



**ASIA-PACIFIC RIGHTS AND JUSTICE INITIATIVE**

Case Studies on Access to Justice by the Poor and Disadvantaged

**Lobbying Against Proposed Dumping of Taiwanese Toxic Wastes  
in Makira Province, Solomon Islands**

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#### SUMMARY BOX

##### **Categorization of lesson:**

Use of knowledge gained from Training to lobby against potential abuse of human rights.

##### **Critical lessons for the sub-practice:**

###### ***Effective Training***

RRRT's effective training approach which is inclusive and interactive in nature. This ensures that participants will not only understand what they are being taught but also implementing them. This empowerment of participants resulted in the positive lobbying against the dumping of wastes. Some of the positive outcomes of these training workshops are that participants are able to strategise, lobby and advocate against human rights violations as it happened in this case.

###### ***Working closely with other stakeholders and effective lobbying***

Networking and the mobilisation of civil society to challenge the policies was very effective in this case. The participants were first educated and trained on human rights, then they were able to educate and inform other stakeholders. These stakeholders then rallied together to effectively advocate and lobby against government's decision.

###### ***Use of the media***

The media is an important ally in the fight for rights and access to justice. The media in this case effectively carried out its role in increasing public awareness and highlighting the potential human rights violations. The media disseminated information on what was happening. It generated public debate and discussion and support against the human rights violation in question.

##### **Recommendations**

- ❖ RRRT/UNDP must continue to run effective training programs and identify the right people to attend these training workshops.
- ❖ Working with the media is essential especially in the area of human rights and governance. RRRT/UNDP should ensure that the media is part of its.
- ❖ Relationships with important national, regional and international stakeholders must be cultivated and nurtured to ensure the consolidation of a more calculated and sustainable approach to access to justice.

#### CATEGORISATION OF LESSON

Use of knowledge gained from trainings to lobby against potential abuse of human rights.

#### BACKGROUND

The people of the Solomon Islands have suffered dearly from years of civil strife and social unrest. Social mistrust in the country is rife, security and law and order problems are of enormous proportions and there is generally a loss of public confidence in governance.

The Taiwanese company Primeval Forest was granted a license by cabinet to dump 10,000 tonnes of waste at a time and the Solomon Island government would receive US\$35million per shipment. Cabinet saw that this was much needed revenue to save the government from bankruptcy.

In 2001, the Solomon Is government, virtually bankrupt from 3 years of civil unrest and two decades of corruption and mismanagement decided to import toxic wastes from a Taiwanese company worth US\$130 million. The Cabinet decided that three million tones of these wastes were to be dumped on coastal lowlands in Makira Province (one of the 9 provinces in the Solomon Is).

The province of Makira for which the waste was destined is home to approximately 23,000 people. The chiefs including the premier and the Provincial Assembly members in the province agreed to this because of the deception of the importing company. The material was described as treated sewage solids and non-toxic, non radio-active humus soil suitable for plant cultivation. To the people of the province this was a "win-win" situation. They had little or no knowledge about the material that was to be dumped on their island.

However, the material was industrial waste highly toxic containing lead, mercury and arsenic. The industrial wastes and sewage wastes combined contained high levels of heavy metals and other hazardous chemicals such as dioxin. If these were dumped into mangrove areas, the heavy metals and dioxin would eventually affect the health of people dependent on the local environment. Furthermore, many toxic substances found in sewage sludge, including dioxins, lead, cadmium and mercury, are known to affect the reproductive system, immune system and increase learning disorders and cancers.

The importation of this waste would have a devastating effect on the environment and health of the people. It would affect their rights to sustainable environment, right to life, right to health and their right to make informed choices.

There was however, a trained community paralegal who used the skills and knowledge that she had gained from attending a series of human rights workshops run by the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRRT) a UNDP regional human rights education project based in Fiji. By mobilizing others in the community she was able to work out a strategy to lobby against a potentially serious human rights violation by the government and the Taiwanese company.

This particular paralegal had been empowered in the human rights training not only assert her rights but also to network and use civil society to mobilize and challenge policies and practices which violated or endangered human rights.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

RRRT works in 8 countries in the Pacific region. It provides training and advocacy in human rights and the law to promote the advancement of groups and further social justice. It works with decision makers and leaders from all levels of society – government, legal, education, media community – in a multi-layered approach, to encourage access to justice for all.

As a training organization, its inclusive and interactive training approach has proved very effective, ensuring that participants not only fully understand the concepts involved but more importantly apply them in their daily lives.

In November 2001, RRRRT facilitated a human rights training in Honiara, Solomon Is which was attended by 30 women leaders from around the country. One of the participants in the workshop was Lynnette Taro who

was from Makira Province and worked for the Premier of Makira. Prior to the workshop, she had been privy to correspondences between the Premier and the Taiwanese company about arrangements for the company to export wastes which was to be dumped on the coastlands of Makira Island in return for a substantial amount of money. However, because she did not understand the issues involved, she was not aware of the implications for the province.

After the workshop, which discussed a number of pertinent topics, including environmental issues and the proposed dumping of so called "humus soil", she returned to Makira and collated all the important documents that she had filed and also obtained other documents from a member of the provincial assembly. They discovered that contracts had already been signed by provincial assembly members without any consultation whatsoever with the people in the province.

Lynnette reacted quickly and with the help from the Provincial President of the National Council of Women, they then decided on the strategies they would use to lobby against the importing of toxic wastes to Makira.

They adopted the following strategy:

- They researched and educated themselves on the issue by reading everything they could on toxic wastes and its harmful effects. They were assisted by a Makira Man who was a conservation officer as well as environmental experts who sent them information on toxic wastes.
- After familiarizing themselves with the toxic wastes, they then met with all the heads of the provincial departments, the chair of the provincial civil society, the principal of the major secondary school in the province, environment organization representatives and community leaders. The women discussed the proposed dumping of the wastes and the impact that it will have on the environment, health and livelihood of the people.

As a result of the meetings that they had with stakeholders, there were some notable outcomes:

- School children, teachers, women and men had a peaceful demonstration against the dumping of toxic wastes
- A press release was distributed to media outlets which alerted the nation as to what was happening. It generated a great deal of public debate and discussion and there was overwhelming support from the people against the planned moves by the premier and provincial assembly members of Makira Province and government. Up until this point the general public in Solomon Is was not aware of the granting of the licences to dump the wastes.
- The conservation officer who hailed from the province alerted international environmental organizations who provided more information to the group and also supported the work that the group was doing.
- Makira women who lived in Honiara held public forums on the issue and helped in awareness raising.

The end result of this lobbying was that the government came under attack from civil society and regional and international NGOs, governments and other lobby groups. The people of Solomon Is rallied against government. They only learnt about this issue when the press release was distributed.

Under this overwhelming pressure, the government withdrew the license and abandoned its hope of receiving the US\$130 million.

RRRT's multi-layered approach meant that it not only dealt with those at the community level but also with the media and the decision makers. RRRT had already conducted a regional media workshop for editors on human rights and had worked with two senior editors in the broadcasting media. These outlets were instrumental in the dissemination of information to the public in Solomon Is as well as internationally.

RRRT also intervened in this campaign by also providing information to the UNDP Fiji Resident Representative on the Waigani Convention which prevents the carriage of toxic wastes and hazardous materials through Pacific Island territories. The Resident Representative also used this information to persuade the Solomon Island Prime Minister to withdraw the license for the import of the toxic wastes.