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Doing Business in the Village/Community/Kastom Domain

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Introduction

If we are to measure business success in terms of sustained operations over a relatively long period of time, the history of private enterprise in rural settings of Solomon Islands could be said to be one of mixed success.¹ This paper addresses the question of why it is that some enterprises appear to succeed where many others have failed. We assume that all businesses will fulfil the formal legal requirements relating to incorporation, licensing and so forth, and that all will enjoy competent financial management and market viability. Instead we take as our focus that sphere of regulation and interaction which is not dominated by state law and regulation, but which we contend is frequently more determinative of enterprise success or failure in the particular context of rural Solomon Islands.²

Based on findings from three detailed case studies, we argue that social relationships, above all other factors, are paramount to enterprise success. These relationships are determined by the interplay of what we describe as the character of the enterprise on the one hand, and the character of the Village/Community/Kastom (VCK) domain on the other.³ Different configurations of these characters, and their sub-characteristics, will produce interactions which are, at one extreme, highly conducive to good long-

1 This metric of success excludes the commercial logging industry – which has dominated the Solomons export economy for the past twenty years or so – for the simple reason that individual logging operations have been short-term in nature. Most of the logging has taken place on customary land under the provisions and regulations of the Forest and Timber Resource Utilisation Act. In light of the corruption, wastage, social conflict and environmental damage that has been wrought by the logging industry, it could hardly be described as successful, except of course from the perspective of the predominantly Malaysian logging companies and a small number of male landowners and political elites. See Allen (In Press) for a recent review of the political economy of logging and Wairiu (Forthcoming) for a detailed case study of logging and conflict in eastern Guadalcanal.

2 We recognise that these spheres are, in practice, inseparable, as local actors selectively draw upon elements of both formal and customary regulation in their interactions with business enterprises. ‘Rural’ is used here as a shorthand for those spaces in Solomon Islands which remain outside of the dominant regulatory influence of state law and agencies.

3 A full explication of the conceptual term Village/Community/Kastom is not possible here. Suffice to say that it has been developed in an attempt to widen the analysis of private sector development in rural areas of Solomon Islands from a narrow focus on land tenure, especially customary land. Through examining the spheres of ‘village’, ‘community’ and ‘kastom’, and the complexity, diversity and dynamic interactivity that characterises them, this research aims to consider the full gamut of individual and institutional actors, bodies of knowledge, and sociocultural factors that can have a bearing on enterprise success or failure. The term is described in greater detail in the Concept Note for this research and in the three case study reports (World Bank 2009, Islands Knowledge Institute 2010a, b, c). Conceptually, the VCK framework emphasises the social embeddedness of economic activity and decision-making, reflecting an expanding body of literature on this topic both internationally (see Zukin and DiMaggio 1990) and in PNG and Melanesia (e.g. Gregory 1982; Banks 1999; Curry 1999, 2003, Curry and Koczberski 2009). The focus on power, space, scale, and the agency and agendas of the full range of ‘domain’ actors, resonates strongly with the concerns of ‘third world’ political ecology (e.g. Blaikie 1995, Bryant 1998).

term relationships and, at the other extreme, inimical to the establishment and maintenance of beneficial relationships over time.

These configurations are mapped on a stylised continuum of ‘business success’ which has as its axes enterprise character and VCK character. We then consider the ‘thick’ case study data to illuminate a number of points on the continuum, demonstrating how the specificities of enterprise and VCK characters, and the interplay between them, can result in very different outcomes in terms of enterprise success or failure. The best possible scenario is one in which the enterprise is characterised by factors that collectively amount to a high level of awareness of, and sensitivity to, the local social context; while the VCK is characterised by factors amounting to a high level of ‘preparedness’ (including the history of land and resource rights determination, previous engagement with private enterprise, and the nature of pre-existing community organization). We conclude by offering recommendations for potential investors, policy makers and business operators, and suggesting avenues for further research.

Case Study Approach and Selection Criteria

In order to best reflect the full spectrum of known engagements between business enterprises and VCK domains in Solomon Islands, it was decided to adopt a case study approach involving qualitative data collection and ‘thick’ description (Geertz 1973). The three case studies have been primarily selected on the basis of their relevance to the likely future trajectory of growth in Solomon Islands. They include enterprises of varying scales across the tourism, agriculture and plantation forestry sectors. In line with growth intentions, one so-called ‘big ticket’ operation was selected, a nucleus-estate palm oil operation on the Guadalcanal plains.

The selection of case studies was also informed by a concern to examine particular types of enterprises in particular localities, rather than individual enterprises per se. The level of project maturity was also considered to be an important variable of analysis, which was reflected in the case study selection.

The three case studies are:

- Three tourism operations of differing scales in the Marau Sound area of eastern Guadalcanal (a nucleus resort; a village stay; and an eco-resort);
- The Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil Ltd (GPPOL) operation on the Guadalcanal Plains region of northern Guadalcanal, including or smallholder or out-grower producers;
- The Eagon Forest Resources Development Ltd logging and reforestation operation in the north western region of Choiseul.

Summary data for each case study and the sub-cases therein are provided in Table 1.

The methodology adopted for each case study involved four steps:

- An initial planning meeting to develop a work program.

- Literature review, contact with key people from the case study locations, and preparation of a framework for field data collection.
- Field research involving visits over several days to the case study localities. Relevant data were collected through field observations, face-to-face interviews, and tok stori (similar to focus group discussions).
- Analysis of field data and reporting.

Table 1: Summary details of cases and sub-cases

Sub-cases	Nature of economic activity/brief description of operations and management
<i>Tourism in Marau Sound</i>	
A. Nucleus resort	<p>This is a “high-end” tourist resort emphasising exclusivity and retreat, with nightly rates at time of research of SBD2000 per person and a maximum occupancy of 24 in 6 guest bungalows. The island was alienated in 1890 by an expatriate plantation owner and has since then the held status amongst local communities of an expatriate outpost. Currently the perpetual estate (PE) is held by the government but the fixed term estate (FTE) is held by the owner of the resort. Although facilities are on the alienated space of the island, all operations rely on the goodwill and support of local communities for everything from produce and fish to reef access for activities.</p> <p>The resort was established in early 1980s by an expatriate couple who relied on a local manager acting as a go-between linking them with the community. They established highly integrated and lifelong relations with local communities, with one dying and being buried on the island. Recently a new expatriate owner has taken on the operation, employing an expatriate manager instead of the incumbent local go-between, and pursuing an agenda to diversify operations and further develop the resort.</p> <p>These changes in approach have led to local tensions emerging regarding use of outlying islands, labour relations and the expansionary plans for the resort, but the resort continues to operate.</p>
B. Eco-resort	<p>This is an island retreat marketed as an eco-resort consisting of 3 bungalows along a 60m stretch of beach with separate buildings for cooking and food storage. It offers more modest facilities and prices compared to the nucleus resort (approximately 25% of the former’s rates). The enterprise was instigated and managed by expatriate husband and local wife on whose village’s (customary) land the resort is located. At the time of research, it was not in regular operation due to the deterioration of relations between the business and the family.</p>
C. Village stay	<p>This is a village stay operation located within a village on an island in the area of study, with a business model entirely driven by the need for community development and harmony. Guests stay in a dual purpose family home, with the visitor experience emphasising a lived experience of village life, involving participation in daily life activities of the host community. This business is integrated with the VCK domain to the extent that financial viability is inconstant, with the business “activating” only</p>

	during occasions of visitor arrivals.
<i>Oil Palm on the Guadalcanal Plains - GPPOL</i>	
D. Leased estate	<p>More than 5000 hectares of oil palm plantation are operated by GPPOL under lease arrangements with landowners associated with 58 parcels of registered land, each with the PE held by between 3 and 5 local trustees with a FTE lease granted to the company. An apex landowner organisation called Guadalcanal Plains Resource Development Association (GPRDA) was constituted from representatives of these landowners, to hold a 20% share in GPPOL, and this organisation distributes cash benefits (land rental and royalties) to landowners on behalf of the company. Plantation production and management is entirely conducted by the company with land rental paid quarterly and royalties monthly.</p> <p>The history of land registration and ownership arrangements varies amongst the parcels, with differing degrees of consensus within owner groups on the propriety of trustee and ownership arrangements. The company's establishment in 2005, within the area formerly occupied by SI Plantations Ltd (SIPL) and in the immediate aftermath of years of violent conflict, has been a success story of large-scale investment in the country.</p>
E. Outgrowers association	<p>A single 504 ha parcel is operated under formal outgrower arrangements with GPPOL, with oil palm fruit sold to the company, and all plantation maintenance and harvesting organized by the Association. The land is held in PE by the landowners via the Loka Mamata Association (LMA). While formerly leased to SIPL this land was withheld from similar arrangements with GPPOL by the people of LMA so no rental or royalties are paid. The Association employs GPPOL workers and other sources of labour under cash or food-barter basis for labour intensive tasks of plantation maintenance.</p>
F. Occasional producers	<p>This class of producers are individual outgrowers raising palm oil on customary and/or registered land which they have access to. These are a diverse group of actors with exposure to service and retail sectors as well as cocoa, coconut and livestock small holdings. Oil palm fresh fruit is sold through agreements with GPPOL as well as some channelling through LMA blocks. Land is either customary or alienated but under individual or family control, and not part of palm oil-specific organizational arrangements. These producers are distinguished by their pro-active consideration of palm oil engagement in the context of other commercial possibilities especially cocoa.</p>
<i>Forestry in northern Choiseul – Eagon Resource Development</i>	
G. Sustained plantation forestry	<p>The Choiseul Bay area was alienated by an expatriate planter in the early 20th century but was bought back by landowning tribes constituting the Choiseul Bay Association Land Trust Board in the mid-1970s. Approximately 2000 ha of land at Choiseul Bay has been involved with continuous logging, replanting and plantation harvesting operations conducted by Eagon since 1994. Replanting of the area followed immediately after initial logging, and one plantation harvest has been</p>

	completed. Only 650 ha is still under plantation production, with the remainder being used by landowners or reserved for sale to the provincial government. The company considers this production unit to be successful in providing a reliable woodflow for the international mother company.
H. Interrupted forestry operations	Eagon established its Choiseul base on government land at Moli and began adjacent logging operations on a large tract of customary land in 1989. Although there was considerable investment in facilities in the base during logging operations and immediate replanting, most (2/3) of the replanted areas have been lost to gardening and fire. Company operations were halted by violence and arson in the late 1990s, and any further planting or harvesting are contingent on successful negotiations with landowners and communities in the area.
I. Logging operation	This logging operation started in 2009 in the Chiropodoko customary land area situated between Moli and Choiseul bay, after a long period of resistance to logging. Trusteeship arrangements for sub-groups within Chiropodoko were established via the Timber Rights determination process facilitating the logging operation. An eight year operation is envisaged by the company but there is already evidence of the emergence of problems normally associated with logging, including community conflict and gendered social issues. This case bears most similarity to the “normal” logging mode in the country.

Results

Application of the VCK domain framework to the selected studies has yielded a considerable body of qualitative data describing the types of relationships engendered by the entry and operation of business in locales dominated by the VCK domain. For the purposes of this analysis, however, a broad metric of success has been adopted to highlight the major linkages between such interactions and business viability. This metric has been defined simply as the continual, uninterrupted operation of an enterprise within the sample set.

In relating this definition to examined variables, three classes of characteristic in a given enterprise situation were considered:

- Characteristics of the enterprise actor – the business entity taken as the unit of analysis;
- Characteristics of the local manifestation or version of the VCK domain – the people and local institutions extant in the space the business engages with; and
- Characteristics of the interaction or engagement between the two – the relations practiced between the two sets of actors.

The overarching observation obtaining from this analysis is that positive relations of the sort conducive to business success emerge from basic characteristics of the two sets of agents identified in the analysis: the enterprise and VCK domain. Particular descriptors of these two agent groups are consistent with business success. These are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: VCK and Enterprise characteristics associated with business success

VCK characteristics	Enterprise characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community organization prior to and independent of enterprise entry. • ‘Prepared territory’ and sense of place in which VCK actors perceive a comprehensive consistency between the operations of the enterprise entity and previously established understandings of the use of that space or territory, or of its place within the locale. • A long-standing, stable and locally legitimate history of land relations and rights assignment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long term focus and a business model obviously supportive of this. • Patience and the ability for capital investment and management effort to be sustained. • The integration of local go-betweens or ‘Lieutenants’.⁴ • A consistent narrative⁵ which is non-interruptive of local ones, and a consistent with conception of development, benefit and progress in that specific community situation. • Operationalised understanding of local conceptions of value and benefit sharing. • Sensitivity to and proficiency in local conceptions of progress • A corporate culture allowing operational flexibility.

In order to illustrate the interaction of VCK and enterprise factors, Figure 1 places the range of sub-cases on two axes describing the relative degree of positively associated enterprise and VCK characteristics. Each sub-case is labelled with the corresponding row of Table 1 which describes it in detail.

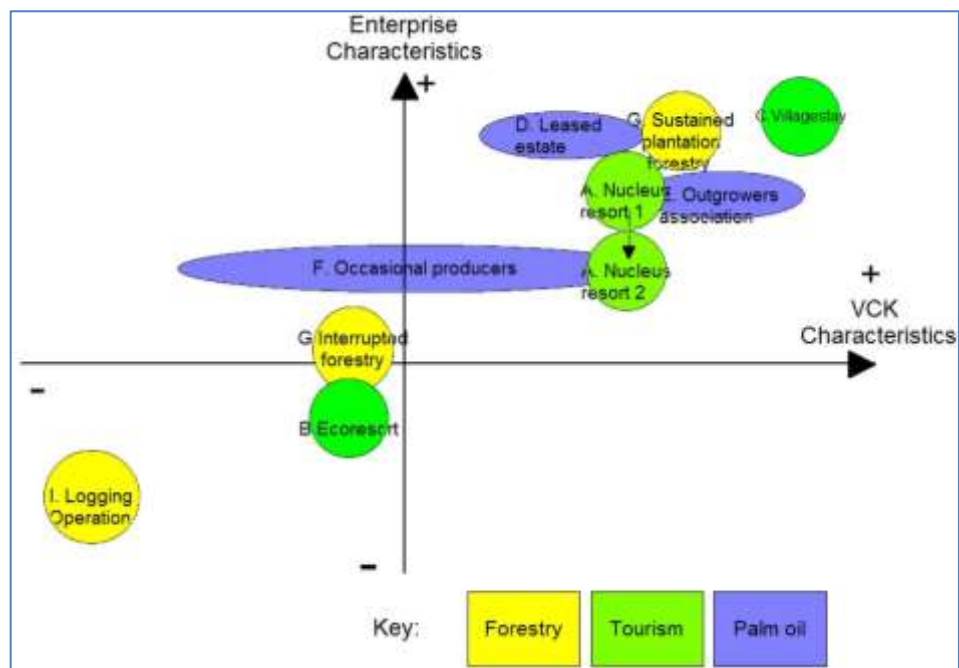
4 The term ‘lieutenants’ is used here to describe influential individuals who play a critical role in maintaining workable relations by acting as go-betweens mediating interactions between VCK domain actors and the enterprise. These individuals are typically embedded in institutions of both the enterprise and the VCK domain, and derive direct benefits from the ongoing successful function of the business in a given setting.

5 ‘Consistency’ here comprises at least two aspects:

- Continuity of the narrative over time and across different phases of the business cycle. Rhetoric employed in initial scoping phases serves as a baseline for expectations in subsequent dealings and in the operational phases of the business.
- A perceived integrity or internal consistency between the operations of the enterprise and the individual actions and rhetoric of leaders in the enterprise. The maintenance of this integrity is an active process requiring effort and competence.

Successful maintenance of such consistency can result in powerful positive local perceptions of the ‘personhood’ of the enterprise. The broad local acceptance and support of the nucleus resort under its original ownership was an instance of this. However changed rhetoric by new owners has introduced inconsistency with the prior narrative and is now requiring a reworking of both operations and perceptual elements. Table 1, Case A presents more detail on this situation.

Figure 1: Location of sub cases on VCK-enterprise axes



The case of “run of the mill” logging (case I) maps onto a least favourable combination of characteristics in the bottom left quadrant, leading us to expect limited sustainability in this case, while “success cases” of sustained business activity such as the different types of GPPOL grower arrangements (particularly D and E), and the two more successful tourism businesses (A and C), are located in the upper right quadrant. The interesting sub-case of changed business characteristics associated with a shift in ownership, is illustrated by the transition in enterprise coordinates between ‘Nucleus resort 1’ and ‘Nucleus resort 2’ (the two circles labelled A).

Discussion

Forestry in Choiseul: One company, two places

This case illustrates the variation in business outcomes arising when an enterprise possessing the full range of characteristics associated with successful outcomes engages with VCK domain actors at different stages of ‘preparedness’.

This is clearly demonstrated in the comparison of the sub-cases of Moli and Choiseul Bay, where significantly different business success outcomes were experienced by the same company with a relatively uniform and positive corporate approach.

The positive enterprise characteristics were manifest in:

- Strong awareness of cultural and social factors critical to constructive relations with local communities and institutions. This was realized through the use of culturally competent representatives of the company at early stages of its entry to the island. The company’s first in-country representative was highly acculturated

through an upbringing and education in PNG where he also interacted with Solomon Islanders.

- An operationalised understanding of local conceptions of development and associated values. Key to this was a Christian evangelical corporate ethos which was visible in communities and consonant with local Christianity. This provided a shared basis for interactions and also informed the provision of social services as part of the company's responsibility to the communities it operated in.

In the case of Choiseul Bay these positive enterprise characteristics interacted with conducive VCK characteristics, in particular the high level of pre-existing community organization in the form of the CBA. The CBA, which had formed prior to Independence as a vehicle for purchasing back alienated lands in accordance with government policy, provided an empowering institutional framework for the local community in its interactions with the company.

A further factor ensuring business success in the case of Choiseul Bay was the ongoing involvement of two 'lieutenants' with complementary competencies in the two different worlds of business and the VCK domain. The first of these was a lawyer holding a senior management role with the company while also representing the Choiseul Bay Association. The second was a community leader with a unique and unprecedented degree of local legitimacy and authority within the lands of the Choiseul Bay area by virtue of an arranged genealogical union. Such figures were absent in the case of Moli, which may have limited the scope for VCK and enterprise adjustments which might have been able to mediate a more constructive relationship between these actors.

In the case of Moli, the VCK domain was less prepared in the sense that there was no pre-existing community organization commensurate to the CBA and there had never been any land or resource determination processes. The VCK in this case was much more reactive, arguably leading to conflict and resulting in mixed success for the company.

Another striking feature in this case study is the remarkable and exceptional degree of perseverance demonstrated by the company in its dealings with landowner issues. The company's dependence on plantations in Solomon Islands for its on-going wood flow makes it unique a unique commercial actor in the Solomons forestry sector.

Tourism in Marau - One company: two faces

The most instructive aspect of this case study revolves around the recent change of ownership and management of the nucleus resort operation. This situation is the converse of that described above: two different sets of enterprise characteristics have played out in a single VCK domain the characteristics of which have been both constant and conducive to forming good long-term relationships. The change in the enterprise characteristics brought about by the change in ownership has resulted in some deterioration of previously outstanding relationships between the business and VCK actors. While the overall situation remains reasonably positive, there is elevated potential for conflict which could jeopardize the success of the resort.

The VCK domain has been striking in its level of preparedness brought about the long history of the resort and the even longer history of the island on which it is situated as an expatriate 'outpost'. This weight of history also underpins an acceptance of the alienated status of the island (with PE vested in the Commissioner of Lands and FTE vested in the resort operator). Interestingly the recent deterioration in relationships has seen descendents of the original landowners signal a willingness to enforce their rights to the inter-tidal zone.

This deterioration of relationships has been brought about by a number of enterprise characteristics altered by changes in personalities and practice:

- An apparent reduction in patience as evidenced in day to day relations, particularly with the workforce.
- Loss of a lieutenant in the situation, which has limited the ability for nuanced communications and mitigation of potentially inflammatory situations.
- A more expansionist business model than previously in evidence and one which elevates the potential for interruption of other uses of space in the Marau area.
- A grander narrative which has raised and subsequently failed to meet, expectations in the area.

Palm Oil in Guadalcanal Plains: "a Big Ticket Success?"

Similarly to the case of tourism in Marau, this agricultural case study exhibits a fixed VCK domain situation interacting with a changed set of enterprise characteristics, brought about by a change of company ownership.

However, in contrast to the case of the nucleus resort, the experience of GPPOL demonstrates the positive potential for business success with an improvement in enterprise characteristics, brought about through a change of ownership and a concomitant increase in corporate competence in dealing with situations of high VCK engagement.

The successful establishment of GPPOL in 2005 and its five years of operation since then, over a large area of land in a territory which had been the epicenter of the ethnic tension only five years earlier, make this a remarkable case of success. All success-associated characteristics from both VCK and enterprise perspectives are in evidence in this case. Of particular importance however are the following factors:

From the VCK side, the Guadalcanal Plains are a instance of well-prepared territory in the sense that the area has an established history of more than 30 years of palm oil plantations and a much longer involvement in commercial agriculture. Over the more recent time span, palm oil has become part of the region's identity. Associated with this phenomenon has been a pattern of longstanding trustee arrangements for parcels of land used for palm oil since the 1970s, lending a degree of legitimacy from the perspective of VCK actors, not only of the production characteristics of oil palm agriculture, but also the base institutional arrangements for benefit distribution.

From the enterprise side, GPPOL has a well operationalised understanding of local conceptions of value and benefit-sharing, demonstrating a sensitivity to and proficiency with local conceptions of progress and development. This was made possible through comparative experience arising from GPPOL's parent company arrangements in PNG, whereby a stable long term production model has evolved involving a combination of nucleus-estate and outgrower production. This has enabled them to accommodate outgrower modes that had previously not been practiced under SIPL, such as the Loka Mamata Association.

Conclusion

The results are recognised as being preliminary given that they have emerged from a relatively small sample size. Nonetheless they are broadly consistent with the premise that highly localised 'social license' is the overarching context for business operations in rural Solomon Islands, and cannot be substituted for by the operation of legal regulation alone. Such license derives from multiple sources and government regulation is often not the most significant of these. Our criterion of success – business longevity – is particularly sensitive to the quality of such social license.

Our initial hypothesis has been that relationships supportive of business success in a given setting are a function of distinct characteristics of the VCK domain and of the enterprise entity. This has been borne out to the extent that a small number of enterprise and VCK characteristics associated with positive outcomes have been identified across the body of cases considered here.

A synoptic description of the main characteristics of both aspects of a business situation is provided:

VCK domain characteristics

The quality of **preparedness** within the VCK domain setting as evidenced by:

- Local conceptions of the use of space which are consistent with that of the enterprise.
- Broad consensus and legitimacy around land relations for the space in question.
- A mature state of community organisation independent of enterprise entry.

Enterprise characteristics

A corporate model supportive of long term engagement, including capital stability and a corporate culture permitting operational responsiveness.

Business activities consistent with local development narratives and conceptions of progress, value and equity.

Effective cultural competence – often operationalised in the form of "lieutenants" able to mediate relations at multiple levels on an ongoing basis.

Relationships, while paramount are not independent of the nature of the enterprise and VCK domain in a given situation. Indeed, this work strongly suggests that instead of being a third independent variable, the quality of the relationships that emerge are dependent on the nature of the two classes of actors: enterprise and VCK. The quality

of these relationships then, in turn, underpin the success or otherwise of the enterprise. The enterprise-VCK domain framework presents itself as a useful model for understanding the various actors and interactions amongst those actors. With more testing, it may also be a useful one for predicting enterprise success.

Recommendations

- Land and land reform needs to be conceptualised in the broader context of relationships. Processes which modify the nature of land relations must do so without jeopardising social relations. The legal status of territory does not obviate the need for a secure social license to operate in the VCK domain.
- Enterprises intending to invest in Solomon Islands need to devote considerable time and resources to develop systemic corporate cultural competence to undergird their engagements with the VCK domain.
- Policy actors need to support the development of both enterprise and VCK competence in managing relationships conducive to business success. Three areas appear particularly important in this regard:
- An improved evidence base through ongoing detailed research, for understanding interactions between enterprise actors and those of the VCK domain.
- Improved government and donor institutional recognition of VCK preparedness as an important factor in programming and policy cycles. Such recognition is needed to underpin policy positions which emphasise VCK preparedness as a critical element for business success.
- Programming which supports both enterprises and VCK actors in developing capacity for relationships supportive of business success. For intending investors, such programming should facilitate the development of corporate cultural competence. For VCK actors, such programming should provide appropriate support to processes of self-initiated VCK preparation.

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