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Solomon Islands in Transition: Workshop Report

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Solomon Islands in Transition: Workshop Report

The Solomon Islands in Transition workshop was held at the Australian National University on the 4th and 5th of November 2013. Jointly funded by the ANU and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and hosted by SSGM, speakers at the workshop included two Provincial Premiers, senior public servants and representatives of civil society; Solomon Islander, Australian and international scholars; and practitioners from the international and Australian development community. The workshop also attracted an audience of around 120 people and was accompanied by a number of 'side-events' including: a documentary screening, a joint book launch, a reception at the Solomon Islands High Commission, a half-day writers' workshop, a roundtable discussion on sub-national issues, a policy dialogue at DFAT, and two academic seminars.

The purpose of the workshop was to use the 'transition' currently taking place in the decade-long Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) as a point of departure for considering other important transitions underway in Solomons and the complex ways in which these inter-relate. These include changes in the economy with the shift from logging to mining, the growth of Honiara, developments at provincial and sub-national levels, and the role of the political elite.

While these and other themes were discussed and debated, a key tension to emerge from the workshop revolves around the question of whether Solomon Islands is experiencing transformational change or merely continuity along existing trajectories and pathways? Two other thematic tensions emerged from the presentations and discussions: comparative experience versus Melanesian/Solomon Islands exceptionalism; and resilience, innovation and tenacity versus collapse, frailty and decline. These three dialectics are outlined below, followed by a brief description of some of the policy-relevant research agendas identified by the workshop.

Change versus continuity

The first substantive presentation, by Dr Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, critiqued the very notion of transition, highlighting, in particular, its connotation of change and 'development' as a linear process. He reminded the workshop that processes of change and development are messy and contested, while their trajectories are shaped by specific social and cultural contexts that defy the teleological tropes of modernisation and demographic transition.

This broad critique of transition was fleshed out further in subsequent presentations and discussion. Tobias Haque, presenting on Solomons' economic prospects, emphasised continuity rather than transition. He argued that the perennial challenges of scale and distance continue to problematize the orthodox prescription of 'good governance' for economic growth. Economic growth in Solomon Islands will continue to come, in his analysis, from natural resource exploitation, agriculture and aid flows. The on-going importance of aid – to fund the public service, which is the main source of formal sector employment, and to address fiscal and capacity gaps – will require both a long-term commitment from donors and a rethinking of the aid delivery paradigm (as a form of 'co-production' as opposed to programmatic aid).

Tobias also pointed to the growing youth bulge in concert with the dearth of formal employment opportunities as highlighting the importance of international labour mobility for Solomons' future growth prospects. He further cautioned that the shift from logging to mining will require careful management and appropriate regulatory responses. Graham Teskey later described this shift as moving from one source of resource rent to another that is more rapacious, more predatory, and likely to produce greater contestation amongst political elites.

Other areas of continuity that were highlighted at the workshop include:

- Terence Woods' description of voting patterns and voting behaviour whereby electoral politics remains overwhelmingly personalised and parochial, with people voting for candidates whom they believe will deliver at the local level
- Continued high rates of population growth and the growing youth bulge
- Comparatively slow but steady rates of urbanisation
- The rise of Constituency Development Funds (CDFs), which can be viewed as consistent with longstanding patterns and practices of patronage politics, and the growing prevalence of corruption

Notwithstanding the broad critique of the transition framing, the workshop identified two emerging phenomena that are potentially far more transformative in nature. These are the growing middle class and the associated rise of social media. The workshop heard from Ben Afuga of Forum Solomon Islands International (FSII), a Facebook pressure group whose membership consists primarily of educated young Solomon Islanders. The advent of new technologies and on-line groups such as FSII is enabling new forms of political activism and the emergence of national-level political discourse, especially in relation to corruption.

Comparative experience versus Melanesian/Solomon Islands distinctiveness

During the final panel, Dr Stephen Ndegwa of the World Bank implored workshop participants to “think more comparatively” and to look at how societies and polities in other parts of the world have dealt with similar issues and challenges to those currently facing Solomon Islands. He pointed to a number of specific cases and parallels:

- Tanzania, where 20 years ago the state was largely absent from the lives of most people, as it currently is in Solomons, and where there are similar challenges associated with geography and colonial legacies. Today the state has “grasp and reach”, which have been achieved through deliberate policy choices and interventions
- Kenya, where 15 years ago CDF’s had similar characteristics to those in Solomon Islands. Today, they have a very different character brought about by a “different configuration of institutional containment”.

By contrast, other voices and perspectives at the workshop emphasised the importance of specificities in time and place. For example, following Dr Kabutaulaka’s critique of linearity in the opening session, Dr David Akin’s presentation on Maasina Rule and the colonial history of Malaita reminded the workshop of the pitfalls of institutional transfer. The system of indirect rule that was transported from India via Africa failed on Malaita because district officers were unable to develop the detailed knowledge of local societies upon which the success of the system was predicated.

The presentation on political settlements by Drs Craig and Porter points to both the strengths and limitations of conceptual frameworks that draw upon comparative experience. On the one hand, the political settlements approach, which foregrounds the role of political and economic power in shaping how institutions (both formal and informal) develop and function, has much to offer our understanding of state formation in Solomon Islands. On the other hand, the framework articulated by Craig and Porter is largely based on the experience of the Southeast Asian ‘leviathans’ whose social, political and economic history – as well as their geography and population size - diverges markedly with that of Solomon Islands and Melanesia in significant ways. This divergence places limits on the utility and applicability of the political settlements concept in Solomon Islands without substantial adaptation to local circumstances. Much the same may be said of the “arrival city” framework that Professor Clive Moore explored in his presentation on the history of Honiara.

Another important dimension of comparative experience concerns cross-learning between countries in the global south and, in particular, the sharing of experience between the post-colonial states of Melanesia, notably between PNG and Solomon Islands. There are striking parallels between PNG and Solomons in policy arenas such as CDFs and decentralisation. Moreover, with the anticipated shift from logging and mining in Solomons, there is much that could be learned from PNG's considerable experience with regulating extractive resource industries. The potential for sub-regional approaches to natural resource governance, especially in relation to seabed mining, was also raised.

Resilience, innovation and tenacity versus decline, collapse and failure

The workshop heard a lot about topics such as corruption, the withdrawal of the state from rural areas, and the politicisation of development funds and service delivery. However, these narratives must be set against some of the positive developments that are occurring at the local level, especially in relation to governance arrangements. Indeed, it is the progressive withdrawal of the state during the post-colonial period that has created the space for these innovations to take place. Moreover, the so-called failure of the state during the conflict of 1998-2003 enabled many of them to flourish, demonstrating the potential for conflict to generate positive social and political change.

Dr Akin's talk reminded us that contemporary governance innovations have important antecedents in the form of political and social movements such as Maasina Rule and that, contrary to colonial accounts, these movements illustrated local capacity for major innovation. Subsequent presentations by Dr Graham Baines, Dr Debra McDougall and Daniel Evans variously pointed to the resilience (noting that Dr McDougall preferred the term tenacity) of communities in the face of change and, in particular, the retreat of the state from rural areas. This is especially apparent in the realm of community-level law and order where locally-specific and contingent configurations of chiefs and churches play a primary role in resolving disputes and keeping the peace.

The Permanent Secretary for Police, National Security and Correctional Services, Edmond Sikua, said that the key policing challenge facing the contemporary Solomon Islands is developing connections and linkages "between the police and the people". He pointed to the Community Officer scheme as a means of working with existing local systems and processes and linking them up to the formal law and justice sector. He also highlighted the need for improvements in the court system, a point that was echoed by former Deputy Chief Magistrate Emma Garo who painted a sobering picture of the state of the Magistrates Court. She noted that the decline of Local Courts means that more minor cases are coming to the Magistrates Court at a time when its capacity is declining. There are currently only seven

Magistrates for the entire country and some remote areas such as Ontong Java and Ulawa have not been visited by a court circuit for five years or more. Like Mr Sikua, she sees scope for greater articulation between the formal and informal justice systems (which could be viewed as another form of co-production).

A policy relevant research agenda

The following research agendas are suggested by the workshop proceedings:

- Investigation of informal governance systems and innovations that appear to be working at the local level and how they can be linked up with formal institutions in order to extend the functional authority of the state.
- Analysis of the nature of informal land dealings and land use arrangements in both rural, peri-urban and urban settings.
- Analysis of the social, political, economic and cultural dynamics at play in the expansion of Honiara.
- Analysis of the political economy dimensions of the shift from logging to mining, including links with wider patterns of agrarian change, and the scope for cross-learning with PNG and for regional approaches to regulating extractive industries.
- Analysis of CDF's, including of the potential for learning from comparative experience (for example from the Kenyan experience).
- Further investigation of Solomon Islanders involvement in international labour migration.
- Further exploration of the political settlements approach to analysing power relations and how power shapes institutions and institutional development in Solomon Islands

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