

# A CANBERRA VIEW OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NEW GUINEA

R. G. CROCOMBE

*Australian National University  
New Guinea Research Unit, Port Moresby*

Mr. Gutman's article on economic development in New Guinea in the December 1966 issue of this *Journal* (Vol. 10 (2), pp. 128-41) contains many value judgements which I find difficult to agree with, but as they are matters of personal opinion they are not subject to verification. There are, however, a number of statements of fact which are quite incorrect. The introductory paragraph states that the article gives a closer examination of three problems (land tenure, wage policy and planning machinery). My own interests and those of this journal are closest to the first of the three problems and I would like to illustrate the deficiencies of the article by reference to the first two paragraphs on the subject of land tenure (p. 135).

The land section begins by stating that "more than 99 per cent of the total area is under native ownership". This means that the proportion of alienated land is less than one per cent, but the latest published reports by the Department of Territories show that of a total area of 55,104,000 acres in Papua, 1,895,586 are alienated; and in the Trust Territory of New Guinea 1,525,113 acres are alienated out of a total of 58,982,000 acres.<sup>1</sup> According to these figures alienated land is three per cent of the total.<sup>2</sup> I am not criticizing the extent of alienation, but do object to its being understated by two-thirds, and to the omission of the very important fact that, because vast areas of the country are too rugged, too swampy or too isolated for any significant economic development, the presentation of figures on alienation only as a crude percentage is very misleading. The International Bank report<sup>3</sup> considered (p. 67) that only about five per cent of the total land area has good potential for crop production. The percentage of alienation of high quality land close to roads or harbours is high (though precise figures on areas of agricultural land are not available) and probably considerably higher than the average for such land in the other eighteen Pacific territories. Certainly the percentage alienated and retained in the hands of foreign-born people since the establishment of colonial government is among the

<sup>1</sup> *Annual Report of the Territory of Papua, 1964-65*, p. 42 and *Administration of the Territory of New Guinea, 1964-65*, p. 220. It is true that some of the alienated land is leased by government back to indigenous people, but the proportion of such land is only a small fraction of one per cent of the total.

<sup>2</sup> The precise area alienated varies slightly but constantly with additional purchases and with some lands being handed back to indigenous ownership.

<sup>3</sup> International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *The Economic Development of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1965.

highest in the Pacific. In parts of the New Britain, New Ireland, Madang and Manus districts it already constitutes a political problem which could reach serious proportions.

Speaking of the nature of traditional New Guinea forms of tenure Mr. Gutman says (p. 135) the bulk of non-alienated land is "held in various forms of communal tenure whereby the land is owned by clans and sub-clans and allocated to individual households for a year or a number of years before being redistributed". But the indigenous tenure systems in Papua-New Guinea are not communal, and reallocation of land each year or few years is unusual, and has probably been confused with the shifting of gardens in a cultivation cycle. Though it is true that certain land rights are commonly held by clans, sub-clans or other descent groups, the rights to cultivate are usually held by individuals. In fact, the only communal tenures in New Guinea are those created by the government through a misunderstanding of indigenous tenure systems. This is done as a byproduct of creating registered individual titles. The procedure is that if a community agrees to consolidate in one area (which is then sub-divided into individual blocks) that portion of land which it will use for cash cropping, the remainder of the lands of the component members of the community is then pooled and registered as the communal land of the people concerned. It was certainly not their communal land before this process was undertaken, and *in practice* will probably not be now, but that is the legal situation. The circumstances under which the land rights of individuals have been reduced and those of the community increased as a result of legislation whose basic intention was the opposite, can be seen by comparing the land rights of the Mt. Lamington Orokaiva to unconverted land before and after tenure conversion.<sup>4</sup>

Next we are presented with the myth of the indigenous cash cropper who plants his crops and finds that when they bear fruit the product is claimed by "relatives and clan members who claim a joint and perhaps superior title to the land or to the product". This is a very widespread belief but one not widely encountered in practice. What is widely encountered is for a person to plant cash crops on land the title to which is disputed (usually with other descent groups rather than within one's own), thus leading to a dispute over the product. Within the local group disputes about land rights are much less common, but what does commonly occur is that a farmer requests the help of other kin in establishing the cash crops. They may help him to clear and plant the land or to weed and harvest the crop and this is often done without (or with only partial) recompense at the time. Therefore, when income is received the former helpers often press for a share of it. The same problem applies with registered individual tenure as Cheetham found

<sup>4</sup> The customary system is explained by Max Rimoldi in "Land tenure and land use among the Mt. Lamington Orokaiva", *New Guinea Research Bulletin*, No. 11, chapter 3. For the effects of tenure conversion on unconverted land in the same area, see David Morawetz, "Land tenure conversion in the Northern District of Papua", *New Guinea Research Bulletin*, No. 17, chapters 2 and 4. This is not a criticism of the main tenure conversion programme which was very efficiently carried out, but is a criticism of the legal planning which, due to a lack of understanding of the indigenous system, quite unnecessarily created a new problem.

on the Northern district resettlement blocks.<sup>5</sup> This problem has nothing to do with tenure: it is a problem of needing additional labour to get crops established and, not having the capital to pay for it, engaging labour under customary arrangements which oblige the recipient to provide customary reciprocity. A related problem that unfortunately is going to remain with us irrespective of the nature of the land tenure system is that there is not in this country (and probably will not be for some time) any comprehensive social security services covering old age, sickness, and other times of vulnerability. Neither are there building societies to help one save for a house. Extensive use of most existing financial agencies presupposes regular cash income which few have in fact. Everyone gets old and everyone gets sick and most people reach crises in their lives when to build a house, or acquire a wife, or undertake some major project, they must draw on the help of others. One of the reasons that so many individual indigenous people who set out boldly to enter the cash economy strictly on their own resources (as they have been advised to do) soon crash is that sooner or later they get sick or need help of one kind or another. But in view of the fact that they have denied help to their kin, they themselves are denied reciprocal help in their time of need, and a tremendous brake is put on the development process.

In the last sentence of page 135, Mr. Gutman states that conversion to individual title "could be speeded up considerably if the legislature agreed to have such decisions taken up by majority verdict rather than unanimous consent". The Department of Territories submitted draft legislation requiring a majority verdict whereas the indigenous members of the legislature insisted on unanimous consent. What Mr. Gutman states as a fact is what his department in 1962 claimed would happen if its proposals were not accepted. But in fact it has not happened at all. To my knowledge no conversions at all have been held up for this reason, and a check at the time of writing confirms that this is so. The Department seems still to be acting on invalid assumptions despite four years' evidence of their invalidity.

<sup>5</sup> Cheetman, R. J. Indigenous land settlement in the Northern District of Papua. In preparation for publication.