

RAMSI: lessons learnt on the role for aid

by Terence Wood

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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 there are aspiring entrepreneurs striving to run small businesses. In Honiara civil society in the form of churches and older NGOs is 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 on-going 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 fifty, and one MP can do little on their own.

I can't pretend to be certain but, reflecting 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 country 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.

This post continues our series looking at the [Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands \(RAMSI\)](#) as it marks its tenth anniversary (23 July 2003), and enters a new period of transition (1 July 2013). The series is collected [here](#).

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