

# Sustaining the Gains in Post-RAMSI Solomon Islands



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The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) recently concluded at an estimated cost to Australia of AU\$2.6 billion between 2003 and 2013. RAMSI was originally conceived in the ‘state-building moment’ that shaped Western responses to ‘state failure’ in the late 1990s and first decade of the new millennium. That moment has now passed, with renewed fiscal austerity, growing scepticism about liberal interventionism, as well as organisational changes and policy shifts in Australia’s foreign relations. Drawing on a recent workshop presentation (Allen and Dinnen forthcoming), we consider how post-RAMSI donor assistance can help sustain gains made over the past decade. Referencing research in rural Solomons and neighbouring Bougainville, we sketch some possibilities for hybrid forms of institutional and economic development capable of accommodating the strengths of both local and liberal orders.

In comparative peace-building terms, RAMSI has been a relatively rare, though qualified, success. With a strong focus on policing, rule of law and financial management, it helped restore security and stability to a country wracked by a debilitating internal conflict that had paralysed government and the national economy. However, RAMSI was arguably less successful in influencing the nation’s weak and non-inclusive ‘political settlement’, including the corrosive nexus of politics and the logging industry (Craig and Porter 2013). This raises important issues for the ‘coproduction’ paradigm in current discussions about the role of donors in the post-RAMSI context (Barbara 2014). It also foregrounds a tension between instrumentalised notions of ‘state-building’ as a predictable, technical and linear project, and ‘state formation’ as a contested, organic and long-term process involving multiple actors at different scales.

Discussing the RAMSI transition, Barbara invokes a spectrum with partnership approaches at one end and interventionist state-building approaches at the other, and suggests that Australia has adopted a ‘hybrid approach incorporating partnership and interventionist modalities’ (2014:405).

RAMSI’s co-production role continues in two critical areas: as a *de facto* provider of security via an ongoing police presence, and as provider of significant support to core areas of state functionality.

While co-production in critical areas of security and governance will be needed for the foreseeable future, we ask what donors might hope to achieve beyond a form of ‘state-building life support’. It is useful to consider the distinction between state-building and state formation. Comparative historical scholarship demonstrates the ‘long haul’ of state formation and the potentially generative role of violent conflict in the emergence of legitimate and sustainable institutions. Bougainville has been described as a rare example of a successful ‘local-liberal hybrid’ approach to post-conflict state-building (Wallis 2012). The prominent governance and peace-building role played by local non-state actors in Bougainville, in conjunction with the ‘light’ international intervention, saw the emergence of hybrid institutions, such as the Council of Elders and the Community Auxiliary Police, and their incorporation into the governance structures of the new Autonomous Region (Dinnen and Peake 2013). These developments occurred in the aftermath of a devastating decade-long conflict and indicated a determination among local leaders to build a different kind of political and institutional order. Perhaps, if the Solomons conflict had lasted longer, hybrid institutions would have emerged to play a similar role as part of a new post-conflict political settlement. Although hypothetical, this does raise the question of whether there is scope for donors to engage with hybrid governance approaches in post-RAMSI Solomons.

While we suggest that there is considerable potential for such an approach, recent research on local justice in rural Solomons (Allen et al. 2013) prompts concerns with any ‘instrumentalist hybridity’ agenda. This research demonstrates that *contra* the presumed privileging of local non-state institutions, rural citizens are acutely aware of the growing frailties of their informal institutions, and see a

distinctive role for actors and institutions that are emancipated from society in a Weberian sense. This is evident in the expressed preference for RAMSI police over local police, in the desire for community leaders to be backed up by state authority, in mimicry intended to attract external recognition, and in widespread nostalgia for the old system of indirect rule that was seen to connect the legitimacy of local leadership with the functional authority of the colonial state. These sentiments should be interpreted in the context of the gradual withdrawal of the state during the postcolonial period, at least in terms of its law and justice and local governance functions.

Such findings affirm the dangers of romanticising 'the local' highlighted in the critical literature on hybridity, and any donor agendas in relation to hybridity need to be cognisant of the growing frailties of 'traditional' institutions in Solomon Islands. That said, grassroots demand for greater engagement with Weberian institutions, albeit on local terms, suggests a potential alignment between local and supranational agendas, especially in relation to security governance. Indeed, they suggest a need for ongoing coproduction, particularly in the policing space, and the concomitant development of strong linkages between Weberian and local institutions. The popular but short-lived Community Officer project that was trialled in a number of rural locations, and modelled on the Bougainville Community Auxiliary Police, provides one example of what this might look like (Allen et al.:76–78).

A salient dimension of the nostalgia for indirect rule is the perception that it linked-up local *kastom* leaders with the authority of the colonial state through intermediaries such as government-appointed headmen and area constables. Intermediaries have long played a critical role as translators between different social orders in colonial and postcolonial settings. While we are certainly not advocating a return to colonial rule, innovative interventions such as the Community Officer project can potentially speak to both contemporary community agendas for the state and the desire of Australia and its partners to maintain the costly gains made by RAMSI, not least of which is law and order. Such interventions can also help develop locally appropriate and sus-

tainable versions of the sorts of networked systems that increasingly characterise security governance in the global north (Dinnen and Allen 2013).

Although we are not suggesting that this is currently the case in Solomons, donor support to hybrid governance approaches should also avoid becoming a foil for a neoliberal small state agenda. While issues of causality around the outbreak of conflict in the late 1990s remain unclear, the structural adjustment program at that time arguably contributed by threatening political patronage networks and by providing a pretext for the abolition of the local-level government system, thereby completing the withdrawal of the state from rural areas that had been underway since Independence. Developing linkages between state and *kastom* actors has cost benefits. However, it should not be seen as a means of replacing expensive state institutions. Indeed the ongoing 'coproduction' of institutions such as policing is integral to the long-term success of hybrid approaches.

### Author Notes

*Sinclair Dinnen is a senior fellow and Matthew Allen a fellow and ARC Discovery Early Career Researcher Award recipient with SSGM.*

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