

## **23. Governance and Livelihood Realities in Solomon Islands**

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The three institutions of Solomon Islands life are traditional governance (custom), the Church and the State. In the past century, the first two have been strong, the third weak (Brown 2003). Despite this, the condition of traditional governance and the Church are sometimes not noticed by the outside world, which concentrates instead on the State. Modern governance systems have displaced traditional governance. Modern governance is perceived by people to be alienating and disempowering (Wairiu et al. 2003). It is characterised as alienating people from their family or tribe, land and culture. Participation in decision-making and reciprocity are inherent characteristics of traditional governance. To Solomon Islanders, governance is about livelihood, that is, working together to meet people's basic needs. Under the modern governance system, the most vulnerable groups in society — women, youth and people living in isolated areas — are often ignored. It is vital for peace and national security that the current recovery plans made possible through the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) are put into practice, to reach and make a difference to the bulk of the people in the villages. This chapter presents communities' perspectives on governance, key governance issues and the need to strengthen leadership and promote good governance to enable people to actively participate in governance and livelihood activities.

### **Community perspective on governance**

Most rural communities have difficulty defining governance. For most, aspects of governance were described as service delivery and working together to meet people's daily basic needs (including food security, shelter, health, traditional education, security and personal safety, self-reliance, peace, spiritual growth and cultural heritage).

Traditional structures of governance were organised around tribes and/or the family. Each unit of the structure provided the necessary power for the functioning of the system in order to accommodate the different needs and interests of all the people bound to the system. Leaders earned their position and respect among their people. People knew who their leaders were and why they commanded leadership and looked only to that one person as leader. Peace and security within and between communities was a priority of the traditional leadership system. Men dominated the leadership and governance domain while women dominated the traditional welfare domain. Traditional governance systems

sustained communities for ages, but they have been displaced by modern governance systems.

Under the state, modern governance is perceived by people to be alienating and disempowering (Wairiu et. al., 2003). It is characterized as alienating people from their family or tribe, land, and culture. The modern governance system is said to 'represent the voices of the people', but in practice this has not been the case. The majority do not understand the structure and functions of the modern governance system and people do not actively participate in it. Modern governance is seen among communities as something that exists at a distance, at provincial headquarters and in the capital, Honiara. Links between community-level governance bodies and those at the provincial and national level are weak or non-existent. This creates the environment for natural resource exploitation by individuals because there is no effective leadership to safeguard people and their resources.

### **Governance issues at the community and national level**

At the community level, key governance issues include concern over the erosion of traditional governance structures and authority; confusion over the complex interplay between systems; lack of participation in decision-making; lack of proper development policies on issues affecting village life; and poor service delivery. Addressing these issues has become critical to the future stability of Solomon Islands. Village youth, who believe their views are not being heard by decision-makers and who are marginalised by modern governance processes, were instrumental in initiating and perpetuating the recent conflict. Roughan (2000) stresses that this issue cannot be ignored as 41 per cent of the country's population is under 15 years of age.

At the national level, poor leadership, corruption, inadequate service delivery and lack of participation in decision-making processes are major governance issues. Some of these issues have existed since colonial times. The modern governance system has long been considered a threat to traditional governance structures and authority and there is much dissatisfaction over heavy-handed, top-down approaches. Because of this top-down approach, village people tend to see their role as the 'receivers' of nationalism rather than the 'builders' of a nation-state (Wairiu et al. 2003). The government has become the creator and producer of services, while people see themselves simply as consumers. The recent ethnic tension that ravaged the country's economy is only one example of people's longstanding dissatisfaction with governance arrangements, service delivery and resource allocation.

### **Governance and civil society**

Civil society organisations have become increasingly vocal on issues of corruption and 'bad governance'. After the ethnic tension and the arrival of RAMSI, civil

society organisations gained momentum and seem determined to bring about a new political order. This is evident through the establishment of the Civil Society Network. A number of local NGOs are now active in promoting leadership and good governance, addressing issues at village, provincial and national levels. These organisations include the Solomon Islands Development Trust, Solomon Islands Christian Association, the Civil Society Network, National Council of Women, Voice Belong Mere Solomon, Environmental Concerns Action Network of Solomon Islands and the Winds of Change Movement. International NGOs such as Conservation International, Worldwide Fund for Nature, the Nature Conservancy and Greenpeace are also promoting good governance through the sustainable use of natural resources and environmental protection and management.

In 2003, the UNDP initiated a pilot project in Isabel Province to build management capacity at the provincial level. This project builds on the unique 'tripartite system' of governance in Isabel Province, which comprises the joint leadership of chiefs, the Church and provincial government. The Rural Development Volunteers Association (RDVA), under the Ministry of Provincial Government and Rural Development, operates the '*Pipol Fastaem Network*' (People First Network), a robust email system that facilitates communication between people in remote locations. This innovative technology enables Islanders spread across thousands of kilometres to access electronic mail and communicate with one another using a central computer, short-wave radio and solar power. The network seeks to promote equitable and sustainable rural development and peace building through improved information-sharing and awareness-building between people in isolated communities. The RDVA plans to establish 29 stations throughout the country; 17 were operational in early 2006.

Churches throughout Solomon Islands continue to play their part in promoting good governance, although this is restricted primarily to messages from the pulpit. Some clergy are moving beyond the church building and 'going public' about governance, development and social justice issues. For instance, a bishop from the Church of Melanesia recently published a report listing 10 priority issues that need to be addressed by RAMSI, including corruption, land disputes and education. The country's five mainstream churches (Catholic, Anglican, United Church, South Seas Evangelical and Seventh-Day Adventist) formed the Solomon Islands Christian Association. This network has become outspoken on governance issues and is constantly reminding government to be transparent, accountable and responsible in its decision-making.

Women's groups, through their national body, the National Council of Women, are also making their voices and choices heard. Women constitute approximately half of the total population of Solomon Islands (Solomon Islands Government 2000); more than 80 per cent live in villages and are engaged in subsistence

agriculture. Women historically played numerous and important roles in traditional governance, including their involvement as decision-makers, mothers, nurses, providers of food and income, community leaders and educators — all of which are necessary for sustainable livelihoods and good social relations. Liloqula (2002) notes that these roles were widely recognised and highly valued within the traditional governance system, giving women status and prominence in their families and communities. Today, women's contributions are often overlooked resulting in the vast under-utilisation of women's potential to contribute to good governance.

## **Leadership**

Links between community-level or traditional governance bodies and those of the provincial and national governments are weak or non-existent. This weak linkage and confusion over the interface between traditional and modern governance systems creates weakness in leadership and exploitation of the country's natural resources at the expense of people's livelihoods. At present, there is a leadership vacuum at all levels, from community to government. People are confused and nobody is giving direction. The leadership crisis has taken form at different levels and in different manifestations and has reached a level where, if it not addressed now, it will remain a major obstacle to Solomon Islands' prosperous future.

## **Governance, livelihood realities and challenges**

Governance and livelihoods are interrelated because peace, security and the opportunity to participate in decision-making are important issues and part of people's livelihood. The majority of Solomon Islanders derive their livelihoods from their own land, sea and labour resources. For centuries, this has provided them with food, water, shelter, medicine, recreation and other benefits. People's livelihoods are underpinned by the tribal ownership of land, which enables all members of a customary landholding group to access resources for subsistence and income-earning purposes. More than 90 per cent of Solomon Islands land is tribally owned (owned by a whole tribe) through 'customary land tenure'. Most landowning groups or tribal members live in rural villages, which comprised 86 per cent (352,600) of the total population of 410,000 in 2000 (Solomon Islands Government 2000). The population of Solomon Islands is now considerably higher.

Although the subsistence sector has directly supported people's livelihoods, it has never been a development priority for colonial and post-colonial governments and donors. Past interventions have concentrated on the cash economy. Women still dominate the subsistence economy for family survival while men are in the domain of leadership and governance. In the past three decades, women have slowly moved into the cash economy as income opportunities became accessible

in some areas. Their involvement in cash cropping adds an extra workload to their existing social commitments to family, community, school, church and women's group activities. Pollard et al. (2004) estimated that there were about 3,000 community women's groups, approximately 10 national women's organisations and 10 indigenous women's associations operating throughout Solomon Islands. The women's groups have established networks at the national level that are reaching rural communities and touching the heart of the key providers of rural livelihoods, the women. It is, however, evident that the network is unrecognised, under-utilised and under-resourced. As women directly support the livelihood of their family, it is important that such women's networks are well resourced and strengthened to ensure continuous support for improvement and sustenance of people's livelihoods. Current governance systems and structures should accommodate women to participate equally in governing the country.

There has been a gradual shift from the subsistence to the cash economy over many years, however, there are limited opportunities in the villages to earn cash to meet basic needs. Prices are low for major commodities such as copra and cocoa and there is a lack of reliable and affordable transport to markets. There is no information on alternative sources of income for villagers and few marketing arrangements for selling the produce they grow. Given this reality, their best option is for men to go to urban centres such as Honiara seeking paid work, while others resort to destructive resource-extraction activities such as logging or over-harvesting of coastal marine resources. The solutions lie in providing a way of gaining cash income for those who are ambitious for their children and themselves, who are prepared to work and who wish to use the two resources that they have — their land and their family labour. This will require leadership and vision, which is lacking in the country. There is a leadership vacuum at all levels and a lack of sound management strategies for resource use. People are making uninformed decisions about their resources, which compromise the future of their natural resource base and their children. Past interventions by government and donor partners have not adequately addressed these problems. The arrival of extractive and destructive industries such as logging exacerbated the problem.

In some communities income-generating activities such as cash cropping, logging, fishing, marketing of garden produce and small business enterprises are having some beneficial results. They bring cash income to rural villages, employment, slow migration to towns and enable people to meet basic needs such as paying for kerosene, soap and school fees. The increase in income is good but people are not investing their modest income to support their livelihood because governance structures are weak, and government services, such as police to maintain order, are absent. As a result, greater cash incomes have brought more social problems. These include: 1) increased consumption of imported processed

food (rice, noodles, tinned fish/meat, tea and flour-based items); 2) consumption of alcohol and drugs; 3) gambling (*kura*); and 4) the introduction of entertainment equipment such as videos and modern dance music. All these are leading to a growth in non-communicable diseases (diabetes and infant malnutrition) and criminal activities, causing disharmony among communities. Home-brewed alcohol, locally known as *kwaso*, and drugs such as marijuana are readily available in many rural communities. Meanwhile, population pressure on the land has led to short fallows, land degradation and poor crop yields.

One of the major governance and livelihood challenges is landownership and use. To most people, land is much more than a provider of the basics of life such as food, water and shelter. It is part of the people's life. Land problems lie at the heart of the country's current problems and the recent ethnic tension. Roughan (2003) argues that land problems have come about because of the way people in Solomon Islands view land. The outside world sees land as a resource base, a commodity, something that is bought and sold. Land is something that can be used to make a profit. Solomon Islanders, on the other hand, understand it as part of their life and not as a commodity, not something that can be bought and sold. Since current leaders are associated with wealth and power, some use land as though it does not belong to the tribe but to the individual. Roughan (2003) pointed out that to address land problems a strong and well-funded program of educating people about how the wider world works was critical. The customary land situation has to be sorted out and a common understanding and workable mechanism need to be established to make land available for development in a way that provides equitable benefits for all parties. Otherwise, endless conflicts will ensue and pose threats to a peaceful and prosperous future. Solomon Islanders need assistance in this area.

Associated with land is the use of the country's natural resources. The desire to improve living standards drives current economic development, which in most cases involves uncontrolled conversion of natural resources in the country into wealth. Timber and fish remain the country's two greatest natural resources. The timber harvest (mainly round-log production) has been beyond sustainable levels for years, reaching a peak of one million cubic metres in 2004. The same is increasingly true for the fish harvest, with illegal fishing by overseas vessels going on and the country incapable of doing anything to stop it. RAMSI can provide some help in these areas. The dependence on the subsistence production system to support a rapidly growing population makes the environment particularly important to the wellbeing of Solomon Islanders. The current trend creates the potential for significant livelihood impacts from the extractive industries which form the bulk of national exports.

Another challenge is whether Solomon Islands has received a fair return from its natural resources exploited in the 28 years since independence. As Suri and

Rarawa (2004) state, it is essential that we refer to the country's balance sheet to see how much of the country's resources have been harvested and how much the country and resource owners have received in return. At present, government and community attitudes towards reliance on socially, economically and environmentally destructive resource extraction have not changed, even after the ethnic tension and the intervention of RAMSI. There is no evidence of changed thinking about the country's economic base, and RAMSI seems to accept the present basis of the national economy.

### **The need for good governance and livelihood interventions**

RAMSI's program is in areas of: 1) law and justice, 2) the machinery of government and 3) economic governance. Its objectives are to: 1) contribute to a safer and more secure Solomon Islands, 2) help the Solomon Islands Government to better serve its people, and 3) contribute to a prosperous Solomon Islands (RAMSI 2005). The program strongly promotes good governance and livelihoods. In promoting good governance, RAMSI is concerned more with the State and less with civil society, but it is important that RAMSI is also engaged with civil society, particularly communities, in its effort to promote good governance. Past interventions have failed because they attempted to change people's attitudes towards increasing incomes to improve their livelihoods. It is important that interventions to address livelihoods are not top-down but are carried out in partnership with the people.

Leadership, landownership, and equal participation and partnership as well as nation-building must be the cornerstones of livelihood interventions. Interventions must aim to benefit the most vulnerable groups in Solomon Islands society — women, youth and people living in isolated areas — and build on the strengths of the subsistence system. It is vital for peace and national security that the current recovery plans reach and make a difference to the bulk of the people in the villages. It will be a lost opportunity to rebuild Solomon Islands if RAMSI simply creates an enabling environment and assumes that people will pick things up from there. Poor leadership in the past 28 years has plunged the country into deep problems and the Solomon Islands certainly requires some assistance to move forward.

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