

## Perceptions of Peacebuilding in Solomon Islands Post-RAMSI

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The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) completed its withdrawal on 30 June 2017. Initially deployed in response to the Tensions (1998–2003), the 14-year-long mission (2003–17) went through various iterations, extending its early focus on restoring security to the longer term tasks of institutional capacity-building, economic development and peacebuilding. While considerable progress was made across various peacebuilding and development measures, scepticism remained about whether these gains would be sustained post-RAMSI.

This In Brief is based on the *National Perceptions Survey on Peacebuilding for Solomon Islands* commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme under a United Nations Peacebuilding Fund project implemented by UNDP and UN Women (UNDP 2018). The purpose of the study was to provide fresh insight into Solomon Islanders' perceptions of peacebuilding immediately after RAMSI's withdrawal. In July and August 2017, 2503 people were surveyed in 24 enumeration areas, which were mainly in and around centres across seven provinces, and included the national capital, Honiara. Limitations to the methodology used included the concentration of target samples in peri-urban and urban areas. While we attempted to mitigate clustering issues around the survey sites, the reported findings should be interpreted in this light.

This In Brief summarises some of the survey's key findings. In particular we highlight the perceived dissipation (but not disappearance) of inter-ethnic tensions and the renewed focus on core development issues among Solomon Islanders. Interested readers should consult the full report.

### Solomon Islands post-RAMSI

While the Tensions occurred along ethnic and provincial fractures, they were allegedly exacerbated by longstanding grievances over access to economic opportunities and resentment directed at settlers perceived as taking opportunities from the 'indigenous' Guadalcanal people. These factors are part of a longer history of ineffective service delivery by successive national governments, inequitable distribution of development benefits, uneven access

to services between areas and the unfulfilled development expectations of Solomon Islanders (Allen 2013).

Although significant improvements occurred under RAMSI, many of the underlying structural challenges that contributed to the Tensions remain. These include the need to increase economic opportunities for a youthful and rapidly growing population; to continue to improve the quality and delivery of basic services such as health, education and infrastructure; and to ensure a more equitable distribution of benefits between government, investors and resource owners.

Political decentralisation revolving around the role and distribution of powers between different levels of government is another fault line that has run through Solomon Islands politics since before independence (Dinnen 2008). It is important to acknowledge these historical grievances when interpreting the survey findings.

### Perceptions of future directions and sustaining peace

Overall survey findings indicate Solomon Islanders have uncertain tending towards pessimistic views of the direction their country is heading. Men surveyed were more optimistic than women, with more than twice the number of men saying it was headed in the 'right direction' compared to women, which is perhaps not a surprising finding given the continuing economic and political marginalisation of women in Solomon Islands. Respondents with higher levels of education were also generally more optimistic than those with low-to-middle education levels. While perceptions of RAMSI's contribution remained positive, consistent with the findings of earlier People's Surveys (ANUedge 2013), confidence that peace would be sustained in the future was mixed, with only a slight majority (54.6%) of respondents confident and over a third not confident (36.5%).

Satisfaction with the national government's handling of issues from the Tensions varied between provinces. In the two provinces most directly affected, Guadalcanal reported the highest levels of dissatisfaction (57% unsatisfied) while Malaita recorded the most positive responses (55.6% satisfied). The

dissatisfaction in Guadalcanal may, in part, reflect the higher expectations of those living in and around Honiara, including reactions to increasing overcrowding and service shortfalls in the national capital.

### Importance of core development issues

Respondents identified the two most important actions for ensuring lasting peace in Solomon Islands as increased access to economic opportunities and employment (23.2%), and provision of greater power to provincial authorities (20.6%). The most pressing national issues were perceived as employment (40.5%), followed by corruption (20.6%) and basic services such as health and education (13.1%). Demonstrating that popular concerns and priorities had moved on, fewer than 1% of respondents identified fixing issues from the Tensions (e.g. reconciliation) as the most important national issue.

Overall, the national government response to corruption recorded the lowest levels of satisfaction, with considerable variation in perceptions between different provinces. Respondents in Choiseul and Isabel, both of which at the time had long-serving and respected premiers and their own distinct systems of provincial governance, recorded the highest levels of satisfaction with their provinces' handling of corruption (56.3% and 60%, respectively), while Makira-Ulawa reported the lowest (23.1%).

### Social cohesion and national identity

Generally, survey results suggest high levels of social cohesion at different levels of Solomon Islands society. Nearly all respondents (97.7%) indicated they were proud to be a Solomon Islander. Although not detracting from Solomon Islanders maintaining strong subnational identities based on, for example, language groups, kinship affiliations and provinces, this is an extremely positive result as a proxy for assessing the strength of national identity. The intense interprovincial animosities that characterised the Tensions period also appear to have largely dissipated. Three-quarters of respondents (75.2%) felt that people from their province were free to visit other provinces. Of the minority who did not feel free to travel (19.2% of all respondents), nearly three-quarters (73.2%) identified Malaita as the location they felt least free to visit.

Almost three-quarters (74%) of all respondents felt that members of their community lived together in harmony, and a strong majority (90.9%) felt free to visit other communities within their province. Over two-thirds (67.9%) of respondents felt involved in decision-making in their community. However, these findings differed between demographics. Women reported feeling less involved than men (60.1% compared to 75.7%) and youth felt less involved than older groups (56.3% of 15- to 24-year-olds compared to 73.9% of older respondents).

### Takeaway messages

While RAMSI's achievements are widely acknowledged and appreciated, Solomon Islanders continue to express considerable uncertainty about the direction their country is heading and the sustainability of the peace the mission helped restore. This suggests a need for continuing support of peacebuilding activities. In particular, concerns about progress expressed by women and youth emphasise the need for targeted programs focused on those who appear to have benefited the least from the regional intervention.

Although the ethnic divisions that animated the Tensions appear to have largely dissipated, concerns remain about the progress of peacebuilding efforts in some areas, most notably Guadalcanal, which is experiencing the highest influx of migrants, especially in Honiara. Highlighted by the majority of respondents and clearly important to acknowledge in light of recent history, many of these unresolved factors appear to relate to broader issues of political governance and social and economic development.

These core development issues — including improved and more equitably distributed economic opportunities and access to essential services, as well as effective anti-corruption measures — remain outstanding concerns for most Solomon Islanders. Peacebuilding activities need to be anchored within this overall development context. These findings identify provinces where perceptions of uneven development are highest and where remedial action needs to be prioritised while identifying provinces with higher levels of satisfaction, from which lessons can be learned.

### Authors notes

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