

A perspective on constituency development in Solomon Islands

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This policy paper looks at how successive national governments in Solomon Islands have used constituencies as a focal point for delivery of government services, apart from established institutions such as government ministries, departments, and the nine provincial governments. It asks whether this is a cost-effective system of delivering government services to the rural areas. Finally, suggestions are made on the need for a paradigm shift—given the constraints and challenges the country faces in using members of parliament (MPs) and their constituencies as a focal point of service delivery.

Historical background of Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands is a group of islands between Papua New Guinea and the Republic of Vanuatu. Ethnically, it is predominantly Melanesian, however it is also home to minority groups such as Polynesian, Micronesian, Chinese, and Caucasian Solomon Islanders.

Like Fiji, the country was colonised by the United Kingdom for a period of 85 years, gaining political independence in 1978. Solomon Islands is a nation of villages—it has strong linkages through its myriad of tribes and clans, with tribal and

clan members being the traditional owners of the land and natural resources.

The country's population is estimated to be well over 500,000. More than 85 per cent of the population lives in villages. Most are tillers of the land—subsistence farmers and fisherwomen and men. Only 20 per cent of the population live in the urban centres and they are predominantly employees of either the government or the private sector.

Pre-independence period

Britain declared protectorate status over the Solomon Islands in 1893. Initially, the islands were administered from the Suva Office (although supervised from the Colonial Office in London). During this pre-independence period, copra was the only major export commodity. At the same time, there was an influx of European and Chinese traders.

Many settled in the islands. Most owned coconut plantations. Partial autonomy was given when self-government was granted in 1975–76. Just prior to self-government, the first elected representatives formed the Governing Council. Theoretically, government services were delivered through government departments. But, by and large, it was the colonial government administration that continued to deliver services.

Post-independence period

Solomon Islands gained full independence on 7 July 1978. The country then adopted its first independence constitution—symbolised in its national flag and national anthem. With independence came membership to the various international communities of nations such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to name but a few. The head of state remained Her Majesty the Queen of England, represented by the Governor General. When the country adopted the Westminster system of government it was agreed that the life of parliament would be four years.

In terms of government services, once parliament approved the government budget, social services were to be delivered to the people on the basis of the approved budget. No funds were given through MPs for government services. For example, in Malaita Province, the Auki south road, the north road that runs down to Fouia, and the east road that ends at Atori, were built with donor funding. Several water supply projects were funded and implemented through the rural water supply and sanitation division of the Ministry of Health.

In 1981, a provincial government system was established. The parent act was the Provincial Government Act of 1981. The rationale behind the provincial government system is that they are the agents of the national government and that through this provincial system, government is closer to the people. The central government sent devolution orders to the provincial assemblies to deliver services to the people.

The Rural Constituency Development Fund

In 1989, under the leadership of the late Hon. Solomon Mamaloni, the government devised a system known as the Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF). The rationale behind this system of service delivery was that MPs should not only talk on the floor of parliament but they must be seen as directly responsible for delivering services to their people. Funding was given to MPs, mostly for small social and economic projects in their constituencies. At the same time, the national government provided Solomon Islands Community Project Special Assistance (SICOPSA) grants to the provincial governments. This funding was also meant to empower Provincial Assembly members to assist their communities.

However, SICOPSA funding was cancelled after only two years of operation, whilst the RCDF has continued. One of the major reasons why the RCDF has continued is that it is the national parliament that decides on the national budget every year, and there is a vested interest in seeing that this funding continues.

With the introduction of the RCDF, each constituency was allocated a budget of SI\$200,000 each year up until 2003. In 2004, the amount was increased to SI\$400,000 per year. In 2005, the allocation was increased to SI\$600,000 per constituency (RCDF SI\$400,000 and micro-projects SI\$200,000). Therefore, the total RCDF funding for each constituency from 1989 to the end of 2005 should have been around SI\$4.2 million.

The Grand Coalition for Change Government (GCCG), which came into power in May 2006, has promised additional funding of SI\$400,000 for each constituency from the Poverty Alleviation Fund. This increase should raise the amount of RCDF to SI\$1 million per constituency in 2006—undoubtedly a lot of money for the smaller

constituencies. As a result, the constituencies should have seen tangible projects or some changes in the living standards and livelihood of the people. However, the opposite is true. Why?

Administering the RCDF

MPs administering the RCDF often face the following challenges

- there are no clear guidelines or strict rules on the use of the RCDF, so it is often given out as 'free handouts'
- funds are used as political favours to voters
- funds are not used for real development projects that could improve people's welfare
- most of the time, funds are granted at the MPs' discretion and used for other purposes such as funeral costs, bride prices, sea fares, airfares, wedding feasts, consumable items and school fees.

The Constituency Development Plan

In 1997, when I first contested the Central Kwara'ae seat, in Malaita Province, one of my key strategic principles was to draw up a Constituency Development Plan. This plan would outline the priority projects identified by the rural communities under different sectors, such as education, health, water supply and sanitation, infrastructure, telecommunications, energy, women and youth, and village development.

A three day workshop was held where community leaders, traditional leaders, women leaders, youth leaders, and school principals came together in the Auki provincial centre to discuss the plan and identify the priority projects in their schools and communities. Based on this workshop, the first Constituency Development Plan

1998–2001, was drawn up. It was revised in 2002, and again in 2005. I now have the third edition of the Central Kwara'ae Constituency Development Plan 2006–2010 in place. Each year my constituency congress identifies projects and programs from the plan to be implemented with RCDF funds. With the support of the government and our development partners, the projects and programs identified in this plan will be funded and implemented for the benefit of our people.

Implementation

In trying to implement the Central Kwara'ae Constituency Development Plan, I have faced the following challenges.

- People's perceptions and attitudes are such that social projects such as schools, clinics, and water supplies also benefit people who voted for different candidates during the general elections. Hence, they don't want the RCDF to be used for such projects
- There is a heavy dependence on donor assistance to fund projects identified under the constituency plan
- Land disputes by certain landowners or tribes inhibit the development of these projects, for example, the new feeder roads that run inland to bush communities
- The lack of adequate funding for capital projects both from the national budget and donor support.

The need for a paradigm shift

So far, I have won three consecutive general elections with a very large majority. People have confidence in my leadership as I have started to implement my constituency development plans. There have been tangible projects established in the electorate

such as schools. That said, I think I could have done a lot more over the past eight years. I would have been able to do more for my people and been able to implement more projects from the constituency plan if the following changes were made to re-direct RCDF from the control of the MPs.

- The national government should include in its annual budget priority projects from each constituency for funding and implementation. These should be administered through the appropriate department, whilst the MP and the community implement the projects. For example, if there were to be a classroom project, it would be the responsibility of the Department of Education to administer the project, while the MP together with the school parents would implement the project. If it was a water supply project, the Department of Rural Water Supply and Sanitation would administer the project.
- MPs should concentrate more on their role as lawmakers and less on service delivery. They must concentrate on collection of information and advice in order to make new laws or to repeal old ones.
- The control and discretion of MPs over the RCDF should be withdrawn. This would help to ensure that RCDF monies would be spent on tangible projects and not given out as handouts.
- MPs, together with their constituency working committees, should implement projects that are properly evaluated and budgeted for and then assessed to see whether they have been successfully implemented.
- Government should assist MPs to draw up constituency development plans, so that the implementation of the plans is consistent with the government's annual budget.

Conclusion

In Solomon Islands it has been government policy to use MPs as service deliverers. This role either replaces or complements government ministries, departments, and provincial governments. It has been done for the benefit of the nation on the basis of equitable distribution to all constituencies, and the political stability it offers for the government of the day. But it has been a costly exercise; for example, by the end of 2006, at least SI\$5.2 million will have been given to each constituency since 1989. This totals up to over SI\$250 million over the past 18 years for the whole country—a substantial amount of money that, if managed properly, could have made a difference to the lives of our people. However, the opposite is evident in most constituencies. There are no tangible socioeconomic projects that have improved the lives of our people. For smaller constituencies such as Rennel/Bellona, a Malaita outer island, with a population of less than 4,000 people, there should have been projects established that improved the lives of people, especially given the amount of funds involved.

It is up to the government to make changes to its policies if it wants to establish a more cost-effective mechanism to uplift the welfare of our rural people. The experiences of the past 18 years of the RCDF in terms of its disbursements process, its management, and implementation should have taught us a lot of lessons, and from these lessons government should devise new policy initiatives.

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