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Community Governance and Justice in Solomon Islands Part 1: From Community Officer Pilot to CGGM Project

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Part 1 of this three-part In Brief series introduces a seven-year project that successfully supported community-level justice in Solomon Islands from 2015 to 2021. It was called the Community Governance and Grievance Management (CGGM) Project, and it sat at the margins of the far larger Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). In contrast to RAMSI, a Honiara-centric state-building mission, the CGGM project focused on rural areas and rural Solomon Islanders' own desires for local justice. It involved appointing one individual to serve as a Community Officer (CO) in each participating jurisdication, an intervention that resonated strongly with the communities the COs served.

In Part 1, we tell the origin story of the project, which is essential to understanding the project's successes and ongoing challenges, which we take up in Part 2 and Part 3, respectively.

Deep roots

Neither COs nor the challenges they helped to address were new in Solomon Islands. In fact, the historical processes that helped make COs successful entered their hundredth year as we completed our CGGM impact assessment for the Ministry of Provincial Government and Institutional Strengthening.

The Native Administration Regulation of 1922 introduced District Headmen to the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (see Allen et al. 2013). The headmen were indigenous to the area in which they worked and were appointed to report to the expatriate District Officers. They were intermediaries between the people and the administration.

After the Second World War, 'native councils' and 'native courts' were formalised, and these bodies gave Indigenous leaders an official role in governance and dispute resolution at local levels. Between then and independence in 1978, local government gradually developed into 'area councils'.

The independent government formally established the area councils with its Provincial Government Act of 1981. The councils, being the lowest tier of government, had roles in tax collection as well as some policy development and public education. They also employed 'area constables' who assisted local leaders and local courts to enforce court decisions and community by-laws written by the area councils. The constables were important local-level nodes in the state justice system, maintaining relationships with the police and other council areas (Allen et al. 2013:9–10).

As has been well documented, however, the independence period saw both progressive state withdrawal from service delivery to rural areas and a centralisation of power in the national government in Honiara. Provincial governments were one victim of these processes. By the end of the civil conflict in 2003, provincial governments had been reduced to such an extent that provincial bureaucracies were capable of little more than managing the payroll of their direct employees (Cox and Morrison 2004).

Area councils likewise fell afoul of the centralisation of power in Honiara, and they were defunded — i.e. abolished — in 1998 (Allen et al. 2013:9–10). One of the 400 focus group respondents to our CGGM impact assessment described the consequences:

> During the time of area councils, we found it easy to manage disputes because we had different types of chiefs, such as tribal chiefs and clan chiefs, that are based on the community structure. Since we lost the area council, the social problems were increasing in the community, institutions did not work well, leaders did not work together. But through this CO program, community life has started to change, social problems have now cut down, people start to [show] respect in the community and feel ownership of the community.

This man's broad-brush observations of the history of government in his area would surely resonate with older Solomon Islanders across the country. A major World Bank study (Allen et al. 2013) that informed the design of the CGGM project indeed found that the abolition of area councils had had effects on all three of the justice systems in use in rural Solomon Islands: the state, *kastom* (customary law), and church systems.

That World Bank research also found that logging was a significant compounding problem that led to the social problems and leadership breakdown the respondent had described. Although most land in Solomon Islands is customarily owned, the state's role in relation to land and landowners has been to facilitate agreements between communities and logging companies, and even to use police to protect logging operations. In this context, Foukona and Timmer (2016:118) have argued that to rural Solomon Islanders

the state begins to resemble a 'landlord and active capitalist'. Just as the state undermined itself, so too did many customary leaders as power struggles among them over logging revenue degraded their legitimacy. Moreover, logging and substance abuse went hand in hand and were a major contributor to the prevalence of 'social order problems' in rural Solomon Islands (Allen et al. 2013).

The RAMSI period

The immediate origins of the project were a pilot that began in 2009, which was supported by the World Bank's Justice for the Poor program and assisted by RAMSI (Dinnen and Haley 2012). The pilot in Solomon Islands involved placing COs in participating communities, where community members envisaged COs would act as a liaison between local leaders and chiefs and the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.

The evaluation of the pilot found that COs had generally worked well, and thus the CGGM Project aimed to put more COs in more places. The rationale was that it would be impossible to improve any local justice system without working through the government's own systems (World Bank 2017:45). Thus, while the project was supported financially by donors, it was managed from within the national Ministry of Provincial Government and Institutional Strengthening and administered by provincial governments themselves. The first two provinces to participate were Rennell and Bellona (Renbel) and Makira, and after a mid-term review of the project in 2017, COs were installed in Malaita and Central Provinces.

The overall aims did not change throughout the project: COs in participating villages would aim to improve the linkages between citizens and the governance institutions that served them (whether religious, customary or state), as well as to improve the links between the governance systems themselves. In the project's language, these links were called either 'horizontal' or 'vertical', with horizontal concerning the links between justice institutions on the ground and vertical referring to institutions of different scales of the government system, specifically the police and provincial government. Yet there were clearly strong resemblances with the area constables of the past, as the evaluation of the original pilot (Dinnen and Haley 2012) and Justice Delivered Locally (Allen et al. 2013) had also found.

Ultimately, by improving linkages between different justice actors operating at different scales, it was expected that there would be fewer conflicts to resolve and that communities would be better able to manage them when they arose.

Enthusiastic reception

The first marker of the project's success was that by and large the COs had found a niche for themselves among the three different justice systems of their local jurisdiction. The impact assessment team had access to COs' logbook records from January 2018 to January 2021, which showed that the COs had recorded on average one vertical or horizontal activity per day over this period.

Importantly, citizens also reported that disputes were less frequent than they had been before the project started. For example, when survey respondents were asked about the prevalence of disputes related to drugs and alcohol, the most frequent response was that they occurred less often (43% in Renbel, 48% in Makira, 65% in Central, 58% in Malaita). And, in each province, there were no statistically significant differences between men and women on chi-squared tests within the cohorts that said that these disputes were less frequent. What the COs did when a dispute was brought to them varied widely, and as we discuss in Part 2 of this In Brief series, this was one of the hallmarks of the CGGM project's success.

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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