

Solomon Islands in Transition



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The current transition taking place in the decade-long Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) has been the subject of intense deliberation among the Australian policy community. Much of the discussion revolves around the technical challenges involved in transitioning from one modality of external assistance to another — from a post-conflict intervention aimed at stabilisation and recovery to the resumption of a more regular and ongoing bilateral aid engagement. It is important to note, however, that RAMSI's gradual drawdown is not the only significant change that is occurring in Solomon Islands and we shouldn't allow the short-term policy focus on managing the mission's smooth exit to obscure what are arguably much larger and more significant transitional challenges facing this small Pacific island country. RAMSI's withdrawal provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the multiple and inter-related transitions taking place, with a view to initiating a wider dialogue about how Solomon Islands — and its supporters in the donor community — can most effectively manage these broader challenges.

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 Paper¹ and a Development Policy Centre blog post.² We might characterise the kind of transition being discussed here, 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 as 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 change in the development relationship between Solomon Islands' and Australian governments, we see a large body of global experience and literature that iden-

tifies the factors most likely to facilitate successful transitions from chronic fragility, violence and conflict, to durable peace and stability. For example, a 2011 World Bank report³ highlighted the importance of building effective and legitimate institutions — formal or informal — that can provide basic security, justice, services and economic opportunities for citizens, and political settlements that can send credible signals of meaningful change and investment in wider institutional transformations. How does Solomon Islands fare in this larger comparative framing, and what can be learnt from international experience about possible post-RAMSI futures?

One of the most significant transitions in Solomon Islands is that occurring in the 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, reopened in 2011; and there is mineral prospecting and mine lease conversion taking place throughout the archipelago. Meanwhile, the country's 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 Papua New Guinea, suggests that the costs and benefits of Gold Ridge and future mining operations will have to be handled with extreme care. Is Solomon Islands simply 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 its 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

remain 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 places 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 learned 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 important changes 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. This occurred around the same time as the advent of constituency funds. In the larger context of the gradual withdrawal of state from rural localities that has happened during the postcolonial 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 Papua New Guinea, the institution of discretionary funds has become fundamental to the way in which the Solomon Islands state actually works — as opposed to notions of how it ought to work — and how state–society relations are governed in practice.

Recently published research⁴ documents some of the transitions occurring at sub-national levels. While there are considerable variations between areas, the research details the existence of serious stresses in many places, and how these are eroding social cohesion locally and increasing the potential for disputation and conflict. The signs of these changes occurring ‘beneath the state’ are found in shifting individual identities and allegiances, endemic substance abuse and increasing intergenerational tensions in many localities. Alas, these remain largely invisible from the vantage point of government and donor offices in Honiara. On a more positive

note, the same research points to an efflorescence in experimentation with culturally meaningful forms of local governance in different parts of the country as leaders and community groups attempt to address some of the 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 that prevails 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 — in and around 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 processes of change.

Notes on Authors

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Endnotes

- 1 Coppel, N. 2012. Transition of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands. *SSGM Discussion Paper* 2012/10. Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, the Australian National University
- 2 Coppel, N. RAMSI: Ten Years On. *Devpolicy Blog* post 25/6/2013.
- 3 *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development*. Washington DC: The World Bank.
- 4 Allen, M. S. Dinnen, D. Evans and R. Monson 2013. *Justice Delivered Locally: Systems, Challenges and Innovations in Solomon Islands*. Washington DC: World Bank.

