

State and local governance in Solomon Islands: building on existing strengths

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In dealing with the question of a future system for governance in Solomon Islands, two options have been put on the table: patch up the existing system or convert the existing provinces into states under a federal system. I question whether the public has had a chance to discuss a third option—that is, more effective use of local governance—and point to the variety of informal governance structures that rural communities have formed to fulfil their needs in the absence of effective government. I argue that better articulation of these kinds of organisations with the state may do more for development through broad-based participation than federalising.

The current calls for a federal system in Solomon Islands are not new. The problems of the centrally biased government now in place have been recognised by Solomon Islanders since discussions on an appropriate system began prior to independence in 1978. In the main the criticisms are twofold. First, that central government does not recognise rural people's wish to self-govern as culturally distinct island communities (represented by the functionally weak but identity-strong provinces) and second, that central

government is not effective in developing the rural areas, which is where most people live (for example, health and education services are poor in many areas, and there are too few ways to earn money). In return, the central government has often said that it could do a better job if it could shut down the functionally rather useless provincial governments and use the resources on better services. To this, many people say that the provinces are important because they act as a buffer and gateway between traditional local life and modern foreign life—the province understands its people, while the central government does not. There is a strong distrust in rural areas of central government, which is viewed as being run by an élite whose interests run opposite to the people at the grassroots.

The question of federalism resurfaced in 2000, at the time ethnically focused communities were in the thick of fighting one another under the name of their provinces, and simultaneously the central government revealed long-held plans to strip the provinces of power.¹ An explanation was circulated, suggesting that the civil war was the work of the much-distrusted Honiara

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élite, whose shady business and land deals were tied to deep corruption within the central government, which was, the critics said, dominated by one provincial-ethnic group anyway. Although the conspiracy allegations were part of the Ulufa'alu government crying foul, paradoxically many saw its proposal to disestablish the provinces as a deepening of the rot. Quickly the idea rippled through rural communities that the best way to end the senseless violence and years of underdevelopment was to strip power from the centre and return it to the provinces where, each province minding its own business, they could build development as cultural communities with minimal national obligations. Many of the élite, it turned out, were no more nationalistic than their grassroots *wantoks*, and promptly returned to their home provinces where, in an atmosphere of public support, they drew up provincial plans ready for federalism, using the long-suppressed 1987 constitutional review report as a road map.²

By late 2000 and since then, another old discourse was dusted off, this time by the culpable élite. This was that centralism was a foreign devil, inspired by the British and fed from overseas. Although some National Peace Council officials were concerned about national fragmentation exacerbating conflict, the Ministry of Provincial Government pushed ahead the 'home-grown state system' with apparently almost unanimous political support. Nationally, decentralisation had come of age: all agreed that major institutional change was necessary and, although not all agreed with the means, the federal option was the only one on the table. At this time, the notion of decentralisation was prevalent in the international arena (particularly for large, weak African states), although those foreigners who questioned whether it was feasible in Solomon Islands generally knew better than to defend the 'devil' of centralism, at least in public. Five

years have now past, the high-pitch fervour has subsided, while technical hurdles to implementation seem to be mounting. Some communities now seem doubtful that any change will occur and affirm their desire for state government, while others say they have lost interest. In the hiatus there are calls for 'more consultation'.³ The need for institutional change is real, but in hindsight there is one clarification, one problem, one flaw, one question and one alternative to the federalism option that stand out.

The clarification is about the kind of decentralisation being considered. It is to shrink central functions, swell the provinces into 'states' with strong jurisdictional power (with their own constitution, laws, police and courts) and most of the service delivery (health, education, transport and so on), with both the decision-making and the service delivery in some way linked to the grassroots. Each state will act as a silo, performing each of the functions for itself, without any overlap between provinces. The centre functions to coordinate only on common issues, primarily international affairs.

The problem is that this type of federalism is expensive. Economies of scale will not be achieved by the smaller or most dispersed states, or perhaps by any of them. The cost of each state running its own hospital system, for example, may be too much to bear. Sceptics think some states will struggle to find people who are qualified and experienced to execute the state's administrative systems properly. Shabby administration could also be very expensive.

The flaw relates to the cost. Already some predict that if the silo model extends to each state depending mostly on its own resources, national tensions will increase because some states will be hungrier than others: the result will be higher mortality and lower personal prospects in the poorer states.⁴ Without better economies of scale and adequate national redistribution

mechanisms, this is likely to pit one state against another. Distrust between the culturally separated communities will run high, at a time when building trust between communities is still a major donor peace-building objective. If the centre has the jurisdictional power to collect taxes or pool donor funds and redistribute according to need, or has the power to order services in larger units, power is drawn away from each of the states and Solomon Islands is back to centralism, with the grassroots once again reduced to what is given them by distant élites. This kind of silo federalism is a flawed model because it cannot handle the dual requirements of equitable development and broad participation.

What does the call for federalism represent anyway? The starting point in the call for 'state government' is that central government has performed poorly, initially in not providing for better rural development and then by ignoring long-term calls for community participation in governance. Only federalism has been seriously discussed in public as the alternative way to deal with these issues. There is evidence that when another alternative is put forward in rural community discussions, public support appears not to be so much 'pro state government' as 'anti central government'. People will take state government if they think that is the only option to central government. Another alternative arises from interviews with rural Solomon Islanders themselves.

This alternative is simply stated by rural Solomon Islanders: help us to help ourselves through our own home-grown associations. These are the various village, health, school and sports committees, councils of chiefs, church women's and youth groups, and smallholder produce and marketing associations that are found in great numbers in rural areas. Mostly these are informal, unregistered associations. Through these the

communities help run clinics and primary schools, improve village public goods and spaces, collaborate more widely to provide informal education and cultural activities, promote livelihoods development, resolve grievances and make decisions on land and natural resources use. Apart from their variety of purposes, these associations vary in membership, scale and in the way they are embedded in the institutional frameworks of traditional culture, church and aspects of government.⁵

Many people complain that the government has never recognised these local associations or their efforts, and that they get no support to build their capacity. Capacity assistance (advice and skills transfer, and small grants) is seen as very important because success of local associations in getting things done is admitted to be very uneven. While the plethora of local associations has arisen because rural people have needed to organise their own service delivery in the absence of government assistance, most see a major role for government. This role is not to take over responsibilities and close down local associations or set up local government agencies in competition, but rather to work through existing local associations to get things done. Part of this demand is expressed as an accountability issue—local people say that when government operates without direct local participation, the budget is wasted without getting local results. In this kind of discussion, it is common to find the sentiment that as long as there is development at the local level, many local people are not concerned whether or not state government comes about. Most are sceptical that the central government can ever deliver because it is remote and seen as inherently corrupt; but then many think that state government will also be inscrutable and corrupt. The call from rural people is for direct local participation in decision-making and

implementation, through local associations that are supported by their government.

Key to this is to identify ways in which government can support local initiatives rather than attempt, so far without success, to command from above. Arguments about top-down or bottom-up, utopian fantasies of a 'world turned upside down' where commoners rule the chiefs (Larmour 1997) do not in themselves provide the answer. The proponents of mediating structures lying between the local level and the central state (such as 'state government') are right in principle; the answer lies instead in the space between. The question is what does the 'middle level' look like if state government is not necessarily the right answer? Restructures, reviews, white papers and parliamentary bills in 1977–81, 1986–88, 1996–97 and 1998–99 have all grappled with the same problem, but still nothing looks fit to carry the dual load of equitable development and broad participation.⁶ Recent approaches in policy science to multi-level governance and citizen engagement help imagine the previously unimaginable. I will now discuss these.

In an analysis of types of systems of governance, Hooghe and Marks (2003) discern just two basic options for liberal democratic systems beyond the centralised state (or its failure). Both these basic options are forms of multi-level governance. They are, to use their terms, type I (general purpose jurisdictions), and type II (task-specific jurisdictions). Existing forms of decentralised or devolved democratic governance around the world fit into one or other of these types, or exhibit elements of both. In Solomon Islands, both the present provincial system and the proposed federal system are 'type I'. Before explaining further the differences between type I and type II systems, I will briefly cover the main features of provincial government as it stands to point out its similarities to the proposed federalism.

The present type of government in Solomon Islands has two functioning tiers, in an arrangement of a 'decentralised union' type (Watts 2001). The Solomon Islands parliament established the provinces under the national constitution. The provinces have no separate constitutions of their own, but operate under the Provincial Government Act. The Act is not specific about the functions of the provinces, although each recurrent national budget provides a number of provincial grants, mainly the provincial-services grant, the revenue-sharing grant, and the 'special supplementary grant'. These grants enable provinces to set up what have *de facto* become known as provincial ministries to cover a range of services, and the elected provincial assembly is able to approve the provincial executive's budget for appropriation of the grants. There is some devolution associated with these budgets, but the mainstream services (such as police, education and health) follow national policies and the staff of these ministries' provincial offices are on the national payroll, as are the provinces' own administrative staff. Legislation is national, although limited provincial ordinances are possible. In the main, power lies with the national government, and the establishment of the present rather lightweight provinces was originally a compromise brought on by unavoidable calls for provincial autonomy, particularly from the Western District, in the lead up to legislation of the national constitution in 1978 (Ghai 1990).

Even if reforms allow for provincial constitutions and properly devolve functions such as education, health and police, the main characterising feature that will remain is the way that the new states will be designed as

- based on non-intersecting provincial-ethnic communities
- general purpose authorities that bundle competencies together (for example, run

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all health, education, police, public works and so on within their jurisdictional territory)

- standing as a limited number of permanent state jurisdictions. They will preserve the idea of government as a set of nested territorial hierarchies.

In these features, both the current 'decentralised union' and the proposed 'federal' system of government conform to a 'type I' system in Hooghe and Marks' distinction. The strong grip of the ideal-type hierarchical model inherited from the British is very evident, for example, in the proposal for state design assembled by the leading proponent of federalism during the tension period, the 'Western State Government' (Political and Legislative Task Force 2001).⁷ Despite the radicalism of the Western State movement at the time, their task force proposals show that aside from an unspecified 'open access mode of operation' between 'village governments' and the state government, they envisaged a standard set-up of state-run line ministries that cover all manner of functions up to the interstate boundaries. The idea that government in Solomon Islands conforms to (and should continue to conform to) this ideal type of a hierarchical silo is pervasive among the country's leaders, but does not represent the actual situation or even their own practice. Here I explain why.

In its day, the hierarchical type of government left behind as a legacy of British colonialism was supposed to deliver public service according to rational principles whose policies were set by elected representatives. The breakdown of this system since independence in a welter of ineffective management and corruption has been widely commented on, but of more interest here are the kinds of governance that have developed around the failure of the state to provide public services. While at the local

level there are the kinds of 'self-help' organisations that communities create to provide local services in the absence of government provision, at the national level are a range of supra-national and international government agencies (the donors) and non-government organisations. Donors often bypass Solomon Islands government involvement in project implementation. Some of these projects establish links to community service provision, such as the EU small grants scheme, or go further and develop for this purpose a parallel multi-level structure that relies very little on the government, such as has happened with the AusAID Community Sector Program. From a base of church organisations that were the original service providers (providing schools and clinics well before government became involved), a wide variety of non-government organisations now operate almost entirely on donor funds to deliver public services with minimal government involvement. Service provision is no longer a matter of government line ministries trundling out development far into the distant future according to executive government blueprints. It is a multiplex environment of differing kinds of agencies entering into varied inter-agency agreements that operate on multiple timeframes and with differing agency-specific policy objectives. This is a similar transformation to that which has occurred in government in Britain itself, with the new phenomenon called 'network governance' (Rhodes 1997; Skelcher 2005). Slow, old procedure-driven government in Solomon Islands has become almost a bystander to the plethora of function-specific agencies networking and competing around, over, under and even through it. Legitimation for all this activity has occurred by a slow syncretism of the original Westminster democracy with a consociational style of governance (see Andeweg 2000), developed on the 'big-man' model by figures such as

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Mamaloni. Except for the brief period of élite competition during the tension, this has been run by a tacit consensus among the political élite to accommodate of a multiplicity of approaches to development.

Recognition of this broader environment of formal government leads toward what Hooghe and Marks (2003) call 'type II' multi-level governance, or what others have called 'polycentric' governance (McGinnis 1999). As with the situation that has developed in Solomon Islands, a polycentric system is one in which many independent agencies are linked not through a coherent hierarchy (the type I model) but one in which different organisations, large and small, focus on specific objectives, more or less coordinating with each other. In relation to the levels at which different agencies operate, from local scale, through middle-scale and to national scale, Hooghe and Marks have nicknamed this the 'marble-cake' model, meaning that the 'layers' are not neatly stacked on top of each other, but overlap and can have different vertical as well as horizontal extents. A classic example in Solomons of the operation of networks in a multi-level, polycentric system is the enduring provision of education services by churches. Here there is overlapping service provision by different denominations. Each operates in church denominational jurisdictions (dioceses) under government agreement to co-manage educational facilities, and also incorporate the many and varied local school management associations based in the villages, who help run each school. The principle of overlapping jurisdictions is an important counterweight to the stacking of service provision into exclusive ethnic-provincial jurisdictional territories, and provides incentives for cross-jurisdictional cooperation. Different functions can have differently organised spatial extents and memberships. At the local level too, the existing patterns of local organisations have a tradition of linking to 'mid-level' organis-

ations: local women's groups inviting in a non-government organisation or a ministry to provide workshops at a district church rally is an example. Again, this local-to-mid-level network of linkages is common, although it substantially bypasses the line ministries.

If presented as a 'model' of governance, the idea of polycentric network governance would look overly complicated to those who want to see the whole picture. The point is that the system of governance is already polycentric and network oriented in the absence of the government to fulfil the old style of ideal state role. It is better to understand coordination arrangements from the point of view of stakeholders working in a particular sector. A local area often already supports a number of local associations of varying types, and each of these may be in some kind of network or co-management arrangement. This happens as soon as, for example, a local association raises funds to add a classroom to a church-run, government-salaried primary school, or a local agricultural association joins an non-government organisation operated seedsavers network. Keeping track of, adjusting and extending these sorts of networks is precisely the grist of local association politics, and each mid-level non-government organisation also knows its local clients. Non-government organisations are well known for forming associations among themselves (for example, the Solomon Islands Association of Rural Training Centres, or the National Council of Women) that are able to interact with donors and government while maintaining their local linkages. Seeing how the relevant part of the system works from each participant's perspective is human-scale and comprehensible. What is required is not a government that needs to 'control' all this activity occurring beyond it in civil space but to support it with core public goods provision (such as institutional regulation).

Before concluding, I sketch a scenario of the kind of governance that may result from

this approach. Members of village-based local associations are able to find mid-level partners who provide skills transfer or grants for local activities, cultivate organisational capacity and broaden uptake of association membership (gender, youth). Associations do not have to conform to set boundaries like area-council wards, but may have a scale dependent on the capacity and purpose of the association. Overlapping associations promote multiple networking and soften hardened territorial rivalries and jealousies. Mid-level partners may be drawn from non-government organisations or government desk agencies providing services suited to the needs of the local associations in that service sector, and in turn governments and donors support agencies able to fulfil demands as determined by wider international concerns and co-management of evolving sectoral policy with mid-level players. In this scenario, it may be that state government becomes a limited public good, because government works much more through agency arrangements that inhabit functional jurisdictions than sitting as functional silos within exclusive territorial jurisdictions. Whether or not federalism is involved depends on its usefulness in achieving the primary intent, which is to provide a system of governance that enables development through broad participation at the local level. Here at a broader level than the federalism debate is a general approach essentially drawn from existing strengths at the local level that may just get the job done.

Conclusion

Without delving into schools of thought or the implications of specific policy choices, I have introduced a fresh orientation to the policy problem of decentralisation in Solomon Islands. I began with a challenge,

pointing out that many political leaders in Solomon Islands (and possibly their overseas advisers) are locked into thinking about variations on a single model of governance. This thinking revolves around how decentralised or devolved should the old British top-down style of government be. The current approach to federalism is of this type, and may not solve the problems it is intended for. It ignores almost entirely the question of local-level participation, does not guarantee more equitable development, and may create more conflict between provinces than it solves.

There are prominent ideas on governance systems that are highly relevant to Solomon Islands, which have not yet been discussed by Solomon Islands leaders or the public. They most certainly do not advocate a return to centralism, rather they advocate more local participation and show in broad terms how this can be done. Such ideas represent the latest thinking among institutional theorists, and build on rapid changes to liberal democratic systems of governance occurring around the world. The relevance of these ideas is that they seem to fit better the criteria that Solomon Islanders should have a system of governance that provides for provincial identity, equitable development and local participation.

Best of all, these new ideas inspire thinking on ways that the informal systems of governance that are already 'home grown' in Solomon Islands' villages can be incorporated, and fit with the Solomon Islands way of getting things done through multiple networks and partnerships. These new ideas provide answers to the old question of how to connect dynamically 'traditional' local level governance with 'modern' formal systems of government in Solomon Islands. This 'third way' of improving governance by making better use of local strengths might yet lead to the real 'home-grown' system of governance for Solomon Islands.

Notes

- ¹ The first public release of Solomon Islands (1999) was a 5-page summary presented at The Australian National University/Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (ANU/SICHE) Solomon Islands Governance and Economics Update in Honiara, 16–17 March 2000.
- ² 'Beneath Guadalacanal', online document authored by the Prime Minister's Office (Honiara), early 2000 (url now extinct). Many people did not see the document so its contents were circulated by word-of-mouth. My description of village discussion of the tension, the élite's return to the provinces and their statehood activities are based on my fieldwork observations on Kolombangara and in Gizo, Western Province March–October 2000. Details of a proposed federal system were contained in Solomon Islands (1987).
- ³ Examples include 'S. Choiseul establishes state govt structure', *Solomon Star* 15 April 2005, 'Savo chiefs endorse proposed federal system', *Solomon Star* 20 April 2005, 'Isabel supports state system', *Solomon Star* 9 June 2005, 'Central Premier voices support for federal system', *Solomon Star* 4 July 2005, 'West reaffirms wish for state govt', *Solomon Star* 29 July 2005; 'Ulu's constituency opposes federal system' *Solomon Star* 2 March 2005; 'WP leaders resolve to further consultation', *Solomon Star* 28 February 2005, 'Consultations essential for federal constitution—PM', *Solomon Star* 2 March 2005.
- ⁴ This centrifugal effect has been an old concern of federalism in Solomon Islands, see Larmour 1990.
- ⁵ The interviews with rural Solomon Islanders mentioned, and survey of the characteristics of rural associations were carried out by me and partly documented by AusAID (2003).
- ⁶ Papers by Nanau (2002), Nanau (1998), Frazer (1995), Ghai (1990), Larmour (1985) and Premdas (1982) cover the successive reviews and implementations of decentralisation in Solomons, and provide primary references.

- ⁷ This ideal type of a hierarchical, self-contained state is often called a Westphalian state (Caporaso 2000), which usually refers to nation-states but calls by the statehood movement during the Solomons tension for inter-state population movement controls linked to territorial autonomy exhibited a Westphalian style of sub-nationalism. Scales (2003) gives the political background to the self-appointment of the Western State Government during 2000.

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