

What the state of politics in Solomon Islands means for aid

by Terence Wood

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In [three previous blog](#) posts I've discussed elections in Solomon Islands, electoral politics, and how politics contributes to the country's governance woes. I've argued that elections, including those in 2014, haven't been perfect, but they've been ok. And yet, as I've discussed, this hasn't spared the country awful governance. The clientelist nature of the country's politics, combined with political resource curse issues, has meant that democratic governance in Solomons has not been good governance. Worse still, there is no reason to expect this to change soon.

The million dollar question (technically, the [\\$US 288 million dollar question](#)) for donors is what this means for their work. How should they react to the fact they are working in a country where quality of governance is primarily a product of domestic political economy, very poor and unlikely to improve in a hurry?

My answer is as follows:

1. Don't cut aid by large amounts. Given the ineffectiveness of aid in transforming Solomon Islands into a well-governed state (despite so much having been given since 2003) and given Australia will have to [cut its aid budget somewhere](#), cuts for Solomons may seem tempting. Yet large cuts would be a mistake. Aid may have not set Solomon Islands on the path to development, but it has helped it become a vaguely coherent state. This may not seem a lot, but it matters. And, because aid is a significant slice of Solomon Islands' GDP, a big aid cut could easily do economic harm — harm the country doesn't need right now. More unemployed young men in a post-conflict country would not be a good thing.
2. Take persistent poor governance into account when choosing what to fund. This sounds obvious, but it still seems to be neglected, particularly in infrastructure work. If the government is poorly governed and if it's going to stay that way, before deciding to upgrade a runway or road, be realistic about whether the government will maintain it thereafter.
3. Be clear that the problems of governance in Solomon Islands are, for the most

part, problems of political economy, rather than issues stemming from the capacity of government department staff. While this is unlikely to be news to aid workers at the coalface, issues need to be discussed for what they are, particularly as a lot of governance-related aid work still occurs under the rubric of capacity building. There are capacity issues, and sometimes aid can help with these, but fundamental problems stem from power and incentives percolating down from the political sphere. This doesn't mean there is no role for aid-funded work in government departments — there is — but we ought to be clear that usually our engagement will be as a countervailing force, placing TA or in-line staff in key government departments as a check against the corroding effects of political economy. The task is foremost one of holding together, not training and improving. To be clear, engagement should still be respectful and empowering in daily practice, but it should also be strategic and understood to be ongoing.

4. Engage intelligently with the provision of social services. Rather than practising **isomorphic mimicry** we should study carefully what currently works and what doesn't, and try and see whether comparatively minor modifications can be made to bring sustainable improvements.

5. Learn about, and engage carefully with, the state/society interface. Quite possibly the most encouraging feature of recent years in Solomon Islands has been the rise of new civil society groups such as Forum Solomon Islands International. These groups have tended to avoid partisan participation in politics, opting instead to hold political actors to account for performance in governing. A lot remains to be seen about the groups (particularly whether they can extend their reach from urban elites to rural electorates), but they do offer the promise of political change. Because of this, there is a case for careful — very careful — engagement from donors and aid NGOs. This shouldn't, I think, involve funding: it's better for the groups to be powered by passion. But donor country NGOs might be able to share some of the tricks of the campaigning trade. And government donors could share good, clear information on how much aid is given to the Solomon Islands government and what for. Existing discussions on social media fora suggest aid is not well understood; and more knowledge might translate into better efforts to hold the government to account for the aid money it gets. Also, obviously, aid agency staff should be actively discouraging colleagues from other branches of their governments from **spying on the NGOs in question**.

Hold the line on aid quantity, hold key institutions together, adapt the way we fund the provision of social services, and engage gently with a new form of civil society. None of this is transformative. But aid can't transform Solomon Islands. Its problems are domestic, born of its own political economy, and ultimately this is where solutions will have to come from too. For the time being though, aid can help: it can

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hold things together, it can improve people's lives, and it can enhance, in its own small way, the space for change to grow from within.

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