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Community Governance and Justice in Solomon Islands Part 3: Lessons and Areas for Improvement

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The first two parts of this In Brief series told the story of a model intervention with strong support from the people it was intended to serve. There is no denying that by deploying Community Officers (COs), the Community Governance and Grievance Management (CGGM) Project in Solomon Islands improved most of the local justice systems it engaged with.

It was not perfect, however. It was difficult to meet its intention to improve the connections between the key justice actors on the ground and formal government institutions. In the language of the project, these were a community's 'vertical linkages'. The project also struggled to fully incorporate women into its operations.

Views on police and provincial governments

Notably, small majorities in Renbel (52%), Central (53%) and Malaita (56%) said that their community's relationship to the police had improved since the appointment of the CO. Similar proportions of respondents in these three provinces also said that since the CO's appointment the police:

- had visited them more regularly (43% in Renbel, 48% in Central, 60% in Malaita)
- were more responsive (50% in Renbel, 50% in Central, 63% in Malaita)
- were more effective (46% in Renbel, 51% in Central, 63% in Malaita).

The provincial government did not fare so well. In no province did a majority of survey respondents suggest that their community's linkages to the provincial government had improved since the CO's appointment.

In Makira, the results were weaker for both the police and provincial government. Half of respondents there could not see a change in police visits, responsiveness and efficacy since the CO's appointment, and only 12 per cent of respondents said their linkages to the provincial government had improved.

In the three locations where citizens praised the project, which we discussed in Part 2 of this In Brief series, the COs had effectively improved a situation that was already relatively good regarding their vertical linkages. Simply put, the police and provincial government were present. One CO pointed out:

> I have built a good relationship with the provincial authorities and national ministries through the provincial coordinator. I travel with the provincial coordinator for awareness programs and updates on how this project operates [in] the last two years.

Another said that he felt 'indebted to the provincial authority for their acknowledgement of my position in the community'. However, these were exceptions.

Whose room to improve?

The mid-term review in 2017 found that Renbel's provincial authorities had responded well to community feedback by removing a requirement that provincial authorities interview and appoint COs (World Bank 2017:16). Likewise, to accommodate the project in Makira, the provincial government had revised the provincial ordinances on which community governance structures were based (World Bank 2017:17). Similarly, problems with the process COs used to record their activities had been rectified after the mid-term review. These were undoubtedly improvements to vertical linkages, even if less dramatic and visible to community members than the resolution of conflict in the community.

Nevertheless, both the evaluation of the original pilot project (Dinnen and Haley 2012) and the mid-term review (World Bank 2017) found that a major limitation on the project's capacity to improve vertical linkages was the state itself. Likewise, our impact assessment in 2021 found COs understood that the government's absence — a reality for which they were not responsible — had contributed to community dissatisfaction with their work. Far from feeling indebted to the provincial government, one CO said:

> Sometimes I used my own expenses for my tour … Generally, it seems like the province does not really prioritise my work in the rural areas … It will contribute to my weakness: the lack of cooperation from the provincial authorities with me or with my work.

Failure to pay COs' salaries certainly affected the project's effectiveness. The mid-term review (World Bank 2017:18) had found that the provincial government could be relied on to pay COs, in 2017 at least. By the time of the impact assessment, however, their financial situation had clearly changed: several other COs also said that they had not been paid their salaries, for two years in one case.

The effects could be significant. In one community in Makira, citizens had been pleased with their CO until he took another job. By all reports, the CO had

been approachable and effective. His openness to community members and commitment to his role had also eased the burden on other community leaders. One woman explained that the CO had taken responsibility for the social order disputes stemming from substance abuse, leaving family disputes for church leaders and land issues for chiefs. By-laws, which have been undergoing a revival in rural Solomon Islands (Dinnen and Pendeverana 9/10/2023), and fines had been put in place during the CO's tenure.

However, since he had taken a new job, those by-laws were no longer in force, and participants observed that issues and disputes in the community were beginning to rise again. Citizens were waiting eagerly, they said, for the province to appoint a CO like the one they used to have.

Women as COs

The impact assessment recorded strong theoretical support for women as COs: two-thirds of survey respondents said they would support the appointment of a female CO in their community.

Despite that theoretical support, in performing their tasks, the two female COs who participated in the impact assessment faced the same challenges as their compatriots had during the pilot project (Dinnen and Haley 2012). For example, it was clear that one of the women had faced resistance that participants attributed to a culture that prohibited women and men from discussing some issues with each other. This CO felt this acutely because one of the community elders was her father, some known 'troublemakers' were her brothers and, as one focus group participant said, 'she is not allowed by custom to settle her brothers' problems'. Focus group respondents elsewhere added that the capacity of the police to intervene when a dispute occurs was even more important because of the physical exertion that intervening could entail.

The other woman appointed as a CO had adopted a strategy that differed from her male counterparts. It focused on community cohesion and entailed conducting training sessions, acting as an informal counsellor, and even using her own funds to organise community sports events. Citizens gave her due credit for these activities. And, she said, as the daughter-in-law of the chief, she had a good and productive relationship with him.

Conclusion

While COs were not to blame for the limitations of the state as a service provider, the impact assessment affirmed that a CO, especially when paid, could do a lot of good. Their success would be shaped by the CO's personal commitment, history of service to local justice, their relationships, and their gender.

We found that the project was vulnerable to sudden shocks, such as when the chief in one community died unexpectedly. Events like this had the potential to radically re-order the local justice setting in which a CO worked and could change the fate of the project dramatically, at least in the short term. However, such changes on the ground would only risk the long-term sustainability of the project if it were unable to identify the changes and respond, and, as participants pointed out, it was important to have mechanisms for replacing a CO. Some even dreamt of having a male and female CO appointed to the same community to address sensitivities surrounding relations between men and women.

It also seems reasonable to speculate that if a village had benefited from both the community organising that one of the female COs had done and the by-laws her colleagues had helped re-establish in other places (see Part 1 and Part 2), then villages would be well prepared to withstand sudden shocks to the local justice situation. The latter was certainly a popular idea. For instance, in the community where the chief had died, we were told:

> Now that there is no chief, we experience a lot of issues and no respect in the community. What I see in this community is there is no proper by-law where our leaders, [CO] and community members should work together and [make it] set as a guideline for everyone.

Author notes

David Oakeshott and Colin Wiltshire are academics at the Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU. The DPA contingent of the CGGM impact assessment team also included Léa Giacomelli and Nicole Haley. Special thanks are due to staff at the Ministry of Provincial Government and Institutional Strengthening, and our reviewers.

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