

State Society and Governance in Melanesia

DISCUSSION PAPER

Discussion
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OUTSIDE-IN: A VOLUNTEER'S REFLECTIONS ON A SOLOMON ISLANDS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

Two different worlds exist in the Solomon Islands: the development world - which, in part, Australia has imposed - and the Solomon Islands world, where Solomon Islanders continue to live regardless. That is how it seemed to me during the 15 months I spent from 2005 to 2007 working as an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development (AYAD) in the Solomon Islands, mainly in the Malaita and Temotu Provinces.

This paper attempts to raise questions about how these worlds interact, drawing on my personal experiences working within a community development program funded by AusAID and set up within the Church of Melanesia (COM). The COM is increasingly seen as an institution that can contribute to 'development' in the context of a broader peace and state building intervention headed by the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands. I describe how this program was negotiated between the church and foreign donors in order to operate and how three prominent terms in development language – *peace building*, *consultation* and

capacity building – translate at the community level. While there are many fashionable buzz words in development, these three were chosen because they were spoken so frequently that I found their meanings became lost to me.

Most of the issues I raise here concerning peace building, consultation and capacity building have come directly from Solomon Islanders themselves. Part of the problem with discussions about development is the absence of the voices of Solomon Islanders. While I am conscious of the fact that I am another foreigner writing about the Solomon Islands, I have attempted to include these voices.

THE INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES PROGRAM

The community program which forms the backdrop of this discussion, the Inclusive Communities Program (ICP), was established within the Anglican Church of Melanesia (COM) when AusAID made funding available to interested members of civil society as part of a Community Capacity Strengthening

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strategy. The Church of Melanesia maintains a unique position in the Solomon Islands because it has widespread grassroots networks and is in a position to deliver services - something both the national and provincial governments struggle with. The church has an historic role in the country, and in recent times it has helped foster peace during the tensions, especially through the *Tasiu* (the Melanesian Brotherhood) and the Mothers' Union missions. The church also maintains an influential role in community structures, especially outside Honiara. As many chiefs are finding it hard to cope with the rapid social change occurring within the youthful population, people look increasingly at church leaders to help solve conflicts and issues. At the same time, church leaders are respectful of *kastom* practices and seek to incorporate them in their work. Churches often have the most resources in rural areas, especially in terms of communication radios and transport. The ICP program was an opportunity to use these strengths and build upon them.

Unlike many other western-conceived programs, the ICP began its operation as a truly indigenous organisation. Its goal, as written in the original design, was "to strengthen Solomon Island communities by increasing the governance capacity for self reliance and peace."¹ It aimed to do this by involving women and youth in the community in decision making, and through training in community orientated conflict resolution. The program initially consisted of two local staff - a program administrator and the Program Manager, Ollie, a knowledgeable and experienced women's leader within the church. Training materials and a Community Development Handbook *lumi evriwan togeda, waka fo bildim gudfala strong komuniti (Working together to build strong communities)* were written by a Technical Advisor from Australia and a local counterpart. This became the basis for the two main components of the ICP. The first component was a workshop for communities involving both mature and young men and women, which covered issues such as self-esteem, communication skills, leadership, conflict resolution, decision-making, planning and networking. The second component involved training for church leaders aimed at increasing their ability to contribute effectively to local governance. The original design

soon grew to include support for the church ministries involved in community work, as well as ongoing programs in Rove prison, which initially involved some of the same kinds of life skills education carried out in communities, but later also evolved into literacy programs.

I joined the program about a year after its initial implementation as an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development (AYAD). AYAD is an AusAID volunteer program which places 400 young Australians in host Organisations (such as the COM) in the Asia Pacific region every year. The program aims to "achieve sustainable development through capacity building, skills exchange and institutional strengthening."² I arrived in the Solomons just after Ollie had appealed to the Australian program partners and AusAID for more staff, and new positions had become available to two young people. One of these became my counterpart, with whom I worked with as a Community Development Officer. In this respect the AYAD program works the wrong way around. If the two new ICP staff had been given the chance to go to Australia and do some work experience for an NGO or community development organisation, for six or even three months, the ICP probably would have been far better off in terms of capacity building and increasing skills, rather than me going to the Solomon Islands. In any case, over the next 15 months I worked with the other young people in the organisation to undertake the arduous training schedule, mainly in the Malaita and Temotu dioceses, and then helped with the final evaluation of the program.

PEACE BUILDING

One of the key concepts in the current discourse around the intervention in the Solomon Islands is peace building, but what is actually being done in terms of achieving peace is questionable. How do you build sustainable peace? How can the RAMSI mission be made into more than a bandaid? The peace building rationale was built into the ICP design and was essential to gain AusAID approval. During the mid-term evaluation of the project in late 2005 under the guidance of a 'fly in fly out' consultant, the program was asked what it was achieving in terms of peace building. It was difficult to consider

the program in terms of the log-frame matrix format provided to the ICP for reporting. The outputs were clear but the outcomes were not. What had become clear from talking to program participants was that there were root causes of conflict which were not being addressed. The consultant spoke with helpful suggestions and encouraging remarks. She concluded that there was no need to panic as it was too soon to see any sustainable change, but at least AusAID would know that the ICP was on track and the conditions (mutual obligation) had been met. Ollie took this all in and concluded "Yes, Yes, we will do that and that and that. Thank you very much for coming to our country and talking with us. Please pass our regards to your family... But you need to go back to Canberra and tell them that until we start addressing the root causes in the Solomons we cannot really peace build".

These root causes were fairly consistent across the various communities I visited and, while not all can be discussed here, there are some crucial and common issues which are concerning many Solomon Islanders - it is unclear how they are being addressed, if at all. Not surprisingly, the first of these is land disputes, which affects many communities in the Solomons. It was frequently the first response people gave when asked what weaknesses or threats their communities faced in achieving peace and stability. Logging is exacerbating land issues. A man from Small Malaita reported "Logging is very heavy in Small Malaita. There are three large operations working there at the moment which is making us very scared." In Temotu the story emerged where a son had given permission against his recently widowed mother's wishes to a company to log the Neunuglu area, now known as "Logging Point". All the other land owners in the area had given their permission except the boy who was eventually allegedly bribed by the company. A woman from a neighbouring community described the event:

The land is now fully bare. This effect was instant. On the second day after the machinery landed, the people of the Neunuglu region came to buy betel nut from a neighbouring community. This has had a huge effect on the community. The land is needed for collecting betel nut, coconuts, leaves for feasts and was a great source of

strong timber. The people relied on this land for working their gardens. Until the loggers came, the people lived an almost completely subsistence life. The people now have to climb up a steep slope everyday to make new gardens or buy their food from neighbouring communities. The son is very sorry now and he realises his mistake. But now it is too late.

The son never received the full amount of money from the loggers. Stories such as this one are too common throughout the Solomon Islands.

If development (particularly economic development) is the way to stability or peace building, one major hindrance identified by many communities is the lack of infrastructure. While the problem of services from Honiara reaching communities without infrastructure is not new, it signifies larger problems. A man from East Are'are in Malaita said "Lack of reliable shipping makes our regions very remote and lacking in services". He explained how he had had a good market for Coconut Crabs in Honiara but by the time he took them there and waited two to three weeks to get another ship home, paid the ship fare and bought food in Honiara while waiting for the ship to depart, and then shared his profits with his *wantoks* in Honiara, there was no profit to be made.

While the initial aims of the program intended to assist communities in developing strategies for participation and planning, the main work was spent in communities discussing various social issues, another major root cause (or perhaps what could be more aptly described as symptoms of these causes). The biggest question for communities lay in how to engage youth. While this has been seen as a major problem facing urban areas in the Pacific, such as Honiara, it is also a critical issue for regional and remote communities. Leaders are struggling with this issue - one chief from the Reef Islands in Temotu was puzzled as to why youth would not obey their elders and why they engaged in negative behaviours such as using *kwaso* (a local alcoholic homebrew) and marijuana. He said "Many young people 'turn out' of villages and we chiefs feel we don't know how to bring them back inside." A young man from North Malaita believed this was

because of the lack of responsibility given to young people:

The community leaders are now in danger of violence from the young people. The present style of their leadership is not fair to the community especially toward us. The leaders... should realize the barriers in their leadership that result in leading youths to the edge of the community to using kwaso and marijuana... For you leaders it's your part to try and change and direct us to where to go forward so that we can be involved in the place of decision making and more especially in sharing responsibilities.

Youth were frequently seen as the cause of many social issues. A North Malaitan mother observed, "Issues youth face are kwaso, marijuana, stealing, disturbances during late hours, no education and early marriage. Night is when the voices of youth come out". Many people, both youth and older people, commented on the waste of human resources occurring. A church program officer said "There are many skilled people from the Northern Region [of Malaita] but many go to Honiara and burn down stores" (with reference to the April 2006 riots). It was these root causes, among others, that the ICP felt needed addressing in order to build peace. Yet the main focus of peace building relies on strengthening law and justice and the machinery of government, as well as economic development. Furthermore, this focus is almost entirely on Honiara, with little or no impact on most communities.

When discussing the process of solving conflicts and keeping the peace in communities, it became clear that in many societies (at least throughout Malaita and Temotu) this was traditionally the role of the mature woman. In Temotu, the Luova and Lata communities commented:

In kastom it was the role of women to put kastom money (feather money), on the end of a bow to stop the fighting, which shows that women had an important role inside the community and that her role was one of respect.

Men from Gracious Bay ironically believed that what white people saw as gender balance

was having the opposite effect on the status and role of women in society because it "weakened *kastom*" and thus the woman's role in peace keeping and solving conflicts. Despite what people view as the weakening of *kastom*, it is clear that the status of women in society continues to have meaning today. One older woman in North Malaita told the story of how she had run "crazily" through the village much to everyone's amusement. When I asked why, she replied it was to stop a man with a bush knife from attacking another man who had been with his wife. She chased him down the village and as he was holding the knife in the air to attack him, she grabbed his wrist and told him to drop it. He obeyed and agreed to go and see the priest and chief to talk about his problem. I asked her if she was frightened and she said "no" because it was "my work for doing this". She told this story as if her role in peace keeping was one so obvious and unremarkable. Ollie often remarked that while working for the COM's women's ministry, during the tension the Mothers' Union took supplies to women and children beyond militant barricades and they could do this because of their status in society. Yet when it came to the peace building after RAMSI arrived, she felt left out of reconciliation processes as a mother. Recently, when then Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare announced that he intended to re-arm some police, letters were written to the *Solomon Star* newspaper by distressed members of the National Council of Women asking him to consult the women and children before he did this for it was seen to be a detrimental decision which would ultimately affect them. Evaluating women's role in peace building as it currently stands, and how their more traditional roles could be incorporated, may be useful. Instead of waiting for development to occur so that women can have increased status in society, it may be better to look at what status they already have in terms of peace building.

RAMSI's law and justice reforms are yet to have much impact at the grassroots level. When communities were asked how they deal with conflict in the village, *kastom* processes such as compensation was the overwhelming response. However, when the conflict reaches the next level, inconsistencies occur as the Western system takes over. There seems to be no interaction between *kastom* and state law and justice processes. Many villages

identifying crime as an issue felt they would benefit from a police post (for the majority of communities the police have little or no presence). Communities who had access to the police commented on the inefficiencies associated with the police system, especially in terms of the *wantok* system. People from Belega village in Nggella (Central Province) commented:

We also would like to see law and order improved in our community. The chief is not doing a good job at controlling young people, but neither are their parents. When someone has been charged for stealing, the police take him to Tulagi [the provincial centre], but usually he will have a wantok connection in the police force. The result is they only make a statement and are let back to the village with no action taken. The police force should have members from other islands because it is very ineffective.

For many Solomon Islanders it is *kastom* justice which operates - for pragmatic (if not other) reasons - yet there are no clear attempts to strengthen or support *kastom* forms of justice. *Kastom* is not always effective, but it is the main system in place. With a population so sparsely dispersed throughout the archipelago, how can law and justice reforms – concerning, for instance, the police presence – affect stability in grassroots communities?

It was clear that Ollie distrusted RAMSI's law and justice strengthening project as a way of achieving long-term peace: "RAMSI builds these institutions, but what happens when they leave?" If RAMSI's law and justice program is designed to act as a deterrent to conflict and to control the conflict that does occur, it is inappropriate within the Melanesian context. The reciprocal nature of Melanesian society means that in order to solve a conflict both the offender and the victim are required to take part, not just the offender and the state. When prisoners in the Rove prison in Honiara talked about anger and conflict, some interesting challenges arose in relation to imprisonment as a method of justice. One Malaitan said he was being made a RAMSI scapegoat in its attempts to clean up after the tension. Many were angered that they were only the little fish while the big fish, or tension leaders, were free and

not being punished. Some commented that they had gone through *kastom* compensation processes already and now they were "paying back double" for what they had done. This does not indicate peace building but rather the creation of further tension. In particular it is necessary to question the effect that prison is having on the juvenile section of the population. Will it create a group of youth further disenchanted and disconnected from their communities? The nature of being a prisoner is quite foreign to Solomon Islands culture in that when someone commits a crime, the family or tribe compensate for it, not the individual alone. Thus, placing an individual, in particular a youth, fourteen or fifteen years old, in jail will often cause more shame and trauma, possibly lessening the chances of rehabilitation compared with the more supportive *kastom* justice. How effective is prison for juveniles? Is it causing even more harm in terms of further "weakening" *kastom*?

CONSULTATION

Development which is sustainable requires consultation with Solomon Islanders, so that this development is appropriate for the Solomon Islands, or even locally owned. Good intentions are behind this concept, but in practice consultation seems to have been subsumed by process, rather than providing the foundation on which development is based.

The ICP learned this the hard way because the consultation process was inadequate and left the program uncertain as to how it was supposed to operate with the church. The program design was written by an expatriate, albeit one with considerable knowledge and experience of the Solomons. Having experienced working within AusAID-funded organisations, he knew exactly what they would want a program design to look like. Pre-conceived ideas about what AusAID would fund became the first hindrance to the ICP consultation process. He came up with an ambitious, meaty program consisting mainly of a travelling one-off workshop to be undertaken in 140 parishes, plus training for clergy and wives, rather than working through and strengthening pre-existing church organisations such as the Mothers' Union and the youth ministry. The program

definitely had quantity but the quality of the design was questionable.

The second major problem with the consultation process was that it did not consult enough, nor did it involve the most relevant people. The consultation process took place over one week in Honiara with representatives from each diocese, the Mothers' Union Diocesan President and both a male and female youth leader. However, this meant that the important key bodies, especially the COM Missionary Board and the Council of Bishops - the church leaders - were left out. Despite the ICP's unique position of having access to grassroots networks, it was not yet truly integrated or accepted by the church. The final evaluation report undertaken by the ICP concluded "There was a feeling that had the Council of Bishops been asked to approve the ICP, many of the initial issues of institutional support would not have arisen."³

Much of Ollie's energy as Program Manager in the first year was spent making the program legitimate in the church's eyes. This helped to solve problems experienced on the ground, especially the confusion that existed about what the ICP was. Several times it was confused with the similarly sounding CSP, AusAID's Community Sector Program, which had considerably larger resources (and the perceived potential to build infrastructure). This raised community expectations and made implementation extremely difficult. In Small Malaita, even the clergy thought the ICP was CSP and they were left extremely vexed and disappointed when they realised that there were no additional funds available, only information provided in a workshop. In the second year, Ollie fought for provisions to run orientation programs and raise awareness about what the program wished to achieve in order to ensure the support of the people in the provinces. The ability of local staff to negotiate with local people was the program's saviour.

One major problem with the design of the program was beyond the control of the consultation process. ICP's programs were intended to increase planning and networking at the grassroots level and, in particular, networking with AusAID's CSP. The ICP was supposed to provide the software in the process of community development and then

be potentially complimented by CSP providing the hardware, so that any development CSP committed to in communities would be participatory in nature. This had potential to work. At the conclusion of several workshops participants outlined plans they had for projects and programs, ranging from youth rallies, awareness and education programs to training centres and other community buildings, and they asked where they could seek funding. In most cases the very mention of CSP aroused scepticism. In Lata, Temotu participants said "We go there with our plans but they keep saying 'We're not ready yet'". A volunteer with the ICP program in North Malaita, who also worked for CSP, said "people keep coming to the office with plans and proposals, but we don't know what to do with them. We ask our boss and he says 'We're not ready yet'". One program participant from Gracious Bay, Temotu summed up the limited success of the ICP's first phase (ending in March 2007):

One solution to problems in our community is to start small, inside our villages, or even our families first to sort out things, to build relationships, and then from there we can walk together to develop change and not have this "individualism" which is too big in our communities.

The ICP became a program about good relationships and conflict resolution and had most of its success at individual and family level. However there is only so much that information and discussion - that words on their own - can do.

An interesting phenomenon occurred after most of the initial implementation problems were improved upon and the ICP was achieving some outcomes. It began to be seen by other organisations in Honiara as an example of a program "successfully implementing programs in the provinces" and became a hive for new programs completing their own "consultation process checklist". The ICP office seemed to have an endless procession of visiting advisors, consultants and researchers asking questions such as "can you identify some cultural barriers to working in the provinces?" For Ollie, life became one meeting merging into another. In such cases a cycle of consultation occurs, where one organisation consults another, and after it is established new

organisations will consult it. This means that lots of talking is done, but are the right people talking? Why is there a lack of trust within donor organisations that Solomon Islanders themselves know the best way forward? It often makes shaky foundations for development when consultation is merely a tick on the process list.

Eventually the ICP evolved (and continues to evolve) into an organisation that provides support for those actually working in the communities, in particular the church ministries. As Bishop Terry Brown stated in regard to the program in the Malaitan Diocese, "People are full of programs and ideas, but they are short on human resources (and other resources). The ICP should become a partner and slide in where it can, but let someone else lead." This is now beginning to happen. While the ICP looked like a local program when it started, it in fact had to fight to be accepted as one. It put enormous energy into negotiating between the church and AusAID to gain acceptance from both in order to operate. How do larger NGOs make their programs meaningful and sustainable in the local context? Lastly, how does RAMSI, an entirely foreign owned entity, deal with the fact it is has consultation processes but not foundations in the community. Without these foundations, how legitimate are any of its achievements? Are their ideas of the way to move forward the same as those of Solomon Islanders, and does it even care?

CAPACITY BUILDING

How to 'transition' leads to a third major concept employed constantly in the world of Solomon Islands development - capacity building. I assume its aim is to build the capacity of Solomon Islanders in order to achieve sustainable development. Capacity building remains problematic. First, there seems to be a narrow and inflexible definition of the kind of capacity being built. Second, it seems to be an overwhelmingly one way process where the Solomon Islander is seen to have very little to offer. Finally (and what I try to address here), how do you actually go about capacity building?

A recent RAMSI report states "[It] has been suggested that RAMSI should do more to develop its own capability to engage with

Solomon Islanders",⁴ although the measures being taken to address this are ambiguous. Similarly, an Oxfam report argues "A... hindrance has been a lack of understanding on the part of many capacity-builders. They generally adhere to a model that assumes Solomon Islands public servants operate in a cultural vacuum."⁵

It is hard to compare my experiences in capacity building to those working in more formal structures, especially RAMSI; however, maybe my own experience raises questions about how expats capacity build. I cannot imagine how I could have transferred any skills without first building up relationships and gaining some understanding about the Solomon Islands. I entered the ICP story about a year after its initial implementation. I had no experience in development and had never even been overseas before. The church and the Australian partners were reluctant to accept me: the partners because of my lack of experience and age; and the church because I was an outsider and was not coming under religious auspices. It is probable that the AYAD program was mostly concerned with filling its yearly quota of mobilising 400 young Australians. Despite these concerns, Ollie had declared she wanted a young woman as a kind of role model to build the confidence of other young women. Ollie made it clear that I was to be treated as an equal, as a local staff member. I found it strange how she felt the need to emphasise it, not having realised that locals generally equated expat with expert.

The situation which unfolded with my arrival was unique. I was fortunate in one respect to not have had much capacity or expertise on which to build with in the first place. I had useful generic skills, but no development knowledge - this I learned from the ICP. My role was not one strictly of capacity building, but rather skills exchange. Ollie said to me "you will build our capacity, but we will also build yours". The ICP went out of their way to teach me Pijin, educate me about *kastom*, and impart their ideas about social issues and development. After a while I had built up enough trust with my colleagues that they felt comfortable enough to come to me with questions, especially in terms of computing, English (I became the office dictionary) and report writing. I experienced the world of development in the

Solomons through their eyes and I began to see their perspectives and observe how they negotiated and manoeuvred their way through the structures and development language the aid world placed on them.

Working within Melanesian culture was not simple. Despite being treated equally, I was never not 'white'. Initially I did not realise I was working not just within an organisational structure, but a societal one as well. Often when consultants and advisors came to the ICP office, they (possibly feeling uneasy at having to talk to a Solomon Islander) would direct their questions at me. I was not the *boss*, and quickly learned to refer the question back to Ollie the *boss* and the *matron*. Once, when a consultant from the World Bank came to ask ICP questions about how to implement programs, I did not do this. I felt it was an insignificant meeting with a consultant who was of no use to us and I told her what she wanted to know, even going so far as to interrupt Ollie to 'follow white man's time', to present the facts without the long stories, so we could all go home. Wrong. Overstepping my age, gender and position in the organisation, even on such a small issue, ensured that the underlying tension I created erupted in a *roao*, or fight, the next day. This was extremely confronting, as I had never had a Melanesian get so angry at me before. I eventually realised that social laws were important and that I had broken them. In hindsight I imagine if I had started at the ICP with ideas, experience and knowledge (like most expats), how this confidence would have come across. Knowing Ollie's personality, it would have been a clash. As I grew in confidence, tension in our relationship grew until it hit breaking point. It became apparent I was working in a completely different world, which required a completely different way of doing things.

The Technical Advisor to the ICP, reflecting upon the importance of relationships, indicated that she had the opposite problem to me. Like Ollie, she was a mature woman, but working with a young male:

Writing together meant bridging cultural, gender and age differences, with both of us needing to be confident enough to critique each others work. Patrick reminded me that in Solomon's culture it was inappropriate for a young

man to criticize a mature woman, but he said he would try... Our first break through in working together came when we discovered that we had much to learn from each other. Patrick could help me gain an understanding of Solomon's kastom and village life while I could offer him an overview of community development theory that would strengthen his already extensive practice knowledge... When we look back on our work together most of all we learned to value each others strengths and to sit with each others differences.⁶

I eventually learned to find new approaches, to question until people understood the issue I was trying to raise. If I disagreed with something, I would attempt to ask questions that were not too pushy, such as "is this *kastom*", or "sorry to ask this again, but can you explain why we are doing this", in the hope people would start to question themselves. My counterpart and I often joked about our strategy for telling Ollie any issues we had. First you would question her, then you would expect her to get angry and then you would wait a few days until she came back and opened up dialogue on the issue. This is not easy and takes lots of time, and sometimes you feel compelled to speak your mind. But when the *matron* speaks, you should just simply listen because a good leader, such as Ollie, will listen too. Just as when the Solomon Islander speaks, the foreigner should listen.

Ineffective capacity building may simply come down to a lack of understanding and relationship between the Australian dominated RAMSI and Solomon Islanders. There seems to be a huge divide between the two groups. The first obvious reason for this divide is physical - the environments in which most Solomon Islanders and most expatriates live. In Honiara expats live on the ridges overlooking the beautiful neighbouring islands of Nggella and Savo, while the locals fight the immensely inflated rent prices to find houses in the valleys below. Expats drive huge four wheel drives, which loom above the myriad of local taxis, while most locals walk and *stori* along the road. The road was where I learned the basics of the Solomon Islands. Besides being an opportunity to build relationships with people at work,

walking became my way of getting to know what was going on in Honiara, of improving my Pijin and gaining greater understanding of the culture. When walking to work, I invariably answered the same questions over and over again such as, "where was I from?" and "how many brothers and sisters did I have?" Through these questions I learned what Solomon Islanders value. I developed a sense of the surroundings and the places from which people had come. Another AYAD once remarked that all expats should be banned from owning cars for their first month in Honiara. This comment reveals how engagement with culture and language is largely missing from the expat experience of working in Honiara.

This difference is also extremely visible in the provinces when coming across the Participating Police Force (PPF), particularly the Australian Federal Police (AFP). In the very remote Lata, Temotu Province, it struck me how ridiculously out of place the RAMSI base looked. All fenced in, with large vehicles, and a large boat, unlike any other Solomon sea vessel. There was noise coming from the air conditioners and generator. Upon being very kindly invited by a member of the AFP to come in and check my email (the only internet access available) I was surprised at what I saw inside - I could have been in Australia. The thing that struck me the most was the tinned fruit. RAMSI has all its food and supplies flown to the provinces apparently so as to not create a "false economy" and because of the "special dietary requirements of its officers" but I thought tinned pineapple was taking it a bit far. Sure I appreciated the coffee and reading my emails from home, but walking out of the RAMSI base felt like walking back to another planet. If this was my experience, I wondered how the locals viewed it? Due to this divide in the physical environments, it is not unexpected that Solomon Islanders frequently *stori-stori* the RAMSI man. On the surface these stories can be quite comical, but what underlying tensions do they reveal? One night in Auki, Malaita, one Solomon Islander said "Did you hear the one about the RAMSI man in Ysabel? The chief blew the conchshell, and at the same time the RAMSI men decided to do a combat operation exercise." And everyone laughed. It is well known throughout the Solomons that when the chief blows into the conchshell, it is time

for a village meeting. The storytellers and listeners were bemused that RAMSI did not know this. I was perplexed that RAMSI had (apparently) completely undermined local sovereignty. It does not matter if this story is true, when people hear the stories, they become true. Upon meeting Australian members of the PPF in Temotu, Malaita and the Western Province I was often surprised not just at their lack of Pijin and disregard for *kastom*. but more so their lack of curiosity and interest in the places in which they were living. Upon hearing I was a volunteer they would often comment "You get paid how much? Why on earth would you come here for that?" It was suggested by Solomon Islanders that the PPF should include more Pacific Islanders who "understand *kastom* better" or New Zealanders, who deal better with their own indigenous Maori population than Australia does with its Aboriginals - Ollie even suggested that perhaps Australia should "look in its own backyard first".

The perplexity towards "the other" occurs both ways. Australians in Honiara make as many judgmental statements as Solomon Islanders do. For example statements such as "*they* didn't show up until lunch time today" shows a lack of understanding about the nature of life in the Solomons. The nine to five concept is one which, like the cash economy, is relatively new (and imposed by the west) on Solomon Islanders. Societal values are also different, as family and *wantoks* will always be the first priority. Upon trying to sort out my visitors permit at Immigration, the woman with the authority to deal with my situation did not come into the office for four days. When I finally saw her on the fifth, my irritation soon turned to guilt as she explained that her son had been in hospital with pneumonia and malaria all week. It is a myth that Solomon Islanders possess no work ethic, they just do not have the same idea of work as Westerners do. The ICP was less like an organisation and more like a family where personal relationships were everything. If someone had a personal issue, it often became something the entire office would engage with through offering prayers and moral support, and all work would be delayed in these instances. While you can install Western institutions quickly, adapting the culture at the same pace will not happen. There are two worlds at odds with each other in the Solomon Islands, that

of the Solomon Islands itself and that of the expatriate world. This makes effective capacity building difficult at best.

Finally, with regard to capacity building and Australia's intervention in the Solomon Islands in general, the issue of time is essential. People working under the various RAMSI institutions often come in for very short amounts of time. However, it takes time to build a relationship which will make their work sustainable. I found this problem with the AYAD program, which places a limit of one year on each assignment. Even as early as six months into the assignment I realised it was not going to be enough time. I was lucky enough to swap into another volunteer program so that I could return to help the organisation undertake the final evaluation, where the skills and relationships I had built up in the last twelve months could be put to use. In particular, many foreigners do not seem to understand the importance in taking some time to learn Pijin. This is possible because English is the official language of the Solomon Island - possibly because Pijin is not given any status as a language - yet it is so crucial to understanding what is happening. I once heard an expat describe Pijin as "the bastardisation of *our* language". While I cannot say if this is a common opinion, it raises serious questions about Australian attitudes towards the Solomon Islands. Many Solomon Islanders were astonished I could speak Pijin, which made me question what kinds of interactions Solomon Islanders had had with white people before. I found the first step in engaging with the locals was as simple as learning some Pijin. This is not always easy for people not exposed to Solomon Islanders as much as I was, but people should learn at least some Pijin, as Solomon Islanders will appreciate the attempt and be more willing to help you to understand what is going on. This simple issue - the lack of appreciation for Pijin - may severely hinder capacity building.

CONCLUSION

The most important lesson I learned from my own experience was that how I communicated with people was everything.

Using Pijin, being aware of cultural norms and respecting *kastom* made my time far more meaningful in terms of exchanging skills. I also observed how the ICP spent so much time and energy forging solid relationships and trust within the church (and with the donor) which made its implementation much smoother after a shaky consultation process. Good relationships are essential. Therefore, current attempts to peace build or state build in a cultural vacuum remain extremely problematic. The current situation is such that two worlds operate but barely interact. The western style bureaucracy which sits on top does not integrate with Solomon Island societies below it. However inside these structures are people. If these people intend to transfer 'development' through capacity building, then relationships become important. In many cases, due to a lack of understanding and inadequate consultation, this becomes a one way instruction from the foreign advisor to the Solomon Islander.

Some fundamental questions arise from these issues. First, is this development having any impact? Second, is this development the right development in the first place if it does not consider Melanesian "values"? Finally, why is it assumed that Solomon Islands development, state building and peace building need to start from scratch? Why are existing strengths, found in culture and in the ideas of Solomon Islanders themselves, forgotten?

AUTHOR NOTE

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