



In-line insights: five years in Vanimo

By Tess Newton Cain

Last year, in conjunction with a trip to Port Moresby, I read [The Mountain](#) by Drusilla Modjeska and [exhorted all](#) who wanted to increase their knowledge of PNG to follow my example. This year I received a copy of [Inside the Crocodile: The Papua New Guinea Journals](#) from the author [Trish Nicholson](#) that I read during my very brief visit to Port Moresby a few weeks ago.

Inside the Crocodile is a 'travel memoir' and it provides a series of glimpses into the author's experiences of working in human resources development for the provincial government of Sandaun Province (West Sepik). Nicholson arrived in

Vanimo in 1987 and spent five years working on a World Bank-funded development project. The book is compiled from the journals she kept whilst living and working in one of the remotest parts of PNG, and it provides a fascinating and compelling blend of personal and professional interactions, mishaps and successes, and clear-sighted observations of the surrounding and changing natural, social, cultural and economic environments.

There were a couple of aspects of the book that I found particularly striking. At a time when there is [renewed debate](#) about the relative merits of in-line expatriate professionals *vis-à-vis* advisers, this book provides a useful insight into what being 'in-line' meant 25 years ago. It is evident that being part of the administration provided very important opportunities to influence individuals and organisations, although it was not always possible to capitalise upon them for a range of reasons. But it is also clear from this account that positions of this type bring many challenges, not least the need to have (or develop very quickly) high-level political skills in order to navigate what can be very murky waters. The challenges that Nicholson encountered included political interference, constant changes in personnel especially at the senior management level and working among people whose professional commitment was undermined by cultural and community obligations. There is nothing to suggest that any of these issues are any less challenging today and, indeed, most of them are likely to be more so.

Another aspect that struck me was the role of churches in service delivery in rural PNG at that time. There are numerous references to priests, pastors and nuns providing education, medical services and, quite often, communication (via radio) in remote areas unreached by state or provincial agencies. As we know, it remains the case that in some places essential services continue to be delivered by churches and those who represent them. Increasingly, it is recognised by [development partners](#) and [governments](#) in the region that these actors and agencies have an important role to play in supporting communities in meeting their essential needs.

I found this book to be instructive and thought-provoking. For those who want 'big picture' analysis of 'development' it may be disappointing (spoiler alert for economists - there are no graphs) and I did find myself asking myself some very 'development' questions, such as 'but what were the impacts?' But on reflection I continue to agree with Nicholson's view, [articulated here](#), that there are multiple narratives on which we can and should draw to develop our understanding of what development is and, perhaps most importantly, the contexts in which we work.

Nicholson, Trish (2015). Inside the Crocodile: The Papua New Guinea Journals. Troubador Publishing.

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