

**SHARING AND EXPLORING PACIFIC APPROACHES
TO DIALOGUE: A COMPENDIUM OF CASE STUDIES
FROM PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES**



**SOLOMON ISLAND GOVERNMENT
– GUADALCANAL PROVINCIAL
GOVERNMENT DIALOGUE**
RECONCILIATION DIALOGUE

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Title: Solomon Island Government: Guadalcanal Provincial Government Dialogue:
Reconciliation Dialogue

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SOLOMON ISLAND GOVERNMENT – GUADALCANAL PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT DIALOGUE RECONCILIATION DIALOGUE

SUMMARY

Longstanding and unresolved issues surrounding land tenure, economic opportunity, internal migration, and illegal settlement between the indigenous people of Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) have been recognized as one of the primary drivers of the outbreak of violent conflict known as 'The Tensions' in the late 1990s. This case study examines the ongoing talks between the SIG and the Guadalcanal Provincial Government (GPG) to resolve these issues and to open the way to achieve wider national reconciliation.

1. CONTEXT

While the outbreak of violent conflict in Solomon Islands that became known as the ‘Tensions’ is generally considered to have occurred in 1998, the years prior were marked by a period of mounting grievances on the part of the indigenous inhabitants of Guadalcanal province in the wider context of a limited sense of post-independence national unity. As the site of the national capital of Honiara, Guadalcanal has historically been the focus of a disproportionate amount of the country’s post-independence development, resulting in a constant inflow of migrants from other provinces, particularly nearby Malaita. Processes of uneven development highlighted differences in economic opportunity between Honiara and rural areas of Guadalcanal, and migrants brought with them differing customary practices and kinship ties¹.

These frustrations and inter-communal differences added to growing Guale concerns over disenfranchisement from their traditional lands by settlers, whom many regarded as illegal squatters. Adding to these growing feelings of resentment, a cycle of killings and ‘payback killings’ began, with murders of Guales drawing widespread feelings of anger across Guadalcanal, culminating in the 1988 murders of three villagers by Malaitans that triggered demonstrations in Honiara and vocal calls for the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) to hold Malaitan settlers to account and begin to address the perceived problem of unmanaged internal migration².

Soon after the 1988 murders, a delegation of leaders representing the people of Guadalcanal submitted a list of grievances to the SIG, headed by then Prime Minister Ezekiel Alebua³. These grievances included alleged killings of indigenous Guadalcanal people by settlers from the neighbouring province of Malaita, lack of equity in the delivery of national services such as healthcare and education to rural areas of the island, unchecked inter-provincial migration, and loss of lands to ‘illegal’ settlement. In a formal letter of protest signed by a number of prominent local leaders representing the Guadalcanal Provincial Government (GPG), the people of Guadalcanal called upon the SIG to respond to a series of ‘Bona Fide Demands’ (BFDs) to address these longstanding grievances.

- 1 Bennett, Judith. 2002. ‘Roots of Conflict in Solomon Islands Though Much is Taken, Much Abides: Legacies of Tradition and Colonialism’. State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper No. 2002/5. Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University.
- 2 Fraenkel, Jon. 2004. *The Manipulation of Custom: From Uprising to Intervention in the Solomon Islands*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, pp. 45–47.
- 3 MNURP. 2007. Report of the High Level Government Committee on Reconciliation and Rehabilitation on Guadalcanal. Honiara: MNURP, p. 12.

These BFDs included the repatriation of 'illegal' settlers and curtailment of future settlement, the creation of a more equitable system of service delivery, greater distribution of development projects throughout the country in order to reduce settler flows into Guadalcanal, relocation of national prisons from Guadalcanal, and provisions to support the return of Guadalcanal lands to the administration of provincial authorities⁴.

Subsequent BFDs were added by the GPG in 2000, stemming from perceived SIG negligence to address the original issues raised in the 1988 petition⁵. Unlike the original demands, which were broad-based and open to interpretation, the subsequent BFDs were extensive and highly specific, containing calls for a federal system of government to be instituted by the new Constitution, a number of land tenure reforms, amendments to national electoral provisions, protections against settler encroachment, greater management of inter-provincial migration, calls for investigations into alleged atrocities committed by the state police, and compensation for victims.

This case study describes and examines the on-going reconciliation process that has been unfolding since the beginning of 2005 between the SIG and the GPG. The process has taken the form of a series of summits and high-level talks, supplemented by occasional civil society consultations and blended with a degree of traditional ceremony. Since progress on the SIG-GPG conflict involves addressing some of the key issues that gave rise to the Tensions, these are sensitive and challenging negotiations that are linked to long-term political issues in Solomon Islands.

2. PROBLEM

The perceived lack of political will and action from the SIG to address the BFDs is now held to be one of the underlying causes of the outbreak of violent conflict in 1998. Simmering for over a decade, the perceived inaction on the part of the SIG to make progress on the BFDs created an environment where conflict was seen as a potentially instrumental way of escalating the issues to the forefront of SIG policy⁶.

4 The full list of demands can be found in the original petition entitled 'The Bona Fide Demands by the Indigenous People of Guadalcanal' (1988).

5 MNURP 2007, 13.

6 Fraenkel 2004, 45–51.

During the following five years of civil unrest, SIG was seen to be an active participant in the conflict, despite its attempts to bring peace. Payment by SIG of compensation to the families of some victims, the role of the state police force in atrocities as well as perceived inaction on the underlying demands meant that by the end of the violence in 2003, few had confidence in the capacity of SIG as peacemaker⁷.

While a number of SIG-GPG talks have been held, issues remain, particularly in the areas of land reform, rebalancing socioeconomic development and dealing with atrocities allegedly committed by the state police. The post-Tensions environment has reduced but not eliminated the atmosphere of deep resentment and mistrust, entrenching perceptions of a victim-perpetrator dynamic whereby it is possible for some members of the GPG to view the SIG as largely responsible for denying the people of Guadalcanal their due needs and rights.

Adding further pressure to the conflict is the fact that a number of the urgent reforms called for by the BFDs cannot, by their very nature, be addressed on a short timeframe. Issues such as land reform and constitutional amendments require legislative solutions or the creation of new institutions that can take years – if not decades – to advance. While the SIG has arguably made some progress towards addressing some shorter-term needs, such as building new schools and roads in the province and paying some compensation to victims⁸, the often high-level nature of the dialogue between the SIG and GPG means that keeping the general public informed is a challenge. The result is that significant differences remain between the parties. Furthermore, without progress on the SIG-GPG conflict it is difficult to achieve a broader national post-Tensions reconciliation.

3. PROCESS

The SIG-GPG reconciliation process has taken the form of a series of summits or leaders' meetings, as well as high-level talks between the SIG and GPG leaders, supplemented by occasional civil society consultations and blended with a degree of traditional ceremony. It is an ongoing process that has unfolded over a period beginning in 2005 and continues through to the time of writing.

⁷ Ibid. 47.

⁸ See, for example: MNURP. 2011. 'Joint Solomon Islands Government and Guadalcanal Provincial Government Consultative Dialogue on Reconciliation: Report on Part One of Dialogue: 7th–8th June 2011.'

The Guadalcanal Leaders' Summit (2005)

The formal process began with a high-level meeting known as the Guadalcanal Leaders' Summit in 2005. In these talks, the Acting Premier of Guadalcanal province, Hon. Stephen Panga, led a GPG delegation that presented proposals for a peace reconciliation between the province and the national government. This summit was held at the Basaluna Christian Outreach Centre, Guadalcanal Plains and was attended by chiefs, elders, women, youth and academics from Guadalcanal, as well as then Prime Minister Hon. Allan Kemakeza.

This was the first of such meetings since the Tensions; as such, the participants themselves were notably not yet reconciled, and an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion was said to have permeated the negotiations on both sides. In particular, there was a feeling from the GPG side that the SIG was primarily responsible for failing to address the longstanding BFDs, and thus the onus for reconciliation was placed squarely upon them. This is perhaps why the GPG has generally accepted the SIG taking the lead in facilitating the reconciliation process – as the perceived transgressors, tradition dictates that the SIG must make amends. Chief among the GPG interests presented at the Summit was a request for SIG to apologise to the people of Guadalcanal for using the state security apparatus against them during the State of Emergency, and to compensate them for loss of life, property and livelihood experienced as a result. The GPG requested that the SIG take responsibility for funding the reconciliation process and for rehabilitating all ex-combatants.

Despite this tense negotiation atmosphere, both sides were generally united in their desire for peace so that future economic development of the province could begin to take place, relationships could be rebuilt and social harmony could be restored. A total of 39 resolutions were passed at the summit, encompassing broad issues, with the most prominent being the GPG call for the SIG to kick-start immediate reconciliations with the Guadalcanal people, beginning with a traditional peace and reconciliation ceremony involving an exchange of gifts and compensation, to be followed by a longer-term programme of rehabilitation.

The SIG/GPG Taskforce on Reconciliation and Rehabilitation (2006)

In response to the proposals made at the 2005 Leaders' Summit, the Prime Minister established an SIG/GPG Taskforce on Reconciliation and Rehabilitation, headed by Hon. Stephen Panga, to make recommendations on the form, substance, cost, date and venue for such a reconciliation ceremony,

and to ensure that it adhered as closely as possible to Guadalcanal custom. This Taskforce was comprised of a number of Guadalcanal provincial MPs and SIG government ministers, in addition to a sole women's representative, a community representative, and a representative of RAMSI. The RAMSI representative was included in order to recognize the role of RAMSI in creating the conditions necessary for a return to stability and to ensure that the mission was kept apprised – and supportive of – the reconciliation process.

Beginning in late 2005, the Taskforce carried out a series of 19 public consultations in conflict-affected 'hotspots' throughout the province to canvass the views of local chiefs, community leaders, ex-combatants, youth and women on their needs and suggestions for reconciliation, rehabilitation and general longer-term socioeconomic development needs. The consultations also were designed to increase public awareness of the process itself and to garner their support in sustaining it. Following these consultations, written lists of lost and damaged property as well as lists of ex-combatants were submitted to the Taskforce to help further frame the compensation and rehabilitation needs.

The Taskforce found that the people of Guadalcanal largely blamed the failures of successive national governments to address the BFDs for sparking the outbreak of violence during the Tensions. They also felt that the government responded with undue force during the conflict, which only exacerbated and prolonged the violence and feelings of resentment towards the central government. The consultations demonstrated that the people of the province generally backed the GPG delegation's belief that the SIG was the main offender, and thus should take responsibility for compensation, reconciliation and rehabilitation if relationships between the people of the province and their national government were to be restored.

In the months following the consultation process, the Taskforce held 16 'brainstorming meetings' to formulate SIG and GPG positions on the reconciliation and to develop a report to submit to the SIG with a recommended strategy for reconciliation. This 'Panga Report' was submitted to the SIG in 2006 and called for the SIG to perform a Rasi peace ceremony – the highest form of traditional peace ceremony in Guadalcanal custom – in order to restore the bond between both parties and pave the way for agreed rehabilitation programmes on Guadalcanal. In addition to the ceremonial compensation, the Taskforce also recommended the payment of a 'peace settlement' amounting to \$SBD7.9 million as compensation to the people of Guadalcanal.

A broad rehabilitation programme was also proposed, calling for the government to underwrite the repair and upgrade of a number of roads, bridges, fisheries and other essential infrastructure projects in the province, as well as personal rehabilitation projects including cash payments and provision of materials for household repairs totalling \$SBD40 million, \$SBD10 million for the reconciliation of ex-combatants, \$SBD100 million for the rehabilitation of livelihoods, and \$SBD25,000 paid to the families of each person killed as a result of the crackdown during the Tensions. A number of sub-national reconciliations were also recommended, notably including a formal reconciliation with the RSIPF for atrocities allegedly committed.

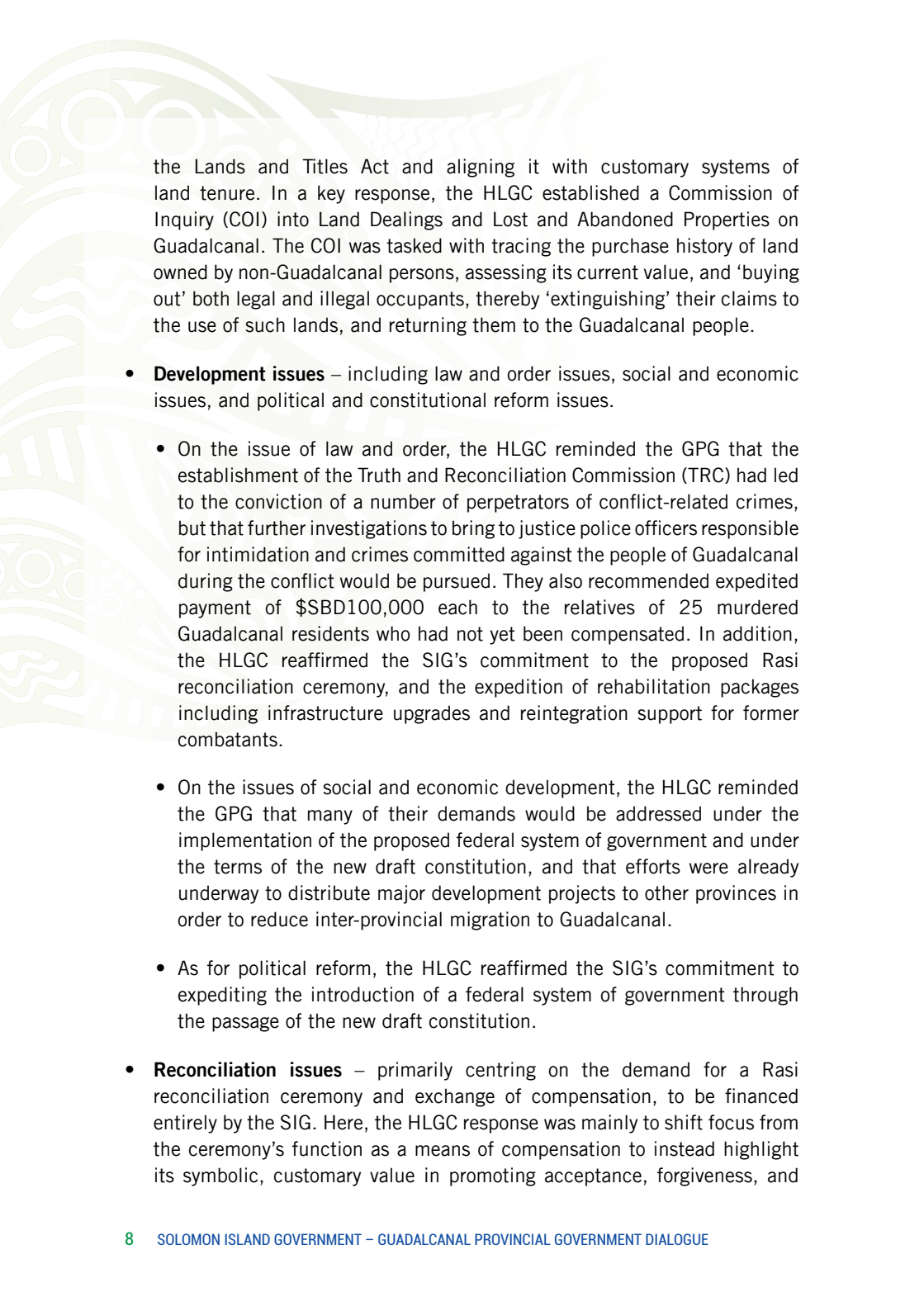
The SIG Response (2007)

The submission of the Panga Report set into motion an exchange of GPG demands and SIG responses that has come to characterize the negotiation process to date. A High Level Government Committee (HLGC) was established by the SIG in 2007 to assist the MNURP in facilitating reconciliation and peace talks between the GPG and SIG and to officially respond to the BFDs submitted by the indigenous people of Guadalcanal. The HLGC is comprised of permanent secretaries of the relevant government ministries tasked with responding to the BFDs. The HLGC also included two women prominent in public affairs and the pursuit of peace, Joy Kere, who chaired the Committee, and Ruth Liloqula.

The HLGC met a total of 12 times in early 2007 to develop the SIG position, while also holding a few consultation meetings of its own. Later in the same year, the HLGC released its own report, outlining the SIG's position and response to the GPG demands. The HLGC response was guided by the following principles: the need to manage the financial burden that implementing the GPG recommendations would place on the government's budget; the need to prioritize the list of demands and coordinate a phased response; the need to more effectively communicate progress already made by the government; and, most importantly, to be mindful that any decisions taken could set precedents for future provincial-level reconciliations.

As a way of prioritizing the GPG demands and the SIG response, the HLGC chose to order them under four major categories:

- **Land issues** – centring on the return of alienated lands to the indigenous people of Guadalcanal, or compensation paid for its use through amending



the Lands and Titles Act and aligning it with customary systems of land tenure. In a key response, the HLG established a Commission of Inquiry (COI) into Land Dealings and Lost and Abandoned Properties on Guadalcanal. The COI was tasked with tracing the purchase history of land owned by non-Guadalcanal persons, assessing its current value, and ‘buying out’ both legal and illegal occupants, thereby ‘extinguishing’ their claims to the use of such lands, and returning them to the Guadalcanal people.

- **Development issues** – including law and order issues, social and economic issues, and political and constitutional reform issues.
 - On the issue of law and order, the HLG reminded the GPG that the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) had led to the conviction of a number of perpetrators of conflict-related crimes, but that further investigations to bring to justice police officers responsible for intimidation and crimes committed against the people of Guadalcanal during the conflict would be pursued. They also recommended expedited payment of \$SBD100,000 each to the relatives of 25 murdered Guadalcanal residents who had not yet been compensated. In addition, the HLG reaffirmed the SIG’s commitment to the proposed Rasi reconciliation ceremony, and the expedition of rehabilitation packages including infrastructure upgrades and reintegration support for former combatants.
 - On the issues of social and economic development, the HLG reminded the GPG that many of their demands would be addressed under the implementation of the proposed federal system of government and under the terms of the new draft constitution, and that efforts were already underway to distribute major development projects to other provinces in order to reduce inter-provincial migration to Guadalcanal.
 - As for political reform, the HLG reaffirmed the SIG’s commitment to expediting the introduction of a federal system of government through the passage of the new draft constitution.
- **Reconciliation issues** – primarily centring on the demand for a Rasi reconciliation ceremony and exchange of compensation, to be financed entirely by the SIG. Here, the HLG response was mainly to shift focus from the ceremony’s function as a means of compensation to instead highlight its symbolic, customary value in promoting acceptance, forgiveness, and

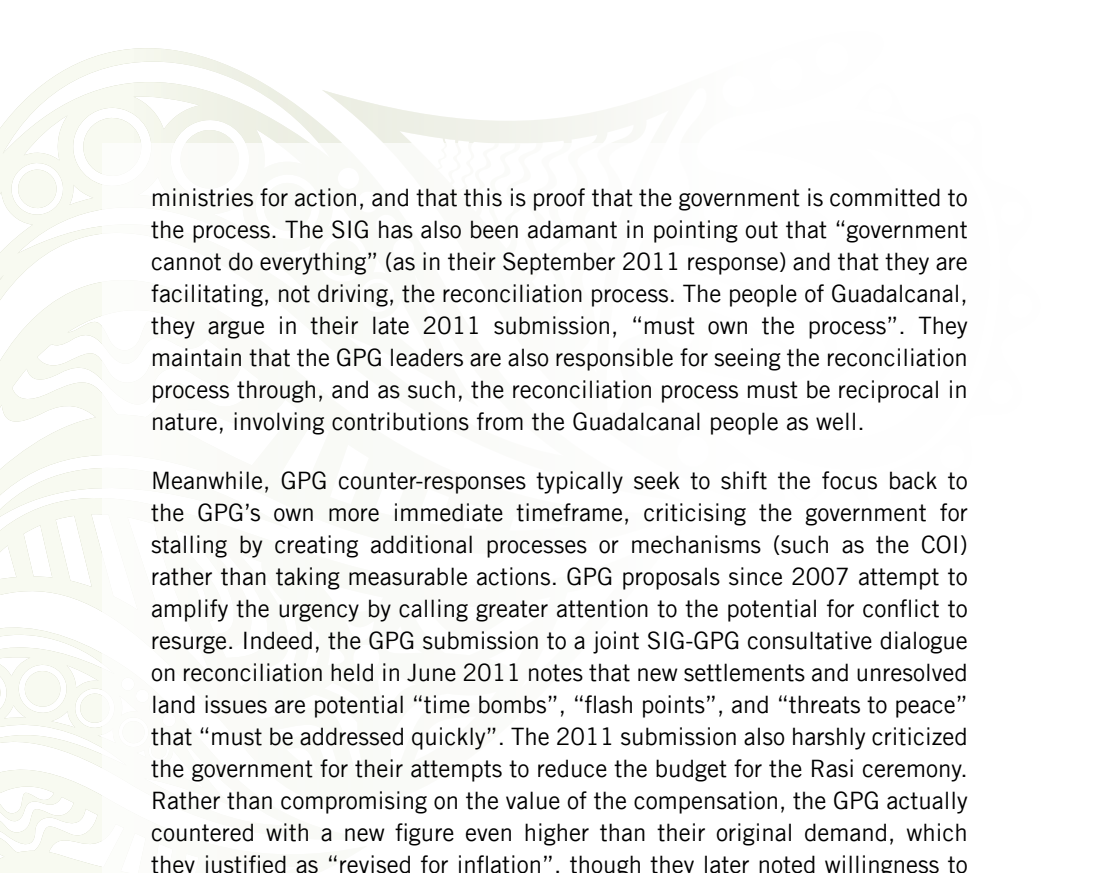
restoration of social ties. As such, SIG counterproposed a revised budget for the ceremony totalling roughly \$SBD5 million – effectively halving the \$SBD9.5 million originally proposed by the GPG in the Panga Report. The government’s lengthy justification for the reduced monetary figure included concerns for setting a precedent that the SIG could realistically follow in other provincial reconciliations, as well as taking into account funds paid to the GPG through other reconciliation and rehabilitation projects already administered.

- **Rehabilitation issues** – including the GPG’s demands concerning livelihood issues, infrastructure repairs and upgrades, and payment of compensation for private property damaged during the conflict. The HLGC response called into question the high figure demanded by the GPG in the Panga Report (\$SBD157 million), noting that while the government agreed in principle to provide for rehabilitation, it would need to form a Rehabilitation Committee to conduct its own needs assessment in the province and determine the funds to be allocated accordingly.

Recent developments

The five years since both sides released their official positions and responses have been characterised by additional rounds of back-and-forth exchanges similar to those above. Generally, the HLGC has tended to group GPG demands into clusters around a central issue or theme – a process that allows them to reduce the overall number of demands, while also helping the SIG order the issues more pragmatically on their terms. HLGC responses also highlight progress already made on certain demands as a way of moving on from those issues, allowing the government to focus on others it sees as more viable or politically acceptable. Indeed, one of the commonalities of every HLGC submission has been an annex providing a detailed update on the government’s actions and current status of each of the BFDs. This is presumably designed to give a sense that some momentum is being generated and that issues are being resolved in a timely manner.

However, the government responses also have continually emphasised timing issues associated with the ‘big picture’ nature of many of the demands, noting that many can be brought under the umbrella of constitutional reform or other longer-term legislative processes that will take time to unfold. While recognising the needs of the GPG and its constituents for reconciliation, the HLGC continues to maintain that all the BFDs have been sent to the relevant



ministries for action, and that this is proof that the government is committed to the process. The SIG has also been adamant in pointing out that “government cannot do everything” (as in their September 2011 response) and that they are facilitating, not driving, the reconciliation process. The people of Guadalcanal, they argue in their late 2011 submission, “must own the process”. They maintain that the GPG leaders are also responsible for seeing the reconciliation process through, and as such, the reconciliation process must be reciprocal in nature, involving contributions from the Guadalcanal people as well.

Meanwhile, GPG counter-responses typically seek to shift the focus back to the GPG’s own more immediate timeframe, criticising the government for stalling by creating additional processes or mechanisms (such as the COI) rather than taking measurable actions. GPG proposals since 2007 attempt to amplify the urgency by calling greater attention to the potential for conflict to resurge. Indeed, the GPG submission to a joint SIG-GPG consultative dialogue on reconciliation held in June 2011 notes that new settlements and unresolved land issues are potential “time bombs”, “flash points”, and “threats to peace” that “must be addressed quickly”. The 2011 submission also harshly criticized the government for their attempts to reduce the budget for the Rasi ceremony. Rather than compromising on the value of the compensation, the GPG actually countered with a new figure even higher than their original demand, which they justified as “revised for inflation”, though they later noted willingness to compromise by returning to their original figure if needed.

Not surprisingly, with both parties apparently not compromising on many of the issues – particularly that of the amount of compensation to be paid in the Rasi reconciliation ceremony – the 2011 talks did not lead to a resolution. Since then, however, the SIG (through MNURP) has prepared a response to the outcome of those dialogues that will be submitted to the Cabinet to be confirmed as the SIG position. The government is also working with the GPG to agree on timing of the next round of informal talks as early as late July 2012. These informal talks will be aimed at explaining current government programs and responses in the hope of reducing the number of issues to be discussed during the formal talks, where it is hoped that SIG can come to an agreement with the GPG leaders about the most sensitive outstanding issues, prior to implementing the broader reconciliation that would involve the people – from victims to chiefs to ex-combatants, women and youth.

4. PARTICIPANTS

The Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace (MNURP)

As the SIG agency responsible for post-conflict peacebuilding, the MNURP was tasked with pursuing meaningful reconciliation of people and institutions at all levels of Solomon Islands society. An important component of this ongoing peace process has been to facilitate reconciliation talks between the SIG and the GPG. The broader goal of these negotiations has been to open the way for provincial-level reconciliation that could lead to post-Tensions reconciliation throughout the country. While the main intervener in this process has been the MNURP – a part of the SIG and thus in some senses a party to the conflict rather than a strictly outside facilitator – the role of the MNURP in organising and facilitating the dialogue process is said to be accepted by the GPG.

The Guadalcanal Provincial Government (GPG)

Guadalcanal interests in the talks have been represented by a GPG negotiating team consisting of roughly an equal number of high-level provincial representatives, including the province's premier, deputy premier, and members of Parliament from the Provincial Assembly. This delegation represents the government, chiefs, leaders and people of Guadalcanal province in the talks. As elected political representatives, members of the delegation have the added interest of preserving their own legitimacy to their respective constituencies, maintaining their standing in the provincial government, and furthering their own policy objectives.

The Solomon Islands Government (SIG)

The SIG has a dual role in the management of this conflict. Firstly, the SIG acts as a facilitator of the process through the MNURP. Secondly, the SIG is called upon to respond to and manage GPG demands while remaining sensitive to the concerns and needs of other provinces. For this reason, the SIG has an interest in keeping both parties engaged through dialogue to manage social tensions. The SIG's various Ministries also have the role of considering the demands that fall under their responsibility and formulating responses in line with their wider government policy programs. In doing so, they strive to ensure that any commitments made are not in conflict with broader government policies, and do not set an unsustainable precedent by making decisions that cannot be applied to other provinces.

Non-indigenous Guadalcanal settlers

Although not direct parties to the reconciliation talks, Guadalcanal's settlers – some of whom have acquired land, built houses and raised families who have never lived outside the province – have an interest in continuing to avail themselves of the economic and livelihood opportunities that are thus far only widely available on Guadalcanal.

5. CHALLENGES

Tension between traditional and institutional reconciliation models

As the SIG-GPG reconciliation process operates primarily at the institutional level, there is a risk that more traditional methods of reconciliation that focus on restoring the social cohesion of the community are being subverted in favour of distributive bargaining over compensation figures. Indeed, while both parties seem in agreement that the Rasi ceremony must be carried out urgently to formally restore relations between the two parties and set the stage for future phases of reconciliation and rehabilitation, both sides continue to dispute the amount to be paid. This calls into question which matters more – the symbolic, healing function of the ceremony, or the resources at stake. A related concern is that some believe that the roles of the traditional chiefs may be fading as politicians are seen as politicising the traditional norm of reconciliation through ceremony for their own political gains.

Linking the high-level process to the grassroots

An overarching challenge is ensuring that the people of Guadalcanal are kept apprised throughout the reconciliation and rehabilitation efforts. While the process is driven at the institutional level, it cannot happen there alone, a fact that both parties have acknowledged. Indeed, through the Taskforce, both parties have demonstrated the willingness to keep the people engaged in the process and to feed their needs and concerns into the agenda-setting phase of the negotiations. While the government continually updates the GPG on compensation figures paid to date, development projects commenced and legislative reforms underway – and indeed carefully documents them through reports – lack of communication to the grassroots level leads many in Guadalcanal to suspect a lack of political will on the part of the SIG. This may serve the immediate political needs of the GPG in maintaining the public's loyalty to their side of the negotiations, but if these incremental developments

are not communicated to the people, there is a risk that they will lose faith in the process altogether, jeopardising the chances of achieving reconciliation.

Institutional accountability and transparency

Allegations of mismanagement of resources in some of the institutions tasked with progressing reconciliation have continued to surface. There are allegations that past corruption in the GPG government has prevented reparation funds and other compensation dispersed from the SIG from reaching their targeted constituencies or adequately achieving rehabilitation and reconciliation activities. As a result, the people of Guadalcanal still feel that their needs have not been addressed by the SIG, even in instances where the SIG may indeed have already provided funds. In these cases, the SIG maintains that they have upheld their responsibilities, and thus places the onus on the GPG, leading to a cycle of blame-shifting and compromising overall progress in the reconciliation process. Corruption allegations have also occasionally affected the progress of reconciliation through SIG processes, with the most notable example being that of the COI on Land Dealings, which was disbanded in late 2010 due to charges of corruption within its ranks.

Developing an agreeable timeline for action

An additional challenge has been getting agreement on an appropriate timeframe for the resolution of a number of key issues. The GPG continues to call for an immediate halt to settlement and return of alienated lands to the Guadalcanal people. However, as the SIG maintains, the nature of land reform and its far-reaching implications on national policy mean that it cannot be enacted on a short timeframe. The government also does not want to set a precedent in Guadalcanal that cannot be replicated in other provinces. To date, much work has gone into a constitutional reform process that is, if adopted, likely to address many of Guadalcanal's grievances; however, this is an ongoing process that will take time to unfold and the outcome is uncertain. Communicating this to the GPG has been a considerable challenge and has likely led the GPG to escalate the urgency and scale of their demands to compensate for frustration at what is seen as lack of political will on the part of the SIG.

Changing party representation

A related challenge is the changing membership of the GPG (and to a lesser extent, the SIG) delegation(s) due to change in political representation and

administrative personnel in a sometimes fractious and unstable political environment. In these circumstances, representatives do not always have the benefit of experience or knowledge of the goodwill generated by participating in prior discussions. They can also be susceptible to outside influence, a factor that has had an impact on GPG politics in the past.

Lack of decision-making power among those driving the process

The MNURP, who are the official 'face' of the negotiations, does not itself have the power to implement many of the changes called for in the GPG demands. As a result, the negotiations have followed a process whereby the MNURP receives the demands, then presents them to the relevant ministries, who need further time to formulate a response and obtain the appropriate government approvals, before the MNURP can reconvene the official talks to present the government position. This has added considerably to the timeline of the process.

Reconciliation with police force

The government has made efforts and some progress on moving toward reconciliation between the people of Guadalcanal's Weathercoast and the RSIPF to address outstanding issues (including an incident in which patrol boats were used to fire upon coastal villages) that are a source of longstanding resentment in that area of the province. However, this reconciliation has not been finalised on the ground. Recognising that this is an issue that is particular to the people of the Weathercoast, the MNURP has made efforts to address this issue outside the formal SIG-GPG talks. The MNURP has enlisted the Sycamore Tree project to conduct reconciliation activities on the Weathercoast at an individual level. There may also be an option to further discuss this issue in the informal talks scheduled to take place prior to the next round of official talks later in 2012.

6. RESULTS AND IMPACTS

Sustained dialogue and peaceful relations

Perhaps the most important result of the SIG-GPG reconciliation process is the clear demonstration on the part of both parties of a commitment to engaging in dialogue and sustaining peaceful relations. The last round of negotiations in 2011 may not have led to a resolution, but at no point has either of the parties walked away from the table or expressed anything but willingness for

the process to continue. Shared religious and customary values are central to this commitment, as they provide a common ground upon which both parties can return when disputes become heated. As a result, while tensions still remain – stemming primarily from the challenges named above – the parties seem committed to using talks to reach a peaceful outcome, and this has likely played a key role in keeping conflict from resurging.

Continued SIG commitment to reconciliation – Similarly, the fact that the government remains committed to GPG reconciliation and continues to consider it a priority is also an achievement. Given that the process has unfolded over nearly a decade and over several changes in government and shifts of leadership in various Cabinets, the SIG's steady commitment to the reconciliation process (including through the support MNURP) is promising.

Thorough documentation of process and progress

Another positive impact of the ongoing negotiations is that they have resulted in a thorough documentation of the issues, history and progress to date. While in another context this might not be worthy of attention, the consistent and thorough documentation of the Guadalcanal BFDs in particular has given these negotiations a constant baseline to which to return. This means that each subsequent round has been able to build upon the last without having to completely reinvent itself, despite the years that have lapsed in between, and the many changes of leadership both sides have seen.

Agreement over Rasi ceremony

Both parties have also come to in-principle agreement over the need for the Rasi reconciliation ceremony to pave the way for future reconciliation and rehabilitation processes. The parties have also agreed that compensation value should not take precedence in the Rasi, but that its symbolic, healing function should instead be the focus. However, despite this nominally shared point of agreement, it should be noted that both sides continue to bargain over the exact amount of compensation, calling into question the nature and function of this ceremony to each side.

Creation of new institutions

A number of key issues mentioned in the BFDs have been taken on board by the SIG, leading to the establishment of a number of government institutions and processes, although these may in some cases also respond to the concerns of other provinces as well. These include the COI on Land Dealings and

Abandoned properties formed to look into the issue of alienated lands, the Customary Land Reform Unit to consider issues of indigenous land tenure, and the Guadalcanal Province Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Committee and accompanying Rehabilitation Taskforce. While not all these institutions are currently operational, they have contributed to the overall reconciliation effort and give institutional recognition of the issues involved. There is also, importantly, Constitutional Reform Unit (CRU) tasked with drafting and reviewing constitutional reform, including GPG calls for federalism. While actual progress towards satisfying GPG demands through the CRU and other institutions has been difficult to measure, the establishment of new institutions by the SIG can at least be viewed as a step in the right direction – one that has been a direct outcome of this reconciliation process.

7. TECHNIQUES AND VALUES

The GPG-SIG reconciliation process has been characterised by its use of primarily formal talks at an institutional level. While more informal consultations with the public have been employed by both parties and the joint SIG-GPG Taskforce on Reconciliation in order to promote inclusivity, feed public opinion into the talks and, conversely, to provide the public with information on the status of the talks, the actual negotiations have been kept to the inter-governmental level. This seems to be accepted by both parties in the negotiations. Based on the consultations, this is also said to be generally accepted among the public as the only means through which most of the larger issues outlined in the BFDs and subsequent GPG demands can be addressed. For example, the issue of land reform, while one that has a clear impact on people on the ground, is an issue that needs to be resolved at an institutional and country-wide level. In this way, the SIG-GPG reconciliation has thus far been largely a political process, and links with wider political processes in Solomon Islands.

The reconciliation does not, however, completely disregard values inherent in Solomon Islands *kastom*, tradition and the church – widely considered to be pillars of a common Solomon Islands identity. Indeed, while the process used is arguably an introduced, modern political process, this is because many of the issues – particularly those surrounding the return of alienated lands – would not have arisen under *kastom* and thus require institutional processes to solve them. *Kastom* is also seen as difficult to employ when there are broader national-level issues at stake. Nonetheless, the SIG-GPG reconciliation process has kept *kastom* as an important part of the process, namely through its

emphasis on setting the conditions for a Rasi reconciliation ceremony. Indeed, the importance of the Rasi ceremony is something both parties agree upon, with each party's positions over the years concurring that the Rasi ceremony is a cornerstone for further reconciliation or rehabilitation. Rasi adheres to a norm in Guadalcanal kastom that allows the perpetrator to make amends to the victim, and for the victim to accept and grant forgiveness, mending the broken relationship and restoring social harmony. This exchange of remorse, restitution and acceptance thus constitutes an indigenous form of justice as well as compensation, and as such, is recognised by both parties as a pre-requisite for longer-term issues to be resolved.


It should also be noted that while the talks themselves have been of a high-level political nature, they are framed by these distinct Solomon Islands traditional practices. In joint talks, such as the more recent GPG-SIG consultative dialogue held in June 2011, each session begins with prayer, drawing on the commonality of Christian devotion shared by both sides. A symbolic 'bridging ceremony' was also used, involving the exchange of food and chupu, demonstrating each party's willingness to come together in peaceful talks and emphasizing the shared centrality of kastom.

In terms of addressing these other more institutional-level issues relating to development, rehabilitation and monetary compensation, the process thus far has focused more on aggregating and/or reducing the number of issues rather than actually developing a shared response to them. This is not solely an SIG approach, as government counter-demands for the GPG to accept certain responsibilities in the reconciliation process and for the GPG to acknowledge that local militants have been the cause of some atrocities have also been the subject of bargaining by the GPG as well. Furthermore, the introduction of new issues by the GPG in each round of deliberations requires that the SIG take additional time to consider them, and requires another subsequent round of talks.

8. LESSONS LEARNED AND OUTSTANDING ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

The importance of shared values

The issues at the centre of the SIG-GPG reconciliation dialogues are contentious and difficult. This is perhaps most emphatically demonstrated by the fact that they were central to the outbreak in armed conflict that became known as



the Tensions. In these circumstances it is crucial to note that shared cultural values, particularly kastom and religion, have helped to bind the parties in their desire for peace and provide all involved with the necessary patience to slowly work through difficult issues.

Need to balance institutional approaches and traditional practices

The fact that many of the issues in the SIG-GPG reconciliation talks are large-scale political considerations highlights the contrast between institutional approaches and the more traditional conflict resolution practices drawing on kastom. MNURP facilitators have pointed out that there are indeed limitations to the institutional approach, as such a high-level process may not respond to the needs of individuals and communities. Indeed, the public also is said to struggle to understand how two institutions can achieve reconciliation. While the policy changes and constitutional reforms that will come out of the institutional process will have an impact on the communities, there is still a need to use kastom as a way of helping rebuild relationships at a more individual and inter-communal level. Once the issues are resolved through the political processes currently underway, then a ceremony can take place and build on its symbolic value to heal the broken bonds within the community. As a result, the SIG-GPG process has strived to be a blend of both the institutional and the traditional.

Traditional practices can risk being co-opted or instrumentalised

As this process has shown, such hybridisation runs the risk of altering traditional practices. For example, some of the participants in the talks have noted that there has been a drift away from what is traditionally required by kastom. Traditional methods of resolving conflict involve a reciprocal exchange whereby both the offender and the victim contribute. However, some comment that this customary reciprocal element seems to have been forgotten in these negotiations. Instead, they feel that kastom is now being used to justify demands that are motivated by economic reasons rather than a genuine desire for reconciliation. Adding to this problem is that the SIG set a dangerous precedent by paying the families of victims killed during the Tension \$SBD100,000 each. This shift towards the material benefits of reconciliation has not been limited to the people and victims, however. Many of the Guadalcanal people have expressed frustration that politicians are also politicising kastom for their own benefit rather than pursuing it based on any genuine desire for reconciliation. As such, one of the lessons learned is that if kastom is to be used, ways must be found to uphold its values in contemporary processes and settings.

Need for informal talks alongside formal talks


Reflecting on the process, some MNURP facilitators noted that one particular lesson learned from prior rounds of SIG-GPG dialogue has been that there is a need for informal talks to take place between the parties prior to and in-between the formal talks. Such talks are perceived as necessary to build good will, share important information to reduce risks of misunderstanding, and thereby reduce the number of issues at play during the formal round of talks so that time can be spent more effectively on the more significant issues. In light of this reflection, the MNURP has already planned an informal round of talks with the Guadalcanal Premier and some of the GPG leaders to set the agenda for the next round of dialogue. By eliminating some of the items that are already being addressed by SIG through ongoing policies and programming, and by getting a better understanding of the GPG's more pressing issues, the MNURP facilitators are hoping to narrow the number of issues so that there can be a clear focus during the next formal talks.

Need for public outreach

One area for possible improvement is the need for greater public outreach on the part of both parties. Given the high-level nature of these talks, there is always the risk that the public will feel that they are disconnected from the process, that no progress is being made, or that its representatives are not truly advancing their issues. Indeed, while the SIG has made some demonstrable efforts to improve infrastructure, including the building of new roads and schools, there is little public awareness that these projects have been carried out by the government as a direct outcome of the negotiations. Efforts have been made to address this outreach deficit. Recognising that the MNURP lacks sufficient capacity in terms of staffing, resources and expertise to develop and execute a communications plan, the MNURP worked with UNDP to develop a communications strategy for disseminating information on the dialogues to the public. However, for a range of reasons the report did not receive official endorsement and the strategy has not been implemented. As a result, no proper follow-up to the initial public-level consultations has been pursued, and both parties currently rely on the GPG delegation to relay any outcomes back to their constituencies.

Need to boost the conflict resolution capacity of intervener(s) driving the process

While the MNURP is a facilitator of the SIG-GPG reconciliation talks, most of the MNURP staff do not have extensive dialogue or conflict resolution expertise,



particularly given the high-level nature of SIG-GPG issues. They struggle with dialogue and conflict resolution capacity, as well as broader capacity and resource constraints. To address this challenge, the MNURP has occasionally contracted consultants to draft key reports and provide legal expertise. In addition, the MNURP has periodically sought the assistance of an Eminent Persons Group (EPG), a group of highly respected Solomon Islanders with experience in conducting reconciliation processes. The participation of the EPG has proven helpful in communicating shared values and assisting with the talks to some degree; nonetheless, EPG involvement has thus far been limited. The EPG could also benefit from greater expertise in formal conflict resolution and dialogue skills, as well as boosting their capacity to work as a group. The MNURP is currently looking to develop the role of the EPG and the MNURP secretariat to support the EPG to that end.

The value and role of the ‘insider-partial’ in negotiations

Current work in the field of conflict resolution notes a growing recognition that so-called ‘insider partials’ – those with some degree of involvement in the conflict or stake in its outcome – can be valuable as facilitators of dialogue processes or talks, in contrast to earlier views that ‘outsider-neutrals’ were more appropriate. The MNURP, as an SIG body, has thus far been able to play the insider-partial role, carrying the trust of the GPG perhaps because it is the government body tasked with advancing reconciliation. At the same time, this is a somewhat awkward position for the MNURP to hold, as it can raise issues of impartiality and fairness. While the MNURP’s role seems to be holding at the moment, and while the involvement of the EPG assists with perceptions of impartiality, it is appropriate to ask if this position might be compromised if either or both the SIG or GPG reduce their commitments to the process, if MNURP capacities are compromised, or if party frustrations increase further.

Formal processes and complex issues require time to unfold

The SIG-GPG reconciliation talks are a relatively formal process and the issues are longstanding matters that are linked with the broader future political arrangements of Solomon Islands. In addition, the work of the formal institutions of the SIG and GPG in relation to the talks has sometimes been slow and subject to changes in personnel. As a result, the timeline of the process has often been subject to extensions and delay, while policy work that has been done to date – including constitutional reform efforts – will continue to take time to unfold.

Progress towards land reform and federalism

The twin issues of land reform and federalism (via the constitutional reform process underway) are perhaps the main issues that the GPG continues to feel remain unaddressed. While the work of constitutional reform may be in progress, with no solid deliverables that the SIG can present to the GPG, these issues will continue to resurface and draw time and attention from other issues that may be easier to address in the immediate term. Questions over the SIG's political will to address these issues has also likely motivated the GPG to introduce new demands in each subsequent round of talks, leading to further delay and frustration. This raises questions about the relationship between long-term political change and the immediate frustrations and aspirations of local people.

Reconciliation with police

While some efforts have been made to start a localised reconciliation process between Weathercoast communities and the RSIPF via Sycamore Tree, and while there have been some efforts at the institutional level by RSIPF and SIG, these processes are not complete and people of South Guadalcanal still harbour mistrust towards the RSIPF for what is seen as impunity from acts of wartime aggression committed against their communities. This issue will likely have to be addressed as part of reaching reconciliation between SIG and GPG as well as overall post-Tensions national reconciliation in Solomon Islands.

Talks or dialogue?

Generally 'talks' are understood to mean relatively formal processes of exchange, frequently involving negotiation or bargaining over party positions. On the other hand, dialogue typically refers to more open exchange among parties in the pursuit of integrative and holistic possibilities for agreement. These terms have been used somewhat interchangeably in this report to refer to the MNURP-led process. More emphasis has been given to the word talks to reflect what the authors understand to be the component of distributive negotiation or bargaining within the exchanges between the SIG and GPG. At the same time, MNURP staff more frequently refer to the process as dialogue, perhaps reflecting the measure of relative good will with which the talks have been undertaken and the place of kastom and church as integrative forces in the exchanges. The issue about how to term the SIG-GPG exchanges raises important questions about the key characteristics of dialogue and to what extent dialogue differs from political talks and negotiations.

How to integrate kastom and church values into an institutional dialogue and reconciliation process – Questions surrounding the timing, monetary value and function of the Rasi ceremony continue to be the subject of debate in each round of talks. With this comes questions over the role that kastom and church values can play in what is largely a political process of reconciliation driven by government institutions. Both kastom and Christianity have served as powerful linking values in the process to date but it also seems that they are not fully integrated into the talks leaving open the question about how to best integrate political, customary, and church-based approaches.



