

'Governance at the Grassroots'

Workshop on participation beyond the centre in Solomon Islands

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Australian National University

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Contents

I.	Introduction	3
	Themes	4
	Developing Governance at the Grassroots – Key Issues	5
II.	Workshop Report	6
	Governance	6
	Civil Society	10
	Youth and Gender	12
	Communication	14
III.	Small Group Discussion Reports	16
IV.	List of Participants	23
V.	Workshop Program	24

I INTRODUCTION

The Solomon Islands 'Governance at the Grassroots' workshop was held on the 15th and 16th of April 2002 at University House, Australian National University. Participants included nine Solomon Islanders, the majority of whom are currently living and working in rural areas, AusAID officials and advisers, representatives from DFAT, New Zealand's MFAT, and the Fellows and Associates from the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) project of the Australian National University.¹

The key objective of the workshop was to provide new insights and impressions for policy makers working on the Solomon Islands. To do this we selected as principal discussants a small representative group of Solomon Islanders who are currently working at the 'grassroots' in Solomons in various capacities.

The workshop was organised around four themes:

1. Governance at the provincial and local levels
2. Civil society
3. Youth and gender
4. Communication in society

The objective of each session is documented in the attached workshop program.

Ms Annmaree O'Keeffe, Deputy Director General of AusAID, opened the workshop. Ms O'Keeffe welcomed the participants and noted in her introductory remarks that the workshop was being held in the context of the most serious crisis in Solomon Islands' post-independence history. In responding to the present needs of the Solomon Islands, Ms O'Keeffe encouraged the AusAID members of the workshop to 'seek signals, help and advice' from the Solomon Islanders who were present.

The Workshop provided an opportunity to hear from Solomon Islanders of various backgrounds - none of whom hold a high public profile - on some of the structures, issues and dynamics at the provincial and local level in contemporary Solomon Islands. It was a productive exercise yielding much information and many views around the topics of governance, civil society, youth, gender and communications.

Beyond that the dialogue revealed some of the deeper concerns and attitudes of this small group of Solomon Islanders about the functioning and legitimacy of the Solomon Island state and, indeed, about the future of their 'nation'. The social and economic consequences of the current crisis in Solomon Islands formed the backdrop to much of the workshop discussion. The discussion threw up direct and indirect questions for policy-makers and practitioners engaged in development assistance, as well as for all those interested in assisting Solomon Islands redress its current problems of polity and economy.

¹ The workshop was organised by the *State, Society & Governance in Melanesia Project* of the Australian National University with the financial support of the Australian Agency for International Development, AusAID.

Themes

Some important themes to emerge included:

- the complexity of the social and political order at the local level and the significant variations across the country in authority structures, cultural practices, gender relations, and societal cohesion or fractiousness, all of which have implications for the way Solomon Islanders conduct their politics and relate to institutions and governments
- the continuing crisis in traditional leadership, manifested differently in different provinces, that will continue to inhibit effective and speedy mediation of conflict
- disenchantment with the representative system of government in its present form and a sense of dismay (if not anger) at the disconnection between the resource owners and the dividends reaped by exploiters and middlemen
- confusion over what constitutes civil society – seen by many to be synonymous with a *particular* organization, SICA – and a lack of comprehension of broader conceptions and roles of that important element of a modern democratic state (although there is a degree of comfort with the indigenous but limited version of civil society built around church associations and – as the participants preferred – ‘community-based organizations’)
- a cautionary message *not* to import abstract notions such as ‘civil society’, which may entail a search for entities that fit the label in disregard of local phenomena, in particular, the low level of social aggregation. (Similar caution applies to transplanting concepts of good governance from other social environments to Solomons without adequate consideration of local conditions)
- strong sentiment for autonomy and some form of federalism – seen as both a more culturally appropriate political unit allowing for decisions to be made closer to the populace and as a panacea for poor governance at the national level
- a concomitant lack of confidence in Honiara’s ability to rule and administer the country and a general loss of legitimacy of the state and its leaders
- the recognised need to transform relationships in the post-conflict period rather than ‘reconcile’ differences or to ‘return to normalcy’
- the increasingly apparent problem of youth alienation – both urban and rural – and the militarisation of youth particularly in Malaita and Guadalcanal. Youth need better prospects: many are not content with subsistence living, but on the other hand, most have few prospects for employment in the tiny formal sector
- recognition of the potentially enormous role for women in politics, development and as peace-makers – yet their impact constrained by poor coordination and checked by cultural norms of silence
- the clear need for an enhanced and authentic information flow and associated diminution of the ‘culture of silence’ or ‘climate of fear’ which inhibits informed commentary, debate, criticism of policies and reporting of political and criminal behaviour
- the lack of knowledge on the part of the overwhelming majority of people of what is happening in any part of their country other than their own immediate

local environment – and the need to deal with this information gap, by means of civic education and nation-building strategies, before wider governance can be representative and accountable.

Developing governance at the grassroots – Key issues

While not specifically addressed during the workshop a number of suggestions were made and ideas raised during discussions about the roles of donors and others engaged in grassroots governance development. These included:

- the continuing need to support the development of civil society and its social capital building role, despite the conceptual difficulties experienced so far
- in approaching development support and activity at the local level, donors and others need to be careful not to load too much on to local level organisations, given the informal and arguably embryonic state of civil society
- a ‘middle-down’ approach might be more appropriate in Solomon Islands than a ‘bottom-up’ approach, building upon the existing capacities of churches and provincial governments
- greater emphasis should be placed on networked communications (as opposed to centre-to-periphery communications) - these are particularly important in the Solomon Islands in terms of public accountability and developing the knowledge base necessary for a more representative type of government
- the need for an enhanced, reliable information flow about events and issues happening in the centre of country
- civic education strategies are required for nation building - to enable greater participation and understanding of structures and policies of governance, rights, obligations, opportunities for employment and economic enterprise
- disarmament and reintegration of militants and programs for youth development (including support for the system of Rural Training Centres) should be an immediate priority
- strategies to build on youth groups’ – both female and male - continuing interest in rural and traditional skills through training programs, including the use of role models and success stories
- programs for income generating activities for women and youth should be encouraged but care must be taken re the availability of markets
- identification of and support for women's organisations that promote greater participation in decision making and governance
- careful implementation of a decentralised or state system of government ensuring linkages between various levels are developed and the capacities of various levels are adequate to deliver services and administer effectively
- attention be paid to bringing village-level leaders and/or representative committees or councils into governance, but adapted in the light of cultural variations between provinces
- frameworks and mechanisms to ensure *representative* government is actually practiced to help overcome widespread scepticism at the grassroots that

government as currently practiced is not a useful deliverer of services but a system rorted by opportunists

- care must be exercised in activity location, delivery and in identifying and involving all stakeholders (not relying on middlemen/assumed spokespeople)
- given that most development agencies generally experience Solomons from the centre while most Solomon Islanders know little about the centre and have different interests from the elites living there, there is a need to overcome this large communication and comprehension gap and obtain a nation-wide sense of the issues of governance by devoting considerable effort to 'reaching' the grassroots
- development consultants need to be much more familiar with the local socio-political context in which they are operating and exercise prudence in their selection of local consulting partners
- to enhance the effectiveness of program delivery at local levels and to deepen the knowledge and information about the kinds of issues covered in the workshop a policy-oriented social mapping project on governance and participation beyond the centre would add considerable value to development activities.

II WORKSHOP REPORT

The report is presented in two sections: a discussion of issues raised and analysed in each of the four sessions, followed by a distilled version of the reports to plenary of all working groups containing points and problems raised and suggestions for addressing them. The workshop was intended to open new issues to discussion rather than address them conclusively. In addition, the workshop presented a range of views. The report does not attempt to synthesize these views or add substantively to the discussion, but rather to present a brief record of main points raised.

SESSION ONE - GOVERNANCE

Key points on Governance

- chiefs are an institution in only some parts of the country, a big-man system is in place in other provinces, while in others the leadership system is a mix of the two
- councils of chiefs operate in some, but not all, parts of the country. Their work is often stated as dispute resolution, hence using chiefly councils as a method of local governance may not be appropriate in all areas of the country
- where chiefs exist, their authority is often challenged, sometimes severely, as is currently the case in Guadalcanal
- decision-making arrangements within villages vary widely: in some villages, special 'community leaders' are voted in by the villagers to lead implementation of village decisions
- there are only two tiers of government covering rural areas - the national and provincial levels: the third tier, local area councils, was discontinued in 1997

- clear linkages between provincial level and local, village-based governance are now lacking
- problems with the management of discretionary funds given to national and provincial members of government are widespread
- cynicism about national level politicians is widely prevalent
- expectations of the proposed system of state government are high
- motivations for state government are different in different provinces - and include a desire to prevent or control internal migration and to capture control over provincial resources
- models of representation proposed for state government differ from province to province - some provide for only minor local-level participation
- Solomon Islanders' ideas on appropriate and desirable political systems are in a state of flux, at all levels of governance, including on what constituted 'traditional' forms of governance and authority.

Chiefs and councils of chiefs

An example of a well-functioning Council of Chiefs exists on Kolombangara Island, Western Province. In Kolombangara custom, there are two types of chief. One 'looks after the land', and the other 'looks after the tribe'. The land chief is present in making decisions about common land property (e.g. whether to log or not), and is supposed to make those decisions in consultation with other 'primary rights holders' who have a stake in the land by fact of their descent. The tribe chief is supposed to look after affairs within the village community, e.g. solving disputes, allocating gardening areas and so on. The Kolombangara Council of Chiefs is made up of both types of chief. This Council is meant to meet on issues affecting Kolombangara Island as a whole. In parts of the island there are also chief's councils which are a subset of the KCC, and look after affairs of two or three villages which have common descent ties. In another part of the island there is the 'North Kolombangara land council' which is a band of people whose common interest is that they live on Temporary Occupation Licences, not tribal land, and they do not participate in the chief's council organisation.

Also on Kolombangara are 'Community Leaders' established within individual villages. They are chosen at a village meeting, often annually. Their role is to organise community work (e.g. maintain the water supply, clean up the village for malaria prevention etc.). A now-defunct system of Village Organisers has also existed since British days. They were to do things like collect store licence fees for the Province.

While the Kolombangara example of a council of chiefs is a good, well organised version (albeit with internal problems including a questioning of its legitimacy by political factions stemming from past land disputes on the island), there are other long-standing examples in the Shortland Islands and Isabel. On Isabel there is a paramount chief, as also in other places like Vella Lavella and Roviana. Isabel's Council of Chiefs is there mainly to solve local disputes. Work on it, as in Kolombangara is done on a voluntary basis, and the chief's councils in both places

are unfunded. This sits with their predominantly 'senatorial' role rather than as service providers.

These chiefs' councils and paramount chiefs are actually post-independence creations, although they are presented as 'customary' with roots back in the pre-independence past. The examples above are all from the western Solomons. In the eastern parts of the country the situation is quite different. In Malaita for example, a 'big man' system operates, with competitive leaders using wealth redistribution, oratory and political alliances to gain and remain in power. There have evidently been few successful attempts on Malaita to establish a system of chiefs, and they are regarded by many there as never having been part of the culture. At least one exception however is Kwara'ae House of Chiefs. The Polynesian populations such as that of the Polynesian Outliers and Rennell-Bellona Province have yet another idea of 'chiefs'. Whereas in the Western Solomons the chief system is evidently tempered by a sort of 'big man' system, the Bellonese present their system as a truly hereditary system of chiefs with powers of authority and respect that are not attained in the Western Solomons.

We saw also that on Guadalcanal, whatever authority chiefs may have had in the past, it is rapidly being nullified by the great division opening between elder men who are selling off their land to outsiders for cash, and the young people who have been militantly insistent on keeping it. In Shortland Islands too, which apparently established the first of the post-independence chief's councils, the autocratic behaviour of the chiefs there effectively undermined their authority, with younger people openly challenging the chiefs and resorting to other modes of authority.

Across those parts of Melanesian Solomons (i.e. that part which is not Polynesian) that have chiefs, their authority is diffused to an extent by the other institutions of church and provincial government (and prior to 1997, the area councils). As in Shortlands and Guadalcanal, challenges can be made to chiefly authority by favouring church leaders or voting non-chief councillors. Apparently in Rennell-Bellona, the chiefly system is strongly coordinated with the church and government structures, so that leaders of the latter two are all chosen from 'chiefly lines' rather than in challenge to them.

Provincial Governments

The Provincial Governments are made up of ward representatives. For a typical example, Guadalcanal is split into 22 wards with an average population in each of about 2700 people. In provinces like Rennell-Bellona and Western, the population per ward is much less. The ward representatives are supposed to be the link between the local level and the province. This is so to a degree varying in each case. Prior to 1997 there was a system of area councils, one per National Parliamentary constituency, and each of these had a number of elected councillors. The area councils made decisions on minor infrastructure projects and, at that time, logging proposals. Since 1997, after the central government disbanded the area councils, the ward member has (at least in the case of Western Province if not generally) been given control of a ward development fund and a member's discretionary fund. Since the member alone decides on the use to which these are put without effective accountability, money seems to have been mis-allocated in some cases.

National Government

The local Members of Parliament (there are 50 of them in Solomons) also get a generous discretionary fund, the Constituency Development Fund. It has not operated since the June 2000 coup because of lack of funding. While it was operating there was no formal requirement for accountability.

The National Government budgeted each Province a Provincial Development Grant, as well as the Service Grants, which are funds to cover the ongoing costs of existing services. Through these the National Government funded infrastructure and other new developments, in addition to a budget for the running costs of schools, hospitals, agricultural and water supply offices etc. The coup and subsequent events have apparently disrupted both sets of funding. National Government, rather than the Provincial Governments, also acts as the intermediary for foreign aid agencies wanting to do work in the provinces. Bilateral aid is channeled through the National ministries, and planning the use of program funds for the provinces is generally done in Honiara.

Grassroots perceptions of Parliamentary Members are perhaps slightly cynical. In an example given, one controversial but recently re-elected member was described as 'lucky' by villagers in his constituency, the implication being that he had no particular skills over and above any other man, and that he would be able to 'reap the harvest' of the opportunities that being an MP had to offer. In another comment, leaders (particularly national-level) were described as 'greedy' and that they would take what they could while in office because once they leave politics they have poor prospects. There were a number of comments to the effect that National parliamentarians had interests in conflict with provincial and local-level interests. These included signing logging agreements over the heads of local people, and not fighting for resources to be kept primarily for provincial rather than national benefit.

The proposed State Government system now under consideration is expected by local people to change much of what is wrong with the present system of routing all resources through Honiara. Different provinces have different issues with the present system. The Western Province is resource-rich but complains that the National Government takes a large cut of exported resources (via duties) but returns paltry amounts for provincial development. The relatively resource-poor and remote

provinces like Temotu and Rennell-Bellona complain of being forgotten by the central government and question whether there is any benefit at all in belonging to the nation. At the moment each province has drafted its own proposals for state governance. These plans vary quite widely from, for example, Isabel which has provision for local-level group representation (women's, youth and church groups) and the Western State model which has a large centralised executive structure with no local-level representation other than a state-wide chief's council to deal with land disputes.

SESSION TWO - CIVIL SOCIETY

Key points on civil society

- most Solomon Islanders think civil society refers to one particular organization in Honiara that labels itself 'Civil Society'
- the level of articulation of civil society found in some countries (the 'weak state, strong society' idea) does not exist in Solomon Islands
- churches seem to be the only community level organisations that have wide organisational networks
- villagers living in different parts of the country are generally isolated from each other except during some church activities
- different religious denominations have different ideological commitments which is reflected in a variety of practical commitments (for example, villagers' labour) to development projects
- each denomination is found only in some parts of the country, and not in others - the missions having acquired 'territories' over time
- churches are responsible for most educational facilities and a good number of health facilities
- some of the current state government proposals include participation by civil society (i.e. community groups), others do not
- if aid funds are known to be in the offing, village 'community' groups that did not exist previously can be formed opportunistically to obtain access to such funds.

Perceptions of Civil Society

There are at least two different ideas of what civil society means in the Solomon Islands. While in Australia the usual understanding of 'civil society' has become widespread since the early 1990's and means something like 'every socially active grouping beyond the state', and in development discourse means something like a 'middle tier' of society, just below the state and incorporating non-government development and social organisations.

In Solomon Islands, the first most people heard of 'civil society' was a specific group emerging during the 2000 coup from the SICA Peace Office in Honiara, which called

itself 'Civil Society'. In the Solomons context it has been very difficult to separate the two different ideas of civil society, and indeed this was so during the workshop. The concept in Solomons has become firmly associated with the one or two groups who name themselves 'Civil Society', and it seems impossible to refer to the general concept without people thinking it involves particular individuals working in offices in Honiara and lately, Gizo. The utility of the concept as it has been employed in Australia or in development discourse generally is severely mired in this confusion in the Solomons, to the point that it is barely worth the trouble of mentioning. In one of the workshop's small group discussions, the term 'community groups' was adopted instead, in order to move the discussion forward.

Church groups predominant

Active groups at the community level are, with the exception of sporting teams, almost always associated with the church. The various churches - the predominant ones of which are the SSEC, Anglican, United, Seventh-day Adventist and Roman Catholic - have each their own women's and youth groups in addition to the church offices which are normally, if not always, filled by men. Well-known women's groups are the Anglican Mother's Union, the Seventh-day's Dorcas Ladies Society and the United Church Women's Union.

Each denomination has different priorities and outlooks expressed via these groups. SDA (Seventh-day Adventist) organisations will not involve in what they regard as 'politics', especially anything that questions authority, because of church dictums. They also will not readily associate with non-SDA organisations, also because of church teachings. Across the denominations, many of the church women's groups are deeply conservative, favouring 'family values' and charity roles. This is a carry-over from the old-style missionary background of these organisations. Nevertheless, a village church women's group will often operate a bank account, have elected office-bearers, and will participate in occasional gatherings of the whole organisation or a chapter of it. They may be engaged in local charity work, and more visibly will sometimes run prayer fellowships and choral groups.

The churches are responsible for most of the education in Solomon Islands at least to year six. The schools are often small village-based schools with combined classes, servicing the surrounding one to three kilometres. There are about 80 of these in the Western Province (which has a population of 63,000 people). Teachers are trained by the government but once teaching are paid via school fees administered by the mission headquarters. Some missions run clinics and even hospitals, but mission health facilities are not densely distributed. A certain amount of coordination occurs between provincially-based education and health authorities and the mission operations.

For many people the church is the only regular source of news and ideas from the wider world. Churches may discuss their own mission projects in other parts of the world, or use 'Sunday School' materials which discuss wide-ranging topics.

Unions and other groups

Trade unions operate among wage workers, typically town-based public servants, rural teachers and rural plantation or forestry workers may be union members. Trade unions have no reach into villages.

There was an initiative by the NGO Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) a few years ago to create a network of rural outreach trainers, but it was Honiara-based and eventually became inactive.

Sporting clubs are very common in villages. A larger village may have a soccer and a netball team. Smaller villages will band together to form their teams. Regular sporting events are held where the teams compete, at anything from local district level to provincial competitions. Players are usually young. Usually teams have to find their own money for transport expenses and competition entry fees (a matter of SBD \$100-200 or so). The sporting teams therefore often have to think up fund-raising ideas to get the money. A usual idea is to work as a team at some sort of labour, e.g. clear a garden for someone in the village.

Scouts and Guides groups operate in Honiara, but have only a few hundred members each, and virtually no village reach.

SESSION THREE - Youth and Gender

Key points on youth and gender

- identity issues are particularly important for youth, and particularly for those in urban settings
- youth are unable to effectively articulate their concerns within the wider community due to lack of acceptance in existing political arenas
- educational opportunities are too few and often inappropriate.
- in some places such as Guadalcanal there is a wide generation gap that has fuelled misunderstanding and militancy
- women are excluded from public decision making in many parts of the country
- women's roles are regarded as largely domestic, while young women are regarded as the lowest members of society
- many think women would generally be better managers of community resources than men due to 'cooperative' and not 'competitive' gender outlook, but are rarely given the chance
- women have played a key part in peace-building activities and have considerable potential in this context
- many of the churches have existing organisations for women and youth which actively provide opportunities for self-management and participation in decision making, but have little wider clout
- the churches host the only women's groups that network across large areas
- sporting associations have large youth participation
- the prospects for improvement in conditions for youth and women are strongly linked to general levels of prosperity at the community level.

Youth

Youth development work was re-invigorated by the Commonwealth Youth Program with dedicated funding in about 1997-98. Most youth programs are with the churches. Scouts and Guides have been dormant for about 17 years, until the government recently wanted to establish youth networks. Generally youth are not a party to decision making, even where it affects them. Youth are not satisfactorily acknowledged for their contribution. Last year the youth networks met, and came up with a youth peace plan and a youth taskforce to contribute to the peace process.

There is an attitude that youth themselves are a problem, but another way to see it is that (1) youth face a lot of problems and (2) their potential to be a 'solution' is not recognised. They have nothing to do economically speaking. Culturally they are isolated, because the traditional culture does not span their interests, and much of what they do is not valued within the local communities. They also have little access to money or services. Many are undereducated, having been forced out of school under the savage culling that occurs with the 'Hicks Test' and other selective school examinations. Undereducated, they are also unable to articulate their own concerns in an effective way.

It is important to look for ways to appeal to youth at different levels, because attempting top-down solutions from Honiara without a commitment to local-level program activity may not always provide good outcomes. Initiatives have to be started within the rural areas themselves, and take account of existing communities and social divisions.

Women

A prevalent way of representing women in the Solomon Islands woman is as a child bearer; humble, patient, responsible and caring - the centre of the home. Daughters are regarded as household labour. These representations are quite different from the way women can be seen as a powerful influence, even more influential than higher official influence, with a lot of respect for their involvement. Yet it is true that in Malaita at least, women are not a part of village decision making, and do not speak out in these contexts.

Just prior to the ethnic tension a National Women's Policy Committee report was to be finalised, but the tension intervened and the initiative has since lapsed. Since the tension, the Ecumenical Women for Peace group has been established on Malaita, inspired by the Women for Peace group in Honiara.

Church women's groups are the only ones in which women network across provinces. Women's coordinators in the provinces are appointed by government, but to be effective it was argued they need to coordinate more with the church women's groups. The government does not currently fund the provincial women's officers.

Women's non-participation in formal politics and public decision making was explained as a function of cultural inhibitions and lack of government encouragement. Although non-participation may be a general perception, it is worth noting that there have been a number of initiatives to include women in politics since

the 1980's. These have included the Women's Initiative Group in Western Province (started in the late 1980's and now defunct), the Solomon Islands Council of Women and more recently the Women for Peace Group. Additionally, women do have a right to vote in elections, and some are employed in professional positions within the national and provincial governments. These are all things that can be built upon.

There is a ground-swell of concern with the status of women and youth. There have been many women's and youth initiatives in many places, but they each have had a short life, attributed to the way that the country as a whole is not strong on structure. Frameworks for participation will need to be continually re-vitalised because of this problem of short-term life of structures.

SESSION FOUR - COMMUNICATION

Key points on communications

- a 'culture of silence', often reinforced by intimidation, exists in which people are expected not to publicly criticise political leaders: this stifles effective debate
- political intimidation is set to continue while guns and lawlessness prevail
- competitive people will try at every opportunity to prevent messages contrary to their interests from reaching their destination undistorted
- the low level of social articulation between local people from one part of the country to those in the next means little 'horizontal' communication occurs
- wide linguistic variation and generally low literacy rates throughout Solomon Islands militates against mass communication
- mass media has poor penetration in rural areas - newspapers are not available and money to buy batteries for transistor radios is often unavailable.
- low levels of education lead to low levels of comprehension of political processes and issues
- formal communication between local people and government is patchy and bottom-up communications are not nurtured
- national political leaders once elected are often inaccessible to their constituents because they live in Honiara or have a 'high-and-mighty' attitude
- political consultations and technical extension programs are rarely conducted in rural areas - national government rarely reaches out to rural areas.

The Solomon Islands is linguistically diverse, with around 80 different languages spoken across the country. Only about 5% of people can be considered well-educated (completion of year 11 or above), with the other 95% having had little or no schooling at all. While missions have a long-term commitment to basic literacy (principally so that people can read the bible), the results are variable across the country. Some provinces have literacy rates as low as 30%. Even in those provinces where literacy is up around 80%, it is one thing to know how to read, and another to comprehend the

information. There is a sense in rural areas that many people lack even the basic ideas and background knowledge that is taken for granted by the educated.

Mass media in Solomons is restricted to the radio and newspapers. The only radio to reach rural audiences is the SIBC broadcasts. During the workshop there was a claim that in recent times the SIBC is no longer an independent source of information, but rather is manipulated by the government. In any case, only a minority of people own transistor radios [or have the money for new batteries]. The newspapers are only distributed in town, and do not penetrate rural areas. Even if they did, only the educated can really comprehend them. One of the NGO's publishes simple-English and pictorial messages (*Link* magazine) but this has poor rural distribution. Rural clinics use posters with pictorial health messages. Religious literature and images have the widest distribution of all.

Inter-province local-level communication occurs by visits and face-to-face meeting, at an event (e.g. marriage, funeral, at market, or stopover while en-route to somewhere else), the passing of a message through a trusted messenger (e.g. someone who just happens to be going to that village anyway), or by use of shortwave two-way radio. Relatives coming from Honiara bring news. One form of communication is 'coconut news' so-called, the engine of rumour and gossip through which stories are relayed true, false or twisted.

Communication by rural people with provincial government formally occurs either through the ward representative or through community leaders in contact with the Provincial Secretary. The provinces also have area clerks based in sub-centres. These too can be the basis of communication between local and provincial levels. The national government reaches the provinces too via the Provincial Secretary or the Premier. Where it goes from there is a topic for more inquiry.

Governments rarely use rural consultation processes, although it was done with the Provincial Government Review in 1999, and has been done since by bodies like the Peace Monitoring Council (largely in Malaita and Guadalcanal) and the various state government movements in the provinces. The process is to call a meeting in one village chosen to cover each wider area, having first sent out notice using the 'Service Messages' session on SIBC radio. People then make their way from their own villages to attend the meeting.

Extension work, like that done by agricultural officers under British rule, has virtually ceased. An attempt to revive the system was made by SIDT using local people brought to Honiara for training, then returned to their local areas to spread messages (e.g. about malaria prevention etc). SIDT has been using theatre groups who tour rural areas presenting plays about various issues (e.g. logging, family violence, health messages etc). Malaria programs, when they have funds, send teams out with bednets and net-dip pesticides, at the same time holding malaria education meetings in each village visited. Village pastors routinely send moral messages, and depending on religion may attempt practical community-building based on those messages.

In conflict situations often use is made of a respected neutral third party to mediate. Warring factions during the civil conflict on Guadalcanal made use of the Melanesian

Brothers in this way. In villages disputes may be mediated by a chief or another senior figure who takes on the mediation role.

Two factors were identified as to why communication gaps exist between the grassroots and the two levels of government. One is lack of knowledge of the process by which to get a message to government. Another is the 'culture of silence' by which it is expected that nobody will openly criticise a leader (unless they are making a big-man type challenge). Noted too was the common experience that National Parliamentary representatives only come to the grassroots to listen and discuss during election campaigning, but seemingly never once they are elected.

III SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION REPORTS

The reports below are based on the comments brought to the plenary session by a spokesperson for each small group.

PROVINCIAL AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Group One

1. There is a lack of clear linkages between the provincial level of government and local, village-based governance. Although in theory each ward has a provincial representative, in practice this is not a strong link. [Local Area Councils, which were based on the wards and had a number of councillors, were discontinued in 1996-97].
2. Chiefs and chief's councils as a method of local level governance may not be appropriate in all provinces, because as in Malaita a 'big-man' rather than 'chief' system operates. [And even in those provinces that recognise chiefs and have had experience of 'chief's councils', there have been questions raised as to the appropriateness of non-elected representatives having decision-making powers]
3. The lack of coordination between levels of government, along with entities like councils of chiefs and sometimes local area 'governing' associations raises the criticism that there are too many systems of governance operating in any one place.
4. The local level of governance is clearly seen when looking at decisions made over natural resources, because over most of the country these resources are held on customary land, and it is local 'landowners' or landowning groups who make the decisions on how to use or exploit the resources (although in many cases with behind-the-scenes influence from Honiara politicians or senior officials acting in their own personal interest).
5. The levels of governance are tied to concepts of identity. Recently the state government movement has been dynamically linked to provincially-based ethnic identity and conflict. In other circumstances, tensions between kinship groups can arise *within* a province (e.g. animosities between the major Malaitan regions), which is associated with the local level 'customary' governance systems. Nation-building, which centres on a national government and national identity appears now to be a failed project of the 1970's independence movement.

Group Two

1. Good governance can remove opportunities for corruption
2. Would the role of local government or grassroots councils be to influence forward planning at the village and provincial level?
 - * social safety
 - * utilising wisdom and experience
3. Awareness and communication

Group Three

1. Linkages between Members of Parliament and Councils of Chiefs seem important at election time but are weak at any other time.
2. Will a federal state government system really act to improve services?
3. The federal system is supported by many people because it offers the following promises:
 - * stop mobility/migration [a problem where people from other provinces squat on or buy with cash untended land and create enclaves which disregard sensitivity to the local culture. This has become a problem with high emotional charge].
 - * Stop the one-way exploitation of provincial resources [an issue for Western Province, or stop the problem of being forgotten when it comes to national development [an issue for RenBel and Temotu Provinces]: a state could keep and make better use of its own resources to improve services.
 - * If provinces or states are responsible for their own economic balance between resources and services, they would have better incentives for sustainable or sensible resource use.
4. How can we stop the exploitation or ripping-off of community resources?
 - * transparency of deals?
 - * accountability of chiefs?
5. Chiefs and community leaders need to work together to keep each other honest [if a process is entrusted to a single leader, problems of temptation can occur]. Don't deal with just one person. Groups, not individuals, are the best unit to deal with in order to reduce 'ripping-off'. Groups are more likely to keep each other in check, while individuals left on their own can capture a process to their exclusive benefit.
6. State versus Traditional system?
 - * systems are continually evolving
 - * there is great diversity [of ways parts of traditional systems can be used], e.g. a 'senate' of chiefs, a chief's lands tribunal.
7. Community values
 - * children taught 'rules' in meetings
 - * community interests are the most important. This set of values conflicts with the modern way of individualism.
 - * corrupt leaders hide behind the 'Melanesian Way' [i.e. they are able to deflect international criticism of corruption, mismanagement etc. by resorting to accusations that the critics are being 'neo-colonialist' and do not understand the 'Melanesian Way']
8. The different provinces have very different attitudes, especially in regard to women and gender.

Group Four

[Group four focussed on the topic of decentralisation]

1. Need to inform awareness about government's rights and responsibilities
2. Need to improve management capacity at all levels including community level
3. Accountability of leaders will need attention if decentralise, to avoid the 'decentralisation of corruption'
4. There will need to be transparency of process in the delivery of services and management of resources
5. The process of decentralisation should not be rushed through

CIVIL SOCIETY

Group One

1. Identify existing community groups, what they do and what is their potential
2. Do a needs assessment for identified groups
3. Capacity building, partnerships, linkages and learning
4. Partnerships between community groups and government agencies
5. Local level planning and problem solving
 - * Taking account of existing resources
 - * Building self-reliance

[Note: group one used the term 'community groups' instead of 'civil society' due to the confusion surrounding the latter term in Solomon Islands]

Group Two

1. A need for educating people on the roles, functions and objectives of the society and various organisations.
2. One of the problems with using the term 'civil society' is there is no vernacular word or understanding to describe 'civil society'. In Fijian *soqosoqo* (pron. songgo-songgo) is such a word.
3. Need for understanding of local cultures and their views. Possibility of transforming cultures and customs by making yourself heard.
 - * encouraging people to speak out on what is wrong
 - * facing reality of the truth
 - * peaceful means of allowing people in the rural areas to know the corruption, e.g. compensation, that is going on
4. Need for rebuilding transforming relationship rather than 'reconciliation'.

Group Three

[Group three concentrated on 'village-life type civil society' rather than the Honiara-based organisation that has called itself Civil Society]

1. Civil society is highly informal. Apart from church groups and the grouping of people into villages there are almost no readily identifiable groups or organisations in rural areas.
2. Where close study reveals networks that could be seen as of a 'civil society' type, they are in many cases restricted in scope both geographically (don't extend over a wide area as a coordinated entity, indeed often restricted to one village or a small group of villages) and socially (e.g. membership depends on age, gender, religion or kinship affiliation, and/or people in 'secondary' categories - not of the right gender etc. - have little say in decisions).

3. There is a lack of mechanisms to effect things beyond the village
4. Cross-province or wide-region coordinating bodies are almost exclusively the churches
5. There is a problem in identifying 'real' groups in rural areas [as opposed to opportunistic groups formed up for the purpose of receiving aid money] when attempting resource allocation or assistance from a remote central office.

Group Four

1. Role of civil society in development of national identity?
 - * 'Re-centralising through decentralisation' – state empowerment can lead to national.
2. Model for state government developed by Isabel Province last year:
 - * elected assembly of community representatives
 - * appointed house of representatives from other groups (women, chiefs, youth, business, etc)
 - * equal power
 - * civil society integrated into government

YOUTH AND GENDER

Group One

1. Assist development of women and youth.
 - * Need to educate men,
 - * Need to educate elders,
 - * use church networks.
2. Difference of gender roles in urban and rural areas.
3. Provincial Government to seriously consider assisting women and youth in areas of development
4. Loss of identity for urban youth.

Group Two

1. Income generation – Women – Savings (school fees) – youth opportunities and structures.
2. Training, literacy and numeracy, has to have practical use and be relevant.
3. Learning, teaching one another. Learning of attitudes, values, culture and role models.
4. Entry points for assistance by a bottom-up approach.
5. Women have special skills. Education, awareness raising for men.
 - * Need of [men's?] support and participation,
 - * communication and networking

Group Three

1. There is already a range of youth groups in J.D.'s area [Kakabona area on Guadalcanal]. This points to scope for change.
2. Ex-militants need counselling.
3. The best role models for change among ex-militants are probably the former leaders of militant groups.
4. Youth are still interested in rural and traditional skills, but for these to develop practically there is a need for links to markets.

5. The family [which could be loosely defined as an 'extended nuclear family' in this context] is the unit that is best able to involve young people in income-generating activities at the village level. This is instead of 'community-based' income-generating projects, which tend to fail. Prosperous families have a lot of work for their young people.

Group Four

1. Youth and gender issues have to be seen in the broader context of nation-building. Youth and women have specific key roles in this.
2. Education is vital for youth. One idea is to refresh and strengthen the Rural Training Centres, with inclusion of civics education in their curricula, and give them means for broader out-reach.
3. Opportunities for more skilled labour already exist
4. Need to work with resources available when increasing income generation opportunities
 - * build on success stories
 - * take account of markets
5. Information and communication are essential

COMMUNICATION

Group One

1. Education is very important. Even if grassroots people have access to information, what does the information mean? An example was the 'tax remissions' issue of 2001 [when the Sogavare Govt extended import duty remissions and remissions on log export duties to many favoured business associates, resulting in the loss of millions of dollars to Treasury]. Grassroots people heard of the issue but generally could not comprehend the implications of it.
2. People need to know about their rights in respect of the Government.
3. There is a pervasive 'culture of fear' in Solomons that discourages people from speaking out on issues that affect them. The perceived threat comes from powerful people in rural communities, and in Honiara from armed groups. SIBC is heavily controlled by the Government.
4. Need to be careful when communicating
 - * show no bias
 - *use trusted leaders as spokespeople
5. PFNet [a rural email project now being trialled, which uses computers powered by remote-area power supplies and uses radio-modems] may be a useful medium for communication between community groups ('horizontal' communications).
6. Western Province during the Y2000 tensions started a newspaper [an 8pp A4 newsletter called the 'Prunsvick' (i.e. Brunswick – after the student newspaper of UPNG, at which certain members of the editorial staff had studied)]. The newsletter was printed by the Western Province State Government Taskforce. The newsletter was replaced by 'People', the newsletter of the Gizo Civil Society Network. Malaita also has a local newspaper.
7. Information flow through the formal mass media [Solomon Star, SIBC radio] is very slow.

8. The law and order problem has a massive impact on freedom of movement and freedom of expression.
9. There is a great need to get rid of guns. Once they guns have gone, people will be more willing to speak out. The complicating factor is that some of the Members of Parliament are the ones who have the guns [and possibly they don't want open discussion and criticism of their actions, so it is in their interest to keep the guns and suppress freedom of speech].
10. The culture of fear has spread throughout the Solomons because people from all provinces are found in Honiara. Should someone speak out in their home province, it is one of their relatives in Honiara who will be targetted for threats or violence [this observation relates particularly to speech about the 'tension', crime and corruption networks in Honiara and the actions of the Government]
11. It is particularly difficult to speak against the dominant order in Malaita and Guadalcanal and Malaita but is possible in some of the other provinces [this observation relates particularly to speech about issues at provincial level]
12. SICA is a good mouthpiece, because of its church base
13. Consider using radio for education

Group Two

1. From little things bigger things can grow. Communication networks are needed for a range of purposes. An example was used about a local issue of failure of slippery cabbage (*Hibiscus manihot* - an edible green leaf crop used as the main vegetable in many Solomons communities), and how discussion of the crop failure led into issues of community management; this shows how 'non-political' issue led to political participation where a direct 'political stance' would have been very difficult.
2. The culture of silence [a different expression of the 'culture of fear' in group one]: how to break it down, or how to work in and around it
3. The international community and international media have a role in opening debates and providing public accountability in the Solomons
4. Strengthening of democratic process comes back to issues of information availability and education, especially in 'civics'.
5. There is a need to strengthen and build capacity in the Solomons mass media, even though these media may still be censored [self-censored by cultural norms of restraint from public criticism].

Group Three

1. Messages need to be accurate and clear. Literacy and numeracy are important to reception of messages
2. Important sensitive messages become personal because of fear
3. Messages need to be attributable to a particular author, otherwise they are regarded only as rumour
4. Minutes of meetings have to be written and distributed, by photocopying or perhaps email
5. Important to communicate is information on
 - * rights of people
 - * development
 - * something that touches people's lives, like children's education, health, possible local projects, community needs, information for help

Group Four

1. Email: email is now widely used by the educated [particularly those in the iumi_ao network, who tend to be living either in Honiara or are based overseas] but before pinning hopes on it as a means of communication at the grassroots level it remains to be proven that it works technically [computers breaking down in harsh village environments etc.], economically [are they really going to become widespread or just be a few showpieces, who pays for maintenance] and socially [issues of uptake, what used for, who in a group actually gets to use].
2. Shortwave two-way radios are increasingly prevalent in rural areas [but are unevenly distributed and would not be in more than 10% of villages at the most]. They are not so much used for discussion, transfer of abstract ideas or debate but rather the relaying of simple messages.
3. Communication of important issues to groups, between groups or from groups to government or NGO agencies has always been by face-to-face meetings in cases where effectiveness is important. This will continue to be the case. Particularly where groups decisions are to be made [i.e. a resolution to be communicated], nothing else has credibility.
4. Where people don't get the story from the source, they will not necessarily believe the story until it is confirmed [while very true of rumour, this can even apply to communications from a minor official: until people hear from the 'big boss' that a particular message has been correctly transmitted they might not believe it].
5. Important communication cannot always be entrusted to intermediaries, because jealousies and rivalries are a major fact of Solomons life. If a rival manages to control transmission of a message that is not in their own interest, they may choose not to forward it on in its original form.