retailing activities. Adoption of such new ideas takes time, however, and in some cases the ground has been broken by government officials, or their wives, who have the excuse that, because they are not on their home-island, they do not own land and need to supplement salary and buy the means of subsistence. It is also easier for all concerned because the business does not involve cash-trading with relatives.

Despite these cultural restraints, there has always been a strong interest in cash income in communities that faced a marginal existence on poorly-resourced islands. At a time when there were few such opportunities for employment within the immediate island world, there quickly developed a sharp awareness of wage employment together with an acceptance of the migration that helped ensure the longer-term well-being of the family. Early in the colonial period, even those in remote villages learned to place a premium on Western education because it might lead to the wage employment which is seen to provide a much brighter future than agriculture and a traditional village existence. This view has been reinforced by the
steady decline in real terms of the price for copra—the only commercial commodity produced on many islands—over half a century or more. It has also been the case that there was a particular attraction for employment over business not simply because of opportunity but because of cultural restraints on doing business with relatives. It has only been with the rapid social change arising from urbanisation that these restraints are being overcome. The effect has been the transformation of the traditional domain over the past twenty or twenty-five years, and especially within the last decade. In many ways, the moulds were broken on South Tarawa by senior civil servants who moved into retailing using businesses ostensibly operated by their families.

Another critical group were those of mixed I-Kiribati and European or Chinese descent who had always been in salaried employment or the small commercial sector and, through marriage, also maintained links to the indigenous community. Despite this, they were not seen as being bound by the same social rules. The economic opportunities, once apparent to all, became the basis of a wider trend, again often led by former government servants who had both the managerial skills and the capital required to establish a business. While a small private sector has emerged, a great deal of the commercial activity is still seen as being part of, and supporting, a subsistence based ‘traditional’ lifestyle. One reason for this is the cultural value that insists that no person should rise above another, or draw attention to individual achievement. Thus many of these small businesses are still based on a traditional ethos that distributes the benefits and provides employment, often without any particular individual seeming to be in charge. The irony is that there is still strong reference to an idealised past that, in a sense, denies both the transition and the current reality of the ‘traditional’ domain in Kiribati.
THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

THE STRUCTURE OF NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Since 1979, Kiribati has been an independent republic led by an elected President (Beretitenti) who is both Head of Government and Head of State. The House of Assembly (Maneaba ni Maungatabu) comprises 39 elected members from 23 constituencies with at least one Member from each inhabited island, and is elected by universal adult (18 years) suffrage for a four-year term. The Rabi Island Council of Leaders may nominate one Member to represent the Banaban people now resident in Fiji.

Reflecting a concern that village, family and religious rivalries might produce a plethora of candidates and the election of Members with only limited community support, it is the intention of the constitution that all Members should have substantial support within their constituencies. Where candidates do not secure an absolute majority on the first ballot, a run-off election among leading candidates (two more candidates than the number of vacancies to be filled) is held. Ordinary Members (but not the President or Ministers) are subject to recall by their constituents through a petition signed by 50 per cent of registered voters; a successful petition would force a by-election.

The Members of the House of Assembly choose from among their number, by preferential ballot, three or four candidates to contest the presidential election. This provision was originally intended to ensure that, in a system without political parties, the voters would be offered a choice of candidates and platforms. The subsequent emergence of political coalitions and parties, however, has sometimes had the effect of offering the voters a choice among allies rather than a genuine choice of styles and policies. No individual may serve more than three terms as President. A President elected from a single-member constituency may be replaced in his/her Assembly role through by-election.

It is the responsibility of the President to nominate Ministers from among the Members of the House. The President, Ministers and Cabinet are responsible to the legislature. The House appoints an independent Speaker from outside its own membership. All legislation is handled according to Westminster conventions with the proviso that, unless the President rules that a matter is urgent, all legislation is delayed during the Second Reading stage to allow Members to consult their constituents in maneaba discussions. This provision was designed to satisfy concerns that the government might not only act contrary to the interests of its citizens (so suspicious were community leaders of elected politicians just before independence) but, in particular, that the unimane, opinion leaders of the traditional domain, might be denied a voice.

The presidential term, as for the legislature, is four years, though a President may be removed from office on either a formal vote of no confidence or by losing an Assembly vote on a declared confidence issue—an event that would bring a general election in its wake and, pending the election, would place power in the hands of the Council of State (Chairman of the Public Service Commission, Speaker, Chief Justice), not the President or Cabinet.
The judicial structure comprises a High Court, headed by a Chief Justice, and Magistrate's Courts; there is also a Court of Appeal, and the right of appeal to the Privy Council in London. The Chief Justice, who sits in the High Court, is appointed by the President after consultation with the Cabinet and Public Service Commission. Other High Court judges are appointed on the recommendation of the Chief Justice sitting with the Public Service Commission. The High Court can decide on any civil or criminal proceedings, including those referred or appealed from lower courts. Magistrates' Courts, which largely replaced Island Courts, usually sit with a panel of five Magistrates in land matters, and three Magistrates for civil and criminal matters. Courts headed by a Single Magistrate can hear criminal cases for offences carrying punishments to a maximum of five years imprisonment or a fine of $500 as well as civil cases. There are some 200 Magistrates in all but, at present, only one who may sit as a Single Magistrate. All decisions of Magistrates’ Courts are subject to appeal to the High Court. Prosecution is usually handled by State Advocates; a public defender (People’s Lawyer) is provided at public expense.

The formation of any military force is prohibited by the Constitution, though the government now maintains a fisheries patrol vessel under a defence co-operation agreement with Australia.

Overall, the constitutional structure is strongly influenced by the Westminster tradition but has major features to reflect local circumstances and cultural preferences and to ensure that the linkage between traditional and public domains remains strong. Among the more important of the latter are the two-phase general elections, provisions that ensure accountability of elected politicians through recall, the insistence on majority voter support for Members of the House of Assembly, and consultation with the people over legislation. The absence of a full party system at independence was reflected in the decision to have the popular election of the Head of State rather than having election among Members of the House of Assembly or appointment of a prime minister by a governor-general of the individual who could command a majority in the House from time to time.

The Nature of Public Leadership

Within I-Kiribati society, there is a strong expectation that leadership in the public domain will represent priorities set within the traditional domain and reflective of its values. This attitude towards leaders obviously creates difficulties for politicians in particular, even though high achievement in the bureaucracy or professions is one of the most important criteria for political success. There is, then, a widespread acceptance that those who will lead in politics must be well-versed in the ways of government but, at the same time, there is an almost paradoxical insistence that political leaders must also adhere to and embody the principles of te katei ni Kiribati—the I-Kiribati way. Quiet, consensual, diplomatic parliamentarians have generally been preferred to forceful debaters. One of the most important factors behind the success of Kiribati's first President, Jeremia Tabai who was only 29 at the time of independence, was that he was seen as embodying I-Kiribati values—taking his son fishing, cutting his own toddy, dressing modestly, visiting his own island and other outer-islands and spending a great deal of his time in maneaba up and down the country discussing issues of concern to his constituents.

In one important sense, Tabai's success as Chief Minister from 1978, and as President from 1979 to 1991, moved public perceptions of leaders a further stage. Tabai's election represented a recognition that, despite relative youth, he could fulfil the traditional role of an older man. This, and the tendency for most new cabinet ministers to be in their 30s or 40s reinforces the extent to which the unimane have stood aside and the political elite is seen as a group apart where personal qualities and experience take precedence over
the usual primary qualification of age. With the Public Service retirement age set at 50, politics has been seen increasingly as an alternative, second career for some senior public servants.

**Electoral Politics**

Within *I*-Kiribati society, traditional and modern come together in the election of politicians, a process that also demonstrates the strength of customary values and expectations. The most fundamental principle of Kiribati elections is that politicians are elected as individuals on the basis of personal qualities and achievements rather than as representatives of any party, organisation, policy, class or ideology. Political parties may reflect common positions among politicians, or no more than convenient alliances, but they exist at their centre as creations by and for the politicians themselves.

As distinct from systems in which either traditional status or party affiliation may be the most important factors in determining an electoral outcome, the focus in Kiribati might be likened to a series of concentric circles extending outwards from the individual. The first criterion by which an aspiring politician will be considered is personal character which will include perceptions of personal ability, educational achievement, employment record, performance of family obligations, drinking habits, marital fidelity, generosity towards others (especially in the exercise of employment or community functions), and role in the church irrespective of affiliation. Underpinning all, there must be perceived a strong commitment to consensual, responsive, representative leadership and to *I*-Kiribati values; the ideal candidate must be seen as 'a true Kiribati man'.

Next in importance is family reputation, an important local factor because the candidate him/herself may well have lived out of the constituency with only occasional visits home since leaving for high school. Thus the family's traditional status, land-holdings, level of contribution to community responsibilities and projects, involvement with the Island Council, *unimane* association, and church, and how its members have performed in the modern economic and political world will all be considered. When two or more candidates from a single village seek office at the same time, the issue is likely to be resolved by discussion and negotiation within the village, resulting in a single candidature with solid community support.

In weighing these various factors, and evaluating the various candidates, the *unimane* play the leading role and have a strong voice in shaping the community view. Politics and the evaluation of the performance of politicians is a continuous process and is an essential part of the informal meetings of old men that take place in a village *maneaba* on a daily basis. Politicians are expected to visit their constituencies regularly, to spend time in public *maneaba* discussion, and to make modest but appropriate gifts (most often tobacco and chewing gum) to those who gather.

This rural-dwelling 'traditional' elite is fundamentally and instinctively suspicious of central government because rural communities depend heavily for funds and services on a government that represents a restraint on island autonomy. Central government is often perceived as a remote, arbitrary, authoritarian and in some senses irrelevant agency that is the successor to colonial authority, shares its less attractive qualities, and seems little attuned to the development needs of outer-islands. To ameliorate this situation, traditional leaders seek to control the election of politicians, and to hold them accountable on an individual basis, even if they cannot control the decisions of the government itself. In this context, it is also important to remember that, although the existence of all Gilbert Islands was known historically throughout the chain, there was no sense of collective identity and, unlike some of the larger Polynesian countries, no
title structure, dynasty or hierarchy that bound the islands together. Indeed, in pre-European times, so close was the affinity to family and maneaba district on some islands that even a sense of individual island identity can be seen almost as a colonial creation. Now, beyond independence, it is the national parliamentary process that provides the critical link between the traditional and public domains, represented respectively by the traditional elites of the outer-islands and the modern elite that dominates politics and the public service on South Tarawa.

Although issues like the proposed establishment of a Defence Force (1978) and the fishing agreement with the Soviet Union (1987) have polarised the electorate on occasions, it has generally been the style rather than the policies of a government that has determined its fate. During the Tabai presidency, the government’s austerity policy was aimed at protecting the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund and living within the country’s means. While this approach was initially accepted as responsible, the government lost ground as living standards were eroded, and evidence of inefficiency, fraud and mismanagement in government activities attracted parliamentary criticism and public comment.

Again, the importance of Tabai’s personal standing in the early years of independence must be emphasised. After serving the maximum three terms as President, Tabai moved to Fiji as Secretary-General of the South Pacific Forum. Without his powerful presence, it became more difficult for the successor government of Teatao Teannaki to defend itself against the attacks of Roniti Teiwaki, Tewareka Tentoa and Teburoro Tito, leaders of opposing factions and parties. These politicians not only criticised the behaviour of Ministers in the Teannaki government but, as part of the 1994 presidential campaign, offered attractive policies to increase the copra price through subsidisation and to abolish school fees for Forms 1-3. It should be noted, however, that it was unusual for such specific policy commitments to be made in the course of a presidential election; they were the more remarkable in that they were put forward by a new political party which captured all four nominations. The policies were therefore shared by all four candidates.

At an individual level, some candidates have moved beyond normal village commitments in making contributions to community fund-raising or offering gifts, including transport to polling stations, to key community leaders. As a consequence, several electoral petitions have been presented (though not all have reached court) but only in three cases (one involving two members), have there been prosecutions and disqualifications for electoral bribery. All were for relatively minor cases involving gifts of tobacco, or the offer of transport to the polling stations, which have become commonplace on the outer-islands. In respect of the 1994 election, a petition was lodged against President Teburoro Tito in respect of similar alleged offences, but failed in court.

In presidential elections, policy and political affiliation to parties has assumed increasing importance in both policy terms and in political experience seen in organisation, publicity and strategic voting. Given the constitutional provision which places the selection of presidential candidates in the hands of recently elected Members of Parliament, the ability of presidential candidates to win supporters is the key to nomination. In practice, the system places a great deal of pressure on, and power in the hands of, newly elected Members and may help to explain the rapid advancement that many make to cabinet office. At the same time, rapid promotion to Cabinet is defended on the grounds that the best people should be appointed and that most of the new Members are, in any case, well-versed in the ways of government.
PARLIAMENTARY POLITICS

Ideology in its Western sense plays little part in I-Kiribati politics. There was a degree of public concern when the government signed a controversial fishing agreement with the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s (with the Roman Catholic Church prominent but by no means alone on the ‘anti-Communist’ side of the debate during the 1987 elections) but there is little public awareness of the politics of Left or Right, let alone New Right. Accepted social and political norms are firmly rooted in an idealised corpus of beliefs and behaviours that are egalitarian in their foundations and based on a clear set of individual rights and obligations within contexts of kinship obligations and community norms.

It has also been significant that, since independence and the removal of, mostly expatriate, official Members from the legislature, debate has been in the I-Kiribati language which gives all elected Members the opportunity to participate and thus to make a public comment and commitment on almost every issue. Moreover, the broadcasting of parliamentary debates in a country that has only a single national radio station stimulates public interest and generates a widespread understanding of both issues facing the government and those that divide the politicians. Debates are broadcast live on FM on South Tarawa, daily highlights are included in the national news, and the full proceedings are broadcast in stages for about an hour each evening during the meeting of the House and for as long afterwards as it takes to complete the full coverage.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the main opposition to Tabai’s National Progressive Party came from the Christian Democratic Party (later the Social Democratic Party) which built a following around Harry Tong, a local doctor. It promoted itself as an alternative government with its strong criticism of government operations and alleged inefficiencies—all of which were presented as limiting the government’s commitment to the needs of the people and responsible government. It was the environment of distrust created in this way that provided the backdrop to alleged ministerial misuse of funds, the 1994 Confidence vote on the issue of whether an independent inquiry into the issue should be held, and the subsequent dissolution in terms of the constitution. It was after the subsequent elections that all of the Members except the five-Member rump of the NPP joined in linking Te Maneaba Party, which had formed around Roniti Teiwaki and Teburoro Tito, and the Maurin Party comprising ‘independent’ politicians but effectively led by Tewareka Tentoa. Within the coalition, which agreed on the basic policies of increasing the price of copra and abolishing school fees for Forms 1-3, each of the leading players had his own band of supporters. Even during the nomination process, however, cracks were appearing in the coalition and subsequent differences saw the exclusion from the ministry of two of the presidential candidates—Roniti Teiwaki, a university graduate and former minister who had left politics in the 1980s but returned in a by-election in 1990, and Peter Taberannang Timeon, a former Secretary to Cabinet. With another supporter, these two retreated to the opposition benches where they have maintained a strictly independent stance. One cabinet minister has since left the government and joined the opposition which now consists of five independents and five members of the NPP. The Tito government thus enjoys the support of 31 of 41 Members of the House of Assembly.

Clearly, political parties will continue on their evolutionary path, irrespective of changes that may be made in the procedures for presidential elections. Equally inevitable is the trend towards the definition of policy and commitment to specific undertakings at least at the presidential level as a means of bidding for electoral support. While there is continuing public interest in who is supporting or opposing the government, there is little evidence at present of public enthui-
siasm for parties as national, mass political organisations.

No single group, coalition or political party has ever secured an absolute majority in an I-Kiribati general election. Rather, each government has been formed around a core group, usually described as a party, which has been one of three or four such coalitions which co-exist alongside a group of independent members. The nomination of presidential candidates and the subsequent presidential election is critical because the constitutional separation of the presidential election from party strength in the Assembly means that any incoming President must face the possibility of a hostile Assembly. It is the expectation, and has been the case in practice, however, that presidents have been able to command majority parliamentary support, consolidated by a judicious balance in the allocation of portfolios.

In recent times, the consolidation of the House into ‘government’ and ‘opposition’ has further encouraged the formation of parties and coalitions and has also served to promote more negotiation and compromise among political leaders in the interests of securing and maintaining a majority. The greater expertise and experience of the National Progressive Party gained during the Tabai years was clearly evident in the 1991 election even in such relatively straightforward matters as success in encouraging electors to direct their votes towards its primary candidate rather than a ‘local son’. These compromise ‘party’ arrangements might be seen as subverting the intentions of the constitution but they may also engender greater political stability through the emergence of larger, compromise political parties and factions. In 1991, for example, both ‘primary’ candidates were northern Catholics though each had a southern Protestant as his secondary partner.

While the current high turnover of Members means that large numbers of new members must be quickly integrated into the process, it does raise the possibility that, in a system designed to encourage popular participation and to discourage party politics, there may soon be, in effect, a party-based system. The logical steps are, at first, for the solidification of parties or coalitions between the election of Members and the determination of presidential candidates and, as a second stage, a broader identification of candidates with parties by Assembly candidates prior to election. The electors’ choice would still be primarily determined by the candidates’ personal qualities and qualifications rather than by their declared affiliations in the national parliament.

As the situation stands, the negotiations that take place after the constituency results are known and before the presidential candidates have been chosen are all important. The assumption has been that any of the leading presidential candidates would, through his own group and with the support of either a coalition partner or a sufficient number of independents (i.e. those who had secured his nomination in the first place) would be able to assemble a working majority of Members at least on confidence issues. The fact that there have been two governments defeated on confidence issues, and that one sitting President was victorious in the ensuing election and the other was not, suggests that a workable mechanism for a change of government exists following a vote of no confidence or during a period of instability, as well as through a general election. It also means that the role of the President is decisive in forming a government and that governments, cabinets and parties are more easily led (and controlled) by presidents than presidents can be controlled by parties because of the loose party structure and the opportunities to woo supporters with the promise of portfolios.

PARTIES AND ISSUES

The absence of a formal party structure makes it difficult for a government to formulate and implement a consistent set of
policies. Some parties have campaigned on the major issues already identified, but there is a more common tendency to 'sell' the qualities of the leader and the approach to government issues. While there may be a commitment to tackling such issues as outer-islands development, the cost of living, the copra price, or the inefficiencies of government, there is neither personal nor party commitment to a clearly defined set of policies or even to a common ideological approach. The closest to the latter that Kiribati has seen is probably the 'austerity' approach taken by the Tabai government but even this amounted to little more than restraint in use of earnings from the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund and a reluctance to expand social spending; while there was some privatisation of government services, there was little enthusiasm for government restructuring, cutbacks in existing programmes or increases in taxation.

While issues are coming increasingly important in I-Kiribati politics, the linking of principles and policies to parties must be undertaken with caution. A study of the 1991 election in the constituencies of South Tarawa, the best educated and most sophisticated electorates, showed that several candidates (even some of those notionally in opposition) strongly supported outgoing President Tabai while criticising his government; almost one-quarter of all candidates had no party affiliation; and more candidates were associated with some of the parties than there were vacancies available. Apart from generally supporting or opposing the government, most candidates strongly emphasised their desire to serve the people ahead of their party affiliation or any particular policies. Perhaps it was as well, because at the end of the campaign nearly half of all voters surveyed on South Tarawa could not name the main parties currently represented in the House of Assembly.

Such political parties as do exist might have rules collectively agreed by their politician-members but they have neither official lists of candidates, nor any administrative or organisational structure, nor even a mass membership. Any fund-raising is by donations of those directly involved and is used to cover only such minimal activities as photocopying small brochures. Although some personal gifts to cover expenses are made, candidates at all levels generally have to pay their own fares to visit other islands and to pay their own campaign costs. Because politicians tend to join parties after, not before a general election, it follows that politicians remain within parties while it suits their purposes and meets the expectations of their constituents. There is little party discipline, and there are no whips. At the same time Members, once elected, tend to retain their party affiliation for the duration of the parliamentary term. There is no official Leader of the Opposition though, for the smooth operation of the House, a leader's name is generally supplied to the Clerk of the House.

Apart from the innovation of firm policy commitments, which will enable the voters to make a much more precise judgement on the performance of the Tito government than has been possible for any of its predecessors, the 1994 presidential election also saw new elements in the style of campaigning. A significant innovation was the national distribution of a video-tapes, most notably of a speech by Teburoro Tito, the successful candidate, in which he spelled out allegations of the misuse of government funds against Teatao Teannaki, his predecessor, and members of the previous Cabinet. This tape later became the subject of unsuccessful legal action for defamation by Teannaki. Tito's supporters also distributed a tape of the embattled former-President's defence of his position in what was generally regarded as an unconvincing and damaging performance. These developments suggest that national policy issues, firm policy statements, and consequential accountability perhaps enhancing the prospects for policy stability, may become more a part of the national political scene in the future.
SECTIONAL INTERESTS

There are few formal lobby groups operating within the public domain. Business interests, for example, tend to operate individually and directly with politicians, especially with those to whom they are linked through marriage or kinship relationships. There is no private press in the usual sense, although political broadsheets have occasionally appeared. More significant in this regard are the activities of the two main churches which have taken a public stance from time to time—either on moral issues, or on matters like education policy in which they have a vital interest and depend on government support. In such cases, the various churches lobby ministers according to their religious affiliation, or rely on pulpit statements intended to sway voters and influence politicians. The Catholic church has been the more active in this regard, attacking the notion of a national Defence Force when it was proposed in the 1970s, opposing the fisheries agreement signed with the Soviet Union by the Tabai government in 1985, and promoting the cause of ‘anti-government’ candidates in the 1991 election on the grounds that the Tabai ministry was dominated by southern Protestants.

Although women’s organisations exist, they tend to be government or church sponsored, apolitical and avoid debate on controversial issues. The Aia Maea Ainen Kiribati, or Kiribati Women’s Federation, known as AMAK, for many years served as an umbrella organisation for church and private women’s organisations. Like its constituent members, it had a strong emphasis on the dissemination of health and nutritional messages from government to women, rather than to apply pressure on the government concerning women’s issues. AMAK was underfunded, and like many indigenous NGOs, depended on the committed leadership of a small group of individuals. While this may have reduced its effectiveness as a political lobby group, AMAK none the less provided a strong focus and educational agency for women in a society strongly oriented towards male preferences and leadership. Following internal difficulties, AMAK’s role was curtailed in favour of a new advisory board and more direct involvement by the Women’s Affairs Division of the Ministry of Environment and Social Development (See Section 7.2).

Because leadership was traditionally exercised by men, women seldom speak in maneaba meetings though it is acceptable for them to do so in an official capacity, or representing a community organisation. Only three women have ever been elected to parliament—one in an urban constituency where she had built a strong personal following for community work; one who replaced her deceased husband as Member; and the other because she was seen as a surrogate candidate for her husband who had been disqualified following a conviction for a minor case of electoral corruption. In the 1991 and 1994 general elections, only four of more than 200 candidates were women, none of them winning significant support.

Another group of potential influence are the ‘home-island associations’ formed on South Tarawa by migrant families. At one level, these associations are no more than social clubs organising feasts and dancing competitions to maintain tradition in a new environment. But they also reinforce church linkages, and some have initiated co-operative fishing ventures, raising capital from fellow islanders on Tarawa or from community savings to buy equipment which is then used to provide employment for the younger men and to generate profit for the association. Politically, the associations also play a role in that they provide a means for members of the urban elite to demonstrate leadership capacity within their island community and thus to establish the foundations for a future political career. Island associations also provide an intelligence network that keeps outer-islanders aware of the performance and peccadilloes of their elected representatives.
and of policy matters that might affect their interests. The associations are also well-placed to lobby the government on issues of concern including, for example, the treatment of squatters on private or government land.

**Policy Formation**

The concentration on personalities in I-Kiribati politics has not encouraged public debate on broad policy issues except, and only occasionally, in presidential elections. From observation of parliamentary proceedings over a period of more than twenty-five years, it is clear that there are strongly recurring themes in the questions asked of government or in motions sponsored by back-benchers. These are: the price of copra; the quality and availability of goods and stores on outer-islands; the frequency of shipping; the supply of medicines and doctors for outer-islands; the supply of teachers, equipment and maintenance funds for outer-islands schools; and funds for outer-islands development projects.

To some extent the prominence of these issues is inevitable, reflecting the geographic and economic realities of scattered islands and limited funds. But the constancy of the issues also suggests that neither colonial nor independent governments have yet been able to convince a significant proportion of the population of the implications of those realities. It also suggests that governments have so far failed to deal with the basic issues of cash incomes on, and government service to, outer-islands to the satisfaction of those who live on them. The consequent, continuing dissatisfaction may also be reflected in the high turnover rate among politicians as successive generations are unable to either make significant progress on these issues or to convince the voters of the essential intractability of the problems. Future governments therefore face the possibility of an increasingly disillusioned rural electorate which can only be won back by expenditure on infrastructure and services that are fundamentally non-viable. At the same time, this potential diversion of funds would create serious difficulty on South Tarawa where major public health issues must be addressed if current indicators of health and mortality, poor even by regional standards, are to be improved.

While the period since the 1977 Constitutional Convention has seen a high level of public education on the constitutional process, a sustained high level of participation in the political process, and continuing interest in, and education through, the broadcasting of parliamentary debates, there has been no parallel growth in understanding of the national economic structure and policy choices. While the politicians themselves, and the bureaucracy, have become more aware of GNP, GDP, the nature of deficits in government spending, the balance of payments, and the management of the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund or the Freight Levy Fund, such knowledge has hardly percolated beyond the politico-bureaucratic elite.

It is to be expected that the level of ministerial capacity, expertise and competence varies and that, as in any other bureaucracy, any lack of ministerial confidence, vigilance or strength will be used to strengthen the bureaucratic hand. At one extreme, however, there are fundamental political (and domestic) decisions—like the 1995 decision to increase the copra price by 25 per cent—in which public servants have very little say and which may affect the economy but do not involve outside governments or donors.

Most policy formulation, however, involves third parties as well as politicians and their advisers. In particular, and to some extent by default, aid donors play a significant role in policy formation in some areas. Indeed, in areas on which they place a high priority, aid donors may almost carry the field. On the other hand, there is considerable I-Kiribati frustration over aid donors’ reluctance to
endorse projects which the Kiribati government considers to be important.

**Policy-Formation in Practice**

An example may be instructive. The formation of policies relating to just one area of educational policy is illustrative of the complexity of the policy-making process in Kiribati. The example concerns a series of decisions made in 1994 and 1995 in respect of decisions to abolish school fees for Forms 1-3, establish junior secondary schools, and upgrade the capacity of the Tarawa Teachers' College. All issues are linked, and illustrate the complexity of the overall process.

The decision to abolish school fees (mostly to cover food and accommodation paid by parents of students attending centrally located high schools) was driven largely by political considerations. The fees weigh heavily on outer-island residents where cash-earning opportunities are limited. The promise to abolish these fees was agreed by the Te Maneaban Te Mauri Party on the eve of the presidential election in 1994 and subscribed to by all four candidates. It was a policy designed as part of a wider package to improve living conditions on outer-islands.

On assuming office, the new government of President Tito also inherited a new education policy, drawn up in 1993 by international consultants. Among other things, the consultants recommended the creation of junior secondary schools teaching Forms 1-3 which, for selected pupils, would supersede Standards 7-9 in the existing primary system. The government had initially shown little interest in the consultants' report—partly because of its dense, jargon-ridden, and excessively detailed style; partly because of resentment at the attitude shown by one of the consultants. In fact, it was substantially on the initiative of some of the potential aid donors that some features of the proposed policy were salvaged and considered for implementation.

The Teannako government eventually decided to go ahead with four of the schools on a trial basis, and the World Bank agreed to fund two schools, also on an experimental basis. The new Tito government accepted the notion of junior secondary schools but recognised that there would be differential access depending on a student's island of residence, and that this would carry a political as well as financial cost. The Minister himself was acutely aware of this issue, and it was on his initiative that the possibility of establishing more schools came under active consideration. If schools were established on all the major islands, as well as South Tarawa, he argued, overall educational standards would be raised. Moreover, the Tito government's commitment to abolish fees would, in effect, only be a cost until the schools were established, because children attending school on their home-islands would not need to pay fees with a consequent saving to the government as the new schools were introduced. The new scheme would apply to government and church schools and further the broader aim of an integrated education system.

At the same time, it was believed that the building of junior secondary schools (in reality the addition of a science classroom and an industrial arts classroom to about twenty selected primary schools and the reallocation of existing facilities) would stimulate the economy (especially if funded by aid), slow migration to South Tarawa by helping to make the outer-islands more attractive, and create more Form 4-7 places in the secondary schools. In theory, the overall number of teachers would be about the same.

Ministry officials, who had embraced the original proposal only after some hesitation, were reluctantly persuaded to accept the Minister's revised policy. The Ministry's task was made the more difficult by having a succession of four secretaries within the first year of the new government (though, it should be emphasised, for reasons having nothing
specific to do with this project). In a separate but complementary development, the New Zealand government agreed to fund a project to strengthen and upgrade the Tarawa Teachers’ College largely for in-service training but also to train and retrain teachers and help develop curriculum for the junior secondary schools. In addition, it was to help address existing and serious problems of infrastructure, management, staff quality, curriculum and morale within the College. After an initial visit by the implementation team, however, the imperatives of the junior secondary schools caused a re-orientation of the project strongly towards the latter end.

The Minister decided that the whole scheme should be initiated from 1997 with a stated goal of launching at least the Form 1 programme in something like 20 schools using 80 or more retrained teachers. Such a timetable would be tight under the most advantageous circumstances, but was accepted at a time when the primary system (government and private, including churches) was at least 140 teachers short on an establishment of about a thousand, and education was constantly losing staff to other parts of the public sector because of the relatively low status according teachers, low morale because of a history of deferred maintenance and low capital input into schools, and salary scales that make administration an attractive option. The policy was, however, adopted in 1995 despite evidence that the government lacked the capacity to either train teachers or undertake the required construction even with external assistance. It then sought funds for the building of some 40 classrooms. It found, however, that the World Bank, which had initially been prepared to fund two schools, was concerned at the escalation of the project and reconsidered its position. The government’s stated intentions are to proceed with the construction and to prepare a major project proposal for the World Bank. Even the preparation of such a proposal, however, will severely test the planning capacity of the ministries concerned.

In summary, the issue of the junior secondary schools may prove to be a classic example of a project that has the strong support of the Kiribati government and the people but, because of its multi-faceted nature, and the varying priorities of aid donors as well as their diverse rules of engagement, it will require the co-operative support of several donors as well as the government of Kiribati if it is to succeed. While various players have an understanding of the overall shape of the policy and their own role in it, the overall policy is nowhere clearly defined and costed. Difficulties of this kind will make it difficult for donors to meet their own procedural requirements or, at the very least, will cause major delays. Moreover, because of the way in which the policy evolved, and the practical difficulties in the way of project implementation (for example the logistical difficulties in the way of such a major outer-islands construction programme), it will not be possible to implement the project to meet the politically defined target of 1997. Consequently, there is a good chance of frustration all round, a failure to achieve the anticipated educational improvement, and a consequent political cost for the government.

Above all, the example of the junior secondary schools shows that policy formation in Kiribati is not simply a matter for governments and ministers but must necessarily involve discussions with potential aid donors at every stage. Here, the bureaucratic requirements of the donors, which may well exceed the capacity of the Kiribati government, also represent a major delaying factor in implementation. Further, at each point that an outside party becomes involved, there is a tendency for local priorities to be compromised, and for a little more ‘ownership’ of the policy, and commitment to it, to be lost. The case of junior secondary schools is by no means unique; similar difficulties have been characteristic of many privatisation initiatives, and also of outer-island development policy and the building of causeways under Australian aid.
POLICY AND THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Within specific sections of the Public Service, the style, preoccupations and competence of individual ministers and, to some extent, of departmental secretaries, can have a significant effect. While some ministers deal only with immediate subordinates others bypass departmental secretaries to seek information or advice from those 'actually doing the work', a modus operandi that causes a degree of discomfort.

The election of a new government in 1994, effectively the first change of government since independence, created some tension within the Public Service. The extent to which the Public Service had become comfortable with a known set of policies and a general approach to economic policy emerged when a new government, determined to make its mark, introduced significant changes of both approach and specific policies in several areas. In general, however, the discomfort was accepted as legitimate and a degree of personal and professional adjustment was seen as an inevitable and proper part of the process. The right and responsibility of the new government to act as it did was not challenged within the Public Service.

With regard to the internal process, some ministers and former-ministers suggested that middle-ranked and senior civil servants were overly-status conscious in dealing with officials higher or lower in the pecking order than themselves. It was also suggested that they were reluctant to pick up the telephone or arrange a meeting to clarify details or clear obstructions. In general, the public service is heavily dependent on the use of memoranda which have to be laboriously drafted in English (seldom in I-Kiribati), and typed, before dispatch to their counterparts' pending trays, where they take second place to the primary business of the recipient department. A further delay may follow from the reluctance to communicate among ministries except according to rigid protocols of 'up, across and down' through departmental secretaries. Younger, well-qualified staff are often blocked by their seniors from 'cutting-through' and discouraged from showing initiative in a system where advancement has traditionally been incremental, rather than based on performance.

The civil service is relatively small and personal preference, as well as the importance of Kiribati being represented and its dignity maintained at overseas meetings and seminars, means that the preparation of reports and papers for outside meetings and agencies will usually take priority over policy formation, implementation and evaluation. In addition, some senior officials noted that more than a quarter of their time was taken up directly or indirectly in dealing with the requests or requirements of aid donors or meeting visiting officials—in addition to which they had to prepare for, or attend, regional or international meetings.

An additional burden on the public service has been the alternative economic approach pursued by the Tito government. From 1978 to 1994, the Tabai-Teannaki governments followed a policy of austerity, taking the advice of the World Bank and other agencies that restraint on spending would provide the foundation for long-term growth. It may be debatable as to how far that advice is valid for an economy like that of Kiribati but, until its defeat, the government consistently adopted this approach, trying to keep annual recurrent expenditure within $A35 million ($US 27 million) and drawing on income from the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund only as a last resort. For its efforts, its 'fiscal responsibility' was endorsed by the World Bank and other international governments and agencies. After the departure of Tabai, the policy became more difficult to sustain electorally amid attacks on government performance, mismanagement, and financial difficulties in government trading enterprises, growing demands for increased expenditure on services, and complaints concerning the effects of inflation on outer-islands pro-
ducers. There was also some suggestion among aid donors that the government's own reluctance to spend demonstrated a lack of commitment—especially in the areas of health and education—and thus diminished the chances of securing aid. Total aid received dropped significantly in the early 1990s.

Since 1994, the Tito government has taken a different approach, approving expenditure of $A48 million ($US37 million) for 1996, and $A51.5 million ($US 40 million), including $A13.6 million from the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund, for 1997. It argues that the country can afford to increase spending which will alleviate real hardship and, at the same time, generate growth. This is the background to its decision to increase the price of copra, abolish school fees for Forms 1-3, and to increase public service salaries by about 35 per cent in 1995. The approach has been condemned as inflationary and fiscally irresponsible by the opposition, but has won widespread public endorsement. It must be remembered, however, that such perceptions are developed within a context in which the implications of economic policies are judged very much in individual terms and with little reference to long-term national interests.

**Operation of the Public Service**

Kiribati has retained many administrative features developed during a long period of colonial rule. In particular, the colonial response to a small population, widely scattered islands, and a lack of commercial potential was to use government resources to provide not only social services, but basic infrastructure including transport and communications. The cost and inconvenience of decentralisation (seriously considered as an alternative after the Second World War) led to a preference for a centralised administration on South Tarawa. To these basic features must be added the realities that colonial policies were often driven by High Commissioners in Suva, then Honiara, and that the colonial administration (expatriate and local) was strongly hierarchical and status-conscious—features that discouraged policy initiatives from below.

These basic conditions have left a powerful heritage in the form of a Public Service which explores and administers policy initiatives from above (ministers) and outside (aid donors) rather than developing alternatives from within. It operates hierarchically among departments, divisions, and sections rather than laterally. As by far the largest employer within Kiribati, government service is perceived as a source of safe employment, wealth distribution and, in effect, of welfare provision. Over the past decade, the size of the Public Service has increased at more than twice the rate of both the population and the national budget adjusted for inflation.

Managerial capacity and managerial styles are not only bound by these constraints, but again the importance of the traditional domain is seen in cultural expectations which make it difficult for one individual to ask another to do something more than once, to check if an instruction has been carried out, or to criticise for deficiencies of performance. It follows that the government finds it difficult to provide service in more than a minimal way, and that government-owned 'commercial' activities have difficulty in defining strategic objectives, making profits, or providing the designated service. While senior officials have a clear perception of the ideals of an independent public service that serves successive governments, provides policy advice, administers policy, implements legislation and fulfils statutory obligations, the performance of these ideals, and efficiency generally, often falls short of them. Especially when dealing with the lower levels of the bureaucracy, an outside observer has a stronger sense of minimal compliance than of public service.

There are three basic entry points for the Public Service—at Level 11 (currently $7,128) for graduates or equivalent; Level 15 ($4,164) for nurses and primary teachers; and
Level 19 ($2,552) for clerks, typists, police constables, drivers, and cleaners. This latter range may attract those who have completed Form 7 as well as those who have no secondary education at all. Most positions carry a salary range of two (and up to four) levels, with three or four increments (of $100-200) within each level. Public service employment, then, carries the possibility of slow but steady advancement within a pyramidal structure that has been steadily flattened by a policy of giving greater cost-of-living adjustments in percentage terms at the bottom than at the top. Conditions of service and discipline are matters for the Public Service Commission which, like the Audit Office, operates independently of the Public Service proper. Matters of appointment and promotion are the responsibility of the Public Service Division within the Office of the President.

In 1995, the Public Service Division embarked on a programme intended to produce job descriptions and job evaluations leading to salary scales and structures that will reflect the nature of the position and the qualifications and experience needed for it. The tendency for the current structure to produce ‘promotion by cohort’, especially in the administrative cadre, and the absence of bonuses or performance-based pay, effectively undermines individual ambition which is already rendered tentative by cultural mores. It is evident, however, that some younger graduates with technical expertise (especially in the financial and management areas) are advancing rapidly through the senior levels but they are the exceptions in a service that provides few incentives or rewards for those who are good time-keepers, work hard, and are oriented towards public service. Individuals seldom seek out work and, more commonly, wait for specific tasks to be allocated. Indeed, those who out-perform their peers may be criticised for being ‘shiny’ and seeking individual aggrandisement—a criticism that now seems less frequently applied than it was to those who have been educated overseas and are expected to perform as members of the bureaucratic elite.

CORRUPTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Political corruption, as it usually defined in Third World countries and as it has arisen over forestry transactions in Solomon Islands, for example, is not a feature of I-Kiribati politics and society. Despite allegations from time to time that returns from foreign fisheries deals are only as low as they are because of the payment of a ‘sweetener’ to key ministers and officials, there is no evidence to support the allegations of corruption (most commonly heard from disgruntled expatriates or external observers). Moreover, there is little evidence in the lifestyle or spending patterns of those who have been involved that they have assets beyond levels accumulated by other members of the politico-bureaucratic elite. The most celebrated allegations of corruption were those made by the present President, Teburoro Tito about his predecessor, Teatao Teannaki and ministers in the previous government who were alleged to have improperly claimed expenses for travel to outer-islands, especially to their home-islands. To some extent, the claims centred on whether a minister was entitled to the same allowances as an ordinary member, and whether they were to be regarded as domiciled on South Tarawa or on their home-island. Charges that these travel claims amounted to theft were made during parliamentary debate. It was the refusal of the government to accede to the inquiry demanded by opposition and independent Members of the Assembly that provoked the 1994 confidence vote that lead on to a general election and the formation of a new government. Public allegations led to associated court action for defamation. As it transpired, an independent inquiry found that some ministers had over-claimed, but only at the rate to which other members were entitled, and which had subsequently been applied to ministers. All claims had been approved by the appropriate officials as
meeting expense guidelines. The inquiry found that genuine mistakes had been made, and that no fraud was intended. A small group of ministers were asked to repay some $10,000.

Within the Public Service, cases of fraud are regularly detected, but few involve sums of more than a few hundred dollars. In fact, the government loses far more through the incompetence and poor training of its employees than it does through fraud. Poor time-keeping and inadequate supervision make a far greater cumulative impact on government expenditure than identifiable loss through fraud. Inadequate skills levels are particularly acute in the financial area, and good performers are frequently siphoned off by the emergent private sector and government trading operations. Nor is it always clear what is being investigated. For example, one employee investigated for a shortfall of funds was found to have banked all the cash received but, being bemused by other transactions and lacking instruction and supervision, had carefully stacked all cheques in his desk drawer since taking up his appointment.

The smallness of I-Kiribati society, and the existence of informal networks, make it difficult for individuals to benefit from fraud in a systematic way. Moreover, community censure is quickly felt by individuals who are seen to be living high on the public purse, a factor that has ended more than one ministerial career. That said, individuals in public office are expected to be generous with what they do earn, and it is difficult to deny requests that are made in terms of custom. The result is that politicians are often under financial pressure, but seem to resort to indebtedness rather than corruption when faced with these pressures.

As well as the supervisory functions of the Public Service Commission and the Public Service Division, the Audit Office has the usual responsibility for public sector accountability. Despite its statutory independence, the Audit Office is often perceived as being a section of the Ministry of Finance and subject to the usual political controls and influence. The current President has emphasised the independence of the audit function and the necessity for a more modern form of audit that examines the accountability and efficiency of performance as well as checking on details of public expenditure. The Public Service system has no difficulty with suspending and charging those considered responsible for fraud or theft, but has no equivalent functioning mechanism for dealing with those who are under-performing in their positions.

Like the government bureaucracy, the administration of the Public Service itself is centralised with departmental heads having little direct control over the appointment, deployment, promotion or transfer of their staff and, therefore, over the rewards and punishments of public service employment beyond being able to make recommendations as vacancies occur. Managerial attitudes towards time-keeping, absenteeism, application to duty and overall efficiency vary a great deal but it might be observed that overt signs of diligence seem to diminish in proportion to the distance, hierarchical or geographical, from the office of the minister or secretary.

THE NATIONAL ECONOMY

In the past decade, Kiribati has experienced little economic growth. In real terms, per capita incomes and standards of living have steadily eroded over the past decade. Overall GDP growth was only 1 per cent per annum between 1984 and 1993 which has meant a decline in real per capita growth of almost 2.5 per cent per annum. With the impact of earnings from the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund and remittances, however, GNP per capita for the same period grew at an annual rate of 0.4 per cent. (More than a thousand merchant seamen working overseas account for 10 per cent of wage employment; collectively, they remit some $5 million a year to families in Kiribati.) A 1995 economic
review put per capita GNP at SA1060 (US $815), and per capita GDP at SA617 (US $415), which is the lowest among the small Pacific Islands states.

In looking at GDP by sector from 1982 to 1993, the most notable features are increases for government activity from 24.3 per cent to 31 per cent, and for fishing from 5.9 per cent to 9.8 per cent. On the other hand, transport and communications decreased from 20.7 per cent to 15.9 per cent, and agriculture (commercial and subsistence) from 18.5 in 1982 to 8 per cent in 1993. The major source of government revenue in recent years has been fishing licence fees from foreign operators for the exploitation of Kiribati’s Exclusive Economic Zone. The figures largely reflect the country’s smallness, remoteness, geographic fragmentation and lack of exploitable resources. In a nation of scattered drought-prone coral islands with a lack of land-based resources, there is a high cost on providing communications and other services in a manner that provides at least some opportunity for economic and social improvement for those living on outer-islands. These are intrinsic restraints on economic development to which must be added, for most of the last decade and a half, poor prices for copra and fish, the two major exports. (In response to these conditions, the cultivation of seaweed for export has developed rapidly on some lagoon islands over the past decade, in some years earning more foreign exchange than copra.) The country carries an annual deficit on its balance of trade of $40 million which is not large in absolute terms but has to be set against imports that are six times the value of exports. Of the imports, some 30 per cent is accounted for by food items, especially staples like rice, sugar and flour.

All of these factors impose barriers to the achievement of the basic macro-economic goals of improving economic growth, diversifying the economy, reducing aid-dependence and improving standards of living. Kiribati relies heavily on official development assistance, mostly for capital investment which is concentrated in the areas of infrastructure, administration, health and education. Aid flows account for about half of GDP. About 25 per cent of the adult population is engaged in some form of significant cash employment, compared with nearly 50 per cent working primarily in the subsistence sector; the balance of the population is engaged in home duties or not in the labour force.

**CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW**

The constitution of Kiribati was designed with more attention to local circumstances than most. It was intended that the constitution would be reviewed from time to time, but few envisaged the comprehensive review that was embarked upon by the Tito government in 1995. To some extent, the review was prompted by Kiribati’s political evolution, but it also owed something to a minor constitutional crisis prompted by difficulties between the government and the then Chief Justice in 1994. The Select Committee reported late in 1995 in anticipation of a full constitutional convention. The Committee’s initial meetings were well-attended on South Tarawa and on outer-islands—a further indicator of the relatively high level of political awareness.

The main issues under discussion are reflective of the on-going tensions between traditional and public domains and suggest, further, that the basic principles that governed the original constitution remain central to public perception. Indeed, the evidence suggests a public concern to reinforce those principles and to maintain the control of ‘the people’ over ‘the politicians’. The issues under debate include the manner of electing the President, the role of the Council of State, the rights of the Banabans, the interpretation of traditional gifts as electoral bribery and corruption, and the representation of South Tarawa. If the constitutional convention is
composed in similar fashion to that held in 1977, it will almost certainly be more conservative than the politicians and will place a strong emphasis on I-Kiribati values. It is intended that constitutional lawyers will be involved in formulating issues for the proposed convention and in presenting issues to it.
THE PRIVATE SECTOR DOMAIN

BACKGROUND

The private domain in Kiribati has always been limited—absolutely, reflecting smallness, isolation, and the scarcity of natural resources since the exhaustion of the phosphate deposits at Ocean Island; and relatively, given the survival of a strong subsistence sector and the heavy involvement of the government in the economy. In a colonial environment that eschewed transparent subsidisation of the private sector in favour of government-provided services, there were few prospects for the development of private enterprise. Indeed, the support of government agencies that bought and sold in bulk, provided freight and passenger transport at below cost, and used subsidies to equalise the cost of freight and key commodities across its scattered islands acted as a positive discouragement. With some moves towards corporatisation in the past two decades, and the growth of an urban population on South Tarawa that has encouraged the development of specialist services and niche markets, the situation is slowly changing and is encouraging, and being facilitated by, changing attitudes towards participation in business by private individuals. With a low savings rate, those entering business for themselves or a broader family or community-based enterprise have difficulty in obtaining capital and depend heavily on ‘packages’ of funds put together through collective participation. This broad participation can provide a pool of cheap labour for the enterprise, and some cushion against individual loss, but also makes for ill-defined enterprises and diffuse managerial responsibilities. These difficulties are exacerbated by legal restraints on the use of land for collateral against borrowing. Moreover, both the National Provident Fund and the Bank of Kiribati, the major holders of private savings, invest 90 per cent or more of their funds off-shore, rather than investing in local businesses or housing stock. Government policy as well as cultural preference has thus ensured a prominent role in the economy for the national government.

GOVERNMENT CORPORATIONS

In many respects, the commercial activities of government are seen as part of the wider Public Service and, from the 1970s, governments of Kiribati have grappled with the issue of the extent to which government should be involved in commerce (especially importing, exporting and retailing) and the provision of services like transport. The conventional wisdom, that the scale of operations was so small that either the services would not be viable or that monopolies would emerge, historically led to significant government involvement.

Pre-independence devolution of some government activity to statutory authorities was followed by corporatisation in the post-independence era by the Tabai and Teannako governments as an intended first step towards privatisation. That final stage has since been rejected by the present government which takes the view that governments can manage commercial activities at a profit. It has declared a willingness to undertake reorganisation, even to the point of dismissing boards of directors but, in the face of strong resistance by employees and their unions, has explicitly rejected privatisation and organisational rationalisation that might lead
to redundancies. It also retains policies of price control, profit control and freight equalisation as well as conditions of employment that mitigate against commercial efficiency.

Taken together, these structural factors and policies mitigate against the commercialisation of government activity, but the current financial difficulties faced by government commercial activities (to the point of insolvency in some cases) suggest that there are also matters of managerial and technical competence that are of equal significance. There is a common pattern of a failure to clearly establish the strategic environment, set realistic goals, establish capital requirements, maintain equipment and inventory, monitor performance and manage adequately which all lead inexorably to serious financial difficulty. Even where difficulties have been identified by the Public Accounts Committee or the audit process (which implies a delay at least one year and often two years before problems are recognised) successive governments have been unwilling to act. Directors are often appointed by virtue of an office or a connection to government rather than specific technical or managerial expertise. In some cases there may also be a conflict of interest in that the Secretary of a department responsible for commissioning the provision of a service may help appoint and also sit on the board of the company providing that service. Directors generally lack commercial and managerial expertise and it is a common complaint of the newer generation of managers that directors lack a sense of ‘ownership’ in, and commitment to, the enterprise.

At the present time, government commercial activities are generally caught between their former role as agencies of government, with Public Service operating principles and procedures and a charter to provide services nationally and at lowest cost, and the current expectation that they can operate efficiently within the public sector and still make a profit, despite having poor leadership and being bound by restraints on personnel policy and commercial practice. In an environment where public sector management is weak even under the most advantageous conditions, the basic goals have proved unreachable as is demonstrated by the indebtedness and managerial difficulties of several commercial entities. As well as the structural difficulties, and specific shortages of managerial expertise, the whole commercial sector presents an intractable political problem for governments. Reform carries with it the implication that employment levels, conditions of service, the price or availability of the designated service may be affected.

Three brief examples might be given. Since the development of airfields on the outer-islands in the late 1960s, domestic air transport has been the responsibility of a government agency. By 1995, Air Tungaru, the government airline, had accumulated costs of at least $2 million in accumulated costs of parts and servicing aircraft. In its attempt to isolate and address the problem, the government formed a new enterprise, Air Kiribati, to which it transferred the assets of Air Tungaru. This made little difference, as the firm responsible for servicing, and the major creditor, refused to release an aircraft it held until Tungaru’s debts were paid. A similar fate befell the Kiribati Co-operative Wholesale Society, the agency responsible for the joint copra exports of outer-island co-operatives and for the importing of materials and consumer goods. Again, with poor management and a heavy debt burden ($3.5 million to overseas suppliers; $1 million and rising to the government by 1995), a government bail-out was necessary. Suppliers insisted on the recovery of outstanding debt before extending further credit. The final example is that of the government’s Te Mautari fishing company. Originally equipped for a pole-and-line operation which foundered on poor management and inadequate supplies of bait-fish, Te Mautari remained largely inactive but fully staffed.
from 1991 to mid-1995. By that time, it had accumulated debts of more than $1 million. The options were to close the company down, or to re-equip the vessels for long-line fishing, buy new equipment and retrain staff with an estimated re-capitalisation cost of $1-1.5 million. In all cases, the government recognised that these were public enterprises and that, because the government could not afford to be seen avoiding its debts, would have to be salvaged to some extent. Despite this obligation, and the costs involved, there is little evidence of willingness to address the underlying problems. The assumption that the government will eventually pay for debts or losses, a sense that government 'commercial' ventures do not need to attain viability, and unwillingness to address issues of staff levels and performance makes for a lack of discipline throughout the government corporate sector. This remains a critical area of economic performance and the success of an investment management section established in the Ministry of Finance with the assistance of the ADB will be central to progress in this area.

PRIVATE TRADERS

A feature of the past decade has been the emergence of small businesses on South Tarawa. A handful of these — mostly in liquor or motor vehicle retailing — are owned by Europeans, most of them married to I-Kiribati. Most, however, are under indigenous control. Small village stores and various bus operators compete for business and, more recently, there has been a strong growth in the local fishing industry. Some of these businesses are owned by individuals and some by families. Collective ownership, which is rather more in tune with traditional preferences towards co-operative economic activity (a particular trait in the southern Gilbert Islands), is also present with home-island associations on South Tarawa (that is, migrant groups forming clubs according to island of origin) and both major churches being significant players. Village-based co-operative societies, dating from the 1930s, which buy copra and sell consumer goods are found on all islands. Allowing for multiple membership, virtually all households are thus covered. The co-operative principle is also inherent in the strong support of credit unions of which some 30 exist, with membership totalling 1800, 55 per cent of them women.

At the 1990 census, only 9 I-Kiribati individuals (as distinct from companies or voluntary organisations) listed themselves as employers. By way of comparison, some 2900 of the 11,000 working primarily in the cash sector (26 per cent) identified themselves as self-employed. It is of interest that of the self-employed, 29 per cent were women. A number were probably engaged in the manufacture of handicrafts, small retail stores, or selling food and beverages in what are effectively open air markets around the main retail areas and bus terminals of South Tarawa. Many have a significant role in the processing of fish and its subsequent sale, especially on South Tarawa. A number may also have been sex workers who are not identified separately in government statistics but there is evidence of their presence in growing numbers, especially around the bars of Betio. These same trends towards commercial development are also evident on the outer-islands, though not to the same extent.

Alongside the growing retail sector, there are a number of local businesses in construction and vehicle maintenance. There is a high casualty rate among these small businesses, many of which operate without bothering to secure a trading license from the government. A policy of corporatisation (leading to privatisation) introduced by governments in the 1980s and early 1990s has been marked by a lack of success with serious management and financial difficulties facing several enterprises. For political rather than economic reasons, the new government elected in 1994 abandoned this policy and declared a preference for government-owned corporations though with an accompanying
commitment to stronger management and greater efficiency.

Those in responsible positions or seen to be trading for profit remain under constant pressure to assist relatives. Many small businesses fail because relatives have been given credit, special rates, or free goods. The business owner, like the public servant, must be seen to accommodate such requests or be criticised for failing to meet family obligations. Individuals tend to patronise businesses owned by their relatives, even to the extent of allowing one bus to pass and waiting for another. This loyalty, while often helping to ensure a core clientele for a new venture, can also carry costs in terms of the favours, loans and discounts that relatives might expect.

Fishing, retail and transport ventures can be expected to grow slowly, especially as attitudes change and cultural restraints are eroded, but there will not be a significant change in the shape of the commercial sector until government policies are modified.

TRADE UNIONS

I-Kiribati have a long history of participating in trade union activity, beginning with employment in the phosphate industry. A bitter and deeply divisive strike among sections of the Ocean Island work-force in 1948 (in which the father of the current President played a prominent role) remains in the popular memory. With the growth of government services, and urbanisation on Tarawa, the last two decades have seen the emergence of politically-active trade unions. As most employment on South Tarawa is with government itself or with publicly-owned corporations, the unions are more often in conflict with government than with private employers. This was particularly the case with the Botaki Karikirakean Arota Taan Makuri (BKATM, or general worker's union) formed in the 1970s. A 1980 BKATM strike over the conditions for government workers in 1980 led to attacks on government buildings and a striker being injured by a police bullet. Over this disturbance, and an earlier BKATM strike over the behaviour of a Public Works supervisor, government was able to divide and rule among unionists and to depict for its outer-islands constituency a picture of worker irresponsibility and excessive demands at a time when the government was exercising restraint. Those incidents strengthened the hand of government in dealing with unions, and most now seek to use informal channels rather than confrontation in achieving their ends. In this regard, consultative groups established within all ministries have had the effect of weakening unions, and providing an alternative basis of representation.

In 1992 the Kiribati Trade Union Congress was formed, building a membership of about 20 affiliate unions bringing some 4,700 individual members. Among the unions, the largest by some distance is the Kiribati and Tuvalu Overseas Seamen's Union (an inheritance from pre-separation days) with some 2,000 members. Apart from that, the next largest unions include BKATM, and organisations for teachers and public employees. Other affiliate unions are more in the nature of home-island-based workers' associations. The KTUC has an executive body representing affiliates, and employs a small staff. Most of its activities are concerned with trade union education, rather than the investigation of specific grievances, a task left to affiliate unions. External influences also play a part with organisations like the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the South Pacific Oceanic Council of Trade Unions, and the Commonwealth Trade Union Council and the Asian American Free Labour Institute providing education programmes and other assistance throughout the region.

Trade Union membership cuts across family and island loyalties and has facilitated the gradual development of political loyalties that also straddles island loyalties. On South
Tarawa where unionism is strongest, union views can find electoral expression in the absence of direct home-island representation. In multi-member urban constituencies, in particular, kinship has a diminished importance. Indeed, with the original land-owning families of Tarawa now in a minority, the unions have the potential to have a significant impact on electoral outcomes.
Socio-Economic Groupings

Background

In modern Kiribati, wealth and direct political power is mostly concentrated in the hands of the politico-bureaucratic elite which is generally defined by relative youth, western education, salaried employment and residence on South Tarawa. Within this elite, men heavily outnumber women, especially in senior positions of responsibility. A significant and steadily increasing section of this elite (directly, or through family representation) is engaged in entrepreneurial activity, often on the basis of capital accumulation from public service salaries. At the same time, on many islands, traditional elites—most clearly seen in maneaba councils—still have significant influence in the election of members of parliament and remain a powerful force in local government and administration. Community leaders retain, and seek to maintain, the ultimate control over the shape and direction of central government with an active role as critic and conscience of a central political system of which they remain fundamentally distrustful. Socio-economic status tends to reflect economic activity rather than wealth as such; there are no clear classes so-defined, because family and island loyalties generally remain stronger than any form of class identification. Rather, there is a spectrum, divided into a myriad of categories but with broad bands that places at one end those who are urban wage and salary earners and, at the other, those engaged primarily in subsistence activity. Each represents perhaps a quarter of the population. In between, making up the balance, are those in both urban and rural settings who reflect the mixed economy, participating in the cash sector to a significant degree, but also significantly dependent on subsistence activity. On South Tarawa, in particular, households are mixed, some covering in themselves all shades of the spectrum.

Rural Traditional/Subsistence

Those living a rural subsistence lifestyle are led by a traditional elite that is defined by gender and age, and finds expression in the role of unimane within the household, and councils of unimane in the broader community. While this elite exercises primary responsibility for control of family assets, leadership of the family, and discipline among its members it also has a broader role in the defence of traditional values. At the present time, unimane status is in transition, with an aging generation of leaders who never held high office in employment or political life, but who have sought to retain control over younger members of the politico-bureaucratic elite, now being joined by the retired members of that modern elite who either move back to their home-island, or keep in close contact from South Tarawa.

These rural-dwellers live a lifestyle that offers subsistence as the basis of daily-living supplemented by the sale of small surpluses of fish, copra, handicrafts or other products and, of at least the same value, remittance income from family members on Tarawa or overseas in employment. In this case, socio-economic status is defined as much by the availability of services and lifestyle, as by the distribution of wealth and power. For many, it is a preferred lifestyle, but there are
few parents from this group who do not aspire for their children to join the modern elite. Nor are there insuperable social or economic barriers to the achievement of such ambitions. Secondary school places, for example, are based on merit which is largely defined in terms of an ability to speak English which, in turn, gives advantage to families who live on South Tarawa and can afford the fees of the only English language primary school in the country.

In the subsistence sector, water is drawn from shallow wells, or occasionally from tanks where a suitable catchment exists. Buildings are a mixture of local and imported materials and there is seldom electricity; cooking is usually on an open hearth or with a primus stove. Land-holding, the primary indicator of wealth in traditional terms, varies but is seldom fully utilised because of scattered holdings, a shortage of young adults to work it, or a lack of incentive when copra prices are low and remittances are sufficient to meet basic needs. It is only the few salaried workers, or former merchant seaman or phosphate workers, who can afford the luxury of a motor cycle on the outer-islands. Primary education is available to all, with only some 20 per cent having the opportunity of any significant post-primary education through government or church schools. Health services are limited as is the supply of consumer goods. The subtleties of differing status within this group will be obvious to those who are part of it, but are less obvious to outsiders because of strong community pressures towards conformity and uniformity, and against the conspicuous display of wealth. Thus, even if they are able, few would demonstrate wealth sufficient to build a house of permanent materials until others in the village were known to be contemplating such a move. The family, the maneaba and the church are the primary focus for social activity.

MODERN ELITES

At the other end of the spectrum is the modern politico-bureaucratic elite which is defined largely by its Western education which, in turn, has led to white-collar salaried positions and a lifestyle modelled on that of the now largely departed colonial elite. (There were only 155 Europeans and 261 other non-indigenous residents in Kiribati at the time of the 1990 census. Most were government employees, diplomats, aid-funded technical advisers and their dependants, together with smaller numbers associated with the churches or engaged in business.)

The lifestyle of the modern I-Kiribati elite is characterised by residence on South Tarawa, living in houses made of permanent (often imported) materials, high levels of consumption, ownership of motor vehicles, access to good educational and health services for their families, and the opportunity to travel beyond the country.

The elite so-defined is relatively small. In a Public Service of some 2,700, only 420 individuals earned salaries in excess of $9,000 a year in 1995. A similar proportion of the approximately 2,000 employed by government trading corporations probably received salaries at this level, suggesting a total of about 700 in all. On first employment after qualifying, a graduate or a secondary school teacher can expect to earn $7128, a primary teacher or a nurse $4164. Some 30 per cent of public servants are women, with 70 per cent of their numbers being concentrated in that half of all government salaried employees who earn less than $5,000 a year. There are two lawyers in private practice, but no doctors or dentists. While a few substantial businesses are emerging, many of those nominally 'in business' (running stores or selling food, for example) have only very small income (a few dollars a week) from this source. Apart from a few highly paid indigenous employees in private (mostly non-I-Kiribati-owned) businesses or in government corporations—where salaries of $17-20,000 are rumoured, only a handful of bus-owners and trading operators might match or exceed senior public
sector salaries of $10-12,000. Increasingly, and in a departure from custom, salaried ‘outer-islanders’ living on Tarawa have purchased land either for the erection of dwellings or for the establishment of small businesses run on a day-to-day basis by members of their families.

While access to this elite is open in theory to all who have the ability, it has to a significant extent been self-perpetuating in that performance in the English language was for many years the most important criterion for entry to the country’s major English-tuition primary school (in Tarawa) and to government and church high schools. Entry to high school is by competitive examination, but the fact remains that the children of the post-war generation of I-Kiribati employed by government, the churches, and the phosphate industry have enjoyed a significant advantage because of English-speaking parents passing their skills on to their children.

If local government remains the preserve of the traditional elite, national politicians are overwhelmingly drawn from this modern urban elite which, because of the structure of the economy, depends heavily on the public sector. A large majority of current Members of the Assembly are former senior public servants, some of them having also pursued a career in local business. This continuing election of Members with a high level of expertise in the Westernised world of government and business reflects a realisation in the 1960s and early 1970s among the first generation of Gilbertese politicians, many of whom had only local government experience, that they were ill-equipped to handle the complex matters of modern government. They struggled to cope with the machinations of expatriate colonial servants, found it difficult to secure advantages for their constituents and, having limited English, could neither follow proceedings in the legislature nor use parliamentary procedure to their own advantage. In the present House, there are only two or three Members who have difficulty in following a discussion in English and a similar number who can follow but not participate.

**Urban and Migrant Workers**

There is a further urbanised group, mostly to be found on South Tarawa, that shares many of the characteristics of the modern elite, but does not enjoy the same level of wealth. This group is composed of those who have made a break with village life through labour migration or by urbanisation (not necessarily the same thing) and have brought themselves within the cash economy to a significant extent. At one extreme in this group are to be found the relatively affluent workers in the phosphate industry (now fewer in number than they were) and in the merchant marine. At the opposite end of the spectrum are those living in town but unemployed or making only a marginal living through casual work or selling the products of individual labour. They might live with relatives and contribute to extended family households through subsistence activity while seeking an unskilled job. Alternatively, they might live independently in fringing, squatter-settlements, effectively in slum conditions. In between as a subgroup come those in manual occupations with public or private sector (road maintenance workers, hotel staff, or bus drivers, for example) who may be wage workers or on continuing, but casual, terms.

This latter group also has a significant political role. At one level, its members vote in urban elections in which, by definition, home-island affiliation is of lesser importance. Moreover, urbanised I-Kiribati have become increasingly unionised and politicised. Urban-dwellers who are not among the elite are observers of (relatively) affluent lifestyles, but are largely excluded from them. Combined with the modern elite, the collective voting strength of migrants (or the descendants of migrants) on South Tarawa is sufficient to return candidates who are not kain Tarawa (original land-owners of Tarawa).
in general elections.

Given the predominance of public employment, these urban migrants are also in confrontation with the government at times. They also suffer the deprivations and difficulties of living on the fringes of an urban society that is experiencing serious stress on services and where public health is demonstrably at risk. Both central and local governments seem powerless to control this urbanisation or to ameliorate its manifest features. The political cost of interfering with freedom of movement or introducing compulsory measures to control the urban population would be enormous. Little progress is being made with planning for what might be done. Urban dwellers are significantly under-represented in the formal electoral process.

At the same time, this group of urban workers and their dependants retain strong links to their home-islands, even if they seldom visit them. They have an expectation that those who have secured positions of power and responsibility in government will use their influence to the advantage of their kinsfolk and those who share a home-island affiliation, and may approach their home-island Member rather than their urban electorate representative for redress of grievances. They are an important conduit of information on the behaviour and performance of public servants, national politicians and governments, and thus help to shape outer-island perceptions of aspiring and serving politicians.
DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

Despite urbanisation and social change, especially over recent decades, the role of women, their influence on the development process, and their opportunities as individuals remain strongly proscribed by traditional values and patterns of behaviour. From a young age, they are expected to learn and assist with domestic chores and with the care of younger siblings. While the younger male members of the modern elite may have more open attitudes towards the role, responsibilities and freedoms expected for a wife (especially if the wife has also travelled outside the country) attitudes are still strongly conservative. Even though public demonstrations of virginity at marriage are no longer common, young women are expected to avoid sex before marriage (or at least to be very discreet as a less preferred option), and to show decorum in their dealings with males. Urban-living, in particular, no longer permits the seclusion of pre-pubescent females but young women may be chaperoned by older female relatives, and the unwanted (or unapproved of) attentions of males discouraged, sometimes with violence, by brothers and cousins. Although young women are now given more say in their marriage partners, marriages are still commonly arranged by parents. Females own and inherit less land than their male siblings.

A ‘traditional’ role for women is promoted by the Catholic Church which also discourages any artificial method of birth control. It is sometimes claimed that the Catholic Church discourages overseas travel for young women because of possible exposure to ‘subversive’ feminist ideas. While the Protestant Church accepts the rights of women to a career and a degree of independence, it still asserts the primacy of the husband within the household. To some extent, these dilemmas are avoided on an individual basis by distinguishing among the domains within which women operate. Thus it would be acceptable for a female doctor, teacher, or senior public servant to address a public maneaba meeting called by a government official for the purpose of discussing some issue which came within the realm of their professional responsibility. But it would also be expected that, in a normal ‘village’ meeting, even a senior female public servant would remain seated behind her husband or older male relatives and not take part in formal debate. These social expectations of and by women (there are few signs that women themselves wish to challenge these behavioural norms) affect both their capacity to influence the development process, and their willingness to do so. Historical experience suggests that programmes most likely to succeed are those that build on the roles of women in reproduction and child-rearing, economic production, and community management.

Initiatives in the area of ‘Women in Development’ are more often raised by donors than by the I-Kiribati government even though there is a long history of organisations which have worked in women’s affairs, albeit within a narrow definition of ‘development’. Since the 19th century, both major churches have organised and supported women’s organisations which have had the dual purpose of providing a context for church-based social activities while
encouraging the development of skills in cooking and nutrition, sewing, and household management—in many cases promoting Westernised practice. More recent arrivals have acted similarly. In some cases, women’s groups have been able to take the initiative in such areas as organising the building of, and community support for, clinics and preschool facilities. All women are expected to belong to one or other of the churches, and to at least belong to its women’s organisation.

Interest from government and multi-lateral agencies, as well as from international NGOs, saw the formation in the late 1970s of Aia Maea Ainen Kiribati (AMAK) an umbrella organisation established with government funding. In 1982, AMAK became an independent NGO and the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific became involved in the organisation, providing funding and assisting with the development of education programmes for women. A major role of AMAK was the co-ordination of requests for funding to the government and outside organisations, and allocating funds received and offers of overseas travel and training among constituent organisations and their members. Discontent over some of these allocations, and an ‘official’ policy that Catholic women could only belong to a single organisation, led to the withdrawal of most Catholic organisations and members by the late 1980s. Some argued, however, that the Catholic church did not want to see financial support going to AMAK and that, having secured Canadian aid for its well-equipped women’s centre on South Tarawa, it no longer needed AMAK’s assistance. Conflict between the AMAK executive, the churches, and other sponsoring organisations like Island Councils also added to a general erosion of support and credibility. Left with an organisation that was no longer ‘national’, the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific withdrew its support.

The new Tito government, elected in the latter part of 1994, took the initiative by establishing a Women’s Affairs Division of the Ministry of Environment and Social Development, and an Advisory Board for Women’s Affairs. The latter is an umbrella organisation, with an agreed formula for representation that has sought to overcome the religious divisions that undermined its predecessor. The new structure provides a co-ordinating role, and in some ways places women’s issues higher on the development agenda, but under-resourcing and traditional attitudes remain a significant restraint. At the same time, it should be noted that women have increasingly emerged into the public domain. There are now women in a few senior positions in the Public Service, for example, with the former head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs being a woman, and with a female graduate being made manager of the Otintai Hotel in 1995. In this regard, the debate over the decision of the President’s wife, Keina Tito, to remain in her senior Education Ministry position has focused attention on the issue. While critics have argued that, as President’s wife, Mrs Tito should fill a largely ceremonial position, the President and his wife both argue that her position is not politically sensitive, they have no children, the country cannot afford to ignore her scarce professional skills, and that she provides a role model for women’s career opportunities.

A number of areas of government policy have seen debate on gender issues. The selection of students for the government secondary school is on the basis of 50:50 males and females, a practice that disadvantages females who achieve higher marks in the entrance examination. When it comes to scholarships for tertiary training, however, the government relies only on merit, a policy that sees two-thirds of all scholarships go to males. The latter policy has been attacked by donors, who have tried to insist on 50 per cent of all scholarships for females, an issue that has caused some tension. The government argues that this is not a gender issue, and that with already disappointing results from those selected for overseas education, it cannot afford to send less than
the best. It is alleged, though without proof, that the policy is based on a conservative attitude towards higher education for women, and concern that they will be unsupervised while away.

The evolution of policy, driven by donors rather than by government, has attempted to accommodate external concerns over gender equity while protecting conservative I-Kiribati attitudes that favour women's development that improves health and family life without challenging the traditional order. At the same time, education for women and the gradual expansion of opportunities for overseas travel has helped to challenge conservatism, especially as parents have realised that there are significant wage-earning opportunities for women on Tarawa. At this stage, education and employment on South Tarawa are seen to provide less of a threat to traditional values because a degree of family surveillance and supervision is possible. The examples of women from the modern elite moving into business has provided a further model, perhaps opening the way for women of lesser education to expand on their traditional role of processing and preserving fish to assume responsibility for selling surplus from the family catch, or playing an active role in the development of other commercial activities like farming beche de mer or seaweed in outer-island lagoons.

Debate on policies for women in development have focused on opportunities for education and employment and on donor requirements for a routine demonstration that development projects will enhance the opportunities for, or improve the condition of, women. There has also been a concern to avoid projects that will lead to long term dependence on outside agency or administration. In the case of Kiribati, it might be argued that, alongside longer term goals in education and employment, the greatest impact on the status, role and opportunities for women could be made through a concerted programme to improve living conditions and public health for the communities of South Tarawa.

**Urbanisation and Public Health**

The population of South Tarawa grew from 17,921 in 1978, to 21,393 in 1985, and to 25,380 in 1990; in all, an increase of 42 per cent across the period. In the same period, the population of the other islands of the Gilbert chain increased by only 17 per cent, meaning that South Tarawa is accommodating a large proportion of the country's population increase. South Tarawa's population is increasing at 3.1 per cent a year, compared with 2.2 per cent for the country as a whole. However, these figures, while significant enough in themselves, obscure the full effect of urbanisation on South Tarawa. From a situation just two decades ago, where the islet of Betio remained separate from the rest of urban Tarawa which had government activities strongly focused on Bairiki and Bikenibeu, a small number of church-based settlements interspersed with villages of kain Tarawa, the indigenous people of the island. The impression was of a strip of land covered in palms and other trees, housing a small number of villages with expansive areas of trees and gardens in between.

South Tarawa is now an urbanised sprawl, stretching from the airport at Bonriki to the port at Betio, a distance of some 25 kilometres, covered with houses in varying degrees of intensity. This concentration of population has transformed residential patterns with migrants and their families now representing a sizeable majority of the South Tarawa population. Water supplies, which struggled for adequacy two decades ago, have not improved. A sewerage scheme, built after a cholera epidemic in 1978, is now in disrepair. Many households which have access to water-sealed toilets do not use them. Two-thirds of South Tarawa residents defecate on the beach or in the bush. The regulations of the colonial period which restricted pigs to designated enclosures outside village limits has fallen into disuse.
with the spread of population and increasing theft. Local authorities are unwilling to act. Pigs are now commonly penned or tethered adjacent to houses, or on the lagoon side between the road and the shore—in the area commonly crossed by people on their way to and from the beach. Cats, dogs and chickens wander through living areas with little restriction. Much of the cooking is done on open fires near thatched shelters occupied by women and children during the day. It is little wonder that infant morbidity and mortality (65 deaths per 1000 births) are high, maternal health is poor, and there is a high incidence of intestinal, diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases. Hepatitis is endemic, and there is growing evidence of malnutrition. Nationally, life expectancy for males is 57.7 years, and for females 62.8 years.

The ‘problems’ of urban Tarawa are widely recognised but the government seems unable to make progress on deciding what to do, let alone putting plans into operation. All stakeholders in the development process are vitally affected but little progress has been made. A closer investigation of the issues would identify not only the diverse interests that virtually all development stakeholders would have in the problems, but would demonstrate the inherent difficulties of accommodating these interests within the current political process in a manner that would provide for policy stability in the medium term. Only some facets can be briefly touched upon here in illustration.

A public education and consultation programme on options for urban development operates from within the Ministry of Home Affairs and Rural Development. It is driven largely on expatriate initiative under an aid programme and, while the issues are discussed from time to time at public workshops representing residents and agencies, there are few other signs of progress. Aid donors have expressed interest in investing major sums in urban development, but not until the government has decided on the direction and priorities of projects and demonstrated the political will to pursue a stable policy. The run-down of public services on South Tarawa also owes a great deal to a lack of both expertise and willingness to provide appropriate maintenance; there is little appreciation of the technical issues involved. A feasibility study for a major water supply and waste management project has been undertaken. A major application is under consideration by the ADB. For their part, the politicians are reluctant to address the problems because to force the clearance of squatter settlements, the re-location of pigs, the enforcement of health regulations or restrictions on migration would almost certainly lead to electoral defeat. The latter expedient is occasionally discussed but rejected less because of international conventions on the restriction of movement than because of local electoral reality. Women, and the small children for whom they are responsible, are arguably more adversely affected by conditions on South Tarawa than any other identifiable group and yet have little voice in the making of policy or determining the major priorities of aid donors. The traditional landowners have lost control over much land, and are out-voted by migrants, but they do have a form of preferential access to the advantages that accrue from living near the major services and sources of employment.

While the longer-term issues are worked through, there is a reluctance to consider short-term palliatives, for a range of reasons both practical and ideological. For example, one donor’s representative rejected the idea of a fully equipped mobile clinic for maternal and child health that might be based at the hospital, staffed by a female expatriate doctor and local nurses, and visit the settlements of South Tarawa on a frequent and rotational basis. Inoculation, vaccination, pre- and post-natal maternal checks, as well as the early identification of potentially serious illnesses and conditions would all be facilitated. For many families, even the bus fare to the
hospital is difficult to find. The reasons for rejection by the donor was that the clinic would need to be funded and managed separate from local medical services if it was to work, which was unacceptable in terms of donor policy and the proposal was contrary to the principle that projects should not lead to dependence on externally controlled services. It was conceded, however, that such a venture might have a discernible impact on personal and public health.

The Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund

The Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund, supported from phosphate earnings from 1956 until 1979, was created to provide funds to supplement the budget after the cessation of mining. Standing at $68 million just before independence, it increased rapidly through the 1980s through a strategy of investing for capital and minimising drawings to support the recurrent budget. The value of the fund stood at $255 million early in 1992 and then grew steadily to exceed $350 million by the end of 1993. Reflecting world sharemarket trends, it dipped to $318 million late in 1994 but recovered strongly to have a value of $360 million at June 1995. In order to provide a check on the primary manager, the fund was split in 1994, allowing a second manager $50 million of the fund.

The nature of the Fund was politicised at independence, with the United Kingdom seeking to restrict budgetary assistance until the interest and principal of the fund was exhausted, and imposing restrictions on the nature and extent of earnings. Thus the Tabai government found difficulty in drawing on the Fund if it was also to secure British aid. The conditions of British aid were later changed. Since that time, the willingness of a government to spend or save the income from the Fund has become a political if not public measure of profligacy or caution in financial affairs. It is, however, remarkable, that the fund has not been ‘raided’ by governments to balance the budget, or to embark on irresponsible spending. Indeed, it might be argued that the opposite is the case, with the Tabai and Teannaki governments slowing development projects and failing to win donor support because of their unwillingness to demonstrate the required commitment to a project through funding. Perhaps it is not surprising that, in a country where subsistence-dwellers still make ‘drought’ foods that can be stored for years, that frugality is admired in a government.

Since the change of government in 1994, the use of the RERF has become a matter of political debate but the economic ‘pain’ being felt by both urban and rural dwellers in the early 1990s was such that the ‘austerity’ approach had only a few remaining supporters. This is not to say that the level of drawing from the RERF was an election issue as such, but that the approach of the Tito government has committed it to a higher level of expenditure. Even so, it has been careful to emphasise that the country’s savings, accumulated over time and at a development cost, are safe, and that expert advisers affirm that the current level of drawing is sustainable. Under present conditions, current levels of ordinary revenue exclude the possibility of funding major development projects (say, a waste and water scheme for South Tarawa) where a local commitment is required by donors. It follows that any increase in the level of drawing from the RERF will become a matter of political debate irrespective of the level of drawing that may be deemed ‘sustainable’ by the government and its advisers. This may not necessarily be a bad thing (either the debate or the drawings) if it serves to educate the electorate on the economic and development choices faced by the country and shifts discussion of such issues beyond the politico-bureaucratic elite and within the comprehension of those who draw their subsistence primarily from fishing and farming. Such a debate may also encourage some focus on the difficulties and
costs of providing services and protecting public health on South Tarawa, and of setting priorities among production, infrastructure and services, and between rural and urban populations.

Migration and Remittances

Labour migration has a long history for the I-Kiribati people. From the 19th century both men and women, single and as families, travelled to plantations and mines within and beyond the Pacific region. For most of the 20th century, the major outlets for migration were the phosphate mines at Nauru and Ocean Island. From the turn of the century, Gilbertese labourers (and Ellice Islands boatmen) were recruited for two or more year contracts. For a time, men were recruited as single, leaving their families at their home islands. By the 1950s, however, men could be accompanied by their wives and, usually, by a maximum of two children. While adoption and the extended family could accommodate any additional children, the practice was important in maintaining a tradition of leaving impoverished islands in search of a better life and a cash income. In the 1930s, families from the southern Gilberts were resettled in the Phoenix Islands in an attempt to alleviate perceived land hunger. In the 1960s, the scheme was abandoned, more for administrative convenience and cost reasons than because of the non-viability of the settlement itself. All of these experiences maintained the tradition of migration and, from the phosphate industry at least, the practice of remitting income to the home-island.

In planning for the future in the 1950s, the building of reserves took precedence over the provision of services. From the 1960s, a changed philosophy saw the rapid expansion of social services, especially education, at least partly in an attempt to develop an educated population that could either compete for labour migration opportunities or seek resettlement elsewhere in the Pacific Islands. With the then British Solomon Islands Protectorate and New Hebrides (Vanuatu) linked with the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony under the Western Pacific High Commission, the strategy seemed to have some chance of success until decolonisation and citizenship debates closed off the options for resettlement. Since independence in 1979, more than a thousand families have been resettled in the northern Line Islands, a project initiated after the government bought out plantation interests operating in the group. As with the Phoenix scheme a generation before, the scheme provides a new start for land-hungry families but equivalent administrative difficulties for government, illustrated early in 1997 with a disabled cargo and passenger ship drifting for several days more than 3,000 km from Tarawa.

In the 1960s, the development of the Marine Training School began its programmes of training young men to serve as cooks, stewards or deck hands in the German merchant marine. Again, men are recruited as single, and most ‘retire’ to shore jobs upon marriage. At any one time, there are more than a thousand I-Kiribati seamen away, sending back remittances conservatively estimated at $A5 million a year. While family elders might have doubts about some of the learned behaviour, there is little doubt that employment on ships is eagerly sought after for the young men of the family in the expectation that this will provide them with employment for at least a few years with commensurate benefits for the wider family. Family separation—through resettlement, the phosphate industry, to South Tarawa, in the merchant marine and for education overseas, now has a long history in Kiribati. Despite inevitable family difficulties and anecdotal evidence that suggests higher divorce rates among couples separated for employment or similar reasons, community support remains strong and some social costs are accepted as inevitable, if undesirable.

Within modern society, those who have
worked overseas usually acquire benefits of savings, capital goods, technical skills and language facility that brings long-term benefits in addition to the immediate returns including the excitement of travel and experience of other cultures. Shared experience brings a questioning of customary practice and an affinity that cuts across family and island loyalties, especially as those who have given up their employment as seamen tend to remain on South Tarawa where, unless they obtain work or marry, they tend to form a disruptive element in the community. In the longer term, this group could be of increasing political significance.

Accepting the tradition of migration, the government from time to time approaches regional governments, especially Australia and New Zealand, seeking opportunities for migration and employment. The strength of community support for these initiatives is impressive, and the importance of maintaining a good reputation for future prospects impressed upon those leaving to work overseas. Even so, it remains something of a paradox that a society which traditionally exhibited such powerful forces in support of the family, now accepts migration as a positive option. The explanation for this probably lies in the recognition that the atoll environment can no longer provide the necessary means of community support, and that migration helps to preserve a form of independence and overall family well-being.

AID DONORS AND POLICY FORMATION

As in most governments, policies evolve in departments as part of the shifting relationship between minister and advisers and, once approved in principle by the minister must then obtain the approval of a co-ordinating committee representing all major departments before going forward to cabinet for final approval. Even if a multiplicity of outside technical experts and aid donors have been involved (and partly because they have been involved) in the formulation of a policy, it may still take up to two years to reach the stage when a formal project proposal is ready for submission to an aid donor for approval, and a further year or two before that approval is obtained. With the major bi-lateral donors being Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, as well as the multi-lateral agencies of the World Bank, the ADB and the UNDP, there is a wide range of priorities and procedures to be taken into account, and time invested in managing stakeholder personnel and requirements.

Once a proposal has been submitted to a potential donor, there may be further delay in obtaining formal consideration, often because of relatively minor matters of compliance—incomplete or missing forms, details lacking, or because the approach does not meet the donor’s criteria (which may well have changed since a similar application was filed), or is out of season. Subsequent negotiation and discussion, and feasibility studies by the donor’s consultants and technical advisers, might produce further changes which may make the proposal more cost-effective, environmentally sound, and fiscally responsible in the donor’s eyes but, at the same time, may have the effect of further ‘eroding’ local ownership.

The introduction of formal conditionality at any stage of the process is not only resented but delays the process. There are several reasons for this. First, and most obvious, any significant change of conditions for the project must retrace the various stages in the approval process within the government of Kiribati. Second, there may be delays in reaching even the beginning of this reconsideration process. Inevitably and invariably, Kiribati ministers and public servants are supplicants in the aid process. This is not only demeaning in itself, but the negotiation of conditions (that is, changes to a locally approved proposal) also opens the possibility of having to back down, or to compromise on features that were of
importance to those who developed the policy with local conditions in mind.

Under any conditions, this would be embarrassment enough, but there is a cultural element involved as well that emphasises the pervasive influence of the traditional domain. Above all else, an I-Kiribati must seek to be independent in all things (hence the importance of owning land in a harsh atoll environment); even to ask for assistance implies a loss of face and creates a future obligation which undermines and qualifies independence. The ‘shame’ implied by having conditions imposed, or having to abandon an agreed policy, is considerable and is a reminder of the constraints on Kiribati’s independence. Such embarrassment are best deferred as long as possible. Examples of formal conditionality and delays being imposed by all major bilateral aid donors, as well as the ADB and the World Bank, are cited by ministers and their senior advisers. The resentment evoked by these examples is compounded by the frequency with which aid projects run over time or over budget, require substantial restructuring or redesign during the implementation process, or fail to meet the agreed objectives often, it is believed, through changes of policy or procedure, or deficiencies on the part of donors. There is also concern that in areas of current (fashionable) concern—like sustainability, the environment or the status of women—there is a tendency for donors, in pushing their own agendas, to introduce culturally insensitive or inappropriate concerns and conditions.

Various examples might be given and, however sound the donor’s concerns and policies might be, it remains a fact that these are not necessarily accepted by the government of Kiribati. For example, in 1994-95, the central Pacific governments tried to expand civil aviation services, made a commitment to the purchase of an aircraft for Air Marshalls, and sought funding from the ADB. When that agency declined to assist on the grounds that several of its criteria had not been met (including its insistence that it should have a major say in the selection and purchase of the aircraft), there was considerable resentment because the governments believed that they were in possession of the facts and knew what was required. In another instance, the New Zealand government’s support for a Line Islands resettlement programme was deferred on academic advice firstly, because the proposed plots of land per family were considered too small and, secondly, because the proposed settlement density might interfere with the nesting habitat for birds that were native to the islands but not particularly endangered. The Minister concerned was himself from the southern Gilberts where land was of lower quality and average family holdings smaller, than those in the new settlement, and he had personal knowledge of earlier, but abandoned resettlement schemes in the Phoenix Islands. He maintained that he and his officials had greater expertise than the ‘visiting expert’, and that experience elsewhere in the group suggested that the birds were not in serious jeopardy (and that, in any case, they should take second place to people). A compromise was reached, but the experience continues to rankle.

In the early 1990s, the Australian government agreed to fund a major causeway construction programme for the outer-islands, a programme on which the then Kiribati government placed a high priority. After initial approval, however, the introduction of engineering and environmental concerns meant a major restructuring of the project leading to further, expensive feasibility studies and fewer causeways, though with the latter supposedly built to minimise erosion and accretion, and to allow tidal flows and fish movement. From the funds spent, there is less to show than expected, and politicians were blamed by their constituents for ‘their’ failure to deliver. The politicians argue that they cannot afford the level of environmental scruple that donors wish to impose.
As a final example, the case of the junior secondary schools discussed above may prove to generate the same level of tension between government and a range of multi-lateral and bi-lateral donors. The development of the new programme is linked to the government's electoral promises on school fees and the reluctance of donors to be as flexible as the government wishes, or to proceed without all due paperwork (which ministries are ill-equipped to prepare), may be perceived as a failure to appreciate local development priorities. Once the government loses the sense of 'ownership' and control of a development project, it tends to walk away from the problem.

Within this context, the forward policy commitments of the present government are of interest because they will introduce through the policy-making process a degree of political accountability that has hitherto been absent. It is clear that the Tito government takes its electoral commitments very seriously, and is sharply aware of the high turnover of politicians and the level of collective responsibility that is implied. There is, however, an element of uncertainty in that almost all policy initiatives are likely to involve substantial expenditure which, in turn, implies a dependence on aid. On the one hand the electoral imperative may give to aid donors leverage on project design and conditions that they have not enjoyed before because political imperatives and timetables may encourage acceptance of donor conditions. On the other hand, the government is as aware of the frustration inherent in the process as it is sensitive to the electorate which means that it may refuse to bow to external pressures and accept any political risk in committing its own funds as a way of avoiding externally-imposed conditionality.
FURTHER READING


Hince, Kevin, ‘Industrial Relations in Kiribati’, New Zealand Journal of Industrial Relations, 17 (1992), 57-68.

Kiribati Government,


PACIFIC ISLANDS
DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

THE USE OF FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGES
IN EDUCATION (No. 1)
NADINE DUTCHER, 1997

ASPECTS OF THE INDUSTRY, TRADE AND MARKETING
OF PACIFIC ISLAND TROCHUS (No. 2)
ICECON, 1997

PACIFIC ISLANDS STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION
IN DEVELOPMENT: SAMOA (No. 3)
ANTONY HOOPER

PACIFIC ISLANDS STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION
IN DEVELOPMENT: TONGA (No. 4)
KERRY E. JAMES