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Title: Postcolonial town planning in Commonwealth nations: A case study of the
Solomon Islands - an agenda for change

Date: 2007

Originally published in: The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of
International Affairs

Example citation: Talbot, J., & Ronnie, B. (2007). Postcolonial town planning in
Commonwealth nations: A case study of the Solomon Islands - an agenda for
change. *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*,
960(390), 319-329.

Version of item: Author's post-print

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/87014>

Post colonial town planning in Commonwealth nations: a case study of the Solomon

Islands- an agenda for change

Jon, Talbot, Buddley Ronnie. *Roundtable: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 2007, 96 (390) pp319-330

Abstract

The principal argument advanced in this paper is that spatial planning in the Solomon Islands has failed to deliver any substantive benefits and is therefore, in urgent need of reform. The present model of planning derived from a combination of colonial practice and legislation originating in the UK, does not add much, if any value to the development process. The poor quality of planning in the Solomons cannot be seen in isolation. There are similar systems in use throughout much of the Commonwealth and anecdotal evidence suggests that the failings are widely duplicated. The Solomon Islands only appears exceptional in the extent to which other government systems have demonstrably broken down, following the 'Ethnic Tension' 2000-2003. The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) provides a unique opportunity for a review of the way in which planning operates. A number of issues are identified which any reformed system must address.

Key words: Solomon Islands, town and country planning, governance, land use management, spatial planning

Development in the Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands are in the western South Pacific and are comprised of over 900 islands, oriented on a north west- south east axis over 900 miles. The population currently estimated to be 552,438 (CIA 2006). It has been independent from Britain since 1978 and has a Westminster style of government, with a highly centralised state (World Bank, 2000). Despite its abundance of natural resources, including minerals, fish and timber and high population growth, it has low rates of adult literacy (30%) and is poor (GDP per capita is less than \$US 75 per head) (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2004). In profile, the Solomon Islands are most similar to fellow Pacific states Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, in the sense of being resource rich, income poor with high population growth.

Even within this group, the Solomon Islands is uniquely disadvantaged. Ethnic conflict (the 'Tension') has led to a deterioration in law and order and a flight of foreign capital.

Between 2000 and 2003, it is estimated that the already small economy shrank by a third, leading the *Economist* to wonder whether it is the Pacific's first failed state (The Economist, 2003). Since July 2002 the Australian backed Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) has maintained law and order and begun the long term process of state building. Despite this serious rioting and looting broke out in the capital Honiara in April 2006, directed against Chinese owned businesses (The Australian 2006).

To some extent the failure of the Solomon Islands economy and political system has been masked by the persistence of traditional patterns of living. A majority of the population live on customary land and therefore still have access to food and materials they can provide themselves. The problems of social and economic breakdown are most apparent in the urban centres. Rapid population growth, poor infrastructure and insufficient work has led to a crisis in urban governance (UNCHS,2002). One of the principal tools for dealing with such crises should be the town planning system but as will be outlined below, the system has proved incapable of dealing with that which confronts it.

Background- Planning in the Solomon Islands in the colonial era (1)

In many Commonwealth countries, the end of British rule has coincided with the introduction of a planning system derived from UK legislation, specifically the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act. An amended form of this legislation was first applied to

Trinidad and Tobago in the 1960s and then rolled out around the Commonwealth (Home, 1997). Anecdotally, the authors have been told that in the period preceding independence in the Solomon Islands, discussions were held concerning a suitable planning system and the 'off the shelf' model was considered the easiest to implement and in 1980, an Act duly appeared.

Prior to 1962, planning was on an ad hoc basis. Control was exercised directly by means of granting leases. As far as the authors have been able to establish, no documents survive from that period but there are later references to a zoning plan for Honiara, the capital, prepared in 1954 and one for Gizo in 1960. A 'plan' for Munda dating from 1961 survives but it consists of a hand drawn sketch and one and a half pages of text. Letters and memoranda from the time make it clear that the administration had few concerns about coordinating and controlling development.

After 1962 a circular was published, providing a formal basis for control (BSIP, 1962). The main purpose of the circular was to regularise decision making and ensure that each component part in government coordinated development one with another. There was no consideration given to the needs and interests of the general population and it was therefore not considered necessary to consult with them either. The circular did at least make recommendations on qualitative issues for the housing of colonial administrators. These were to be arranged on an east-west axis to enhance protection from the sun and 'removed from swampy ground'. The circular also acknowledged that a 'pleasant

outlook' was 'desirable' so long as it did not interfere with 'orderly and economical planning'.

Colonial planning: attempted reform in Gizo

The Circular appears to have stimulated some attempts at plan making at Gizo (1962), Munda (1966) and Honiara (1967). Only fragments of these plans survive. There was a greater consciousness of the need for planning although the results of increased awareness were rarely translated into action. The only example of an attempt to develop a plan for the whole community is contained in an internal memorandum from the District Commissioner of Western Province to the Chief Secretary in 1964, commenting on the draft proposals for Gizo. The Commissioner's memo is worth quoting since it stands as an eloquent critique of the complacency of the colonial administration with regards to planning.

The Commissioner, wrote of the

...urgent need for coordinated town planning and control of development which looks further ahead than the immediate future. If the town is to develop into a place pleasant to live in, something better than the present comparatively 'ad hoc',

piecemeal and uncoordinated development should be devised...Comprehensive planning should include areas for open spaces and recreational fields, commerce, community or social centres, public lavatories, school, port, wharf, Public Works Department yard and market areas...

The Gizo Town Plan number 912, which is the latest I have, does not seem to me adequate as a town plan and siteboards deal with only Government buildings on an ad hoc basis. I would suggest that early consideration be given to this.

Initially the Commissioner of Lands and Surveys agreed, writing that he was in 'in full agreement with District Commissioner Western's remarks' but following a lukewarm reply from the Honorary Chief Secretary he later wrote that he was 'unable to proceed...due to other commitments...I have no option but to suggest that the matter be held in abeyance for some while'

An unrevised plan duly appeared in November 1964 but the Western Commissioner still had not given up. In a further memo to the Chief Secretary in December 1964 he wrote:

The latest plan of Gizo town shows that 19 plots of land of ground which the Commissioner of Lands is offering to the public consists wholly or partially of actual swamp- that is some surface water always present, with (smelly) mud up to 3 feet deep. A further 15 plots, some of them already taken up, are in marshy ground, which is wholly or partially submerged during wet weather and merely soggy during dry periods...the high water table and general swamp conditions make proper sanitation a farce.

There is little eagerness on the part of the public to take up plots of land in Gizo. I attribute this in part to the general unattractiveness of living in a swamp.

The road system in Gizo attracts outspoken criticism from residents and visitors alike....That such conditions should exist...is in my view, a disgrace.

This time the Chief Secretary was forced to act and visited Gizo personally in 1965 to see for himself. Funds were eventually granted to improve drainage but only in part of the town. Even today, there is only one section of metalled road in Gizo and the swamp like conditions are made worse by the removal of trees (which absorbed water and provided shade) for 'security reasons'. The same lack of concern for the population is still evident. A conference centre (never completed) displaced the traditional food market in Gizo in 2002, to the great inconvenience of the people.

Planning in Honiara

Even the capital, Honiara has not benefited from any considered planning, something very evident to the visitor today. Honiara developed as a depot for the Americans during the War (Zimmerman 1949). Its layout is therefore a product of the short term needs of the military and it has grown in a haphazard manner since. In 1966, Mr Robert Riddell, a man with 'experience of planning in tropical countries' was contracted for three weeks to prepare a town plan. No copies of the plan survive although some of the

correspondence gives an indication of its contents. The plan was a straight forward zoning plan for the central area with some general provisions. All land was allocated either for civic, residential, commercial, light industrial and heavy industrial use. No allocations were made for other uses, such as open space or car parking. Comments were invited from within the administration and leading businesses but there was no attempt at public consultation.

The plan envisaged a large dock and heavy industry on the eastern side of the sea shore and the owners of the then only hotel, were outraged to discover themselves zoned for heavy industrial use. The rationale for this appeared to be that once the heavy industry arrived, the hotel would no longer wish to enjoy its current location and would simply move away!

The plan has had a lasting impact on Honiara but it gave no consideration to public amenity. Today Honiara is a city by the sea that largely denies its citizens access. It has no public parking space. There are no continuous footpaths, little or no public landscaping and little recognition of the benefits of shade and the free passage of air. There are no covered public spaces except the market, again located away from the centre at great inconvenience to the majority of the population. The plan contained nothing of the broader concerns expressed by the Western Commissioner. The plan for Honiara was simply an instrument to serve the interests of the colonial administration and business interests. Fortunately, the hotel survives in its original location.

Managing land use during the colonial era was therefore a means of serving the interests of the colonial authorities and major business interests. Notions of the public good and public discourse had little meaning. In some respects the very notion of planning can be seen as an extension of colonial hegemony. Planning was only ever exercised in alienated land where western patterns of land ownership operate. No attempt was made to manage customary land, since there were no administrative or economic interests involved.

The legacy of planning from the colonial period is therefore not very distinguished. It tended to function as a forum for the administration and businesses to coordinate and further their interests. Planning was confined to alienated lands where these interests were pursued. There is little evidence of planning 'shaping' development, in the sense of refusing or modifying proposals. There were no attempts to inform or involve the population let alone any conception of the 'public interest'. The colonial era therefore established a pattern of planning practice at odds with the needs of a modern democratic state.

The Post Colonial Era and the 1980 Town and Country Planning Act

The 1980 Act reviewed: Local Planning Schemes

The Act makes provision for each province to prepare forward plans, called Local Planning Schemes (LPS). The LPS should be prepared by planners, overseen by a

provincial Town and Country Planning Board. The purpose of a LPS is contained in section 6 of the Act. That is, to

...assist in securing orderly development in the interests of the health, amenity, convenience and general welfare of the community... indicate the general principles upon which development in the area will be promoted and controlled....define sites for particular purposes...protect features or areas of social, historical, scenic or architectural importance...safeguard routes for highways, pipelines and other services...(and) 'indicate the stages by which development should be carried out

The legislation also allows that 'subject to any regulations which may be made by the Minister relating to the form and content' that maps and 'descriptive matter' can be prepared and the 'proposed general use zones' can be indicated (Section 6, 2). The Act enables the specification of distances between buildings, plot sizes, height, land for parking and open space (Section 6, 4). Section 8 enables a survey prior to plan making to be conducted. The legislation includes details of what the survey should include. This might seem overly prescriptive but there is the facility for the Minister to include other matters. The legislation does not allow for general consultation but the Board must ensure it is given 'adequate publicity' and that 'all persons who may be expected to wish to make representations' are given the opportunity to do so (section 10). The responsibility for the preparation of a draft plan is the responsibility of the Board but final approval rests with the Minister. Prior to final approval, notice of the Draft is placed in the Gazette

and the public are allowed a month to object or make any representation. Following this period the Minister can further consult with anyone he chooses before approving the LPS with or without modification. Final approval is accompanied by a statement which includes references to places where copies of the plan are available for public inspection. Section 12 of the Act places responsibility on the board to reconsider and redraft its plan every 5 years.

Development control

Section 14, 2 contains the standard UK derived definition of development, upon which the entire system hangs, that is: ‘the carrying out of building, engineering, mining or other operations, in on, over, or under land, or the making of any material change in the use of any buildings or other land’

This definition is of crucial importance since it defines what is town and country planning is concerned with and therefore what is to be included in Local Planning Schemes and what it is necessary to seek planning permission for. The definition really falls into two; the first part essentially describes all new uses of land, the second part, (‘the making of any material change in the use of any building or other land’) has been the subject of endless interpretations by British courts. In essence it means that any change as related to land use, is potentially a planning matter (Moore, 2002)

The legislation allows for Outline consent and Full permissions, again a standard UK provision but there is no requirement for publicity and public consultation. In considering applications, the Board ‘shall have regard to the Local Planning Scheme (if any) and to other material considerations’ although the meaning of this phrase, so familiar to UK practitioners is nowhere explained in plain terms.

Similarly, UK planners appreciate the importance of being able to grant permission subject to conditions and regularly do so (Audit Commission, 1998). But in the Solomon Islands the purpose and nature of conditioning has not been explained and is therefore not understood.

The legislation allows for appeals but the appeal is to the Minister who first decided the application. There is therefore no separation of jurisdiction. Nor does the system allow for the input of a professional opinion into the appeal process. All decisions are explicitly political and the right to determine appeals by politicians unfettered by any constraint. The system is therefore, unwittingly, an invitation to corruption. Absolute powers are placed in the hands of politicians with little realistic redress against arbitrary decisions. In the unlikely event of a refusal, the applicant has to appeal to the same person who refused the original application.

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Planning practice in the Solomon Islands

The same year that planning legislation was enacted, a Department of Physical Planning was established although there were no professionally qualified staff. A pre service training programme was delivered with assistance from the United Nations Development Programme. A later recruit described how ‘without knowing what is physical planning and whom does it deal with and so forth, I choose planning and was accepted without formal interview’ (Lokumana, 2003)

The training provided involved map reading, drawing plans, surveying and the subdivision of plots- all of use to a technician rather than decision maker. What the training did not do is explain the meaning of the legislation to the people who were supposed to operate it. In addition to the initial training, a few others have managed to obtain a technical qualification (Diploma) in Physical Planning but all of those with degree level qualifications have left the Solomons for lack of opportunity and poor levels of pay. The capacity to deliver the legislation effectively in the Solomon Islands is therefore greatly restricted.

Local control of planning is exercised by the Town and Country Planning Boards in each of the nine provinces and Honiara. Each in turn, in theory at least, serviced by corresponding Physical Planning Divisions. Honiara was the first Board and Division to be established in 1979 and the rest of the Provinces developed their equivalents as resources allowed. In each case the boards are responsible for the preparation of Local Planning Schemes and determination of planning applications. In practice, no Local Planning Schemes have been prepared. There is a draft zoning scheme prepared for

Honiara in 1983 but there is no accompanying text and it has never been formally adopted. The Planning Boards are therefore only concerned with planning applications although their decisions can be overridden. All planning matters are overseen by a Minister, in whom all powers are ultimately vested, as described above. Funding for the Boards and Planning Divisions is provided by central government. The UK pattern of strong central control and dependency on the centre for funding is like the planning system, replicated in the Solomon Islands.

The Planning Boards are mostly composed of politicians with some other co-optees, serviced by a Secretary, who is a planner. In Honiara for example, the board is chaired by the Mayor and there are eight other Councillors in attendance. The co-opted members include a representative from the National Association of Women, the Solomon Islands Christian Association and the Chamber of Commerce. Meetings are supposed to be monthly but are less frequent in practice. The public are able to attend but there is little or no publicity to encourage attendance. The public are not usually consulted over applications although larger developments may involve wider consultation. There are no written procedures for consultation.

The number of applications reported to the Boards is low, mainly because of a failure to understand the wide ranging meaning of development. In effect, the planners guess what is a planning matter, based upon their own experience of practice. If the law was applied as it is written, there would be an unmanageable number of very trivial applications.

The reports of applications to the Boards are, as they are the world over, fairly routine. They invariably address issues in relation to land ownership, although this is not a planning issue. Reports do not, as is standard UK practice, make a recommendation based upon professional judgement to grant permission in full or refuse. There is little discussion of material considerations, that is the planning issues to considered other than parking, access and zoning.

The result of this is that there are few Board meetings but when they do meet, all applications are approved in full, without any modifying conditions. Even where the planners can see strong objections, developers have learned that politicians can be influenced to grant permission. Or, as in some recent cases, the originators of poor development are the politicians themselves.

Despite this failure, all planners in the Solomon Islands are dealing with planning applications. No forward planning work is being conducted. The lack of professional training in even the meaning of the legislation they (the planners) have to implement, the lack of guidance in the form of secondary legislation and their powerlessness in the face of political interference does not equip them to add value to the development control process. The lack of public knowledge and involvement in planning ensures politicians are unaccountable and leaves planners feeling isolated and ineffective. While the powers exist in theory to create a better quality environment, in practice planning is unable to affect outcomes. In effect, there is a free for all, as is evident to anyone walking the streets of Honiara.

The case for planning; towards reform

The current planning system, as set out in the 1980 Town and Country Planning Act is the sole mechanism for managing land in the public interest in the Solomon Islands but it is failing to deliver any tangible public benefit. The question is whether this is a result of programme failure, that is there is nothing wrong with the planning system except the way it is implemented or something more profound- a policy failure.

Specific shortcomings of the system are as follows:

- **The current definition of what ‘planning’ is.** The current legislation follows the British definition of ‘development’. For the purposes of modern spatial management this is at once too broad and too narrow. It is too narrow in the sense that it is only concerned with land use. It is unable to incorporate more social and economic objectives into spatial management. Without modifying secondary legislation it is too broad in the sense that anything to do with land use is potentially a planning matter, such as painting a house or putting up a garden structure.

- **The emphasis upon discretionary decision making.** The lack of compulsion to conform with statutory plans when determining planning applications undermines any incentive to prepare plans in the first place. Even in the UK, the emphasis upon totally discretionary decision making has been considerably amended in the last 20 years.
- The emphasis upon discretionary decision making also has **human resource implications**. Such a system creates the need for a large number of bureaucratic procedures. Scarce human resources are consumed in dealing with planning applications rather than plan making. A revised system needs to be simpler and less expensive to administer.
- The use of a discretionary system **downgrades the importance of plan making** and hence strategic decision making. Instead the emphasis is upon reactive control – determining applications on an ad hoc basis. In a broader sense it prevents planning from becoming what it should be- a tool for the broader population to institute long term, positive change.
- **There is undue reliance on political decision making**, which at best precludes public and professional opinion and at worst creates opportunities for malfeasance. The system has no countervailing forces on arbitrary decision

making. The disincentive to provide a policy context through forward plans is only part of the story. Decision making is entirely in the hands of politicians so if, for example, an application is refused, the appeal is determined by the same politician- there is no separation of function or appeal to a third party. This problem is compounded by an almost complete lack of accountability. The exclusion of the public from all planning matters means that there is no political price for poor decision making. As a consequence planners feel they have little right to express a professional opinion and at present all applications are approved, with little or no modification from the use of conditions.

- **The system is partial not universal.** Despite the title ‘Town and Country’, it is only applicable in alienated lands. This reflects the colonial origins where planning was only ‘for’ areas of interest to the colonial administration. As a result there is no planning at all where the majority of the population live- in villages in rural areas. Nor is protection afforded to fragile environments. The Solomons is one of the few countries in the world without National Parks and other devices to enhance environmentally sensitive areas. A new type of planning, able to engage with traditional patterns of land ownership and deal with rural issues is needed.
- **The impact of major industries is uncontrolled.** Logging, mineral extraction and fishing are often conducted in the same areas where there is the greatest scope for tourism (Kabultaulake, 2000). In particular, Marovo, the world’s largest

lagoon and potential World Heritage Site is the centre of much uncontrolled logging.

- **There is little or no scope for public involvement** and very often decisions are taken which are clearly contrary to the needs of the majority of the population and which serve little purpose other than the short term needs of an individual or government. The historical lack of consultation and involvement, a product of the colonial past, means that such decisions are rarely publicly challenged. More profoundly, there is little pressure from the public to create the sort of development they wish to see. Perhaps it is no coincidence that people often seem to have little pride or sense of involvement in their surroundings.

- The lack of involvement is exacerbated **by the lack of communication about the spirit and purpose of planning**. The legislation, which only provides the bare bones for the system, is written in a legalistic language virtually unintelligible to planners and politicians, let alone the general public. The lack of action to develop relevant secondary legislation and plans is not simply a reflection of the lack of human resources but also the vast gulf in understanding. This is partly the result of the lack of resonance in the legislation, designed as it is to meet the needs of a society far away geographically, culturally and in time. It is also a result of inappropriate training and education. But it is also a product of sheer linguistic incomprehension. Any legislation upon which people are expected to

act should be available in plain English and Pidgin. There should also be accompanying secondary legislation, again in plain English and Pidgin, which sets out in more detail how the system should operate, as well as a series of policy documents to guide decision making.

Towards an agenda for reform

If nothing else planning legislation in the Solomon Islands is outdated. The 1932 Act UK upon which the Act is modeled, was principally intended to control suburban sprawl in the British countryside and has long been superseded by a comprehensive, universal system. (Ashworth, 1954; Hall et al,1973). Since the late 1960s, the UK system has incorporated extensive provision for public participation and since the last consolidating legislation was enacted in the early 1980s, there has been a strengthening of the role of plan making, which is now universal (Heap, 1996). More recently, the discretion enjoyed by politicians has become greatly circumscribed (Local Government Association, 2002). By contrast, legislation in the Solomon Islands and other Commonwealth nations with similar legislation, has remained frozen in time. A government review of the original 'model' for planning systems in Commonwealth nations, in Trinidad and Tobago, recommended a complete overhaul of the system but no action has been taken (Government of Trinidad and Tobago, 1993).

Many of the ills identified above are the product of not just outdated legislation but more fundamentally, a system designed to meet the specific needs of the UK. There are

alternative methods of land use or spatial development, such as those common in continental Europe, which are cheaper, provide greater certainty, remove arbitrary political decision making and place greater emphasis on plan making (Booth, 1996; Department of the Environment, 1986; Newman and Thornley, 1996). Nor does planning have to confine itself to land use issues only; it is perfectly feasible to devise participatory systems of spatial management to include costed social, environmental and economic objectives. The Integrated Development Plans recently introduced in South Africa are an example of such plan making but there are others. (Hadlington, 2002; OECD, 2001).

The failings of the planning system in the Solomon Islands were raised at the first ever meeting for Pacific planners, facilitated by the Commonwealth Association of Planners in Brisbane in November 2003. At that meeting it was apparent that the issues identified in this paper are not confined to the Solomon Islands. A more recent CAP conference, in Kuala Lumpur in July 2004, also highlighted the unease of practitioners in Commonwealth nations beyond the Pacific. The study of post colonial planning systems is a greatly neglected topic but the present example highlights above all the need for action.

The presence of RAMSI in the Solomon Islands and the renewed interest in effective governance in developed and developing nations alike, presents an opportunity to create a revised system of spatial planning which serves the needs of the people rather than the administrative convenience of a departing colonial power. The time is right for an

informed review of the options for change, which respects not just the culture of the Solomon Islands but also facilitates change. The work of Jones and his colleagues in Samoa demonstrates this can be done in the Pacific (Jones et al, 2002; Ale and Jones, 2003). Following the review, a second priority is redrafted legislation with accompanying secondary legislation available in English and Pidgin. The third stage of reform needs to address the issue of training and education, so often neglected when new systems are introduced (Hamsa and Zetter, 2000). This is a process likely to take several years but beyond it, there will be lessons for many other Commonwealth nations. (2).

Notes

- (1) This section is based upon documents stored in the National Archive of the Solomon Islands, Honiara which was visited on 13 August 2003. Further details can be supplied on request.
- (2) A bid for support from the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation is being submitted in the first instance, to carry out a review of the planning system in the Solomon Islands. This is the first phase of a longer term project managed by the Government of the Solomon Islands, RAMSI, planners in the Solomon Islands and the Commonwealth Association of Planners.

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