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Beneath the State: Chiefs of Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands, coping and adapting

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Beneath, but above

That Solomon Islands village communities find their governments to be distant and invisible is not a new observation (Wairiu, et al, 2003, among others). Allen and Dinnen, 2013, have aptly described what happens locally as 'beneath the state'. During the 'tension years' 1998-2003 Solomon Islands national government for an extended period was unable to function but village communities not involved in militia action continued under traditional governance. In terms of both presence and performance the perception of most villagers is that chiefly governance is 'above' the State.

Eight formally constituted District Houses of Chiefs correspond mostly with the distribution of the island's six language groups. The District is the main unit of chiefly authority in Isabel, with less formal groupings such as Area Councils of Chiefs, or Village Councils of Chiefs at lower levels. As explained by White, 2007, the position of Paramount Chief has existed for well over a hundred years while the District Houses of Chiefs have been represented formally at an island level since 1984 – the year the Isabel Council of Chiefs (ICC) was established as an advisory body to the Isabel Provincial Assembly.

The Isabel Council of Chiefs (ICC) guides and coordinates the work of District chiefs. In recent years it has shifted from simply reacting to issues emerging from the Districts to introducing issues and ideas for the Houses of Chiefs to consider. This is now a proactive ICC - to promote 'peace and orderly life', 'unity and solidarity', 'understanding', to 'set down broad policy guidelines for our people and District Houses of Chiefs', to 'mediate in land, social and customary disputes', to 'represent collective views of the Isabel people regarding developmental issues, land and customs', and to 'liaise on matters of interest with Chiefs of other Provinces' (ICC Constitution, 2004).

In Santa Isabel, once governed only by chiefs, they now govern in dialogue with the Church and the Isabel Provincial Government (IPG) through a consultative body known as the Isabel Tripod.

Traditional leaders in Santa Isabel face many challenges

Challenges faced by chiefs include:

- Resolving the question as to 'What is a chief?' and, in particular, determining how best to 'modernise' through 'appointed chiefs' (to contribute knowledge, skills and experience not usually available in the village) without weakening the status of traditional leaders;
- Proposals for mining give rise to an expectation that land group leaders will consider the impacts of their decisions on neighbours and on their region generally before deciding whether to approve access to miners whereas, traditionally, Isabelians defer to the decisions of a land group on how its land is to be used; neighbours do not interfere;
- An inadequate cultural education leading to a poor understanding of genealogy and its meaning for their customary land rights has resulted in increasing numbers of people becoming embroiled in land disputes;
- Though most social transgressions are ably addressed the resolution of adultery cases and household disputes is handled with less success, one possible reason being because so few women chiefs have been recognised (Allen, M., et al, 2013).
- How to overcome resistance to the idea of engaging more women in decisions regarding use of natural resources and in meaningful chiefly roles;
- How to cope with the fact that, as in all societies experiencing globalisation, youth are shifting away from what they see as restrictive and old-fashioned constraints imposed by their elders;
- While a Paramount Chief is accepted as a new 'tradition', a history of several more-or-less equal chiefdoms at the time of first contact with European society means that where chiefs of a District feel their place in history is not reflected in arrangements for chiefly governance this has the potential to be divisive;

- The disquieting recent revelation that only seventeen per cent of Isabelians are 'functionally literate' (ASPBAE and COESI, 2011); and
- How to engage the support of Santa Isabel's three national Members of Parliament.

Santa Isabel chiefs adapting and coping

Chiefs' adaptation to circumstances and challenges faced by Isabelians are made more difficult by their need to cope not only with globalisation but also with the community-undermining impacts of national government policy and practice expressed through the government's eagerness to establish a major nickel mine in the island.

Directly, and through their Tripod partnership with the Church and the Province, chiefs:

- Are compiling written lists of each Districts' penalties and compensation levels with a view to the ICC guiding the development of an Island-wide standard.¹
- Continue with efforts to link with their island's MPs, though with little response as yet;
- Strongly support a Santa Isabel Cultural Heritage programme now underway and have linked with the IPG and the Church to establish a schools-based cultural education programme;
- Have embraced the idea of engaging with qualified and experienced professional Isabelians outside the island who debate Isabel issues online through Facebook and who have formed an Isabel Concern Group (ICG) offering technical advice to the chiefs and other members of the Isabel Tripod;
- Seek the promotion, expansion, and intensification of efforts to improve literacy and numeracy, with chief's efforts focused through cultural education;

- Have initiated action to facilitate linkages with Isabelians of the emerging urban middle class living outside Santa Isabel;
- Now have links through the ICC with an international NGO, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), as a source of advice, information and modest funding;
- Are considering how the eight Houses of Chiefs might assume some of the roles previously handled by the Area Councils that were terminated by national legislation in 1998;
- Are seeking a practical way to approach the difficult problem of rationalising customary land holdings in a way that does not undermine the social and subsistence support role of land; as espoused by Allen, 2008 and Fingleton, 2008; and
- The Paramount Chiefs' role as Facilitator of an Isabel Mining Forum, November 2013, has brought the Isabel community to better appreciate 1. the role that chiefs can play in debating and deciding on large scale resource development; 2. the need for individual landholding groups to consider impacts on their neighbours; and 3. an effective way for some younger Isabelians to engage - through the Isabel Concern Group they have established.

Sub-national governance for Solomon Islands

This brief insight into chiefly efforts to adapt to modernity and to cope with development in Santa Isabel shows that, as elsewhere in Solomon Islands, there is a coherence and capacity 'beneath the state' to adapt and that such experience should inform the continuing debate on decentralisation.

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Author notes

Graham Baines has had a long association with Solomon Islands as Senior Planning Officer, Western Province, 1982-1985, and in various short-term roles with Isabel Province over the period 1985 – 2004 – as well as five years as Environmental Management Adviser with the national government of Solomon Islands. Since he is married into a Santa Isabel family this brings with it certain obligations, now expressed primarily through a role as adviser to the Isabel Council of Chiefs.

End notes

1. Even without standardisation written lists will help Police to better understand the scope and meaning of chiefs' work and to avoid unnecessary duplication of punitive effort. Police in Isabel respect the role of chiefs and do not interfere with chiefs' mediation in social and land disputes.