

In dire states: poor political governance in Western Melanesia and what it means for aid

Terence Wood

PhD candidate, SSGM, ANU

To differing degrees the governments of the Western Melanesian states of Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands struggle to provide the public goods and services necessary to facilitate development. In this paper, using the case study of Solomon Islands, I will argue the problems of governance in these countries are first and foremost problems of political governance — dysfunctional politics means poorly functioning states. I will then discuss what this means for aid. How can aid help in such environments? Can it help? I will contend that, at least until recently, much thinking about what aid can and cannot do in countries such as Solomon Islands has been mistaken. I will argue that, contra the suggestions of some of aid's critics, withdrawing aid would only make things worse. Yet at the same time, aid which engages in isomorphic mimicry, or which seeks to improve governance through capacity building, has achieved, and will achieve, relatively little. As an alternative I will suggest that aid ought to aspire not to foster transformational development but rather to act as a countervailing force to the problems of politics, seeking to hold key institutions together, while striving to find innovative ways of delivering key public services. If focused on these tasks aid may possibly succeed in fostering development indirectly: by providing space for the societies in question to find their own solutions.