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Community Governance and Justice in Solomon Islands Part 2: Signs of Success in the CGGM Project

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In Part 1 of this three-part In Brief series, we established that the design of the Community Governance and Grievance Management (CGGM) Project met the needs, both historical and contemporary, of rural Solomon Islanders as they saw them. In Part 2, we look more closely at what 'success' meant for the the citizens of the 25 jurisdictions that participated in the impact assessment. We show that while citizens in only three of these jurisdictions were near unanimously supportive of the project, there were also notable changes in the local justice situation in participating communities in the other 22 locations, whose citizens showed less enthusiasm for the project.

Highly satisfied participants

Based on their responses to survey questions about the efficacy of the Community Officers (COs), the 'horizontal' linkages between local justice institutions and 'vertical' links to the police and provincial government, there were three communities that gave near-unanimous support to the project. From the focus group discussions with men and women, and interviews with the COs themselves, we then worked out what factors had contributed to the success in these locations.

A key reason for the strong support in these locations was that the core assumption of the project matched the reality on the ground: customary, church and state institutions were present and well regarded, and the CO could link these together.

A second key reason was that these three COs had worked in village-level governance for a long time prior to taking on the CO role. One had close ties to both the local and national MP, another had been a member of the Melanesian Brotherhood (an Anglican order highly regarded across Solomon Islands), and the third had a strong relationship to the community's Crime Prevention Committee.

A third reason for their success was the way they worked. They either worked through pre-existing committees, such as the Crime Prevention Committee, or created new ones that community leaders could use to discuss disputes. One of these committees was called 'Taskforce' and it was widely praised during focus group conversations, being the venue, according to the CO, where 'problems are first dealt with before we refer to certain leadership to resolve … We recognise our different roles and responsibilities in the community'.

Working within these committees, the COs were able to assist, and even drive, the creation of community by-laws (Dinnen and Pendeverana 9/10/2023). One citizen said:

> The community now has ability to manage issues or problems through these established community by-laws. He [the CO] initiated the plan and consulted other leaders. With these local leaders and community support, we launched our by-laws last year.

These by-laws had legitimacy in the community and could be targeted to the disputes the community felt were most affecting them. One woman said, 'alcohol purchasing and consumption has a limited time now. Some people who do not follow these rules [by-laws] will pay a sum of [SB]$200 for compensation.'

The COs had ultimately lessened the burden on other sources of authority for the resolution of disputes. Prior to the project, in these three communities, chiefs were solely responsible for the resolution of incidents fuelled by drugs and alcohol. But by the time of the impact assessment, the responsibility was being shared more widely, with COs complementing chiefs in their role in resolving these specific social order disputes. The police were likewise being used less frequently, and only for more serious incidents. One man asserted that 'the community can manage and resolve disputes in our circle of influence' and that the police were only required in the case of serious crime.

Complex working environments

Elsewhere, there was less coherence to the justice system in which COs were working. We heard of villagers who were reluctant to cooperate with each other, others who levelled accusations of bias in the resolution of incidents, and others who feared retaliation from perpetrators if they tried to report an incident to the police.

Such attitudes were not the CO's fault but rather consequences of social and economic change. For example, baseline survey data and other research informing the project established that the chiefly system in Renbel was 'extremely weak' (Allen et al. 2013:38), and this was related to the deleterious effects of logging and mining on community cohesion. Chiefs were not widely used to resolve disputes.

In these complex settings, COs had to fight hard for their successes. One CO in Makira (where COs were called Village Peace Wardens) was particularly insightful. This individual's links to the other pillars of the local justice system were not universally praised. One woman said that, in her view, the CO and chief had worked almost independently of each other. There was also some doubt about the CO's strategy regarding youth; the CO's apparently aggressive method for dealing with them had not resonated with young people.

Thus, despite having been a parish chairman, this Makiran CO said:

> It [took up to] three solid years to finally settle down with my work and gradually win the hearts and minds of communities. Thus, as more awareness [raising] was conducted and trainings/workshops attended, my roles and responsibilities [have] now vividly been seen by communities, and thereafter, trust, confidence has now emerged and [been] established with communities.

As another example, at one location in Renbel, which had been affected by bauxite mining, the fate of the CGGM project took a dramatic turn for the better in January 2020. An illness had forced the original CO to resign from his position, but his replacement embraced the role. Although the old CO was well liked, the new CO enjoyed wider support from the community due to his heavy involvement in community affairs before he took on the position of CO.

That village had become more organised since the new CO took on the role: one community member said that the chiefs 'are not active but because of the CO's good works and his active roles in the community, our community is more organised'. One of the major successes of the new CO had been in the reduction of disputes related to drugs and alcohol, a result that stemmed from the CO's treatment of young people. One respondent said that heavy-handed tactics towards youth, which had not worked for the CO in Makira, had worked in this community. Another respondent observed that 'the incidence of young people drinking has definitely cut down because of the CO'. This has had flow-on effects, according to one community member: 'A lot of land arguments and family problems involve drunken people. These problems caused by drinking have lessened because of the CO.'

These observations about the reduction of disputes were reflected in the survey data across the 25 communities we visited. In Part 1 of this In Brief series, we showed that both men and women considered that disputes related to drugs and alcohol had become less frequent. The same was true for domestic and family disputes (31% in Renbel, 37% in Makira, 62% in Central, 51% in Malaita). Although these proportions were lower than those for disputes related to alcohol and drugs, again there were no statistically significant differences between men and women on chi-squared tests. In contexts where customary and church justice systems are known to discourage women from leaving abusive relationships, the prevention of at least some of that violence in the first place is a noteworthy achievement.

Conclusion

It would be unfair to measure these two COs from Renbel and Makira against their counterparts from the three communities whose citizens widely praised the project. Although all had personal experience within their respective justice systems, the two COs in Renbel and Makira were not working in contexts that were well matched to the project's assumptions. They had multiple obstacles to overcome in the communities they served. However, the COs had the autonomy to find their own way and, over time, either through changes of circumstance or hard work, their labour began to pay off.

Author notes

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