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# DEBATING TEN YEARS OF RAMSI

Reflections on the Regional Assistance  
Mission to Solomon Islands

Edited by Terence Wood and Stephen Howes

**DEVELOPMENT**  
POLICY CENTRE



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Mission to Solomon Islands

Edited by Terence Wood and Stephen Howes

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## Introduction

*Stephen Howes and Terence Wood*

RAMSI, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, is the regional policing, peace-keeping and development mission which arrived in Solomon Islands (SI) in 2003 in response to the country's civil conflict. Nominally it has involved contributions from 15 Pacific countries, although in practice material input has predominantly come from Australia and, to a lesser extent, New Zealand.

2013 marked the tenth anniversary of RAMSI. It was also a year of transition, in which the military component of RAMSI was concluded, and its development functions spun off to bilateral aid programs. RAMSI has thus shrunk to primarily a policing mission.

Last year, we ran a [number of blog posts](#) to mark the tenth anniversary of RAMSI. The series ran to 13 articles, and was testimony to the power of expert crowd-sourcing. We received a fascinating range of views making a collection that deserved to be put together. Hence this volume.

Our contributors included the (then) outgoing RAMSI Special Coordinator, alongside a range of commentators whose research-related and/or practical experience afforded them insight into RAMSI and Solomon Islands more generally. Several contributors came from within Solomon Islands civil society. Two were expats who have spent much of their lives in the country. Some were integrally involved in peacebuilding efforts during the Tensions, and all have interacted with RAMSI in a range of ways.

We gave very little guidance to our authors, except to ask them to reflect on RAMSI, and/or Solomon Islands more generally. To disentangle the various views we got, we have grouped the answers we received as if they were responses to one or more of three questions.

1. Has Solomon Islands progressed or regressed over the last decade, or both in different ways?
2. What have been the strengths and weaknesses of RAMSI?
3. What could and should have RAMSI done differently?

In this introduction, we summarize the views of our various authors in relation to each of these questions. We don't situate every author in relation to every question, but rather discuss each contribution where we think it fits best.

## 1. Has Solomon Islands progressed or regressed over the last decade, or both in different ways?

In his [article](#), the first in our series, Nicholas Coppel, then the RAMSI Head, emphasizes the progress Solomon Islands has made: “Security has improved, services are being delivered and the economy is growing.” Coppel also draws attention to a number of SI institutions strengthened by RAMSI, and to improved public finance responses. As the volume shows, each of these claims is contentious, at least as full assessments.

Most other authors are less positive. On the security front, all would agree that security is now better than ten years ago, but several argue that the country still faces real risks. Ashley Wickham [argues](#) that we should “expect further turbulence.” Benjamin Malao Afuga [notes](#) that “development conflict” remains a threat. Louise Vella, in her moving [account](#) of the reconciliation process, notes that much more needs to be done to build a “durable peace” because “the grievances that lead to the conflict remain”.

Coppel’s claim that “services are being delivered” is supported by survey statistics [cited](#) by Clive More which show increased satisfaction with health and police services. But Benjamin Malao Afuga adds a reality check by noting the simple and inarguable point that, “[m]any Solomon Islanders still do not receive the services they need.”

The economy is certainly growing, but Shahar Hameiri [highlights](#) what he calls the inconvenient truth that the higher growth is largely due to higher, and more unsustainable than ever, levels of logging. Hameiri writes:

..the RAMSI-era has seen a logging boom so big that logged timber volumes have reached extraordinary levels of six to eight times the estimated sustainable yield of 250,000 cubic metres per annum – more than double the previous logging boom of the 1990s.

The legacy of the logging boom, once it is over, will be minimal, Hamieri argues. Graham Baines [concurs](#) that “the over-exploitation of the forests has been a long-term economic disaster.” And, indeed, the IMF August 2013 [SI country report](#) shows that logging production has already started to fall. However, both Graham Baines and Benjamin Malao Afuga both take a broader, and therefore more optimistic, view, noting the importance of the fact that “investor confidence has returned over the last ten years.” (Baines).

Whether this confidence will lead to growth beyond logging remains to be seen. Matthew Allen and Sinclair Dinnen [raise](#) the possibility of a transition from logging to mining and that “there is mineral prospecting and mine lease conversion taking place



throughout the archipelago.” Allen and Dinnen are appropriately cautious, however, about the welfare implications of any such shift.

What about governance, Coppel’s fourth area of progress? The title of Tony Hughes [post](#) – “Solomons saved from sinking, but drifting and taking in water” — tells us that he has a very different view. Transform Aqorau [shares](#) Hughes’ perspective: according to him, SI is “falling down in bits and pieces.” He acknowledges some institutional improvements, but argues that: “no one in 2003 could have foreshadowed that, by 2013, corruption would have become so invasive in Solomon Islands...”

Joseph Foukona [provides](#) a very valuable contribution by focusing on recent policing developments, which call into question the sustainability of any RAMSI-backed improvements. The acceptance by the police of funding from a Honiara MP to travel to Vanuatu for a soccer tournament and the reinstatement of a deputy police commissioner prior to investigations into allegations against him for malpractice “bring into question the professionalism and impartiality of the RSIP,” as well as its independence.

Terence Wood is somewhat [more optimistic](#), pointing to positive trends such as an increasingly active urban civil society, though even he concludes that prosperity and stability will only be secured if the country sees “the rise of national political movements” to counter the country’s strongly clientelist politics.

Also on governance, Matthew Allen and Sinclair Dinnen point to the rise of constituency funds in the Solomon Islands. More generally, Ashley Wickham pins the blame for the country’s ongoing problems on the country’s political culture, as do Terence Wood and Graham Baines, albeit in slightly different ways. In the words of Wickham:

... many people, including national leaders, see government as a garden of opportunities to harvest as they see beneficial for themselves and their voters. And the country wants a majority of visionary and courageous leaders to provide the space, the resources and the authority to effect change.

## **2. What have been the strengths and weaknesses of RAMSI?**

Tony Hughes nicely highlights the very limited consensus around this question. The “only thing” that all assessors agree on “is that getting the guns off the streets of Honiara and the rural roads of Malaita and Guadalcanal in 2002 was essential, and was well done.” Though it was notched up very quickly, mostly within a few weeks of arrival, it was no mean achievement, and it has had long-lasting benefits. As Terry Brown [argues](#), “unlike Papua New Guinea, the Solomons are still largely gun free.”

Beyond this uncontested contribution, however, the nature of RAMSI's score-card is a matter of intense debate.

Nicholas Coppel documents RAMSI's claimed achievements. According to him, RAMSI has strengthened institutions, delivered "key outcomes" in the area of law and justice, and helped the economy, as well as public finances, recover.

Clive Moore [adds](#) that the People's Survey, conducted annually from 2006 to 2013, has never shown support for RAMSI to fall below 86%. This is itself strong evidence of an important contribution by the regional mission. Terry Brown, on the other hand, has little positive to say about RAMSI beyond its extraction of guns. It neglected health, education and infrastructure (building prisons but not hospitals), and supported too many, too highly paid advisers.

Ashley Wickham criticizes RAMSI for not doing enough to influence SI political culture, and for missing opportunities for influence by working too separately.

Other authors take the middle ground. Benjamin Malao Afuga acknowledges the achievements that Coppel articulates, but balances them by noting areas of failure, including the failure to capture, or to keep in custody, key combatants from the pre-RAMSI civil disturbances.

Other authors are more agnostic. Graham Baines argues that it is "too early to reach substantive conclusions" about the impact of RAMSI. Clive Moore agrees that it is "a difficult task."

Several of contributors caution against criticizing RAMSI on the basis of unrealistic expectations. Vella says that RAMSI "has not, indeed could not, build peace and reconciliation." Afuga notes that "the immediate future of the country lies in the hands of Solomon Islanders." Baines argues it is unrealistic to expect RAMSI to influence SI political culture, as Wickham criticizes it for failing to do.

Several authors also credit RAMSI for providing Solomons with breathing space: "some needed space" in the words of Baines, or "a little extra space" in the words of Wood. Wood argues that RAMSI is a case study of how little influence donors in fact have, noting its limited impact on governance despite its massive relative size. But, Wood goes on to say, while deep change can only come from within, aid can, and presumably has in the Solomons, worked to "hold things together." This is about more than getting guns off the street. "Holding crucial institutions together" and preventing their further decay has also been important. (Wood lists the Electoral Commission, the police force, and the Finance Ministry as ones where RAMSI has had a positive impact.)



### **3. What could and should have RAMSI done differently?**

From this collection come a number of suggestions for things RAMSI should have done differently.

Ashley Wickham argues that much more use should have been made of in-line advisers. The successful governance interventions, Wickham argues, were in-line ones, such as in the Auditor General's Office and the Internal Revenue Service. More use of such positions "could have broken the cycle of ineptitude and corruption that sadly still exists in the public service today." As Wickham notes, this is not new advice, and nor is it advice which has only been given in relation to Solomon Islands. Wickham also argues that funds should have been used to educate SI children overseas in order to give "the next two or three generations of high achievers a solid metropolitan education experience." Wickham's proposal is:

for Australia and NZ to revise their education policies and each year take all SI's year 5 and year 6 students achieving B+ passes to study in Australia and New Zealand to complete their high schooling and prepare for tertiary studies.

Terry Brown contends that RAMSI's advisers were often ineffectual. He adds that they were very expensive, arguing that RAMSI advisers were sometimes paid 13 times their local counterparts:

They were certainly not doing 13 times the amount of work; locals often resented this high pay, and felt that many RAMSI advisers were building up large savings back in Australia while they suffered to survive.

Graham Baines argues that mistakes were made in the in early days: advisers and the "over-built and maintenance-costly" Auki prison.

Clive Moore argues that RAMSI and its police intervention, the PPF or Participating Police Force, must take "a great deal of the responsibility" for the 2006 Honiara riots since the riots occurred "when the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force was weak and the PPF was largely in control." (p.30)

The PPF's way of dealing with social tension was very Australian, and they lost control of the situation. I don't think they had any idea of the capabilities of a Solomons mob moving fast.

Both Clive Moore and Terry Brown argue that RAMSI's military presence went on far too long. According to the latter, a military presence hasn't been required in the Solomons "for many years."

## Conclusion

Of course, answers to these three questions are related. The more positive you are about SI, the more positive you will be about RAMSI. The more positive you are about RAMSI, the less you will see the need for things to have been done differently.

Nevertheless, it is still useful, we would argue, to separate out responses under these questions or headings. In particular, it makes it clear that even if one is not totally optimistic about SI, one might still be mainly positive about RAMSI. Similarly, even if one is mainly positive about RAMSI, one can still think that it could have done at least some things differently.

Although RAMSI is now winding down, the lessons learnt from the intervention are still of enormous relevance, for at least two reasons.

First, RAMSI may be wound back but the huge concentration of aid in Solomon Islands will remain. Indeed, there seems to us to be more continuity than change in the attitude of RAMSI's backers towards their charge. The end of the military presence is of little consequence to the Solomons if those who argue that none has been required for several years are correct. And the management of non-policing aid by bilateral donors directly rather than through RAMSI also appears to be a second-order change. If the Solomons ship is taking in water, then the aid journey will become more rather than less difficult.

Second, RAMSI has global lessons. It is a textbook case of both the utility and the limits of large aid-backed interventions. On the one hand, such interventions can be critical for ending violence, restoring stability, and expanding services. On the other, they do not put countries on the road to prosperity. Rather, they buy them time to work out their destiny. The history of aid suggests that many countries make good use of this time, and in the end make the right decisions: think of much of [Africa](#) (Adams, 2013) and of [Korea](#) [pdf] (Howes and Smith, 2014). But by no means all do.

We commend this collection to all who are interested in the future of the Solomon Islands, and to all who are interested in the use of aid in fragile states.

## 1. Ten years on

*Nicholas Coppel*

Solomon Islands is a very different nation today from the one that greeted the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) when it arrived on 24 July 2003. Security has improved, services are being delivered and the economy is growing.

RAMSI quickly dealt with the problems of lawlessness and conflict. It arrested leaders of the “Tensions”, enforced a prohibition on firearms and began rebuilding the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF). Now, Solomon Islands has no militias, no militant training camps and no confirmed trade in illicit weapons. Firearm incidents have been extremely rare, with only 11 confirmed reports of firearms being discharged since RAMSI’s arrival ten years ago.

RAMSI’s development assistance program has been focused on three areas or “pillars”.

The **machinery of government** pillar has helped to strengthen institutions, including: the National Parliament Office, Electoral Commission, accountability institutions, Ministry of Public Service and Office of the Prime Minister. It has also helped Solomon Islands reinvigorate parliamentary committees, resolve a backlog of cases in the Ombudsman’s Office, develop a code of conduct for public servants and create a new centralised IT system. Since 2008, Solomon Islanders have led all audits carried out by the Office of the Auditor General.

The **law and justice** pillar has produced a number of key outcomes since 2003, notably the restoration of law and order and the surrender of almost 4,000 firearms. It has brought correctional facilities up to UN standards and is working to rebuild Solomon Islands’ justice system so that it can operate effectively, fairly and openly. Solomon Islanders now head the majority of the nation’s law and justice posts—with the Chief Justice, Attorney-General, Director of Public Prosecutions, Public Solicitor and Commissioner for Correctional Services all being Solomon Islanders. Though a serious shortage of legal workers to staff the justice system continues to present challenges, the correctional service now operates with minimal advisor support and crime is stable at low rates.

The **economic governance** pillar has helped achieve a substantial recovery in Solomon Islands’ economy and public finances. This has been facilitated by the restoration of law and order, successive governments displaying fiscal discipline and control, and a commitment to economic and financial reforms, and the support of development partners.

Over the past decade, the economy has grown steadily and by over 80 per cent in real terms, interrupted only by the effects of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2009. Government revenue, which had been severely constrained, has recovered strongly and government expenditure has grown and become more controlled. The government has delivered mainly balanced or surplus budgets over the past decade. This fiscal discipline, combined with debt workouts and agreements during the early period of RAMSI and no new borrowing over the past decade, has seen an impressive turnaround in the public sector's debt position. This has situated the government to be able to undertake limited new borrowing for high quality infrastructure / social investments.

The stability over the past decade has provided an environment in which investment and trade have been able to grow. This has buoyed the private sector, providing increased employment and other opportunities for Solomon Islanders to support themselves and to contribute productively to society. The economic reforms that have been introduced, including cuts to import tariffs, have helped to reduce costs and stimulate growth. The introduction of telecommunications competition in 2010 has led to better coverage and has halved retail costs.

The achievements over the last decade need to be viewed in the context of the events over the five years or so prior to RAMSI's arrival. Between 1998 and 2003, the economy and public finances of Solomon Islands experienced a massive collapse—real gross domestic product (GDP) fell by around 62 per cent and the decline in real GDP per capita was even greater as the population continued to grow.

While good progress has been made in relation to economic and public finance outcomes over the past decade, future progress will depend upon continuing fiscal policy discipline and reforms being cemented and enhanced. The GFC period demonstrated how vulnerable and fragile the economy is to shocks. In an environment where logging has been occurring at an unsustainable rate and is expected to fall away sharply over the medium term, this adds to risks around macroeconomic stability and growth.

### **RAMSI is changing**

RAMSI is changing because of the progress that has been made. Solomon Islands Government (SIG) and RAMSI have decided that the time is right to introduce changes that will make RAMSI a policing-only mission.

On 1 July 2013, RAMSI's development assistance programs will shift across to the bilateral aid programs managed out of the Australian and New Zealand High Commissions.

RAMSI's military component will leave in July/August 2013, sending a clear signal that Solomon Islands no longer needs an extraordinary intervention involving a foreign military force. The military is leaving because their job is done (the last time they were formally called upon to assist the police restore public order was in 2006). Today, the security challenges facing Solomon Islands, such as the risk of public disorder and family violence, are handled by the RSIPF, who are fully in charge of everyday policing.

However, RAMSI's Participating Police Force (PPF) will stay in Solomon Islands for four more years. They will continue to provide training and support to the RSIPF, especially in leadership development, public order management, logistics, human resources and administration. They will retain their armed capability to back-up the RSIPF where needed and as requested.

Over the next four years, RAMSI will remain a regional mission with all Pacific Island countries contributing police officers. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) will retain broad oversight of RAMSI's activities in Solomon Islands.

*Nicholas Coppel is RAMSI's Special Coordinator, a position he has held since March 2011. He is a senior Australian career diplomat with previous postings to Papua New Guinea (Deputy High Commissioner), the Philippines (Deputy Chief of Mission) and the United States of America.*

## **2. A few reflections on RAMSI's tenth anniversary**

*Terry M. Brown*

I supported RAMSI's arrival in the Solomons in August 2003. The conflict on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal was intractable and the ability of the RSIPF to work effectively in Honiara and the provinces, including Malaita, was at a minimum; so badly had they been compromised during the ethnic conflict period. The RAMSI force that arrived was effective and they quickly established good local relationships. Primed by the Melanesian Brothers and others, Harold Keke surrendered on the Weather Coast and effective police stations were re-established around the country. Assisted by the churches and civil society, gun collection continued effectively on Guadalcanal and Malaita and many villages proclaimed themselves "gun free" with public signs. While this disarmament was not 100 per cent effective, and may have been overly zealous (did family heirloom Snider rifles from blackbirding days really have to be surrendered?), I believe it is the most significant of the positive aspects of RAMSI's legacy, right up to today. Unlike Papua New Guinea, the Solomons are still largely gun free. Violence from guns is minimal. If RAMSI had stopped there (as seemed to be the original plan—"in" and "out" very quickly), I think I would have no complaints.

Instead RAMSI expanded enormously. The RAMSI headquarters near the Honiara International Airport became a virtual Australian military base in disguise. Armed troops patrolled the streets of Honiara and the back roads of Malaita for many years, even when there was no necessity whatsoever. It was a common sight to see armed RAMSI military personnel in the banks and shops of Honiara or Auki, just doing business, or whole truckloads barrelling along the roads. Even when there was no need for the military component of RAMSI, they were kept on, even expanded, to give a place for Australian Reservists to train. RAMSI eventually became a kind of re-militarization, projecting the view that “might-is-right”. The Townsville Peace Agreement, probably futilely, outlawed military uniforms for the country. RAMSI brought them in.

RAMSI personnel and funding expanded exponentially in its priority areas: military; police; the judiciary; prison services; and the “machinery of government”, especially the Ministry of Finance, Customs and the Electoral Commission. Yet direct RAMSI support was absent in areas arguably much more important: health, education and infrastructure. While these areas were often covered through bilateral aid, their absence from the RAMSI remit suggests that they were a much lower priority. RAMSI lawyers advised on criminal cases, but not (often more important) civil cases. Malaita was given a huge new prison in the centre of Auki, while the main provincial hospital nearby remains a health hazard – often without doctors, medicine or even water. Famously, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Honiara once asked RAMSI officials, “Why don’t you spend money on keeping people out of prison, rather than all this money on building huge new prisons?”

The “softer” areas of health, education and infrastructure were left to “ordinary” foreign aid and not given as much attention. In the RAMSI priority areas, overseas staff (“advisors”) poured in, highly paid in Australian dollars (A\$100,000 per year tax free was a common figure cited) and provided with free housing and vehicles, to “advise” underpaid, disheartened, houseless, vehicle-less, under-resourced Solomon Islands personnel. In one study I conducted in the Public Solicitors office, I found that RAMSI legal advisors were being paid in the range of 13 times that of their local counterparts; they were certainly not doing 13 times the amount of work. Locals often resented this high pay and felt that many RAMSI advisors were building up large savings back in Australia while they suffered to survive. Such inequality does not make for real capacity building, though “capacity building” became a RAMSI mantra. RAMSI personnel, especially in the RSIPF, brought an Australian police culture that did not seem to be based on building relations with those being policed, but quick armed interventions. Thus RAMSI police became the enemy in many Malaita squatter communities around Honiara and in rural Malaita. I could give many more examples of RAMSI as virtually a neo-colonial intervention. The RAMSI culture and presence also made a significant contribution to inflation, making housing for locals in Honiara virtually unaffordable.



Only in the last year or two has RAMSI begun to dismantle itself. This dismantling needs careful thought. At this point, RAMSI has left a mixed legacy and getting out without doing more damage needs reflection. It appears the RAMSI military is in the process of departure. The RSIPF still needs support, but often in infrastructure rather than personnel. Ministries that still need support, such as Finance, Education and Health, will continue to receive bilateral aid. I am puzzled as to why it is so hard simply to say, RAMSI is finished, bilateral or multilateral foreign aid will replace its civilian programmes; and quick military intervention from Townsville is possible in genuine emergencies. As RAMSI is largely Australian-organized and directed, it is almost as though Australia cannot leave. Instead of a tenth anniversary “celebration”, there should be a carefully thought transformation and a clear break with the past, which is the end of RAMSI, to allow new models to emerge that are not so hamstrung by RAMSI’s ambiguous legacy.

*Bishop Terry M. Brown was Anglican Bishop of Malaita, 1996-2008, and stayed in the Solomons throughout the ethnic tension conflict. He then lived in Honiara from 2008-2012, working as church archivist. He returned to Canada in November 2012, where he is Bishop-in-charge at the Church of the Ascension, Hamilton, Ontario.*

### **3. So near and yet so far**

*Ashley Wickham*

RAMSI has given Solomon Islanders a glimpse of how things ought to be. It is unclear if this was one of its original objectives. If it was then RAMSI was an attempt to influence our politics, and this is understandable as it is in politics that leaders have failed Solomon Islands. Yet as an attempt it has mostly been unsuccessful.

This was again in evidence recently when the government announced that the SBD\$33m (approx. \$A4,893,000) previously budgeted by parliament for the Ministry for Agriculture and Livestock for cocoa and coconut planting and rehabilitation, was now to be channelled to Members of Parliament (MPs) to seed development in their constituencies. If RAMSI could not steer successive parliaments and leaders toward using the institutions of government properly, then it has failed.

Was it in the design or the implementation of RAMSI that something was overlooked? Aussies shouldn’t feel that we are ungrateful. We wanted RAMSI to succeed. Now however, I believe that until something creative and strategic is done, we can expect further turbulence in Solomon Islands.

Discussions continue among Solomon Islanders about RAMSI, its departure and its legacies, and I am sure that many agree that the experience raised hopes and created

high expectations of better things, for example, that government institutions and leaders would sustain the changes that RAMSI tried to bring about. And better things are possible: the professional Solomon Islander is as adept as any other professional in the world.

Yet our country has a number of unique problems not found in Australia or New Zealand, from whence most RAMSI advisors came. Here, because of the colonial experience as well as experiences with logging and casinos that have contributed to major fractures in the body politic and the social fabric, many people, including national leaders, see government as a garden of opportunities to harvest as they see beneficial for themselves and their voters. And the country wants for a majority of visionary and courageous leaders to provide the space, the resources and the authority to effect change.

Such challenges are not insurmountable and RAMSI could have aided the country in overcoming them. Yet this hasn't happened, and I believe it is unlikely to, because RAMSI was built on misunderstandings of how to impact and influence Solomon Islands' culture. What was needed was critical analysis of what influences culture, followed by a scrum-like drive with cabinet in the front row, running interference with RAMSI personnel, embedded in a reinvigorated system of government.

Instead RAMSI became an administration that paralleled SIG but with superior resourcing—both in finance and human resources. And only in a few instances was it able to demonstrate good governance of the structures already in place. Solomon Islands' institutions are fixed in post-colonial structures and a post-colonial culture, and RAMSI was unable to get “under the skin”. Instead it showed up and amplified the weaknesses of government to the point that many Solomon Islanders distrust government more today than before, which is why many people are nervous about the impending departure of RAMSI.

If RAMSI was meant to help restructure government at arm's length (i.e. not becoming involved in politics), then it was mission impossible! It could have significantly influenced political administrations (Kemakeza, Sogavare, Rini, Sogavare, Sikua, Philip and Lilo)—Kemakeza more than the others—but it largely remained on the sidelines, funding repairs and renovations and generally working according to its own priorities. When it did venture into politics—as in the Castles and the Julian Moti case—it stumbled on sensibilities it had not expected. It missed significant opportunities by doing little concrete work in its first four years when then prime minister Kemakeza was amenable to new options. Instead RAMSI sent in staff with older conceptions of what was going on, while a younger group tried to analyse the situation they found. They lost four years and a lot of taxpayer funds doing this.

A number of advisors in key roles preferred to listen to experts in Canberra than take advice from local professionals. An example is the Sikua administration waiting on the Electoral Commission to come up with proposals for a new electoral system. Too late it found that the RAMSI advisors disagreed with government policy and only strengthened the existing system. Also, academic political advisors in Canberra sided with naysayers to scupper Sikua's plans to stabilize the government, which contributed to his loss of influence and government.

A better way would have been to emulate the work of former Victorian premier Steve Bracks. Upon his retirement from politics he was personally asked by the East Timorese President (who was recovering in a Melbourne Hospital from gunshot wounds) to be his advisor. I met him at a workshop organized by former WA premier Geoff Gallop in Sydney a few years ago. When asked what he did in Dili, Steve Bracks said he just showed them how to use the institutions of government. When reformers were in power in Honiara, rather than working at cross-purposes with them, RAMSI should have enabled them with the support of senior advisors. Yet this opportunity was missed.

Beyond politics, amidst the mechanisms of governance, RAMSI has worked hard on the younger generation, but the controls of the institutions were in the hands of the generation before them. We need something substantial: it needs to come from within and be carried by the new professionals who can influence and/or become the new leaders. But because of the ineptitude of our leaders, it needs a starting point that only our neighbours can provide.

Here a traditional development assistance approach can help: technical advisors actually working within the structures of government institutions to contribute to expected outcomes. Examples of successful interventions are in the Economic Reform Unit in the Ministry of Finance (which had people in line as well as advisory positions), and the Auditor General's Office and the Internal Revenue Service, where advisors held line positions. More of this could have broken the cycle of ineptitude and corruption that sadly still exists in the public service today. This is not new advice. When Australia and New Zealand sent in analysts before RAMSI arrived in mid-2003, they were told by civil society members that the best place to effect change was from line positions of critical ministries.

Yet, more radical social change is also needed. I have advocated for more than a decade for driving an educational wedge between the predominant neo-colonial culture and mindset and today's market-oriented paradigms, so as to propel Solomon Islands' government and politics into the new realities. This could be done, I believe, by giving the next two or three generations of high achievers a solid metropolitan education experience. The proposal is for Australia and New Zealand to revise their education policies and each year take all SI's year 5 and 6 students achieving B+ passes to study in

Australia and NZ to complete their high schooling and prepare for tertiary studies. The current Australian and NZ educational policies focus on in-country high schooling. By the time young adults leave local high schools, however, their world views are formed on the basis of local standards and perceptions.

Immersed in the metropolitan neighbourhood education systems SI students can learn how to perform to the expectations of the market economy as they forge careers in the globalised market place. When they return to Solomon Islands, their influence on government will be substantial, as they will take control of the institutions when their turn arrives. This approach shapes people's perspectives at a younger age.

These are the sorts of wide-ranging changes that are needed. Without them, I believe that a major lesson learned is that stability, economic development and social progress cannot be imposed or cultivated by a mission of the RAMSI kind.

*Ashley Wickham is a Policy Analyst for the Office of the Leader of the Opposition in Solomon Islands.*

#### **4. All good things must come to an end**

*Benjamin Malao Afuga*

As the saying goes, "all good things must come to an end". RAMSI's good intentions and blessings to the people of Solomon Islands will eventually come to an end. Here are my contemplations and reflections about the current RAMSI transition.

After the first rays of dawn struck the tarmac of Solomon Islands' Henderson International Airport on Thursday 24 July 2003, hundreds of soldiers, police and civilians from Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu stepped out from planes. Eventually totalling over two thousand personnel, these security forces came not in anger but with smiles and as friends determined to assist a neighbour who was in need. In what was to become a successful experiment in regional cooperation, RAMSI *helpem fren* (help a friend) was born.

The fundamental objective of RAMSI was to help Solomon Islands lay the foundations for long-term stability, security and prosperity in the wake of a conflict that had begun in 1998 between rival militants of Guadalcanal and the neighbouring province of Malaita. (If you are interested I have written more about the conflict [here](#) [Afuga 2013].) Looking back to 2003, both Solomon Islands and RAMSI have come a long way.

## **Successes**

### *Safety and Security*

One of RAMSI's paramount achievements was the immediate restoration of law and order, including the successful collection of guns from former militants. This has been a major success, something that Solomon Islanders are very grateful for.

### *Governance*

There have been clear successes in this area. There has been substantial work done in repairing and reforming government machinery, resulting in improved government accountability (although there's still much to be achieved) and improved delivery of services in urban and provincial areas.

RAMSI's strengthening of the court systems and of the legal services has been a huge success. The Case Support Unit has benefited many Solomon Islanders, especially witnesses and those accused of crimes who do not understand English properly. It has also provided counselling and basic support.

Through ten years of hard work, with the help of many Solomon Islanders who are passionate to see changes, RAMSI has also helped improve economic governance. Today, the country's economy has improved and this is due to better economic governance and tighter controls on the government's financial systems.

### *Economy*

RAMSI's presence has given confidence to many to invest in the country. This helped to rebuild the economy and has encouraged economic growth, which is paramount in a post-conflict nation like Solomon Islands.

### *Strong and peaceful communities*

Building strong and peaceful communities is no easy task, but, through ten years of hard work by both RAMSI and local communities, many communities have grown stronger and more peaceful.

RAMSI has also worked on the capacity of the RSIPF. The Acting Police Commissioner told FSII News two weeks ago: "Yes we are ready to take RSIPF forward after RAMSI leaves". This suggests, hopefully, that the country has achieved a lot in terms of policing improvements—one of the central areas of RAMSI's work.

## **Failures**

### *Safety and Security*

One of RAMSI's most significant failures in terms of safety and security has been the unsuccessful missions to recapture fugitive Edmond Sae, who at this point in time is still hiding in the jungles of Malaita. Sae was charged with the killing of former police commissioner, the late Fred Soaki. Soaki was murdered in cold blood at an Auki Motel during his term as a member of the Peace Monitoring Council, which was set up to oversee the restoration of peace after the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement. Sae was further charged over the killing of a civilian, after he indiscriminately fired rounds at the Aukipolice station from a moving vehicle. He was captured, arrested and taken to Honiara, but he escaped because of the collaboration of certain people in the RSIPF. He is still at large after another failed mission last month by the PPF and RSIPF members. Failure to recapture him raises serious questions about RAMSI's intelligence and capabilities.

At the same time, Guadalcanal Prison escapees Gedley Isa and Francis Lela, two of Harold Keke's close acquaintances, remain at large despite PPF/RSIPF missions to recapture them. Both fugitives are now hiding on the rugged Weather Coast of Guadalcanal and are classified as very dangerous. Unless these two prisoners are recaptured, people in the Weather Coast will not be safe.

### *Governance*

Much has been achieved in this area, but the geography of Solomon Islands remains a significant hindrance to the delivery of services in provincial areas. Many Solomon Islanders still do not receive the services they need.

Another major, remaining governance challenge comes in the form of constituency development funds given to MPs from government revenues and Taiwanese aid. Often this money is unaccountably spent.

### *Economy*

Whilst RAMSI's presence has given confidence to investors, which has helped rebuild the economy and encouraged growth, there needs to be more broad-based growth. As usual, investment is focused on urban centres, especially Honiara, burdening social services. RAMSI should have done more to promote decentralisation and regional development, because unequal, Honiara-focused development was one of the causes of the Tensions.



## **The future?**

RAMSI's *helpem fren* mission will have many legacies that many Solomon Islanders will treasure, but the immediate future of this country lies in the hands of Solomon Islanders. Much has been learnt, and transforming the future begins with us.

Solomon Islands is blessed with abundant natural resources, but has been unable to use them in a way that brings development to all. Indeed, one of the underlying causes of the Tensions was the unfair distribution of the nation's wealth, and this continues. Unless all the people of Solomon Islands begin to share in the benefits of peace and development, conflict will continue to be a threat. This, I think, is the biggest challenge for the future, and one that SIG has to deal with.

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## **5. The inconvenient truth**

*Shahar Hameiri*

As we're approaching RAMSI's ten year anniversary, as well as the anticipated transition towards a scaled down civilian mission, there appears to be a unanimous view in the region that the intervention has been a great success.

Ten years on, Solomon Islands' economic growth rates have been robust; peace and stability have been maintained, with the exception of the April 2006 Honiara riots; and Solomon Islands' political leaders could not be grateful enough in public for Australia's contribution to making this turnaround possible.

The inconvenient truth, however, is that RAMSI's success to date has had little to do with its self-described mission of building state capacity and a lot to do with its unwitting facilitation of rapid, unsustainable expansion in the logging and (to a lesser extent) fishing industries.

Here too lay the seeds of the potential undoing of RAMSI's apparent achievements. The expected exhaustion of commercial logging stocks in the Solomons over the next few years will likely destabilise the country again, although it is hard to precisely predict in what ways and to what extent.

To understand why, we must first note that contrary to the expectations of modernisation theory, which is still at the core of mainstream development policy ideas such as “good governance”, not all “good” things come together. It is not essential for liberal, market-led development, and democracy and peace to all arrive in one package. It is quite common, for example, to find that peace and stability are achieved at the expense of empowering some unsavoury groups in the state and in society.

With this in mind, it is crucial to point out that in Solomon Islands the environmentally destructive and communally divisive practice of commercial logging on customary land has played a pivotal role from independence in bringing together otherwise flimsy political coalitions. Hence, RAMSI’s effect on the logging industry is not a side-show to the main business of state “capacity building”, but the most significant aspect of the intervention. Yet, precious little attention has been paid to this by most commentators.

Unsurprisingly, for a country that never went through the industrial revolution and where a national market and collective national or class identities have never formed, ideological differences do not play a meaningful role in politics. Instead, politics is intensely local and election to office requires maintaining local support-bases, usually through the dispensation of patronage and material rewards.

In the near absence of alternatives for generating cash incomes, logging has become a widespread practice, and logger-backed politicians have been particularly powerful in Solomon Islands in most post-independence governments. Arguably, the violent conflict of the late 1990s had its origins in the Asian Financial Crisis. The crisis caused a sharp decline in log export revenue and thus undermined the logging-dependent structures of power running through the Solomons’ state and society that, although highly exploitative, had kept the peace to that point.

By contrast, the RAMSI era has seen a logging boom so big that logged timber volumes have reached extraordinary levels of six to eight times the estimated sustainable yield of 250,000 cubic metres per annum—more than double the previous logging boom of the 1990s.

Of course, nowhere in RAMSI’s stated objectives was “initiate an unsustainable logging boom” mentioned. But by pacifying the country and cutting “red tape” for foreign investment, it has unwittingly (though entirely to be expected), unleashed a logging investment bonanza. No doubt, a greater portion of the rents generated from logging now ends up in state coffers than before. But this does not alter the inescapable fact that this logging boom will not last much longer, and its legacy in terms of long-term economic development will be minimal.

It is precisely because of this logging boom that most powerful interests in Solomon Islands have had no reason to resist RAMSI. It has bought the peace by reinforcing their already privileged position. But one wonders what the end of the logging boom will mean for the sustainability of this arrangement? Fledgling mining operations are a long way off replacing logging revenue. And because mining is highly localised, it is possible we could see the intensification of competition over control of mining rents (in a way not previously seen in logging) as timber is a widespread resource.

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## **6. Solomons saved from sinking, but drifting and taking in water...**

*Tony Hughes*

The analysis above by Nicholas Coppel and Terry Brown mark opposite ends of the spectrum in the evaluation of the RAMSI intervention in Solomon Islands, while Benjamin Afuga and Ashley Wickham paint more mixed pictures.

The only thing that the first two assessors agree about is that getting the guns off the streets of Honiara and the rural roads of Malaita and Guadalcanal in 2003 was essential, and well done. It was done quickly, within a few weeks of RAMSI's arrival, and it worked. That was an unambiguous act of physical intervention, reinforcing the intentions of the Townsville Peace Agreement, applauded by all but a few hundred gun-drunk characters and their political masters and hangers-on. It triggered a great sense of relief in the country at large, and much speculation about what else could and should be done to restore normality, get back on a sensible track and safeguard against relapse.

In search of a balanced view, I've been looking back at how things were just before and just after RAMSI arrived to see how far our hopes and fears have been realised.

In April 2001, I discussed the situation with AusAID (Hughes 2001). Key points were that Solomon Islands has a long and close association with Australia and is not about to disappear; as a result, Australia collectively knows a lot about SI, but doesn't use this knowledge to best effect; and the aid program seems to be formed more by institutional procedures in Canberra than by any joint Australia–Solomon Islands intellectual processes. On Australia's involvement immediately before RAMSI was created, I noted:

The tragedy unfolding in SI since late 1998 has only highlighted these characteristics. Australia was shocked by the eruption of violence on Guadalcanal, as were many people in Solomon Islands. The build-up of pressure—traditional inter-island friction, aggravated into bloody vengeance by

uncontrolled post-war migration, land dealings, increasing unemployment and a history of unattended grievances—was missed by most observers.

As the violence escalated and the deep fault-lines in SI's security services were exposed, the SI Government asked Australia for help with restoring law and order. The negative response was a blow to SIG and many ordinary people, including most resident Australians. Official statements explained that Australia was afraid of being sucked into open-ended internal strife with no clear prospect of success in ending it and thus no sure way out. Once it was clear that there would be no preventive intervention from outside the Ulufa'alu government's fate was sealed.

The 5 June 2000 armed coup by the MEF, PFF and their political allies precipitated the evacuation of most Australian personnel from Honiara. Key diplomatic and aid management people remained to witness the small-scale but intensely traumatic civil war, political deal-making and gangster-like wave of urban and rural crime that followed. The eventual ceasefire and the Townsville Peace Agreement—both achieved with strong logistical and psychological support from Australia—opened the way for a small, unarmed Australian peace-monitoring team to be provided as support to the peace process.

Just over two years later, when RAMSI had been two months on the ground and the benefit to public safety was being felt, I made a number of comments in an outline development strategy prepared in Canberra for reconstruction of the SI economy, including:

The policy prescription running through the outline is philosophically 'Washington consensus'. This has not worked anywhere without substantial adjustment to local circumstances, history, geography, social and business culture. The outline seems to assume away all these things as if SI was a blank sheet of paper—apart from some messy recent scribbles that will be dealt with by the RAMSI eraser... the outline reads as if SI were an aberrant district of NSW that needed to be shaken up and brought into line. The Melanesian countries differ in important ways from the '*successful, resource rich developing and middle-income countries*' you cite as comparators—which differ among themselves in equally important ways...

In the same vein, it is simply not true that '*in successful economies, governments have not initiated growth*'. Every successful economy I can think of owes much of its success to intelligent state intervention (including forms of state ownership)... What SI has suffered from in the last fifteen years is plundering of the economy

by corrupt public officials in collusion with unscrupulous enterprises—not a necessary corollary of a strong state role in laying the foundations for economic growth.

In the event, Canberra didn't persist in prescribing development strategy in that way. Instead, RAMSI successfully restored and strengthened the badly damaged systems and controls of the Ministry of Finance, and in the process created an Economic Reform Unit in the Ministry as the main instrument through which to influence economic policy. In a curious offshoot to this very effective engagement, the ministry was re-badged "Ministry of Finance and Treasury"—a meaningless change in SI, as the treasury function was already an integral part of the finance ministry. My inquiries indicated that the change was made to protect the CVs of staff seconded from the Treasury in Canberra, who were unhappy with a posting to a mere Ministry of Finance, a relatively low-prestige location in Canberra.

In June 2004, almost a year after RAMSI arrived, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka of the East-West Center convened a three-day workshop in Honiara to discuss what lay "beyond intervention". The RAMSI Special Coordinator addressed the workshop and mine was one of many discussion papers (Hughes 2004). At that time I was most interested in what recent events told us about:

- the real nature of post-colonial statehood
- the effect on government policy of easy access to an abundance of foreign aid relative to other sources of national income
- the impact of population growth, internal migration and access to land on domestic ethnic relations
- the capture of public resources by corrupt officials and their private sector collaborators.

All of these issues were making for unease about the future among Solomon Islands people, and uncertainty among domestic and foreign investors in sectors important for long-term growth.

To those concerns I would add now:

- the chronic absence of a credible, politically grounded and technically coherent development strategy
- the parliamentary dominance of a cross-party "Stay-In-Power-At-Any-Cost" political alliance and its ready access to public funds to achieve its aim

- the hijacking of customary land tenure and perversion of the traditional role of the “big man” by a new elite of monetised con-artists
- lack of progress—or news—about the long-awaited new constitution, expected to formally recognise and strengthen sub-national identity and institutions of government.

At this stage RAMSI may be seen to have materially helped to keep the leaking ship of state afloat, but not to have had the desired impact on the structural integrity of the hull, the quality of the seamanship and navigation of the crew, or the well-being of the passengers.

Lifeboats should remain in contact.

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## **7. Finding the road to peace and reconciliation**

*Louise Vella*

Her story flows. She knows what she wants to say. She talks about what happened to her and her family during the Tensions with care, consideration and purpose. There is little need for further questions as a clear picture unfolds. It’s the future that is of more concern to her. She asks: what will happen now?

Sitting on a wooden veranda attached to a house made from local materials, the woman is a victim of the Tensions. She is being interviewed by my colleague from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established to “promote national unity and reconciliation” in post-conflict Solomon Islands. Both women hunch over a Dictaphone in an effort to record the story over the noise of the waves crashing onto the large pebbles that form the beach of the Weather Coast, the southern coast of Guadalcanal.

This interview was one of almost three thousand statements collected for the TRC. Teams of statement takers travelled the provinces by sea, road and foot, equipped with recording devices and coloured forms, to talk to victims, survivors, witnesses and ex-combatants of the conflict. The information was passed on to the research manager and commissioners in Honiara, where along with other sources, it was analysed and collated into a final report.



Arriving in villages and introducing themselves to the leaders and chiefs, statement takers were often met with suspicion. Public meetings were spontaneously held, and questions asked. Many villagers did not know what the TRC was, and did not want to talk about the past. They asked why the government wanted to take their story, and what would come of it. There was fatigue and distrust of more people coming to take more information. They wanted something in return, some form of restitution. All the statement takers could offer was the promise that the information would be used for a report for the government, including recommendations for the future. This encouraged participation—villagers wanted their voices heard by their government.

Focussing primarily on Guadalcanal and Malaita, the statement takers listened to accounts of the past: of the fear; the first time hearing gun shots; the fleeing to Honiara, to the bush, or to other provinces; the accusations of spying; the violence; the loss of houses, gardens, everything. While people told stories of the past, they wanted to document their needs now: the effect of the Tensions today; the ongoing grief and trauma; the need for development in the rural areas; for youth employment; for regular or improved shipping and transportation.

Ten years after RAMSI arrived in Solomon Islands, their mandate to restore law and order has been fulfilled, yet much more lies ahead for reconciliation and building a durable peace in the country. While guns have been removed and government departments strengthened, for many, the grievances that led to the conflict remain, and their circumstances have not improved. The conclusions in the TRCs final report noted:

The trauma of violence – physical and mental injuries, loss of properties and loved ones, forced displacement – has caused profound physical and mental injuries which are still to be healed. (p. 743)

The final report was officially handed over to the prime minister in February 2011. Since then it has not been debated in parliament or released to the public, despite the TRC Act requiring this. In April this year, after 14 months of delays, the editor of the report and long-term resident of Solomon Islands, retired bishop Terry Brown, unofficially [released the final report](#) electronically, saying that:

The report... gives proper recognition to the victims of the conflict whose stories should be heard. It is not good enough to forgive the perpetrators and forget the victims...

The need to acknowledge the victims echoes one of the conclusions of the [final report](#) (Brown 2012):

The state failed in its obligation to protect the victims and has the obligation to offer them adequate reparation. A policy of “let bygones be bygones”, as pursued by former militants and/or political leaders, would mean to victimize the victims again by disdaining their suffering. (p. 743)

Yet the ongoing delay of the official release of the final report, and therefore the neglect of the recommendations, threatens to do this, and is itself symbolic of a major challenge of working towards peace and reconciliation today.

After working for the TRC for one year, as part of the research team, I began doctoral research examining the TRC as a mechanism for peacebuilding in post-conflict Melanesia. I have been privileged to not only talk to many victims and survivors and ex-combatants of the Tensions while working at the TRC, but through my academic research, to also interview the TRC’s staff and stakeholders about their views of reconciliation and peace in the country.

The message being conveyed to me has been clear. While RAMSI has been widely welcomed and appreciated, its work and achievements have not, indeed could not, build peace and reconciliation across the country. Peacebuilding and reconciliation need to be locally driven, supported and encouraged by the government, located at the village level, and directly include the victims of the conflict.

In a country where the majority of the population live outside the capital on customary owned land, much potential lies in building on and enabling the existing strengths in Solomon Islands communities and local approaches to conflict management. Solomon Islanders have shown their resilience, tolerance, and willingness to work together and reconcile. Across the islands, there have been locally instigated and church led reconciliations, and throughout the TRC’s work there was willingness to ask for, and offer, forgiveness.

As Solomons moves towards a post-RAMSI future, reconciliation and peacebuilding need to continue in ways that are meaningful to Solomon Islanders. From my research thus far, this can occur on two levels:

**Firstly**, on an interpersonal and community level. Restoring relationships after conflict is something Solomon Islanders can do well, on an interpersonal level—between families and communities, and on an intra-personal level—as I heard many times, it happens in the heart. According to many Solomon Islanders, this interpersonal reconciliation, often involving exchange, meetings and feasts, is effective. It is not, however, something that can be solely achieved at high-level negotiations or symbolic representative reconciliation events—the people involved in the dispute must be

involved in its reconciliation. These processes can be supported or facilitated, but they must be led by those involved.

**Secondly**, reconciliation and peacebuilding can be promoted on a national scale. While the TRC was an attempt to do this, its official release and recommendations are imperative for its work to be meaningful. The Tensions provide a particular challenge to usual localised reconciliation processes, as the government itself was implicated as an active party to the conflict as well as failing to provide adequate security to its citizens. A reconciliation process that involves active input from the government must therefore be offered. On this broad scale, acknowledging the TRC report, disseminating its results in a village-friendly format and addressing the recommendations, provides a potential avenue for the government to do this.

As we look toward a post-RAMSI Solomon Islands, the government's next move in regard to the TRC report and wider peace and reconciliation will be telling. The people of Solomon Islands want to heal and move forward, yet they require government participation and support, and leaders committed to building peace across the country.

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## **8. Only part of the picture**

*Graham Baines*

It is too early to reach substantive conclusions about the impact of RAMSI. Only time will tell, as Solomon Islanders digest the outcomes and test whether the systems and security fostered survive into the post-RAMSI era.

Nicholas Coppell's reference to one RAMSI achievement as being the strengthening of the Office of the Auditor General brought back a memory of a discussion I had in Honiara with an Australian economist who'd been sent to assess the country's needs about a year before RAMSI's arrival. At that time the Auditor General was unable, for safety reasons, to venture to his office and no audit reports had been prepared for many years —from a time even before militia began to destabilise the country. On that account alone, RAMSI can certainly be said to have strengthened the “machinery of government pillar”. The question now is, “will it last?”

Nicholas is also of the view that the “law and justice pillar” outcomes are positive. There is no question that the restoration of law and order and the surrender of almost 4,000 firearms were achievements, but how long can the current settled state be sustained? It

is common knowledge that some weapons caches remain undetected and, in the course of a consultancy in which I was engaged with Correctional Services Solomon Islands, senior officers reported that this was a major concern of theirs in relation to prison security.

Those officers were happy with the RAMSI assistance from 2006, but had less pleasant memories of the early input of staff whose Australian prisons experience and perspective was applied directly with no thought to the idea that the Solomons' prison community might be (and really is) markedly different. Treating prisoners the Australian way got the exercise off to a negative start. But RAMSI learned and moved on to an improved approach. The major remaining impediment to successful outcomes for RAMSI in correctional services may be the over-built and maintenance-costly Auki prison.

Mistakes made early in the implementation of RAMSI and through the uninformed selection of prison officers was but one. However, Terry Brown's statement that "Armed troops patrolled the streets of Honiara and back roads of Malaita for many years" gives the wrong impression. In Honiara, as I recall, the display of arms lasted about two weeks before army commanders felt comfortable about sending their soldiers into town unarmed—and these were very few, for banking and shopping.

It might be argued that even for a short period it was unnecessary for soldiers to be armed, but military commanders had to guard against even the remote possibility of surprise attacks. In any case, when RAMSI put on a show of equipment at Town Ground ten days after their arrival, it was attended by an enormous crowd. It was a heartening sight to see a lively flow of pedestrians along streets that for so long had been dangerous and deserted. They came to see the display of helicopters and the breaking and burning of confiscated weapons. As each gun was sawn in two, a cheer rose from the pressing crowd. Noticing curious young men and boys cautiously eyeing armed soldiers, I ventured to introduce the two parties. Once they got talking, both sides relaxed. It seemed that it was the soldiers who had the greater need to relax.

Terry's observation that "RAMSI support was absent in areas arguably much more important: health, education and infrastructure" is beside the point. RAMSI was not intended to be a development assistance agency.

Ashley Wickham said, "RAMSI has given Solomon Islanders a glimpse of how things ought to be." True; but he went on to express disappointment that, "If RAMSI could not steer successive parliaments and leaders to using the institutions of government properly, then it has failed." There was much that RAMSI could do to bring security and to build capacity and institutions—but change the behaviour of Solomon Islander politicians?

There is widespread agreement with Ashley's observation that "RAMSI became an administration that paralleled SIG but had superior resourcing—both in finance and human resources". It would have been difficult to avoid this perception, and a key lesson to be learned from the intervention will hopefully lead to guidance as to how to intervene sensitively in similar circumstances, in a way that minimises the risks of undermining the established administration.

RAMSI is only part of the recovery picture. If Solomon Islands is to regain strength and secure lasting peace, then its political leaders need to play their complementary role: prompt action on recommendations emerging from the TRC report, for instance. It is disappointing that apart from the anticipated groans of political displeasure at the unofficial release of the report, there appears to be no public and little private debate on its content.

Ashley expresses it well in saying that, "many people, including national leaders, see government as a garden of opportunities to harvest as they see beneficial for themselves and their voters. And the country wants for a majority of visionary and courageous leaders to provide the space, the resources and the authority to effect change."

RAMSI, with mixed results, has done its bit to provide some needed space by first securing the country against armed gangs and then repairing and strengthening the three "pillars" of governance. It's time for Solomon Islands leadership to seize the opportunities this provides, and build on them. Solomon Islands' public is still looking for a sign of a political will to do so.

*Dr Graham Baines lived and worked in Solomon Islands at both national and provincial government levels for the greater part of the 1980s, and has since made many return visits from his Brisbane base.*

## **9. Moving forward by asking the right questions of the past**

*Clive Moore*

Assessing RAMSI is a difficult task. There is no equivalent intervention force in the Pacific against which to compare it. Although a PIF initiative, the venture has always been dominated by Australia and New Zealand. The RAMSI agenda lacked direction in the first few years and grew over time into the three "pillars" assistance programme, focusing on: the machinery of government; law and justice; and economic governance. We need to question if these were the right pillars, who chose them, and what else could have been done as part of RAMSI to create a viable and enduring Solomon Islands society and economy?

We also need to go back to 2003 when the RAMSI concept was formulated and enacted, and to the dangerous situation that had developed from 1998. SIG was lurching along dealing with rival militia forces, which led to the expulsion of tens of thousands of peaceful citizens from their homes, the deposing of a prime minister and the capital city falling under the control of militia. Solomon Islands had become a failing state and three prime ministers had pleaded with Australia to intervene before catastrophe occurred. The saving grace for the nation was that the dispute was largely isolated to two major islands, Malaita and Guadalcanal, and that the great majority of the people relied on subsistence agriculture and fishing to feed their families. Breakdown of the central government was a nuisance in rural areas, but not in the same way as it would be in a nation that was more reliant on the cash economy. While there was suffering because health, education and other government services were either unavailable or had declined, if one stands back and looks at the “tension-related” deaths that occurred during 1998–2003, they probably number around 244 (TRC figure). A larger number died from lack of access to health services; though this is still no more than 2,000. Compare these figures with the estimated 20,000 deaths in Bougainville (1988–98) and a reported 200,000 in East Timor (1975–1998). Although there were some horrific deaths and crimes of violence, by international civil distress circumstances the Tension years in the Solomons were moderated by a dispute etiquette that reached back into pre-colonial social mechanisms, mixed with Christian tolerance and other changes since colonial intervention began in 1893.

Between 2003 and 2006 RAMSI was fairly cocky about its success. In the initial phase, guns and ammunition were removed with speed and most Solomon Islanders breathed a sigh of relief. It was not pleasant to be threatened by thugs with high-powered rifles, and the appreciation levels for the PPF and the army contingent was overwhelming. RAMSI also began to work out a long-term agenda to deal with getting the apparatus of government working again. Unexpectedly, 2006 was RAMSI’s worst year and the organisation, through the PPF, must bear a great deal of the responsibility for the riots in Honiara after the election of Snyder Rini as prime minister. These were not the first riots in Honiara, but they came when the RSIPF was weak and the PPF were largely in control. The PPF’s way of dealing with social tension was very Australian, and they lost control of the situation. I don’t think they had any idea of the capabilities of a Solomons mob moving fast. I suppose it’s too much to expect RAMSI ever to admit to this major failing; but the disturbance probably did some good as it caused RAMSI to quietly reassess its overall strategy. Local cultural sensitivity had never been a strong point; however, from 2006 onwards there was more of a realisation that what works in Australia or New Zealand might have to be modified for the Solomons. A stronger and more focused RAMSI emerged. I have always thought that more rural training/immersion was needed for short-term expatriate public servants who have a theoretical knowledge of what should work, but no understanding of what actually

happens on the ground. It's hard to insist that this is necessary as it runs against the secondment standards they expect (hardship is not in their vocabulary), but attending a two-day training at a resort is not the same as a village stay.

One thing that the Solomons gained from RAMSI and other aid organisations is accumulated statistics on all aspects of life in the nation. An interesting mechanism by which to rate RAMSI is their People's Survey, which operated between 2006 and 2013, and is run by independent consultants. RAMSI is justly proud of its success as depicted in the survey: support for RAMSI has remained consistently high, averaging over 86 percent during the years of the survey.

The 2013 survey results have been published recently; there were 3,405 respondents, and they afford a range of other interesting insights into Solomon Islands life after ten years of RAMSI. 24 percent of respondents had partners from a different home province, a figure which rises to 50 percent in Honiara; an indication of growing social complexity. Many people still insist on identifying Solomon Islanders by island or province of origin, when in fact the mix is changing fast and eventually a national consciousness will emerge, overriding present regional allegiances. Health services were viewed as generally improving, although there were problems with staff and shortages of medicines. The same patterns of improvement were seen with education and the RSIPF. A majority (54 percent) thought that the national government was performing at a satisfactory or better level, but 66 percent thought that provincial governments were not performing well. The reported main cause of conflict in communities came from alcohol, drugs and *kwaso* (potent home brewed spirits). One interesting statistic is that 59 percent owned a mobile phone, which shows how fast the nation is changing, even in rural areas.

It is easy to criticise RAMSI. Even though a very large amount of money was made available, RAMSI was never intended to be a *de facto* national government and it had to choose its priorities in a quest to strengthen the overall apparatus of government. While we can question the priorities chosen, in the end the organisation can only be judged on its implementation of its stated agenda. The RAMSI agenda concentrated on a military presence, rebuilding the police force, maintaining the judiciary, stabilising and expanding prison services, and a concentration on the machinery of government, particularly finance, customs and the Electoral Commission. The military component outstayed its welcome, and one wonders what the Australian agenda actually was in maintaining such a large force for so long. In the early years they were much more visible; more recently the military was effectively confined to barracks. My impression is that RAMSI was using the Solomons as an Australian military training ground, not because of any real need to maintain troops.

During the Tension years the police force was compromised by its collaboration with the Malaitan militia. It was dismantled and rebuilt, which was sensible, but some of the priorities were wrong. Accommodation was poor: the Rove Police Quarters and the accommodation at Central Police Station were squalid to say the least; so why would high quality staff want to join the RSIPF? Eventually, better housing was constructed, but in my mind this should have been part of the initial package when rebuilding the police force. RAMSI's priorities left major areas like health, education and development of infrastructure to the national government.

In my assessment, there were several major factors that caused the Tensions: migration from Malaita, the most populous province; lopsided development on Guadalcanal; problems over urban development; un- and underemployment and resultant social pressures; and rogue leaders who inflamed less educated people. Arguably, unless these pressure points can be released, trouble of some sort will come again. The government has tried to get large scale economic development moving on Malaita but all attempts have failed; who can blame young Malaitans for wanting to move to places where they have better chances of employment? No one has solved the issues of underdevelopment on Guadalcanal, except in Honiara. Providing more infrastructure on Guadalcanal and Malaita could well have been seen as a RAMSI priority, or they could have been more involved with negotiations with other funding agencies. And as for rogue leaders, well we can't blame RAMSI for them and RAMSI has tried to strengthen the electoral and parliamentary systems.

Solomon Islands' economy is buoyant. Although the over-exploitation of the forests has been a long-term economic disaster, investment confidence has returned over the last ten years. RAMSI can take part of the credit for this.

Overall, RAMSI does need to have consistent policies and RAMSI has deep but not endless financial pockets. However, perhaps, as RAMSI is devolved into High Commission aid programs it is time to look back ten plus years and return to basics. Ask the question: what were the central elements in what went wrong and could it all reoccur again? Should RAMSI have revised its policies more, once the basic pillars were standing without the need to be further propped up? Now that the findings of the TRC have been released (albeit it not officially), should RAMSI be assisting to implement the recommendations? Although Solomon Islanders are overwhelmingly thankful to RAMSI and supportive, we can still question its policy choices. We must think ahead over the next ten to 20 years to ensure the creation and maintenance of a prosperous and just society in Solomon Islands.

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## 10. Solomon Islands in transition

*Matthew Allen and Sinclair Dinnen*

RAMSI's current "transition" has become the subject of intense deliberation among the Australian policy community. Much of this discussion revolves around the technical challenges of transitioning from one modality of external assistance to another, namely, from a post-conflict intervention aimed at stabilisation and recovery to a more regular bilateral aid engagement. However, the "RAMSI transition" is not the only type of transition that is taking place in Solomons and we shouldn't allow the short-term policy focus on managing RAMSI's smooth exit to obscure what are arguably much larger and more significant transitional challenges facing Solomon Islands. In this analysis, we use the occasion of RAMSI's transition to outline the multiple and inter-related transitions taking place in Solomons with a view to opening a wider dialogue about transition.

Much has already been said about the RAMSI transition. The well-rehearsed Australian government position has been disseminated across a range of media, including in a recent [SSGM Discussion Paper](#) (Coppel 2012) and a Development Policy Centre [blog post](#). We might characterise this form of transition, and the discourse that accompanies it, as managerial and technocratic. It is primarily a "change management" process; moving from one form of intervention to another. "Transition" in this sense is by no means unique to Solomon Islands (nor, to be sure, are any of the other transitions discussed here) and has some similarities, as well differences, with the "exits" playing out to varying degrees in other so called "fragile" settings, such as Liberia, Sierra Leone or Afghanistan.

Widening the frame beyond managing the transition in the development relationship between Solomon Islands' and Australian governments, we see a large body of global experience on the circumstances under which conflict-affected and fragile states are most likely to achieve durable peace and stability. For example, the [2011 World Development Report](#) (World Bank 2011) highlighted the importance of restoring confidence and transforming the institutions that provide citizen security, justice and jobs. Elite settlements and credible signalling are also increasingly viewed as critical to successful transition from conflict and fragility. How has Solomon Islands fared in this comparative frame, and what can be learnt about possible post-RAMSI futures?

Another significant transition is currently underway in Solomon Islands' economy, with the shift in the export base from logging to mining. The Gold Ridge mine, which was shut down in 2000 as a consequence of militant activities on Guadalcanal, re-opened in 2011; and there is mineral prospecting and mine lease conversion taking place throughout the archipelago. Meanwhile Solomons long-suffering forests, for several decades the victims of a notorious alliance between politicians, local big-men and Malaysian logging

companies, are nearing commercial exhaustion. The history of mining and conflict in Solomon Islands, as well as in neighbouring Bougainville and mainland PNG, suggests that the costs and benefits of Gold Ridge and future mining operations will have to be handled with great care. Is Solomon Islands transitioning from one form of “resource curse” to another, and one likely to generate major stresses and divisions with potential for violent conflict? What are the political economy implications of this shift from logging to mining?

In addition to the shifting export base, Solomon Islands is also undergoing several of the deep structural changes that have characterised development in many other fragile contexts. While rates of urbanisation remain relatively low, Honiara has more residents than ever before, with the town boundaries spilling over into surrounding areas, much of which are under customary ownership. Colonial era infrastructure is totally inadequate to the needs of the expanding capital. Significant agrarian change is also taking place in some rural areas, especially in those where population densities are highest, such as on north Malaita, and where there is significant cash-crop production, such as on north Guadalcanal. What lessons can be learnt from comparative experience with these sorts of social and economic transitions?

In addition to structural and economic transitions occurring “above the state”, there are also transitions taking place “beneath the state” in the local social orders that remain the primary reference point for most Solomon Islanders. Since the effective abolition of Area Councils in 1998, there has been no local level of elected government in Solomon Islands. The removal of this level occurred around the same time as the advent of constituency funds. In the larger context of the gradual withdrawal of state that has occurred during the post-colonial period, constituency funds, which have expanded dramatically in recent years, provide the only consistent linkage between national government and the rural communities where the bulk of the population live. As in PNG, the institution of discretionary funds has become fundamental to the way in which Solomon Islands’ state actually works (as opposed to Weberian ideals as to how it should work) and how state–society relations are governed in practice.

Recently published research on [Justice Delivered Locally in Solomon Islands](#) (JDL) [pdf] (Allen et al. 2013) documents some of the transitions occurring “beneath the state”. These transitions taking place at the most local levels, including changing identities and allegiances, pervasive substance abuse and growing intergenerational stresses, remain barely visible from the vantage point of government and donor offices in Honiara. On a more positive note, the JDL report also identifies the efflorescence in experimentation with local and culturally meaningful forms of governance in different parts of the country, as local leaders and community groups attempt to address some of many challenges they face in the absence of effective government engagement. While such

experimentation inevitably yields many failures, it provides an important reminder of the largely unacknowledged resilience at local levels and the practical ways in which local actors are seeking to fill the void in state service provision, especially in areas such as safety and dispute resolution.

As we contemplate Solomon Islands' future beyond RAMSI, it is critical that we do so in light of the full range of transitions underway—within the state, as well as above and beneath it—shifting away from a narrow concern with the technicalities of changing aid modalities to a more analytical focus on the implications of, and likely interaction between, these more profound transitions.

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## **11. Impartiality and Solomon Islands' police**

*Joseph D. Foukona*

According to Sir Robert Peel, one of the principles of ethical policing is “impartial service to the law”. While most people would agree with this, recent events in Solomon Islands seem to indicate that the RSIPF is gradually losing its grip on impartiality and public confidence.

RAMSI has contributed positively towards strengthening the RSIPF in the last ten years. However, impartial service to the law remains a challenge.

During Solomon Islands' Tension period (1998–2003), the RSIPF's impartiality was drastically compromised because some police officers were perceived to have supported militant groups and some were allegedly involved in criminal and corrupt practices. This exacerbated the conflict because there was no longer a strong functioning state to protect citizens. This also led to deterioration in people's trust and confidence in the police.

Since the arrival of RAMSI in July 2003, the focus on building an effective policing service through training and the re-strengthening of structures and systems has put pressure on the RSIPF to step up. Hence, the force we have now has improved a lot compared to ten years ago, and the rule of law has been restored. But, as RAMSI scales down, there are still concerns about police impartiality.

This became evident due to two recent events involving the RSIPF. The first event was a trip to Vanuatu by a group of police officers, funded by the Member of Parliament for West Honiara, Namson Tran, who has a [court case](#) (Solomon Star 2013a) pending

against him. According to media reports, Tran forked out SBD\$110,000 from his constituency fund to pay for the police officers' trip to Port Vila.

The local media reported that when the acting Commissioner of Police, Juanita Matanga, was asked about the assistance from the West Honiara MP she said ["there is nothing wrong about the funding"](#) and that she "does not see any conflict of interest arising from the assistance" (SIBC 2013a). Ms Matanga later claimed she did not make these statements, and that the media made them up; the media's response was to say: ["We've recorded everything she said"](#) (Solomon Star 2013b).

The acting Commissioner of Police and the RSIPF Executive then claimed that they had no prior knowledge of the assistance from Tran and denied having approved the request for funding. They said the arrangement was facilitated by the Police Social Soccer Club Committee, which is independent of the Office of the Commissioner and RSIPF Executive.

While the acting Commissioner of Police claimed that she did not play any role in acquiring the funds from the West Honiara MP, it was clear from her previous statements in the media that she at least knew about the police officers' trip to Vanuatu and the reasons for the trip. The fact that the acting Commissioner of Police and the RSIPF Executive failed to make a decision to stop a politician from funding the trip indicates that there is still a lot that needs to be done to ensure the RSIPF maintains impartiality and a high level of professionalism.

Worse still, from media reports, it appears the police trip to Vanuatu was not only as a social soccer club, but also as official representatives of the RSIPF. The fact that a politician has used constituency funds to pay for this trip gives the impression that police officers have formed "clientelist" relationships with some politicians. This is likely to fuel public perceptions that the force is not impartial and cannot be trusted.

Overseas trips by police officers are state responsibilities and should have been budgeted for by the government. The failure to do so indicates that the state is unable to adequately manage its budget to cater for police operations, capacity and welfare. Also, the fact that the Police Social Soccer Club Committee solicited funds from a politician who has a court case pending against him and the acting Commissioner of Police and RSIPF Executive did not stop it, demonstrates that the RSIPF's operational culture could easily be subverted by other interests that do not promote police impartiality.

The second concerning event was the reinstatement of Walter Kola as Deputy Police Commissioner. Kola had been suspended pending investigations into allegations of malpractice, but was reinstated in July 2013. In the wake of this there were public expressions of concern that Kola's case was not thoroughly investigated by an

independent body, and that he might have not been appropriately reprimanded. In response to these concerns, the acting Commissioner of Police said that Kola “[has been dealt with and he has been severely punished](#)” (Solomon Times 2013). It is not clear, however, what she meant by “severely punished.”

Interestingly, the police officers’ trip to Vanuatu was led by Kola and the assistant acting Commissioner Simson Bugeva. The fact that Kola is the Deputy Police Commissioner and a RSIPF Executive is further evidence that the Executive knew about and participated in the trip. Kola should have known that accepting funds from the MP for West Honiara would have negative impacts on the public’s perceptions of the force, especially its impartial service to the law.

The police trip to Vanuatu and Kola’s reappointment as the Deputy Police Commissioner are recent events that continue to shape public perceptions about the RSIPF. These events bring into question the professionalism and impartiality of the RSIPF, especially the level of independence in investigating issues involving top/senior ranking police officers, government officials, politicians, businessmen and other prominent individuals in Solomon Islands.

Public trust and confidence in the RSIPF, as well as its legitimacy, can only be maintained and sustained—now that RAMSI is in transition—if RSIPF demonstrates a high level of professionalism and impartiality both at the organisational and operational level. Based on recent events, this will be a major challenge in coming years.

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## **12. Lessons learnt on the role for aid**

*Terence Wood*

There are both glass half full and glass half empty ways of looking at RAMSI’s legacy. If glass half full is your style, you can focus on the restoration of peace, relatively well-run elections, government departments functioning after a fashion and the return of trade—copra, cocoa, produce, markets. Or, if you’re a glass half empty type, there’s the return of the logging trade, corruption, vote buying, intermittent violent crime in Honiara and the fact that few of the issues that contributed to the Tensions have been addressed.

There are also optimistic and pessimistic takes to be had on Solomon Islands’ future.

Most pessimistically, coming years could see a return to conflict, although a more likely unhappy future for Solomons is one that sees it sinking under problems similar to those plaguing Papua New Guinea. A future where the political influence of extractive

industries continues, and where the environmental damage and local inequities they bring causes increasing harm. A future where Honiara becomes unsafe as a dysfunctional police force fails to contain crime. A future of even worse public services.

On the other hand, the country might well withstand its challenges. It isn't the Balkans—while it is possible to divine fault-lines of prejudice between island groups, it's easier to find individuals interacting across divides. In parts of the country, village institutions work well and aspiring entrepreneurs are striving to run small businesses. In Honiara, civil society, in the form of churches and older NGOs, are active and increasingly accompanied by new groups, all working on their own ideas for improving things. Reforming politicians struggle onwards. And in all this lies the possibility that the country may slowly but surely find itself a pathway to development and stability. A happy future is possible.

As is an unhappy one. And which of the two it will be is something that will ultimately be determined by Solomon Islanders themselves.

Indeed, if there is one lesson to be had from the RAMSI years it is just how little power donors have over the fate of nations. Since RAMSI's arrival over \$2 billion USD has been spent as aid in Solomon Islands (exact numbers evade me because [Aidflows'](#) and the [OECD's](#) figures differ). All that in a country of approximately 600,000 people. The aid involved hasn't gone completely to waste, but it has done little to solve the foremost problem Solomon Islands faces: poor governance.

A better governed Solomon Islands would be better able to maintain law and order in its urban areas. It could provide services. It would make it easier for productive commerce, and harder for extractive industries. Yet, while donors have tried to improve governance, and while there has been some success, progress has been underwhelming.

Mostly, this isn't donors' fault. Mistakes have been made (far too much [Isomorphic Mimicry](#), for example) but the real issue is that governance, in Solomon Islands as everywhere on Earth, is born of politics and political economy. And the political arena is one where, for obvious reasons, it is very hard for donors to intervene.

In Solomons the core problem is that the country's politics are acutely clientelistic. Voters elect and assess MPs on their ability to provide personal assistance. And MPs respond to the incentives that spring from this: they focus on dispensing largess to supporters and, for the most part, neglect to govern the country. The prime minister can only maintain a governing coalition by dispensing largess of his own, buying the support of wavering MPs with money or ministerial positions. Ministers end up atop government departments as a result of sold allegiances, not aptitude. And they stay in

their roles not by running departments well, but through ongoing manoeuvring. Under disinterested political leadership the civil service remains moribund.

The money from extractive industries permeates this. It buys concessions and the turn of blind eyes. Cash is used by politicians to shore up support.

None of this is the fault of voters. Clientelism exists throughout the developing world, and voting in search of personalised benefits makes sense when the state is weak or corrupt. It also makes sense in a country that is absent national reforming political movements. Even if a voter wants a better governed country, absent such movements facilitating national collective action, all they are left with is a small say over the behaviour of one MP out of 50, and one MP can do little on their own.

I can't pretend to be certain but, reflecting on the above, I *think* Solomon Islands' escape from poor governance will require the rise of national political movements: Solomon Islanders making common cause across the county to promote peaceful change. And this could happen: the raw ingredients are there. But whether it happens is out of the hands of aid workers.

Until it happens, there remains a role for aid though. Aid cannot transform governance in Solomon Islands but it can still help.

Aid can fund research, and better evaluations. There is a lot to learn.

Aid can also assist if donors seek out innovative ways (suitable to poorly governed environments) of improving the provision of public services and getting resources to communities. Aid for services is no substitute for a well-run government but absent one of those it can still help people.

And aid can serve as a countervailing force holding crucial institutions together despite the problems of politics—the Electoral Commission, the police force, the finance ministry. Donors can't cure these entities, not while politics remains dysfunctional, but they can stop them from decaying further. Prevent, for example, elections in Solomon Islands from descending towards the disorder present in PNG.

This won't fix the country of its own accord—that's beyond us—but good aid can help hold things together in a way that allows such transformation to grow from within. It can provide just a little extra space for Solomon Islanders to shape their own happy future.

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### **13. Solomon Islands post-RAMSI: falling down in bits and pieces**

#### *Transform Aqorau*

How does one evaluate RAMSI? I am not sure, although there are various reports, consultancies and surveys that have attempted to address this question. These reports have endeavoured to evaluate the effectiveness of RAMSI against the three pillars of its stated mission: a) restoration of law and order; b) improving the machinery of government; and c) promoting economic growth. There is, however, little independent, evidence-based, critical research that has been carried out on RAMSI's approach and operations, and their impact on people's lives and the public service. Perhaps some research has been done, but these papers are not accessible to the public because they are owned by RAMSI. Much of the research that has been done to date has presented individual perspectives, rather than research based on a program to uncover tangible evidence about the effectiveness of RAMSI. This short discourse is intended to add to the ongoing debate.

I would argue that it is not easy to measure RAMSI's effectiveness across the three pillars, or to make specific conclusions on the efficacy of RAMSI's operations over the past ten years. This is because people's views of the efficacy of RAMSI are often subjective and influenced by perceptions of, and interactions with, RAMSI personnel. The examples given below illustrate this point.

The first example is café proprietors who set up business specifically to cater for expatriates who want a nice, comfortable, posh place to have coffee. They would argue that RAMSI has been good for business because it has made the demand for such facilities economically viable. Solomon Islanders, on the other hand, who probably want to also have a nice cappuccino and a slice of cheese cake, but cannot afford the exorbitant price that these café's charge, would argue that RAMSI has helped inflate the price of a cup of coffee and therefore effectively pushed them out of the market. They would have a different view of RAMSI.

The second example is home owners who rent their homes at exorbitant rates to RAMSI personnel. They would argue that RAMSI has had a positive impact on the local rental market because it has created a demand for good quality houses for rent at rates that would not otherwise have been possible. Solomon Islanders, on the other hand, (many of whom are public servants) would have a negative view of the impact that RAMSI has had on rental prices because they are pushed out of the market and therefore have to live in overcrowded conditions with relatives. They too would have a different view of RAMSI.



The third example is those who view the restoration of law and order, especially the presence of the PPF alongside the RSIPF as having enhanced the effectiveness of the rule of law. They would argue that RAMSI has restored law and order and helped the RSIPF regain its credibility. Solomon Islanders, who may have experienced the heavy handedness of RAMSI personnel in various operations, may take a different view. They would argue that RAMSI is biased, culturally insensitive and heavy handed in their approach to carrying out investigations. Thus, as a result of their personal experiences, they may have a different view of RAMSI.

These examples illustrate the bias with which individuals may view RAMSI. As alluded to earlier, this might originate from the nature of their interaction, personal experiences and circumstances. All these experiences help shape people's attitudes and perceptions of RAMSI.

I would argue that because perceptions of RAMSI are subjective, it is unfair to evaluate it on the basis of what has been achieved in terms of the three pillars. RAMSI's performance should rather be evaluated around the question of what Solomon Islands is like in 2013, taking as a yardstick the three pillars. In addition, I would argue that RAMSI was not established to solve Solomon Islands' law and order, governance and economic problems. RAMSI was established to provide a conduit through which Solomon Islanders would address these problems. Thus, the question that should be asked is not how well RAMSI has performed, but rather how well successive Solomon Islands' governments have performed since 2003.

There are different ways in which this question may be answered, which are also subjective. I do not claim patent over the way I attempt to answer these questions because my views are also subjective, but I will offer them nonetheless as a basis for discourse. How well successive Solomon Islands' governments have performed may be evaluated against the following factors:

- a) What impact has law and order had on governance?
- b) What improvements have been made to the machinery of government?
- c) How have living standards improved, resulting from economic growth?

### **What impact has law and order had on governance?**

I would argue that overall this has been positive. There is a semblance of law and order, the RSIPF is visible at times and generally available most times, and government systems are generally functioning. However, these gains are being negated by the way state agencies like MPs are appropriating limited state resources for themselves. In this regard, it may be argued that whereas former militants held Treasury to ransom at gunpoint, MPs are holding Treasury to ransom through legislation and the budget. The

only difference between the two groups is the *modus operandi* through which Treasury is being held to ransom, but the impact on the economy and the lives of Solomon Islanders is the same. Furthermore, whereas former militants demanded inflated overtime allowances for keeping Honiara “safe”, MPs are demanding more of the state’s limited resources for themselves in the name of “constituency development”. MPs have not restricted their insatiable greed only to the Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF). They are packaging funds for tourism, cocoa, cattle and fisheries, and legitimising it under the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) Act. This kind of behaviour has a percolating effect on other elements of the public sector because it originates from the highest echelons of the government. Other state actors, like the provincial governments, are also imitating what national MPs are doing. I would also argue that other state agencies, like the RSIPF, are also being compromised because of the behaviour of MPs. Unfortunately, all the good work that has gone into restoring law and order is being undermined by the very people that were elected to uphold the rule of law, demonstrate respect for the rule of law and apply the rule of law without fear or favour. MPs have instead undermined the rule of law and given themselves power over how millions are spent in ways that are disproportionate to the needs of Solomon Islanders. The increasing misapplication of these rules is evident, *inter alia*, in the delays in allowances for students, the declining standards of medical services, and the poor condition of roads and state assets. I would respectfully argue that while there has been a positive effect with regard to pillar one, it is unfortunately being negated and abused (*albeit* legally through Acts of Parliament) to the economic and social detriment of Solomon Islanders. To that extent, the answer to the first question might be: law and order has had a somewhat positive impact, which is unfortunately being undermined by poor governance.

### **What improvements are there to the machinery of government?**

The machinery of government is intended to restore confidence in government organisation, systems, procedures, policies and to create a civil service capable of providing “public services” to the general public, be they Solomon Islanders, investors or foreigners. The extent to which this has been achieved is reflected in the ability of public servants to work with confidence and exercise competence in their respective positions. The work that the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM) is doing to ensure public servants are trained in the basic administrative and financial instructions of the public service is also commendable. If the response to the second pillar were to be evaluated on these grounds alone, I would argue that it has been successful.

I would respectfully argue, however, that there are at least two areas in which doubts may be cast on this conclusion. The first is in respect to land allocation, in particular, allocation of urban land where developments clearly reflect corruption, as evidenced by the standard of commercial buildings built by the more recent Chinese arrivals. It is argued that these lands could only have been allocated through corrupt means, as there has not been any government tender of government lands by the Commissioner of Lands in the last ten years. I would argue that the replacement of residential homes at Kukum Labour Line by commercial buildings that are owned and operated by these new Chinese arrivals could only have been due to corrupt means. There were no tenders, and the fact that Solomon Islanders who lived there could have been given an opportunity to own the plots of lands on which their homes were located arguably points to corruption. I would argue that government machinery that disenfranchises its citizens by making them homeless to give way to the new wave of Chinese underlines serious inherent weaknesses in the government systems, particularly in the Lands Department, Physical Planning Division and Honiara Municipal Authority.

The second area is in regard to work and residential permits. A government system that enables people who do not speak a single word of Pidgin or English (or whose command of both languages is limited) to hold a Solomon Islands passport and own property, shops, buildings and businesses underscores a failure in the system. Can you imagine a Solomon Islander arriving in China, Australia or New Zealand without any funds and then suddenly owning businesses and becoming a citizen without being able to speak the language? To that extent, it is argued that a system that enables a person with limited command of Pidgin or English to own land, run shops and hold a Solomon Islands passport illustrates corrosion in the machinery of government. The revelation by a staff member of the Auditor General's Office that corruption is widespread in government arguably supports the contention that Solomon Islands has gone from bad to worse, and therefore, to that extent, its performance on pillar two is wanting. It is beyond the scope of this discourse to ascertain the reasons. I would simply venture to suggest that there is an inextricable link between political behaviour and a lack of respect for procedures, processes and regulations by those supposedly serving under political directives.

A question that also needs to be asked is what impact did RAMSI advisors have on the machinery of government, and why has the system been abused to the extent revealed by staff from the Auditor General's Office in spite of these advisors? It might be argued that this was a flawed approach because of the huge disparities in the salaries of local public servants and their RAMSI counterparts. RAMSI advisors were often paid ten times more than their local counterparts. These differences distort the relationship between them. I have heard from *wantoks* who worked with RAMSI advisors that, even though the relationship was supposed to be one of equals, it was not unusual to find the

RAMSI advisor bossing the local counterpart, often in ways that were culturally insensitive or lacking in respect for local knowledge and expertise. I doubt that one would be able to find reports of this nature because of the tight control that RAMSI has on information, but I know that exit reports by local counterparts have often been critical of their RAMSI advisors. There is no better way to build competence in the public service than to give Solomon Islanders the same level of education as their RAMSI advisors and encourage locals to write policies to raise the standards of the public service.

### **How have living standards improved as a result of economic growth?**

Pillar three is not necessarily easy to evaluate because of definitional issues. What constitutes economic growth for one person might not be viewed as economic growth by others. Similarly, measuring improvements in living standards is subjective. Thus, someone who receives a royalty payment from logging operations might think that their living standards have improved because they can now buy corn beef, tea, sugar, rice etc. (even if it is only for a short time). There is also a problem of generalising the issues because of the uneven distribution of resources throughout Solomon Islands, and imbalances in the availability of government services. There are, however, some general ways in which improvements in standards of living may be measured by looking at changes in economic well-being over time. Questions that might be asked include: is the economy meeting people's needs and, are real incomes improving? It is basically a quantities measure of well-being. Suffice to say there are different ways in which this can be measured.

One baseline measure of standards of living is to look at real income per capita (that is GDP divided by the total population). This is to see if real GDP per capita rises when real national output grows faster than the population over a period of time. Solomon Islands' politicians have often argued that the economy has grown, by pointing to the increase in GDP. It is argued, however, that GDP is not necessarily a measure of economic growth because it does not reflect real changes in society. It is a fact that the increase in GDP has been spawned by the logging industry, at huge environmental and social costs to Solomon Islanders. Economic growth rates in the past five years have been distorted by the rate at which Solomon Islands' natural forests have been removed. The real question is: what improvements have been produced for the general population of Solomon Islands as a result of this so called growth? I would argue that the logging industry may have enriched some people, including some politicians, but it has left a terrible legacy of corruption that has permeated all levels of Solomon Islands' society. I would also argue that policy rhetoric about economic development is not supported by relevant administrative and legislative actions: reforms to natural resource legislation to enable resource owners to be participants in development and to get a fairer share of the value

of their resources have never been made and are unlikely to. At the same time, necessary reforms to the Lands and Titles Act (that would make it easier to recognise customary land right holders without having to take their rights away through acquisition of their land) have also not been made and are unlikely to. It is argued that there is a close nexus between economic development, reforming the Land and Titles Act, natural resource legislation and resolving the problems that led to the ethnic tension. The fundamentals have not been addressed. It is argued that there are clearly more squatters within and on the outskirts of Honiara in 2013 than there were in 2003. There are more Chinese-owned shops and buildings in Honiara, Munda, Auki, Noro and Gizo in 2013 than there were in 2006. The Commission of Inquiry into the 2006 riots was unequivocal in its conclusion about where polices should be directed; namely, inclusive development, proper planning, delivery of social services and ensuring that the new wave of Chinese businesses move away from being economic rent seekers and become “developers” of well-planned and designed shopping malls, so that Solomon Islanders can also participate in the retail sector. Unfortunately, Solomon Islands’ politicians have been too preoccupied with how much more of the state’s limited funds can be appropriated to the CDF to address these fundamental economic problems.

## **Conclusion**

There are elements of bias in looking at the success of RAMSI, and particularly the response of successive Solomon Islands’ governments. I have tried as best as I could within the limits of this discourse to argue what I view to be the “measure” of Solomon Islands’ responses to the opportunities provided by RAMSI’s presence in Solomon Islands between 2003 and 2013. The lens I have used is subjective and reflects my own bias; based on what I have observed. My assessment is a qualitative evaluation, and I would caution readers not to read too much into it without a more comprehensive analysis of the arguments I have made to measure the impact of RAMSI on Solomon Islanders. I have tried to show some trends across the three pillars of RAMSI’s mission statement and I have set out what I believe to be trends that should concern donors and people who might be interested in contesting the elections in 2014. Donors such as the Taiwanese government should be concerned that their tax money is helping to sustain a situation that will fuel a revolution; a revolt instigated by young Solomon Islanders who are well-informed through social network links as to what is happening within the deepest corners of the government.

I would argue by way of conclusion that we have missed an opportunity. If there are criteria against which we can measure respect for the rule of law, and how successfully we have responded to these opportunities, we need only look at the way in which an increasing number of people drink beer in public in front of police officers in total defiance of the law. I would submit, as a final remark, that there are lessons to be

learned about interventions that make assumptions about the cultural, political, historical, ethnic, traditional, economic and social conditions of a country. No one in 2003 could have foreshadowed that, by 2013, corruption would have become so invasive in Solomon Islands so as to undermine the good work that has been done by RAMSI.

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