

I am a Geographer ...



Ian Fenton

Rural Development Project Manager

I think I would generally describe my career title as 'Rural Development Project Manager' but my current title is 'Agroforestry Trainer'. Over my career I've generally worked in community development, predominantly in an agricultural or land-use and management context. I've mainly worked in south-east Africa and the Pacific.

I studied Arts (International Studies) at the University of Canberra and studied my Masters in International Development and Environmental Analysis (MIDEA) at Monash University. I am also currently about half-way through my Bachelor of Sustainable Agriculture through the University of Queensland.

I work with Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and Not-For-Profits (NFPs) in rural areas of developing countries. As a project manager I generally help to establish projects or social enterprises which can take

locally available resources and develop them in such way that a viable, long-term profit can be generated. This could involve the sustainable harvesting of local forests, including adding value to timber or non-timber forest products or the introduction of a new crop along with better land-use practices and identification of local or foreign markets. In almost all instances, my work is about taking an asset-based approach to building capacities and improving livelihoods in marginalised areas.

Geographical thinking applies to almost all aspects of the work I do. From a Physical Geography perspective it is both difficult and exciting to work in different parts of the world with different climates, topography, soils, geology and hydrology. Understanding these differences and how human actions play into them is an essential part of determining whether a new enterprise or economic activity is a good or bad idea. A bad project that doesn't consider

topography, soils or hydrology could lead to soil erosion, ecological damage and financial losses. However, a good project which considers these elements can help people to improve a community's resilience to climate change, improve their livelihood or improve their financial status.

That being said, understanding how participants and communities interact with their environment and go about shaping a positive intervention around those practices and processes is the most challenging part of the work I do. Simple questions – such as “Who owns the land?”, “How do people use the fishing reef?”, “When is hunting allowed?” – almost always have complicated answers. These answers are influenced by traditional practices, tribal and family structures as well as modern laws and economics. If the objective of a project is to get people to grow a crop on a particular type of land or build new infrastructure on a local river, you have to consult with the local community first to determine what their relationship is with that space or place.

I sometimes work with other geographers, although most of the time they don't identify as such. I've worked with foresters who can create detailed and useful maps, and with architects and craftsmen with a deep understanding of where exotic and endangered timbers come from and how they are moved across the planet. Really though, I generally work at a community level with people who mostly don't have a long formal or tertiary education.

That being said, many of these people are tremendous geographers in their own environment and know more about their land's ecology, climate and history than so-called 'experts'.

My initial knowledge of Geography was maps and compasses on the school oval or looking at rivers and borders in textbooks. What I wanted to understand was how social, political and economic processes could create wealth in some places and poverty in others. I wanted to understand how people's well-being was linked to their environment and how their management and interaction could change due to external influences.

The aim of development work is to improve the lives of the participants who are targeted in the project. Today, the biggest threat to most people's livelihoods is climate change. Geographers are the people who work at the intersection of environmental sciences and human activities. It is in this area that the climate change and other environmental disasters have emerged and it is in this area that the real working solutions will be found. Ecologists, demographers, architects, farmers and foresters will all need to be geographers, and geographers will need to be some of these things as well. So if geographers are willing to go into the field with some other tools in their kit or skills up their sleeve then they will have a lot of meaningful work to do.