# 1. Introduction

The Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was the first truth commission in the Pacific region. It was established by the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act 2008*[1] with a mandate to 'promote national unity and reconciliation' following the civil conflict that affected the country between 1998 and 2003, locally referred to as 'the tensions'. The commission was publicly launched in April 2009 by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former Chair of the South African TRC, and officially began operations in January 2010 for two years. In February 2012, the commission presented its final report to then Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo. The report has yet to be publicly released or presented to parliament, despite requirements to do so in the TRC Act. In response to the ongoing deferment and refusal to release the final report by the government, long-term Solomon Islands resident Bishop Terry Brown, editor of the final document, unofficially publicly released the report electronically in April 2013.

The five-volume final report concluded more than two years of research, exhumations, investigations and truth-seeking by the TRC. It contains recommendations for the Solomon Islands government about how to address the causes and legacy of the conflict. It details the antecedents to the conflict and its events and timeline, and contains information on the militant groups involved and an analysis of human rights abuses perpetrated, specifically: killings; abduction and illegal detention; torture and ill-treatment; sexual violence; property violation; and forced displacement. The final report also lists 200 people who were killed in tensions-related violence. The report draws on thousands of statements and testimony from victims, ex-combatants, politicians and leaders, as well as public submissions and a review of media, literature and other available documents.

This thesis presents an in-depth qualitative case study of the Solomon Islands TRC. It draws on interviews with former staff and stakeholders of the commission, and my own personal

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[1] Access to full text of the Act is available at: http://www.paclii.org/sb/legis/num_act/tarca2008371/. Referred to throughout this thesis as the TRC Act.

experiences of working for the commission, to explore the visions and realities of the first (and thus far only) truth commission implemented in the Pacific region. This thesis examines and challenges the complexity of translating and pursuing 'truth' and 'reconciliation' in a particular cultural context, and describes the practical challenges and everyday realities of implementing a TRC in the Solomon Islands.

The Solomon Islands TRC conducted its mandated activities and submitted its final report, despite the myriad challenges and obstacles experienced, as detailed in this thesis. In light of these outcomes, the Solomon Islands TRC could be considered a 'success'. This success, however, was arguably superficial, a performance of reconciliation in the theatre of post-conflict peacebuilding. A wider perspective of post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation in the Solomon Islands shows the TRC was a minor player on a crowded stage (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 77; Kabutaulaka 2005a, 420), and lacking in genuine political and public support, as evidenced by the limited public demand and ongoing refusal of the government to release its final report. This thesis describes how many Solomon Islanders were unaware of the TRC, and those familiar with its acronym or name were often unaware of its role or mandate.

This thesis contends that although the Solomon Islands TRC successfully replicated the structure and operation of a truth commission, this was based on a globalised and context-free theory of best practice. The commission was not adequately contextualised nor integrated with local approaches to reconciliation and peacebuilding, and it therefore fell short of its ambitious mandate. The following chapters detail the background and experiences of the Solomon Islands TRC and demonstrate the conceptual and practical challenges and friction experienced in implementing a truth commission seven years after the conflict had abated, and in the context of a multinational stabilising force. The thesis also discusses the positive processes and outcomes from the TRC, and the concluding chapter seeks to discern the potential that truth commissions offer for promoting reconciliation and peacebuilding in post-conflict contexts in Melanesia.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first establishes the context of the research, and in so doing, provides its rationale. The second section delineates the aim and scope of the research, identifying research questions and the contribution this research offers to the discourse and practice of truth commissions, and the growing bridge between the peace

studies and transitional justice fields. The final section describes the structure of the thesis, and provides a brief overview of each chapter.

## 1.1 Establishing context and rationale for the research

Solomon Islands is situated in the south-west Pacific, in a subregion widely known as Melanesia. As shown in Figure 1.1, Melanesia comprises a chain of islands including Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji, as well as the Indonesian province of West Papua, the Australian Torres Strait Islands and the French state of New Caledonia (Brown 2008, 187; May 2011).

With a population of between eight and nine million people, Melanesia is home to approximately 85 per cent of the Pacific Islands region's population (Brown 2008, 187). Like neighbouring Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, the population of Solomon Islands is predominantly Melanesian (around 95 per cent), with a smaller Polynesian population (around 4 per cent), particularly on outlier islands (Allen 2013, 37). There are also Chinese, European and Gilbert Islander (Micronesian) minorities (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 13).



**Figure 1.1** Map of south-west pacific region, demarcating Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia subregions.

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Brown (2008, 193) warns that terms to define and describe cultural groups and communities are typically vague and problematic: phrases such as 'the West' or 'the international community' and 'Melanesia' are equally opaque. The term 'Melanesia' (the black islands) was coined by 'nineteenth century traders, missionaries, colonists and anthropologists' and was based on the inhabitants' darker skin colour (Brown 2008, 187), in contrast with Polynesia (many islands) and Micronesia (small islands). The division of the Pacific into these subregions is critiqued by some scholars (see Clark 2003; Jolly 2007). Nevertheless, the terms are widely used in academic literature, and I use the term Melanesia throughout this thesis for a number of reasons.

Firstly, because it is now one of positive self-identification within the region (Brown 2008, 88; see for example Narokobi 1980); during my time in the Solomon Islands, I found the term to be claimed and employed by Solomon Islander colleagues, friends and interviewees.

Secondly, Solomon Islands, like other countries in Melanesia, is typified by its cultural and linguistic diversity: Melanesia is home to about one-thousandth of the world's population, yet has one quarter of the world's contemporary languages (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 13; Brown 2008, 188; Fraenkel 2004, 20). So while the nation-state of Solomon Islands is culturally diverse and resists national generalisations, Solomon Islanders share a number of anthropological, cultural and sociological similarities with neighbouring Melanesian populations (Vallance 2007, 1). This allows for some generalisations to be drawn regionally, as Brown (2008, 190) describes: 'Life for most Melanesians is grounded in kinship networks, a strong sense of place, communally held land, and principles of reciprocity […] Consultation and consensus are strongly emphasised.' In Solomon Islands, as elsewhere in the region, culture and tradition is commonly described with the term *kastom*, which despite being 'a living, changing cultural mechanism that varies island-by-island, district-by-district, and has incorporated many modern influences', has 'enough nation and region-wide similarities […] to be a distinct indigenous cultural development' (Moore 2004, 27).

Finally, following the reasoning of Vallance (2007, 2), the term Melanesia is used in this research because a number of regional issues of concern (and of interest to researchers) 'transcend the national boundaries of Melanesian countries', such as: 'land rights; the divide

between customary and modern ways; [and] the conflict of traditional versus so-called "Western" ways'.

In the last two or three decades, the Melanesian region has been characterised by an increase in prevalence of conflict. Henderson (2005, 3) notes that while the Pacific Islands region had been one of the more peaceful regions in the world following the Second World War, from the 1980s there was a series of predominantly internal conflicts:

> [I]n 1987 Oceania experienced its first military coup, in Fiji. Throughout much of the 1990s a bloody civil war was waged as the island of Bougainville sought to break away from Papua New Guinea. In 2000 further coups took place in Fiji and Solomon Islands. Armed militia in Solomon Islands continued to engage in intermittent violence for another three years. Army mutinies have also taken place in Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Fiji.

Common challenges and possible reasons contributing to the increase in conflict in the Melanesian region identified by scholars include the comparatively large size of Melanesia in terms of both land mass and population compared to Micronesia and Polynesia; that the states are relatively young;[2] their culturally diverse populations and national boundaries that cut across 'older cultural affinities and trade networks'; the fluid, decentralised and fragmented nature of the politics; existing high levels of poverty, despite the region's considerable wealth in natural resources; and poorly performing economies reliant on external sources of income such as foreign aid and revenue from the export of primary resources (Henderson 2005, 12; McDougall and Kere 2011, 141–42). Brown (2008, 188) notes that the Melanesian region faces a number of problems typical of postcolonial contexts:

> These include high population growth and the associated youth bulge, low growth in the cash economy and significant unemployment, growing inequality and poverty, the tension between cash and subsistence economies, patterns of unequal development, unplanned urbanization and squatter settlements, stress on traditional land tenure arrangements and the erosion of traditional mechanisms of social order without the emergence of clear alternatives, political instability, corruption, HIV aids, predatory commercial interests from beyond the region, resource stripping and environmental degradation.

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[2] Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu gained independence between 1975 and 1980.

Despite the 'rhetorical recognition' of the unique challenges in the region (Corbett 2013, 497), responses to development, peace and conflict challenges are largely informed by globalised and placeless theories of best practice (Larmour 2005, 3). Outsiders (namely Australia and New Zealand) have adopted doomsday language to refer to their Melanesian neighbours, and 'discussions about the future of the Pacific Islands are subject to this negative labelling and stereotyping' (Wallace 2009, 526). The prevalence of conflict in Melanesia has seen the region characterised as: '"an arc of instability"; a zone of economic "basket cases" and "failing states" populated by "tribal and warlike" people and open to penetration by terrorism and organized crime' (Brown 2008, 184; see also May 2003; Wallace 2009, 527).

Framed in the context of post-2001 security discourse and the subsequent 'war on terror', so-called fragile states gained particular prominence, perceived as potentially threatening to global and regional security (Brown et al. 2010, 99; Richmond 2011, 125). The international community thus regards state-building as a core response to violent conflict, and a logical step in peacebuilding programs and development assistance (Brown et al. 2010, 99; Wallis 2012, 613). In the Pacific, Wallace (2009, 525) notes that development literature and policy materials 'contains a strong element of a judgmental inference of the "right" way to "develop" premised on western economic and cultural norms'.

In contrast to the characterisations and metaphors used by development policy makers to describe the Pacific, Wallace (2009, 526) points out that 'the language and metaphors of Pacific Island writers depict relationships to the sea and to the land, which do not blend with traditional western models and ideas of development'. Similarly, Brown (2008, 184) warns against an essentialist doomsday outlook that 'often overlooks the potential and actual strengths that the region possesses'. McDougall and Kere (2011, 142) reiterate this point, emphasising that while:

> Melanesian states are weak, and their politics fragmented [..] equally important – and
> far less recognised – is the strength of nonstate social institutions and the role played by
> Indigenous ways of dealing with cultural difference.

Wallace (2009, 526) elaborates:

> The language of the doomsday scenario theorists ignores long-standing practices and
> "traditions" that promote community cohesion. It directly contradicts positive attributes,

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by providing an agenda, which seeks to rationalize domination and subordination. The imagery associated with the doomsdayism reinforces an implicit subordination of Pacific Island peoples.

While a narrow focus on 'failing' states has seen a corresponding emphasis on strengthening state institutions in the region, Solomon Islanders and regional scholars point to non-state institutions such as churches, customary authorities and other community networks as existing strengths in localised mechanisms for community governance, conflict management and peacebuilding (see Brown 2008; Dinnen et al. 2003; Maebuta and Spence 2009; McDougall and Kere 2011; Sanga 2005). The need to seriously consider the root causes of prevailing problems is emphasised, as Durutalo (2003, 175) explains:

> Without addressing these problems first, attempts to restore justice, whether in the accepted customary or in the legal-rational sense, only serve as window dressings and become mere 'band-aid' solutions to deep-seated dilemmas and contradictions.

The 1998–2003 conflict in Solomon Islands was illustrative of the changing nature of contemporary conflict globally since the Cold War, which increasingly occurred within, rather than between, nation-state boundaries. This global shift in the nature of conflict has highlighted the need for innovative, thoughtful and appropriate responses to not only halt armed violence through peacekeeping activities, but also to repair social relationships, build peace, and promote 'reconciliation' between conflicting groups (Lederach 1997). Other significant characteristics of contemporary conflicts include being protracted, with deep-rooted causes, and often located in the 'developing' world, where the state itself may be considered fragile or weak, or not regarded with legitimacy from within (Boege 2007, 1). These conflicts are often rooted in issues relating to identity, and involve multiple parties with diffuse power and a weakened central authority (Lederach 1997, 14). Despite these common characteristics of contemporary conflict, the approach to conflict management worldwide remains primarily state-based. This has led to the increasing involvement of the international community and the emergence of the liberal state-building project and institutional transfer, despite its poor results with regard to sustainable peacebuilding (Brown et al. 2010, 111; Milne 2010, 75). This pattern of conflict and its management was seen following the tensions in Solomon Islands and the response by the international community, particularly in relation to the subsequent regional intervention.

The dilemma of how to 'transition' or 'reconcile' from conflict has thus become increasingly relevant in the post-Cold War world. Sharing geographical areas, social ties, intermarriages and interdependence means drawing boundaries between former protagonists is neither possible, nor ideal (Assefa 2001, 339). The 'post-conflict' period is recognised as a period of transition, and while perhaps signifying the cessation of large-scale violence, 'is often characterised by attempts to strengthen institutions, restore order, rebuild infrastructure and establish positive social relationships between formerly conflicting parties' (Kabutaulaka 2005a, 409). Peace agreements are now considered the starting point of the peace process rather than the end of the conflict, as it is during this phase that the causes and consequences of the conflict can be attended to (Borer 2006, 4–5; Call and Cook 2003, 237). Post-conflict peacebuilding thus involves the dual tasks of 'preventing a relapse into war while simultaneously constructing a self-sustaining peace', requiring a combination of conflict prevention on the one hand, and societal reconstruction and reconciliation on the other (Borer 2006, 6–7). This dynamic has seen an increase in the uptake of truth commission in post-conflict contexts globally in efforts to deal with perpetrators of past abuses, address the needs of victims, and promote reconciliation, peace and a culture of respecting human rights. While truth commissions are a core focus of transitional justice scholarship, Borer (2006) and Lambourne (2009) point out that the field could benefit from strengthening its understanding of the peace-promoting effects of truth-telling, and similarly, that the peace and conflict studies field could pay more attention to the role of truth-telling for building sustainable peace.

This research is concerned with exploring, understanding and analysing the real world implications, consequences and effects of implementing a truth commission in Solomon Islands for the purpose of peacebuilding. To date, there have been over forty truth commissions globally, often 'deployed by a narrow range of international personnel in the field who move from place to place' (Harris Rimmer 2010, 8). As the mechanism is transferred, adopted and adapted in each new context, further 'lessons' and norms develop around their implementation, resulting in international and globalised theories of 'best practice' relating to their operation. Truth commissions, and wider transitional justice practice, have thus been influenced by the historical developments in the regions in which they have been mostly implemented – namely Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa

(Harris Rimmer 2010, 8). Subsequently, much of the empirical analysis and scholarship on these mechanisms focuses on 'a handful of the most well-known and well-regarded truth commissions' resulting in the lessons for best practice being drawn from a 'biased sample of cases' (Brahm 2007, 19). Recently, however, there has been an increase in the uptake and discourse around transitional justice in the Asia–Pacific region (Dicker 2015, 83; see also Jeffery and Kim 2014). Being the first truth commission in the Pacific region, the Solomon Islands TRC stands to offer insight into the experience of implementing a truth commission in a Melanesian context.

## 1.2   Aim and scope of research

> *There was no model of TRC for Solomon Islands, or in the region for that matter. And so we were like, we do this, we did that, we come back here and there and we start over again. It's like a puzzle - you're trying to put it together but it takes time, it took time [...] With the documents that are now in place, I hope they are kept safe. I think we should come up with a very good model that other neighbouring countries could use (Interview with statement taking coordinator, Benjamin Afuga).*

While truth commissions proliferate globally, the underlying premises and purported benefits for peacebuilding and reconciliation are widely contested (Brahm 2007; Mendeloff 2004). Scholars, policy makers and practitioners frequently call for greater empirical research to understand how truth commissions are adopted, negotiated, contested and transformed in the range of cultural contexts in which they are implemented, and to contribute to a more informed and refined understanding for future policy makers (Baxter 2009, 327; Borer 2006, 26; Brahm 2007, 17; Hayner 2011, 25; Shaw and Waldorf 2010). Heeding the call for greater empirical research on the real world application of truth commissions, this research provides an in-depth case study of the first truth commission in the Pacific. Furthermore, while the field of transitional justice has engaged a diverse range of disciplines and professions, such as psychologists, sociologists, historians and regional specialists (Hayner 2011, 237), there is a recognised gap in the literature at the intersection of peacebuilding and transitional justice in relation to truth commissions and reconciliation (Borer 2006; Lambourne 2009). This thesis contributes to this burgeoning and broadening area of study also.

The Solomon Islands TRC was initiated as a peacebuilding mechanism in the midst of instability and conflict. The research design is thus one of reflective peacebuilding practice.

This thesis does not attempt to theorise about transitional justice based on a case study of the Solomon Islands TRC, but is rather an outcome of a concerted effort and unique opportunity to reflect deeply on the experiences of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission and to heed the call for greater empirical research into the real-world application of truth commissions. In particular, this research aims to listen to those who worked with and in the Solomon Islands TRC.

Solomon Islands scholar Kabini Sanga (2005, 447–8) emphasises the importance of national and community level leadership for conflict management, and scholarship on the topic:

> Non-Solomon Islanders can write about it, undertake research and offer advice on conflict resolution in the country, but they are unlikely to be able to play pivotal roles in longer-term resolutions. The focus should be on Solomon Islanders, rather than on external people and their advice, input and assistance, however well-intentioned.

Thus the research questions that form the focus of this thesis are centred on eliciting stories and listening to those who were involved with the Solomon Islands TRC, exploring their perceptions of the commission's successes and challenges, and deepening an understanding of how the TRC operated in practice. The research questions guiding this research are:

1. What are the features of effective TRC practices, and how do these contribute to post-conflict peacebuilding?

2. How did the Solomon Islands TRC work in practice?

3. What are the differences between international TRC and peacebuilding practices and the local practices of TRC in Solomon Islands?

4. What potential do TRCs have for post-conflict peacebuilding in Melanesia?

Two key sets of data inform the analysis and arguments presented in this thesis. First, I draw on my experiences, observations and reflections while working at the Solomon Islands TRC for one year between 2011 and 2012. As a research officer, I worked within the research team and assisted with the research and writing on women's experiences of the conflict and human rights abuses for the final report. Second, I draw on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with

TRC staff and stakeholders about their experiences and perspectives of the TRC, and reconciliation and peacebuilding in the country more generally. Many of the interviewees worked 'on the ground', implementing TRC activities at the village, community and government level. As 'translators' or 'intermediaries' of human rights research and truth-seeking, they occupied the difficult 'middle' between global ideas of human rights and local sociocultural understandings (Merry 2006), experiencing many of the challenges and tensions of implementing the TRC first hand. More on research methods is detailed in Chapter Three.

This research is guided by three methodologies aligning with the three core components of the research topic – the place of research, the academic discipline, and the researcher's personal world view. Accordingly, the research methodology and methods have been guided by: indigenous epistemologies and Pacific research (see Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2002; Maebuta 2010; Nabobo-Baba 2006; Teaiwa 2006; Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Vallance 2007, 2008; Wood 2006 ); peace research (Fuller 1992; Galtung 1969; Rogers and Ramsbotham 1999); and transformative, participatory and action research (Deshler and Selener 1991; McTaggart 1997, 1999). I reflect on these methodologies in Chapter Three, and conclude that these approaches to research are largely congruent with one another, emphasising values such as the importance of holistic, ethical, empowering and participatory processes of research.

Such key values underlying this research preceded any specific predicated research approach or design. Nevertheless, contemporary literature on researching peace and transitional justice supports and validates the in-depth, ethnographic case study approach that has been taken for this thesis. Chapter Two outlines the historical movements in peacebuilding practice that have culminated in a shift away from earlier ideals of grassroots and empowering practice to a globalised liberal peace approach centred on state-building, democracy, free markets and the rule of law. Subsequently, the liberal peace agenda has attracted critique by those who argue for a more localised, contextualised or hybridised approach to peacebuilding. Similar arguments are also made regarding peace research and the evaluation of peacebuilding and transitional justice practices, as Rogers and Ramsbotham (1999, 752) describe:

> Perhaps the most significant recent development here has been criticism of earlier concentration on 'top-down' peace-building processes guided by outside 'experts', and insistence on the importance of 'peace-building from below' with a main emphasis on

supporting transformative indigenous capacity […] This remains an important agenda for the future in which peace research is well-suited to take a leading role.

As international interventions in the form of 'peacebuilding' or 'transitional justice' increase, so do the forms of research and evaluation considering their impact. Critics note that peacebuilding interventions, if done at all, are often based on measures that are irrelevant to the local context and are unequivocally accepting of the underlying conceptions of project funders, planners and administrators (Millar 2014, 15). Millar, however, emphasises that an understanding of the local context is necessary to evaluate the effects of peacebuilding interventions, and proposes an ethnographic approach that considers local perceptions and experiences of conflict, justice, security, development, empowerment, dignity, opportunity and peace itself. This, he argues, must be the starting point for any further theory or international action:

> Understanding, however, demands a grounded, ethnographic approach to evaluating *local experiences* of international processes. Ethnographic evaluation is therefore key not only to understanding what has been done, but to considering what to do in the future. (Millar 2014, 16)

Considering that ethnography 'is hardly a novel practice', Milne questions why it has been largely unrecognised in conflict studies (2010, 76). Richmond (2010, 14) similarly notes that broader approaches to peacebuilding, including research methods such as ethnography, 'tend to be relatively marginalised in a discipline and policy domain dominated by mainstream realist, liberal, and neoliberal theories'. Milne attributes the discord to the tensions between ethnography and peacebuilding, pointing out that 'even a casual glance reveals that the "theoretical leanings" of ethnography and the "methodological predispositions" of conventional conflict theory are pulling in opposite directions' (Milne 2010, 76). Specifically, the in-depth and 'atomistic' nature of ethnographic research makes it difficult to generalise and employ in peacebuilding policy discourses, which rely on general knowledge and 'best practice' (Milne 2010, 77).

Yet peace practice and transitional justice efforts globally are marked by disconnections between international norms and local priorities and practices. And, as already noted, scholars and practitioners argue that more in-depth and localised understandings are needed. Ethnographic approaches to peacebuilding evaluations eschew the reliance of liberal peace

projects on standardised theories and purported 'best practice': 'by offering insight into the "local", ethnography can support attempts at rediscovering the "original" ambitions of peacebuilding, conceived as a bottom-up, emancipatory and empowering process' (Milne 2010, 90). Yet, as Milne (2010, 83) warns, for such critiques to be utilised in peacebuilding discourse, they must be acknowledged by policy makers and practitioners – an endeavour made difficult by 'the unwavering righteousness regarding certain cornerstones of peacebuilding, such as human rights and democracy, whose presumed timeless universality is seen as justifying the problematic practice of top-down enforcement'. This challenge similarly applies to transitional justice discourse and practice.

This study will contribute towards this demand for ethnographic research in the peace research discourse. The research design has a two-tiered approach to addressing the overall research questions pertaining to the potential of TRCs in Melanesia. The two-tiered approach, as described by Schnabel (2001, 195) is necessary 'if research is to go beyond academic discussions and inform policies'. It involves a combination of *general* knowledge and *particular* knowledge, which 'allows the researcher to produce data that might eventually, if effectively communicated to the appropriate audience, lead to an improved response to the local and external management of internal conflicts' (Schnabel 2001, 195). While this research has a two-tiered approach aimed at producing practical and action-oriented research useful for policy makers and Solomon Islanders alike, the localised methodology of the research is of particular value. Rather than an external, top-down evaluation of the TRC, this research offers a participatory observation and employs ethnographic methods, to reflect on the structure, function and relative successes  and challenges of the Solomon Islands TRC.

## 1.3   Structure of thesis

This introductory chapter has established the context, scope and contribution of this research, as reflective peace practice in the Solomon Islands. It has placed the research at the intersection of transitional justice and peace studies, and identified research questions centred on eliciting ethnographic evaluations of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission from those who worked at or with the commission. As a prelude to the literature review, this chapter has begun to outline the research design and offered an introduction to the research approach taken. The contribution of this research towards more effective peace and

transitional justice practice has also been established, as well as its contribution to developing understanding based on the experiences and reflections of those who worked on the ground with the commission.

The following three chapters provide a comprehensive background and literature review to situate the research problem and research questions.

*Chapter Two* builds on this introductory chapter, and distils the focus of the research on truth commissions, situating the research at the intersection of peacebuilding and transitional justice. The chapter begins with an overview of peacebuilding and transitional justice literature and policy, providing a theoretical foundation for the thesis. Following is a discussion on truth commissions, which identifies their key features and characteristics. The role of truth-telling in relation to post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation is then explored. Following analysis of contemporary literature in relation to post-conflict peacebuilding and truth-telling, the chapter then turns directly to the call for localising peace and transitional justice practice, reviewing what is variously termed as 'hybridised', 'liberal-local' and 'indigenous' peacebuilding practices. The chapter explores the complex relationship and interlinkages between peace, truth, and reconciliation, demonstrating their real-world implications. In concluding the chapter, the research objective is framed in light of the literature review.

*Chapter Three* provides an overview of the research process taken for this study. It describes the background of the research project, including my personal journey in arriving at this research problem and questions. The research approach and theoretical frameworks that guide this research are detailed, and the underlying values of the research identified. The research design and methods of data collection are discussed, including references to any ethical concerns and the reliability, validity and broader applicability of the research. In offering a dedicated chapter on the research process, this thesis seeks to contribute not only to the production of knowledge in relation to truth commissions for post-conflict peacebuilding, but also to the evolution of research methodology of peace research in Melanesia.

*Chapter Four* offers a contextual background to conflict, peacebuilding and the emerging discourse of transitional justice in post-conflict Solomon Islands. An overview of

contemporary Solomon Islands provides context for the research, and details general practices of conflict management and conflict resolution utilised across the islands. While the importance of not generalising practices is emphasised, general features and characteristics commonly found in conflict management practices in the country are identified. The concept and influence of *kastom* is discussed, particularly in relation to conflict management and resolution. The events and timelines of the 1998–2003 conflict are presented to demonstrate the conflict dynamics. Similarly, the multiple efforts at brokering peace are also detailed to demonstrate the complex and multifaceted approaches taken towards peacebuilding. In analysing and reflecting on the peace work conducted prior to the establishment of the Solomon Islands TRC, the broad post-conflict challenges are identified in order to provide a context to the implementation of the commission and an understanding of the challenges that affected the commission, shaping its implementation, operation and outcomes.

The remaining chapters of this thesis focus exclusively on the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission, presenting rich, in-depth data from the research conducted, and analyses and conclusions of the research findings.

*Chapter Five* focuses on the development of the Solomon Islands TRC, tracing its establishment and history, and the initial hopes and visions of those who advocated for the commission. This discussion provides an understanding of the original intentions of the commission, which will later be contrasted with its eventual mandate and outcomes. The processes involved in developing the TRC are described, and the shift from advocacy by civil society to government responsibility delineated. An overview of the operation of the TRC is provided, including its key activities and programs. This chapter provides a necessary and sufficient overview of the TRC to provide context for the remainder of the thesis, which focuses on the various challenges experienced by the commission, and analysis of the commission as a peacebuilding mechanism in Melanesia.

*Chapter Six* begins an in-depth presentation of the research findings and addresses the research question pertaining to the practical operation of the Solomon Islands TRC. The friction of importing a globalised truth mechanism into post-conflict Solomon Islands is demonstrated through presentation and analysis of the 'inherent' challenges of truth commissions – that is, challenges associated with pursuing 'truth' and attempting to facilitate

or achieve 'reconciliation' (Tepperman 2002). These challenges are explained, in part, as a clash between local perspectives, expectations of, and approaches to truth and reconciliation and normative interpretations of truth and reconciliation in transitional justice frameworks.

*Chapter Seven* continues the presentation of research findings relating to the operation of the TRC by focusing on the 'avoidable' challenges of the truth commissions – that is, challenges relating to how the commission was established, conducted and followed up (Tepperman 2002). This includes discussions on the commission's administration and management; personnel; awareness and communication strategy; field and operational challenges; gender sensitivity and inclusion; and issues relating to timing and trust. These interrelated topics and challenges demonstrate the unique on-the-ground experience of the Solomon Islands TRC, and problematise the adoption of a globalised truth-telling mechanism for promoting 'national unity and reconciliation' in a Melanesian context.

*Chapter Eight* concludes the thesis, linking the research findings with the theoretical propositions provided in Chapter Two and Chapter Four, and offers analysis of the experience of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Although the Solomon Islands TRC was instigated locally, implemented through an Act of Parliament, staffed mostly by Solomon Islanders, and partly funded by the Solomon Islands Government, the commission was arguably 'replicated' according to normative transitional justice discourse rather than becoming a 'hybridised' institution (Merry 2006). Shifting from the civil society sphere where it began, the Solomon Islands TRC became a responsibility of the government and thus moved to a domain with less trust and traction to operate such a sensitive process. Foreign consultants, the United Nations and international organisations provided welcome support and guidance, two of the commissioners were foreigners, and being mostly funded by international donors, the Solomon Islands TRC had to comply with standardised global models of organisation, governance and administration. While these external actors provided welcome support, guidance and funding, the TRC was simultaneously pulled closer to the globalised transitional justice model and further from a hybridised and localised approach that may have proven more effective. This resulted in limited local ownership, participation and buy-in of the commission and its activities.

This final chapter argues that in a Melanesian context, the effectiveness of a TRC depends on whether it can work within local cultural practices of memory, truth, justice and reconciliation. While the research found that many elements of truth commissions were incongruent with a Melanesian post-conflict context, it is concluded that a TRC did offer potential to play a positive role for building peace in Solomon Islands: to document the conflict; sanction a space to prompt or initiate reconciliation; and focus attention towards future action. To do so, however, it needed to respect and work with local cultures and *kastoms*, and be viewed and operated as an ongoing *process*, whereby stories collected and 'truth' documented would be used to address enduring injustices and grievances in order to build a sustainable peace.

# 2. Theoretical background and literature review

## 2.1   Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical context for the thesis by reviewing academic and policy literature relevant to the theory and practice of truth and reconciliation commissions. It outlines the key assumptions and debates in the discourse on truth commissions. A vast and diverse literature on truth commissions exists, located mostly within the transitional justice field. As the Solomon Islands TRC was mandated to 'promote national unity and reconciliation' (TRC Act 2008, 5[1]) and envisioned as a peacebuilding mechanism in response to the civil conflict which broke out in 1998, this chapter will also draw from peace studies literature.

Peace studies and transitional justice are relatively recent fields of study. Definitions of key terms are hotly debated and key assumptions continually contested. Both fields are also intrinsically practical, stemming from, reflecting on, and informing contemporary conflict management and peacebuilding practices globally, and some argue, struggling to keep up: 'The practice of peacebuilding has been running ahead of peacebuilding theory' (Knight 2004, 355). The theories and debates pertinent to the fields of study therefore extend beyond the theoretical domain, influencing current policies relating to conflict management, resolution and reconciliation.

This chapter begins with an overview of the history and definitions of peacebuilding, transitional justice and truth commissions. In contemporary post-conflict contexts, particularly in the case of the Solomon Islands conflict and the ensuing regional intervention, the term peacebuilding is often understood and defined within a liberal peace paradigm, typified by top-down and elite-led official processes (see Chapter Four). This thesis, however, builds upon a broader conceptualisation of peacebuilding to highlight the potential that truth commissions offer to Melanesian and Pacific contexts. In so doing, the aim of this thesis is not to critique the Solomon Islands TRC for what it did or did not achieve, but to explore how it was locally adopted, implemented and perceived, and gauge its usefulness as a peacebuilding tool in similar settings.

An overview of the history, key terms and core debates of transitional justice is then outlined, followed by an in-depth discussion on truth commissions. Here I clarify the types of truth that such mechanisms may strive for, and outline some of the practical challenges documented in the literature on implementing truth commissions. On the topic of truth commissions, the peacebuilding and transitional justice literature overlap regarding reconciliation. A discussion of the relationship between these terms teases out some of the complexities and assumptions often made of truth commissions in relation to peacebuilding and reconciliation. Finally, acknowledging the increased attention in both the peacebuilding and transitional justice fields for a localisation of practice and greater contextualisation, a discussion of the arguments for and critiques of hybridity is presented. This point, in light of the preceding analysis, provides an argument for pursuing the research questions that frame this research, which focus on the experiences of implementing the first truth and reconciliation commission in the Pacific – the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

## 2.2   Peacebuilding: an overview

Peace studies is a transdisciplinary field, closely linked and overlapping with the fields of conflict resolution, international relations and more recently, transitional justice. Initially defined by prominent peace scholar Johan Galtung (1969), the term 'peacebuilding' is now used within the peace and conflict studies literature to refer to a range of goals, activities and projects.[3] As such the definitions and theories of peacebuilding can vary considerably and are often contested, shifting between perspectives that range from human emancipation to state security and sovereignty (Borer 2006, 11; Richmond 2010, 15). In this overview, a background of the term peacebuilding and the field of peace and conflict studies is provided in order to demonstrate the range of goals and activities of peacebuilding, and identify the key values of 'sustainable peace'.

Following the Cold War, two distinct but interrelated trends saw a marked shift in global politics and the approach taken to manage and resolve conflicts: (i) the rise of intrastate

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[3] For comprehensive descriptions of the developments in peacebuilding theory see Keating and Knight 2004 and Richmond 2010.

violent conflict in which the majority of victims were civilians, and (ii) the increased willingness (and ability) of international actors, such as the United Nations, to intervene and focus on concerns of human rights, human security and good governance (Keating and Knight 2004, xxxii; Borer 2006, 11). Emerging peacebuilding theories converged with conflict resolution and conflict management practices as international actors such as the United Nations, non-government organisations and international financial institutions became increasingly involved in the democratisation of so-called 'failing and failed states' (Richmond 2010, 22). A 1992 report by then UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali titled *An Agenda for Peace* served as a blueprint for such multidimensional post-conflict interventions. The *Agenda for Peace* defined peacebuilding in relation to preventative diplomacy, peacemaking and peace-keeping in the following terms: preventative diplomacy seeks to stop conflicts from escalating; peacemaking seeks to negotiate agreements between conflicting parties; and peace-keeping seeks to contain violence through military, police and/or civilian personnel, with the consent of the parties concerned (Boutros-Ghali 1992, par. 20). Post-conflict peacebuilding was defined as 'action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict' (Boutros-Ghali 1992, par. 21). Peacebuilding thus became part of official global political discourse and global governance, and 'the new imaginary of peace in the minds of policymakers and peace and conflict researchers alike' (Richmond 2010, 22).

The intervention of international actors in peace processes evolved from earlier roles concerned primarily with observing ceasefires and peace-keeping, to the ambitious, complex and highly involved task of (re)building states, including in some cases developing international transitional administrations in initial periods of post-conflict reconstruction, such as in Bosnia, Kosovo and Timor-Leste (Wielders 2008, 135). External actors increasingly play key roles, as peace is conceptualised as a top-down, rather than bottom-up exercise, as Richmond (2010, 23) explains:

> All of these approaches effectively combine an outside-in construction of peace, whereby outside actors import the specialised knowledge, procedures, and structures, with an inside-out approach, whereby disputants attempt to renegotiate this process according to their own interests, culture and frameworks.

The international community increasingly regards state-building as a necessary and logical step in peace processes (Wallis 2012, 613). This approach links the restoration of security and peace to state-building and governance, emphasising democratisation, economic reform, human rights and the rule of law, and development programming; thus conflating the state-building enterprise with peacebuilding (Brown et al. 2010; Richmond 2010, 23). As Jabri (2010, 41–42) describes, the liberal peace project:

> [R]equires not just militaries, but an international civil service at large engaged variously in the building of institutions from schools to departments of justice, and reinforced by armies of 'trainers' who in turn engage the local population in such pedagogical exercises as gender awareness, human rights training, budgetary probity and so on. The liberal peace project is hence self-defined as a 'peacebuilding' and indeed a statebuilding project, a form of social engineering internationally rendered.

These developments in conflict management demonstrated the implicit belief that a universal version of peace could be attained through specific strategies; namely, the construction of a liberal state, and 'that states not only can but should be shaped into Western-style democracies by more and more direct interference from foreign nations' (Wielders 2008, 135–36). State-building as a liberal peace project can be seen across a range of diverse locations, such as Timor-Leste, Sierra Leone, the Congo, Iraq, Liberia and Afghanistan. Whilst the modes of articulation vary across the contexts, the vehicle for reform is predominantly institutional, interventionist, and driven towards social transformation beyond violent conflict (Jabri 2010, 41).

Peace studies and peace researchers, however, often employ a broader conception of peace and peacebuilding than the liberal peace agenda and its focus on state-building, post-conflict reconstruction and institutional reform. The term 'peacebuilding' essentially refers to the pursuit of sustainable peace by peaceful means. However what this entails varies according to the definition or understanding of 'sustainable peace'. Whilst peace is generally defined as an absence of violence, the scope and definition of violence varies. Peace scholar Johan Galtung broadly conceptualises violence and conflict as not only limited to physical manifestations but extends the terms to also refer to cultural and structural forms; the absence of the former referred to as 'negative peace', and the absence of the latter as 'positive peace' (Galtung 1969; Reychler 2001, 12). Differentiating between the two, argues Richmond, illustrates 'the deficiency of realism and liberalism in understanding the extent of violence and its indirect

impacts' (2010, 15). Ware (2014, 29), however, warns that 'in the real world, often the broader the definition the less helpful it is', and reminds readers not to neglect the real-world implications of violent conflict and the value of 'negative' peace for those who live in conflict zones.

Unlike state-building and liberal peacebuilding approaches, peace studies literature also emphasise non-elite and bottom-up processes beyond or below the state, conceptualising 'social, psychological, religious, and other dimensions of conflict resolution processes operating at the local or community level' (Call and Cook 2003, 235). A broader conceptualisation of peacebuilding is thus concerned not only with ending armed conflict (which should be the first priority) and (re)building institutions, but also with transforming relationships, promoting 'reconciliation' and building skills to creatively and non-violently manage future conflict (Lederach 1997; Lambourne 2009, 34–35): 'In short, it calls for a radical transformation of society away from structures of coercion and violence to an embedded culture of peace' (Keating and Knight 2004, xxxiv). This broader conceptualisation of peace, and the goal of an array of peacebuilding activities, is often referred to as 'sustainable peace'. While a similarly vague term to peacebuilding, 'sustainable peace' is often described as peace that 'moves beyond negative peace […] and more closely approximates the concept of positive peace' (Borer 2006, 13). Peacebuilding and sustainable peace are therefore linked, or two sides of the same coin; peacebuilding consists of activities that contribute toward transforming conflict into sustainable peace (Borer 2006, 13–14). Therefore, Lambourne (2009, 34) explains, sustainable peacebuilding:

> [R]equires pursuit of the twin objectives of preserving 'negative peace' (absence of physical violence) and building 'positive peace' (presence of social justice), as well as alleviation, if not elimination, of the underlying causes of conflict.

While liberal peacebuilding projects dominate policy circles, ideas stemming from the broader, and somewhat more radical, conceptualisation of peacebuilding and sustainable peace continue to resonate amongst contemporary peace and conflict practitioners and scholars, who offer more holistic, sustainable and transformative frameworks than the liberal peace paradigm (Keating and Knight 2004, xxxiv; see also Jenkins and Branagan 2014; Lambourne 2004, 2009; Lederach 1997, 2005; Reychler and Paffenholz 2001; Richmond

2010). Spence (2001, 137–8) encapsulates the core values inherent to creating sustainable peace in this comprehensive definition, referring to:

> [T]hose activities and processes that: focus on the root causes of the conflict, rather than just the effects; support the rebuilding and rehabilitation of all sectors of the war-torn society; encourage and support interaction between all sectors of society in order to repair damaged relations and start the process of restoring dignity and trust; recognise the specifics of each post-conflict situation; encourage and support the participation of indigenous resources in the design, implementation and sustainment of activities and processes; and promote processes that will endure after the initial emergency recovery phase has passed.

For the purpose of this research, the broader, holistic and transformative definition of peacebuilding and sustainable peace is the point of reference against which the Solomon Islands TRC will be considered, as this is the approach instigators of the TRC initially aimed for. This is evident in the terms of reference and mandate of the TRC, which demonstrate goals for similarly holistic and reconciliatory outcomes (see TRC Act and Chapter Five). Exploring the Solomon Islands TRC in light of the tenets of sustainable peace will also highlight the potential that truth commissions offer in Solomon Islands or other Pacific contexts. Nevertheless, the warning Ware (2014, 29) makes of broad definitions is noted, and as Mendeloff (2004, 363) writes, if 'negative peace' – or the absence of war – is the minimum requirement of peace, then it can also be the benchmark against which truth-telling as a means to peacebuilding is assessed: 'if truth-telling cannot bring about "negative" peace in a war-torn society, it can hardly be expected to bring about "positive" peace'.

## 2.3   Transitional Justice

> At these transitional moments, a state and its people stand at a crossroads. What should be done with a recent history full of victims, perpetrators, secretly buried bodies, pervasive fear, and official denial? Should this past be exhumed, preserved, acknowledged, apologized for? (Hayner 2011, 3)

Truth-telling as a peacebuilding activity has been relatively underrepresented in peace and conflict literature; however, it features prominently in studies of transitional justice (Borer 2006, 17). Evolving as a separate field to peace and conflict studies, transitional justice is similarly concerned with post-conflict peacebuilding, and the question of how to 'deal with the past' (Hayner 2011, 3; Teitel 2002, 3). Like peace studies, transitional justice is more than

an academic field of study. It is a burgeoning field of research, policy and practice, forms United Nations policy and is practiced in post-conflict contexts globally. As such, the debates and dilemmas that feature in the literature are pertinent to contemporary post-conflict practice. Like peace studies, the field of transitional justice is multidisciplinary and relatively young; it is continually expanding and has undergone significant developments reflecting the changing nature of global politics.

There is a vast literature on the expanding field of transitional justice, exploring its potential and promise, and its critiques and key debates (see for example Hayner 2011; Hinton 2010; Kritz 1995; Olsen et al. 2010b; Shaw and Waldorf 2010; Teitel 2002, 2003). An international refereed journal is dedicated to the topic – the *International Journal of Transitional Justice* – and transitional justice is the subject of conferences, workshops and UN policy papers and practice (see for example de Grieff 2013; UN 2010; UNSC 2004). The unique challenges of researching transitional justice are also documented (see van der Merwe et al. 2009). Here, a brief overview of transitional justice provides a background to the history of the term and field, and current definitions as they relate to contemporary policy and practice.

The term 'transitional justice' was initially used to describe contexts of political change, from repressive or undemocratic regimes to ones seeking accountability or justice for past abuses, such as in the transitions from authoritarian to democratic governments in Latin America in the 1980s (Lambourne 2009, 29; Teitel 2003, 69). Over the last twenty years, however, the understanding of transitional justice has broadened from political transition to also refer to transitions from conflict or human rights atrocities, such as in Solomon Islands. Indeed, transitional justice has become a normalised form of intervention in post-conflict contexts: an active domain of policy, practised and supported by the United Nations, regional organisations, bilateral donors and governments around the world (Shaw and Waldorf 2010, 3; Sriram 2007, 583).

The United Nations defined transitional justice in 2004 in relation to post-conflict peace and reconciliation goals (Lambourne 2009, 29; UNSC 2004). And in 2010, a guidance note on the UN's approach to transitional justice offered a comprehensive definition of the term:

> For the United Nations system, transitional justice is the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-

scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve
reconciliation. Transitional justice processes and mechanisms are a critical component
of the United Nations framework for strengthening the rule of law.

Transitional justice consists of both judicial and non-judicial processes and
mechanisms, including prosecution initiatives, truth-seeking, reparations programmes,
institutional reform or an appropriate combination thereof. Whatever combination is
chosen must be in conformity with international legal standards and obligations.
Transitional justice should further seek to take account of the root causes of conflicts
and the related violations of all rights, including civil, political, economic, social and
cultural rights. By striving to address the spectrum of violations in an integrated and
interdependent manner, transitional justice can contribute to achieving the broader
objectives of prevention of further conflict, peacebuilding and reconciliation. (UN 2010,
3)

Many scholars and practitioners, however, adopt the definition of transitional justice
articulated by the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), a New York–based
international non-government organisation dedicated to the cause (Olsen et al. 2010b, 10).
The ICTJ is one of the most influential and authoritative organisations in relation to
transitional justice theory and practice. They define transitional justice as:

A response to systematic or widespread violations of human rights. It seeks recognition
for victims and promotion of possibilities for peace, reconciliation and democracy.
Transitional justice is not a special form of justice but justice adapted to societies
transforming themselves after a period of pervasive human rights abuse. In some cases,
these transformations happen suddenly; in others, they may take place over many
decades. (ICTJ 2009)

Transitional justice encompasses a range of mechanisms and efforts to address human rights
abuses and seek accountability during transitions to democracy (ICTJ 2009). Over time, the
scope of tasks included under the banner of transitional justice has included transitional
justice criminal prosecutions, truth-telling, institutional reform and reparations as well as
more holistic inclusions such commemorative practices and memory work, educational
reform, and reconciliation initiatives: 'Such ambition provides connections between
transitional justice and broader notions of peacebuilding and postconflict reconstruction
(Gready and Robins 2014, 344). Like peacebuilding, the study of transitional justice was
given impetus following the end of the Cold War, amidst the creation of *ad hoc* tribunals, as
increased attention was directed towards the issue of justice in a wide variety of transitional

contexts, and the question of how to deal with the past became 'an inescapable task' (Borer 2006, 17; Huyse 2001, 327).

The assumed and purported benefits and outcomes of transitional justice generate a long and idealistic list including, but not limited to: restoring the dignity of victims, promoting psychological healing, ending violence and human rights abuses, creating a collective memory or common history, building democracy and respect for human rights, holding perpetrators of violence accountable, aiding institutional reform, promoting reconciliation, education about the past, promoting justice, and recommending ways to deter future violations and atrocities (Mendeloff 2004, 358; van der Merwe et al. 2009, 2–3).

While asserting a host of ambitious goals and outcomes, the transitional justice field is subject to debate and critique. 'Transitional justice' is now a popular term; however, there are 'frequent criticisms that it is unhelpful, misleading, or simply wrong' (Olsen et al. 2010b, 10):

> Some consider the term simply wrong. They argue that the mechanisms associated with transitional justice neither bring nor intend to bring justice or transition. Instead, some mechanisms may actually undermine both justice and transition by replacing justice with mechanisms of unaccountability, hiding impunity and the continuity of authoritarian regime control behind a thin veil of political transition.

The breadth of purported outcomes of transitional justice leads some to question if 'a single effort can manage all or even many of these responsibilities', noting that 'what seems desirable or appropriate in theory may not be feasible in practice, since each of these tasks is a major undertaking' (van der Merwe et al. 2009, 3). Others point to the 'foundational limitations' of transitional justice inherent to being embedded in liberal peace and the state-building enterprise (Gready and Robins 2014, 341). Like the liberal peace project, a secondary foundational limitation of transitional justice is that its success 'as a global political framework has led to its practice being dominated by an elite international professional and donor network rather than locally rooted movements' (Gready and Robins, 2014, 342). In response to this critique, scholars have proposed frameworks for 'transformative justice' (Gready and Robins 2014; Lambourne 2009, 45) that emphasise locally led, process-oriented, holistic approaches to justice, encompassing social, political and economic, as well as legal, perspectives. A discussion regarding the critique of liberal peace, and the subsequent turn to local approaches, or 'hybridity', is discussed in further detail in Section 2.6 below.

Critiques of transitional justice come from a range of sources, beyond the usual suspects of academic debates or former 'strongmen or their apologists' (Tepperman 2002, 131), but from within the human rights field and the very people it is designed to serve – survivors of mass violence (Shaw and Waldorf 2010, 3). For some, mechanisms of transitional justice such as truth commissions are 'deals with the devil […] flawed compromises between those seeking justice and those trying to obstruct it' (Tepperman 2002, 131). Such critiques argue that if those bargains were once necessary, they are not any longer (Tepperman 2002, 131). Policy statements from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have consistently stated that after conflict or mass atrocity, accountability – preferably legalised accountability – is necessary (Sriram 2007, 589). In some cases both truth commissions and prosecutions have thus been pursued, such as in Timor Leste, Sierra Leona, and indeed, Solomon Islands.

## 2.4   Truth commissions

The core premise of transitional justice – the need to deal with the past – became widely accepted amongst scholars and policy makers, and transitional justice literature distilled its focus as to what mechanism would be most appropriate to achieve the task. Earlier transitional justice literature centred on the debate between those in favour of prosecutions and those in favour of amnesty, each side generating its own set of questions and studies (Borer 2006, 19; Jeffery 2013, 4). The merits and debates of the binary opposition between prosecution and amnesty are beyond the scope of this thesis, and discussed in detail elsewhere (see Huyse 2001, 324–327; Rotberg and Thompson 2000). Notably, however, the 'right to truth' became a fundamental post-conflict requirement, and truth-seeking and memory were increasingly seen as imperative for justice in transitional environments (Huyse 2001, 327).

Truth commissions, the most commonly used non-trial transitional justice mechanism, have generated a vast literature, including the authoritative work by Priscilla Hayner (2011), which comprehensively details the features, experiences and challenges of truth commissions globally (see also de Grieff 2013; Gonzalez and Varney 2013; ICTJ 2014; OHCHR 2006). The literature on truth commissions has continually expanded as the mechanism has circulated the globe and increasingly been adopted in a variety of contexts. Studies have focused on specific commissions as well as general comparative research, with the South African TRC being considerably researched and documented (Borer 2006, 19). Here, the

history and features of truth commissions are outlined, to provide a theoretical background and context for the Solomon Islands TRC and this thesis. The underlying premise and assumptions of TRCs are also explained, as are a clarification of the term 'truth' and common practical implications of implementing a truth commission. These topics will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Six and Seven of this thesis in relation to the Solomon Islands TRC.

Truth commissions are generally officially sanctioned, temporary, non-judicial investigative bodies mandated to conduct activities such as statement taking, public hearings, exhumations, research and investigations, with the purposeful intent of investigating crimes, abuse and human rights violations that occurred during the period in question and giving an opportunity for victims to have their experiences heard and acknowledged (de Grieff 2013; Gonzalez and Varney 2013; Hayner 2011). These activities typically culminate in the production of a final report that describes patterns of abuses and violence, as well its antecedents, causes and consequences (OHCHR 2006, 1). While truth commissions do not replace the need for prosecutions and formal judicial processes, they may complement these processes, especially in situations in which prosecutions are not likely (OHCHR 2006, 1). Hayner (2011, 11–12) offers a succinct definition of truth commissions:

> A truth commission (1) is focused on past, rather than ongoing, events; (2) investigates a pattern of events that took place over a period of time; (3) engages directly and broadly with the affected population, gathering information on their experiences; (4) is a temporary body, with the aim of concluding with a final report; and (5) is officially authorized or empowered by the state under review.

The role and expectations of truth commissions have changed over time. Early truth commissions were implemented in states transitioning from authoritarian regimes to democracy in an effort to discover and acknowledge crimes and human rights abuses that had occurred. They focused on what happened and usually why, such as the commissions in Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Sri Lanka and Uganda (Hayner 2011, 235). Seeking truth was a valued goal and outcome in contexts where it had been strategically concealed or withheld by governments, dictators or ruling parties. Providing a public account of violations was believed to be a form of justice itself, as it offered acknowledgment and accountability that had been previously denied (Millar 2011, 180). Following the widely publicised South African TRC and its emphasis on public hearings and 'reconciliation', the process of truth-*seeking* in earlier

commissions was largely replaced by truth-*telling*, and the goal of pursuing 'reconciliation' became closely associated with truth commissions (Millar 2011, 180).

Truth commissions have since become standardised and globalised following conflict or political repression. In 2004, the UN Secretary General issued a report titled *The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post Conflict Societies*, which identified truth-telling as an important mechanism for addressing past human rights abuses and cemented the link between peacebuilding and transitional justice, saying truth commissions are 'a potentially valuable complementary tool in the quest for justice and reconciliation, taking as they do a victim-centred approach and helping to establish a historical record and recommend remedial action' (UNSC 2004, 2).

Globally, truth-telling and truth-seeking have grown in popularity, considered a necessary component of peacebuilding processes (Mendeloff 2004, 355–6; Tepperman 2002, 129). More than forty truth commissions have operated to date; however, they vary in name, composition and purpose.[4] Truth commissions are not implemented by overarching international law, nor are their form or function necessarily directed or prescribed (Millar 2011, 179). Earlier commissions, however, have served as templates for later iterations resulting in a set of globalised norms in their implementation. This has led to a risk of over-standardisation in their establishment (ICTJ 2014).

Truth commissions are typically tasked with some or all of the following goals (Hayner 2011, 20):

(i)     sanctioned fact finding to discover, clarify and formally acknowledge past abuses;

(ii)    address victims' needs and give victims a public voice;

(iii)   counter impunity and advance individual accountability;

(iv)   outline institutional responsibility and recommend reforms; and

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[4] For an up-to-date list of truth commissions maintained by United States Institute of Peace (USIP) see http://www.usip.org/category/publications/truth-commission.

(v)        promote reconciliation.

In addition to these goals, literature on truth commissions shows they are often credited with a long list of desirable outcomes that are assumed to contribute to sustainable peace, such as: accountability, acknowledgement, amnesty, apology, coexistence, confession, dignity, forgiveness, healing, human rights culture, justice, mercy, national unity, peace, punishment, reconciliation, reconstruction, remorse, reparations, repentance, responsibility, retribution, rule of law, and truth (Borer 2006, 26).

Truth commissions increasingly share common characteristics that 'are included based on their theorized ability to produce certain social effects in response to particular abuses of the past' (Millar 2011, 180). Yet debates persist on whether these claims are compelling, or the relationship between truth-telling and reconciliation or peacebuilding justified (Borer 2006, 26; Brahm 2007; Chapman 2009b; Hayner 2011; Mendeloff 2004; Tepperman 2002). Despite their popularity, there exists no consensus as to whether truth commissions are even considered beneficial (Brahm 2007, 19). Critics warn that:

> Their results have been mixed, and their operations have been manipulated and politicized. And thus, as the panels proliferate, an intense debate has broken out over whether they cause more problems than they solve, and whether they deserve international support or condemnation. (Tepperman 2002, 131)

While the claims made of the peace-promoting effect of truth commissions are appealing, scholars agree that the purported outcomes remain ambiguous and under-researched, and that in reality, insufficient empirical work has been done to substantiate them (Baxter 2009, 327; Borer 2006, 26; Hayner 2011, 25). The transitional justice field lacks comprehensive retrospective longitudinal quantitative and qualitative analyses of the effects of truth commissions in transitional contexts. Rather, many of the claims made about both positive and negative effects of truth commissions rely on normative conviction, anecdotal accounts or single-country case studies (Brahm 2007, 17; Hayner 2011, 25). Two recent studies, however, have attempted to quantify the consequences of truth commissions, albeit in relation to democracy and human rights rather than to their own specific goals, likely due to available datasets (Hayner 2011, 25–26; see Olsen et al. 2010a and Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2010). Faced with a lack of comprehensive comparative studies and datasets, Hayner (2011, 26) suggests:

For better or worse, our assessments of the impact of truth commissions will have to continue to include qualitative, case-specific comparisons in order to fully understand the dynamics, the possibilities, and the limitations of these often contentious bodies.

## 2.4.1 Clarifying truth

Although in principle the idea of acknowledging truth seems relatively straightforward, 'in practice, even the most generous observer will admit that this is not an easy assignment' (Hayner 2011, 5; McAdams 2011, 305). 'Truth' is an ambiguous term and concept, and transitional justice scholars widely accept that there is no single truth that can be documented and presented as 'the truth' (Borer 2006, 21; Lambourne 2009, 39). Rather, the transitional justice literature recognises various truths. For example, the South African TRC was guided by four notions of truth: factual or forensic truth, personal or narrative truth, social truth, and healing or restorative truth (Borer 2006, 21).

A common conceptualisation of truth in relation to truth commissions and transitional justice more generally is to differentiate between knowledge and acknowledgement (Borer 2006, 22; Lambourne 2009, 39; Wilson 2001, 36–37). Drawing from Wilson (2001), Borer (2006, 22) explains that knowledge refers to the factual aspects of truth and may be an end in itself, whereas acknowledgement is a means to a different end, such as healing or affirming the dignity of victims and survivors:

> Both knowledge and acknowledgement are important in different ways for fostering sustainable peace. Knowledge can be important for prosecutions and thus for furthering justice and the rule of law. Acknowledgement can contribute to the personal healing of victims. Both are necessary for peace. (Borer 2006, 22)

Thus, through the goal of discovering and acknowledging truth, truth commissions variously pursue goals ranging from individual healing to macro-societal peacebuilding. A detailed exploration regarding the ambiguity and challenge of pursuing 'truth' is discussed in relation to the Solomon Islands TRC in Chapter Six.

### 2.4.2 Truth commissions in practice

While dozens of truth commissions have been established worldwide, each one must be adapted and implemented according to the local context. They are rarely a smooth operation. Hayner (2011, 2010) describes how:

> Most struggle daily with a barrage of methodological, operational, and political problems, and operate under extreme pressures of time and under the heavy moral and emotional weight of their task.

> Truth commissions do not operate in a vacuum, but are typically implemented in fragile contexts typical of transitional environments. The ongoing, day-to-day challenges that staff and stakeholders overcome in the work of a truth commission determine the kind and quality of the truth that will emerge and the consequences of the commission (Hayner 2011, 2010).

Scholarly literature and policy papers reflect on the practical implications of implementing truth commissions in a variety of contexts and identify common challenges and recurring issues that affect their operation (de Grieff 2013; Gonzalez and Varney 2013; Hayner 2011, 2010–233; ICTJ 2014; OHCHR 2006). Major challenges and practical concerns include the political context and support of the commission throughout its operation; the use of amnesty and ensuing consequences and risks of impunity; clarity and authority of the mandate; public expectations of the commission; staffing; integrity of the commissioners and their reputations; independence and transparency; international support and assistance; participation of civil society and the wider community; public consultation; gender sensitivity and inclusivity; timing (of implementation and length of operation); relationship with judiciary processes; consideration of local approaches to conflict management; sensitivity towards victims' needs, including reparations, redress and rehabilitation; and finally, the acceptance and dissemination of the final report and implementation of the recommendations. These deliberations form the substantive arguments and details of this thesis and are detailed in Chapter Seven in relation to the Solomon Islands TRC.

## 2.5   Post-conflict peacebuilding, reconciliation and truth

> As a future-oriented approach to the past, an ultimate aim of transitional justice is to create the conditions for a sustainable peace, and in this sense it is an intrinsic part of peacebuilding. (Gready and Robins 2014, 350)

A range of underlying premises regarding the positive outcomes of truth commissions are assumed to contribute towards peacebuilding and reconciliation process, propagating the assumption that truth and peace are somehow related and mutually reinforcing (Freeman and Hayner, 2003, 122; Gibson 2006, 258; Lederach 1997, 29). Advocates of truth-seeking claim commissions deter future crimes, assure justice, promote social and psychological healing, outline needed reforms, and promote reconciliation and respect for human rights (Freeman and Hayner 2003). Yet debates persist on whether these claims are compelling, or the relationship between truth-telling and reconciliation or peacebuilding justified (Braithwaite 2011; Hayner 2011; Mendeloff 2004; Tepperman 2002).

The fields of peacebuilding and transitional justice have evolved relatively separately, and literature analysing the peacebuilding potential of truth commissions is relatively limited. The peacebuilding field generally neglects transitional justice and truth-telling as a category in peacebuilding analysis, and transitional justice scholars generally frame their research on human rights and legal procedures rather than peacebuilding (Lambourne 2009, 29). Yet, through contemporary conflict management practices and UN policies the two fields are evidently now tightly linked, and research increasingly reflects on the potential of truth-telling and transitional justice for peacebuilding (Borer 2006; Braithwaite 2011; Gready and Robins 2014; ICTJ 2014; Lambourne 2009; Mani 2002; Mendeloff 2004; Sriram 2007).

In reviewing the connections and gaps between the two fields, Borer (2006, 28) notes that the goals and purported functions of truth commissions resonate closely with qualities associated with sustainable peace, such as truth, assisting victims, reconciliation, healing, national unity, reconstruction, public deliberation, rule of law, justice, accountability, human rights culture and institutional reform. In terms of truth commissions, the fields of peacebuilding and transitional justice particularly overlap on the topic of 'reconciliation' (Borer 2006, 28). Reconciliation is often stipulated as a goal of truth commissions and the term increasingly included in their title, as in the Solomon Islands TRC. Reconciliation after contemporary conflict has increasingly become a priority as former adversaries must coexist within nation states. Yet defining 'reconciliation' and delineating its relationship with peace and truth commissions requires clarification. Borer outlines three issues that warrant further attention (2006, 29–36), which are used as a starting point for the following discussion: the relationship

between peace and reconciliation; the relationship between truth and reconciliation; and finally, clarification of the term 'reconciliation' itself.

## 2.5.1   The relationship between peace and reconciliation

The relationship between reconciliation and sustainable peace requires clarification. While the two terms are frequently conflated, used interchangeably or inevitably conjoined, they are in fact analytically distinct (Borer 2006, 29; Mendeloff 2004, 365). Some scholars view reconciliation as necessary for sustainable peace (Lederach 1997, 20), yet others see peace as a necessary precondition before reconciliation can occur. For example, Ware (2014, 18) employs a realistic and pragmatic approach in reminding peace theorists not to forget the reality of conflict and the simple virtues of negative peace: 'the fact that children, women and men are no longer subject each day to being bombed, shot at or cut up by machetes'. She warns against a broad, all-encompassing definition of peace, asking, 'if social justice is defined as a necessary pre-condition for peace, just how many countries in the world could be said to be at peace? (Ware 2014, 18–19). While peace and reconciliation may be related, the exact nature of the relationship is less clear: 'At times reconciliation is seen as a means to an end; at other times it is seen as the end itself. Sometimes it is a process, sometimes an outcome' (Borer 2006, 29). The peacebuilding potential of pursuing truth and reconciliation in the Solomon Islands and similar contexts is discussed in Chapter Eight. Importantly, both peace and reconciliation are broad terms and while linked, are not synonymous. Further clarification of the term 'reconciliation' is made below.

## 2.5.2   Does truth lead to reconciliation?

The assumed relationship between truth and reconciliation is often taken for granted in transitional justice literature (Borer 2006, 30). The premise that discovering and acknowledging the truth in post-conflict contexts will lead to reconciliation between former adversaries is clear in truth commission discourse and the very titles of truth commissions themselves, which now frequently include the term 'reconciliation'. However this relationship is problematic and the underlying assumptions often questioned (Hayner 2011, 4), not least due to the difficulty in assessing 'truth' and 'reconciliation' as social indicators (Gibson 2006).

A key problem with the assumption that truth will lead to reconciliation is that it conflates success of a truth commission with reconciliation: 'Reconciliation is no longer one of several possible contributions of truth telling; it becomes the *sine qua non* of assessing success' (Borer 2006, 30). This is problematic as it runs the risk of overlooking the number of other ways in which truth commissions are successful, and the contributions they can make towards sustainable peacebuilding (Borer 2006, 31). Hayner (2011, 23) echoes this concern, noting:

> The goal of reconciliation has been so closely associated with some past truth commissions that many casual observers assume that reconciliation is an integral, or even primary, purpose of creating a truth commission, which is not always true.

Furthermore, the inclusion of the term 'reconciliation' in the title of truth commissions likely generates expectations that cannot be met (de Grieff 2013, par. 47). The relative benefits and expectations of pursuing truth and reconciliation through a TRC in Solomon Islands are discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

## 2.5.3 Clarifying reconciliation

Reconciliation is associated with a range of approaches in the peacebuilding and transitional justice literature, such as psychosocial, legal, religious, socioeconomic and anthropological perspectives (Millar 2011, 177). Post-conflict reconciliation is the focus of a vast scholarly literature (see for example Abu-Nimer 2001; Bloomfield et al. 2003; Lederach 1997; Lerche 2000; Theissen 2004). Despite the wide coverage it receives (or perhaps because of it), the term suffers from a lack of definitional clarity (Borer 2006, 31; Lerche 2000). Like 'peace', 'reconciliation' can be defined 'negatively' and 'positively', to denote states of being ranging from the elimination of physical threat and violence, coexistence, positive relationships, to intergroup harmony and cooperation (Bloomfield 2006; Mendeloff 2004, 365–66).

In terms of truth commissions and reconciliation, it is important to distinguish between reconciliation at the interpersonal or individual level, and national or political reconciliation (Borer 2006, 32). While much literature focuses on state-building and nation-building for peacebuilding, scholars also emphasise the importance of interpersonal healing for post-conflict reconciliation, highlighting that 'it is the interpersonal ruins, rather than ruined buildings and institutions, that pose the greatest challenge for rebuilding society' (Halpern and Weinstein 2004, 563). Truth commissions are variously credited with being able to

contribute to reconciliation at a range of levels; however, these assumptions are variously critiqued (Brahm 2007). Depending on which level truth commissions are supposed to promote 'reconciliation', if at all, often impacts how they are assessed or evaluated: 'This problem is compounded by the fact that these two definitions of reconciliation may, in fact, be fundamentally at odds with each other, making their indiscriminate use even more problematic' (Borer 2006, 34).

The claim that truth commissions promote reconciliation, healing and peace on an interpersonal level is questioned by a number of scholars, some of whom question the conception of reconciliation rooted in Judeo-Christian theology and its relevance in varying cultural contexts in which truth commissions are employed (Brounéus 2010; Hamber 2009; Hayner 2011; Mendeloff 2004, 2009; Millar 2011; Shaw 2005). The impact of participating in a truth commission will differ from person to person, so that while some deponents may find that retelling their story to a truth commission is a healing or cathartic process, others may find that it raises pain and experiences of trauma (Brounéus 2008; Brounéus 2010; Hayner 2011, 161; OHCHR 2006, 23). While certain (clinical) circumstances may show truth-telling to trigger a cathartic response in the individual, it cannot be assumed that public truth-telling would have the same effect. On the contrary, under the conditions of truth commissions where victims may only have a limited time to tell their story and access to little or no ongoing support, 'there is contradictory anecdotal evidence that truth can rekindle anger and trigger posttraumatic stress' (Brahm 2007, 20). While future truth commissions may seek to improve on past practices in relation to individual trauma, Hayner warns that commissions, policy makers and society must recognise that this contribution may be just a small step in a much larger process of national and individual recovery (2011, 162). Overall, a lack of longitudinal data prevents the establishment of a baseline to understand individual perceptions prior to a truth commission, thereby limiting our ability to assess its impact beyond anecdotal evidence and examples from a small number of cases (Brahm 2007, 20).

Aside from direct participation, truth commissions can purportedly instigate secondary benefits for personal healing and reconciliation, such as through the final report and how the recommendations are addressed (Borer 2006, 24); through publicly recognising previously denied truth; and by acknowledging victims' needs for basic services (Hayner 2011, 162). While Brahm is cautious of perpetuating the benefits of truth commissions at the individual

level without further research, he acknowledges that they can serve a positive role on the macro-societal level, through contribution to democratic processes and improving human rights practices (Brahm 2007, 24). Hayner (2011, 183) agrees and suggests that advancing reconciliation on a national level is a strength of truth commission processes, whereas:

> On an individual level, however, reconciliation is more complex, and much more difficult to achieve by means of a national commission […] Forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation are deeply personal processes, and each person's needs and reactions to peacemaking and truth-telling may be different.

Chapter Four outlines the characteristics of conflict management and the local interpretations and understandings of reconciliation in Solomon Islands. In light of this, Chapter Six documents and analyses the difficulties encountered by the Solomon Islands TRC in attempting to pursue 'truth' and 'reconciliation' through its activities. Despite the challenges faced by the Solomon Islands TRC, Chapter Eight discusses the potential of a TRC to pursue reconciliation on individual and societal levels in Melanesian contexts.

### 2.5.4 One part of the process

Expectations for truth commissions are often much greater than what these bodies can in fact reasonably achieve (de Greiff 2013; Hayner 2011, 5). Existing literature on truth commissions shows legitimate and real concerns with their conceptual basis: that 'truth' can be identified and documented, and that doing so will lead to national healing or 'reconciliation' (Tepperman 2002, 131). Mendeloff systematically considers the claims made of the peace-promoting benefits of truth commissions and concludes that they 'rest far more on faith than on sound logic or empirical evidence' (2004, 356). Tepperman (2001, 131) concurs, noting that while these debates:

> Highlight a number of awkward dynamics that commissions and their advocates too often tend to gloss over […] they also overlook an essential part of the picture: the depressing realities that make compromises in justice necessary in the first place.

In assessing and exploring the relationship between truth-telling and peacebuilding, a number of scholars conclude that while they may not be a one-stop shop for sustainable peace, they can 'make a critical contribution in the midst of a difficult transition' (Hayner 2011, 18); are 'the least unsatisfactory solution' (Huyse 2001, 327); they provide 'something of a middle

ground between trials and amnesties' (Olsen et al. 2010b, 23); and that 'this is not to say that truth-telling has no role to play in preventing the resumption of violent conflict in postwar societies, only that proponents likely overstate its importance' (Mendeloff 2004, 355). At a recent symposium on the topic of truth commissions and peacebuilding, 'it was stressed that truth commissions are part of a larger transitional justice process rather than integral, one-time solutions in themselves' (ICTJ 2014, ix).

## 2.6   Localising peace and transitional justice

> The liberal peace has been widely criticized in fragile transitional contexts for prioritizing the creation of institutions over a contextualized engagement with the welfare of the population, creating 'empty' institutions paralysed by a lack of capacity rather than responding to the everyday needs of the new state's citizens. (Gready and Robins 2014, 341)

Across the peacebuilding and transitional justice literature, the importance of working with local cultures and recognising local capacities for peace is often reiterated: 'Both transitional justice and peacebuilding become transformative when they emphasise the principles of local participation and empowerment' (Lambourne 2009, 35; see also Brigg 2010; Lederach 1997; Rogers and Ramsbotham 1999; Shaw and Waldorf 2010). Largely subsumed by 'the liberal peacebuilding apparatus', transitional justice is subject to similar critiques as the liberal peace agenda, such as that it may be 'externally imposed and inappropriate for the political and legal cultures in which they are set up' (Sriram 2007, 579 and 586). Dominant, liberal post-conflict approaches are criticised for viewing peacebuilding as a series of technocratic tasks that focus narrowly on democratisation and institutional reform, eliding peacebuilding with governance, state-building and development (Ginty 2010, 352). Critics argue that local dynamics, such as local sources of strength or resilience, and the affective dimensions of peacebuilding such as trust-building and reconciliation, are consequently neglected (Bleiker and Brigg 2011; Brown et al. 2010, 103; Ginty 2003, 125–6; Richmond 2011, 115). Critical scholars increasingly place emphasis on the value of grassroots, local, indigenous and hybridised models of conflict resolution, peacemaking and state-building in what are variously referred to as 'hybrid' or 'liberal-local' approaches (Bleiker and Brigg 2011; Boege 2007; Boege et al. 2008; Ginty 2003, 2008; Richmond 2011; Wallis 2012). Transitional justice scholars similarly emphasise the need to localise mechanisms to better adapt to or resonate with the local context (Gready

and Robins 2014) and call for empirical research evaluating successes, limitations and impacts to inform policy decisions (Baxter 2009; Shaw and Waldorf 2010).

So-called 'local' approaches, while 'necessarily rooted in specific communities and thus may have highly localised elements' generally share a number of common traits that lend them to more sustainable peacebuilding (Ginty 2010, 349). These generally include engaging respected local figures with moral authority; involving a public element making them more transparent and accessible (such as being physically located in the community or between disputing communities); using oral traditions such as storytelling and publicly airing grievances; emphasising relationships rather than a definitive agreement; and lastly, relying on local resources (Ginty 2010, 349–50). These features echo key characteristics of contemporary conflict management and reconciliation processes in Solomon Islands, as will be discussed in Chapter Four.

The call for greater localisation of peace processes and hybridity as an alternative to liberal peace frameworks also attract legitimate critique. Drawing on conflicts in Africa, Ware (2014, 18) argues:

> The search for effective and enduring hybridity is doomed to failure both because it romanticises a past which never really existed and because, where a form of hybridity is temporarily achieved, it contains the seeds of its own destruction; and this, since it largely excludes the needs and views of three-quarters of the population, that is women and young men. Hybridity all too often means government by the grandfathers.

Those advocating hybrid or liberal-local approaches to peace, state-building and transitional justice are aware of the limitations and risks involved. Caution is made against lapsing into cultural relativism or reifying the 'local' as a homogenous category and placing it in a dichotomous relationship with the 'external', 'liberal', or 'Western' (Wallis 2012, 631). References to 'customary ways' should not be interpreted as practices of the precolonial or pre-contact past, nor should 'custom' be viewed as static, 'but remarkably dynamic and adaptable' (Brown et al. 2010, 102). Finally, local approaches should not be romanticised, as they can 'be a site of competing victims' claims, discriminatory practices (e.g., against women) and low capacity' (Gready and Robins 2014, 349). Rather than denoting solely historically traditional practices, Ginty proposes that at a minimum, the term 'indigenous' can refer to approaches 'that are locally inspired rather than the increasingly standardised

approaches to peacemaking and peacebuilding that are used by international organisations and INGOs in post-civil war environments' (2010, 349).

In this thesis, the term 'local' is used to refer to the everyday social reality of the heterogeneous Solomon Islands population, which may include a variety of customary structures or processes, spiritual and religious beliefs, state institutions and global influences (Richmond 2011, 117). Further discussion of contemporary conflict management practices in Solomon Islands is provided in Chapter Four. Similarly, 'hybrid' is not limited to mutual accommodation between local and liberal approaches, but also refers to a combination of the multitude and diverse forms of local practices within Solomon Islands, which Solomon Islanders themselves regularly navigate when mediating across cultural differences (McDougall and Kere 2011). Limitations and drawbacks of hybridity are identified in the literature to warn against romanticising 'the local', and to prompt researchers and policymakers to contextualise responses and judge techniques according to their efficacy (Ginty 2010, 359–60; Peterson 2012, 12). While most post-conflict contexts already employ a mix of peacebuilding mechanisms that draw from local and external techniques, the key issue is 'who determines the mix' (Ginty 2010, 360–61). In other words, we must question:

> If international organisations promote 'traditional' and 'indigenous' approaches to peacebuilding (as is the case in many instances) does this compromise the authenticity of these practices and perhaps detract from the very factors that makes them worthwhile in the first place? (Ginty 2010, 348–9)

Merry uses the term 'vernacularisation' to refer to the process whereby intermediaries attempt to frame globally circulating ideas and practices, such as human rights, into local conceptual understandings – a messy process of translation between international and local actors (Merry 2006). She depicts the process as occurring along a continuum:

> At one end is replication, a process in which the imported institution remains largely unchanged from its transnational prototype. The adaptation is superficial and primarily decorative. At the other end is hybridization, a process that merges imported institutions and symbols with local ones, sometimes uneasily. (2006, 44)

Although policymakers and scholars recognise the value of local models of conflict management and adapting peacebuilding and transitional justice mechanisms to local contexts, in practice this view is often neglected, or superficially included as another criterion

to be met. For example, as TRCs are replicated around the globe, the foundation assumptions underlying truth commissions and transitional justice continue to be reiterated without significant modification (Gready and Robins 2014, 343; Shaw and Waldorf 2010, 4). While truth commissions promote a host of seemingly universal goods such as human rights, justice, healing, peace and reconciliation, these ideas can be abstract and ambiguous and may not necessarily resonate with local sociocultural understandings (Hinton 2010, 11). When mimicked or replicated, the original intention and meaning can be easily lost or mistranslated, and the processes carried out in name only while a veneer of adaptation masks the lack of genuine participation, ownership and buy-in. This results in a performance which, on paper, may meet criteria for 'best practice' or 'success', but in reality falls short of a meaningful process congruent with local world views and cultures, capable of resonating with the population (Ginty 2010, 356).

## 2.7   Research questions and conclusion

This chapter has provided a theoretical foundation for this research and thesis by delineating the theoretical assumptions and premise for implementing a truth commission as a post-conflict peacebuilding mechanism. Gaps in both the peacebuilding and transitional justice literature in relation to truth commissions have been identified: namely, that peace and conflict literature has mostly neglected truth-telling as a means to post-conflict peacebuilding, and transitional justice literature tends to analyse findings within human rights and legal frameworks rather than peacebuilding paradigms (Lambourne 2009, 29). In relation to truth commissions, both fields particularly overlap on the topic of reconciliation. It is at this nexus between the two fields that this research will contribute.

This chapter has also acknowledged the increased attention given to localised approaches to peacebuilding and the burgeoning 'hybridity' literature in relation to both peacebuilding and transitional justice. In heeding the call of many scholars working on issues of transitional justice and peacebuilding to produce scholarship that is context specific, this thesis looks specifically and empirically at the Solomon Islands TRC.

This chapter has demonstrated the complex relationship between peace, truth and reconciliation. These are more than theoretical concerns. As truth commissions circulate the

globe and are implemented in varying and diverse contexts, the complexities inherent in the literature and theory on peacebuilding and transitional justice are further exacerbated with real-world consequences. Scholars increasingly question the usefulness and validity of truth commissions in the range of cultural contexts in which they are applied, inquiring how official transitional justice discourses are adopted, negotiated, contested and transformed (Hinton 2010; Kent 2011; Millar 2011; Ross 2010; Shaw 2005; Shaw and Waldorf 2010; Sriram 2007). Faced with a lack of longitudinal qualitative and quantitative data to assess the impact of truth commissions, a number of experts agree in-depth case studies and empirical research evaluating the success, limitations and real impacts of various commissions will contribute to a more informed and refined understanding for future policy makers (Baxter 2009, 327; Hayner 2011, 237; Shaw and Waldorf 2010). In researching truth commissions, Borer (2006, 31) warns that focusing on achieving set criteria such as 'reconciliation':

> […] runs the serious risk of overlooking various other ways in which they *are* successful, or the many contributions they *do* make […] Almost every attempt at coming to terms with the past has some accomplishments. It makes little sense to simply pronounce such attempts as failure; it makes more sense to examine what they *have* achieved and where improvements can be made.

It is here that this research contributes to the wider literature on truth commissions, transitional justice and peacebuilding. Rather than attempt to assess and evaluate the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission against a set of peacebuilding criteria, transitional justice aspirations, or its own mandate, this research utilises the author's position, experience and relationships within the Solomon Islands TRC to reflect on practice and explore how the Solomon Islands TRC was adopted, implemented, operated and perceived.

This chapter has begun to address the first research question, which considers: What are the features of effective TRC practices, and how do these contribute to post-conflict peacebuilding? It has also introduced a theoretical foundation upon which this thesis will proceed. Chapter Three will explain how this research emerged, the methods used to gather and analyse data, and efforts made to commit to ethical peace research.

# 3. Methodology: Developing an ethical approach to peace research in Melanesia

## 3.1  Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methodology and theoretical framework of this study. Research methods have been at the forefront of this study – the opportunity to conduct ethical, practical and reflective research preceded the research questions or topic. The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. On one hand, I aim to document and describe the methodology of this study, provide context for the research, and consider the validity and reliability of the data and analysis. On the other, I aim to contribute to the discourse on research methods in peace and transitional justice research, as well as in research in Melanesian contexts. I draw out some of the complexities and sensitivities of researching peace and reconciliation in post-conflict Solomon Islands. I describe the efforts made to develop ethical research practices that not only met the University's standards of ethics, but were respectful of, and useful to, the people who were involved with the research and the Solomon Islands TRC.

I begin this chapter with a detailed discussion of how I came to be in the position of 'researcher' and how this research topic emerged. I then describe how this history influenced my research approach and research methodology, and the overall research design in which I attempted to ground research theories into practice. This is followed by a discussion of a number of practical aspects of the study, including the methods of data collection, the choice of research sites and specific ethical issues that I encountered during the research process. Finally, I discuss the process of data analysis, and comment on the reliability, validity and broader applicability of the findings.

## 3.2  Background to the research project

> Methodology is the atmosphere or ether, the encompassing medium within which the research is undertaken and includes the worldview of the researcher and the researcher's understanding of what are useful research questions and how these questions can be pursued. (Vallance 2007, 2)

From an interpretist perspective, purely objective knowledge is not possible. Rather observations are 'situated in the worlds of – and between – the observer and the observed' (Denzin and Lincoln 2003, 31). Behind all research is a biographically situated researcher (Denzin and Lincoln 2003, 30), and social research is arguably never unaffected by the researcher's preconceived values or identity (Hermann 2001, 78). Vallance (2007, 2) defines methodology as the: 'validated integration between the research design and the means of data collection and analysis. The integration requires a "match" or connection between ontology and epistemology constructed by the researcher'. Understanding that 'what we decide to research and the way we conduct our research is a political statement about who and what is important to us' (Deshler and Selener 1991, 9), and given the highly politicised context of the research project, here I openly acknowledge my personal biography, values, worldview and previous experiences in order to be transparent about my role in the research process and reflect on my position in this research.

Officially, this research began upon returning from a year volunteering in Solomon Islands, in 2009, when I enrolled in postgraduate studies at the University of New England (UNE). At the time, I was interested in combining my experience of living and working in Honiara, and the contextual awareness I had come to have of the challenges working there, with my undergraduate studies and interest in peace and conflict studies.

Unofficially, however, this research began several years earlier. After completing high school and eager for an adventure, I embarked on a volunteer trip to Papua New Guinea through a youth program jointly run by Australian Volunteers International (AVI) and Youth Challenge Australia (YCA). Aside from the sporadic and mostly negative media I was exposed to, I knew nothing of the country or region. Over ten weeks, our volunteer group of ten Australians transited through Port Moresby and stayed in two remote, subsistence villages along the Kokoda trail in Central Province. We flew in with supplies on a chartered flight and spent the following weeks waking early, eating rice, cassava, taro, tinned fish, *nabawan* biscuits, cucumbers and the sweetest, juiciest pineapples. Without electricity or modern amenities, we bathed in the rivers and waterfalls, spent our days working in the village on small-scale community identified projects, lived in local houses, and trekked long distances to reach neighbouring villages. Our hosts were hard working, kind, tough, pragmatic and beyond generous. Our time was divided between two communities – Efogi and Manari – a day's walk

from one another. At the end, together with over twenty of our new friends from the two villages, we walked for four days through heavy rain and swollen rivers back to Port Moresby.

I am under no illusion of the likely limited impact this experience may have had on the host villages, or indeed the more recent debates and arguments of the possible negative impact, and arguments against, such 'voluntourism'.[5] But for the purpose of providing a background to this study, this experience was enormously influential. I experienced and witnessed generosity across cultural divides, the communal and extended nature of families and the pragmatic and dynamic use of spiritual frameworks – whether they were Christian or customary. Staying in a remote area with very limited communications, appreciating that English was our hosts' third, fourth or perhaps fifth language, and experiencing first-hand the nature of planning, logistics and working in resource-poor settings in difficult terrain meant I was able to observe, learn, and begin to develop a preliminary understanding of life in rural and subsistence Melanesian villages.

I did not revisit the Melanesian region until graduating from university, after studying Peace Studies and Development Studies. In 2008 I again took the opportunity to volunteer – this time in a somewhat more professional and productive capacity – through the Australian Government funded Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development (AYAD) program.[6] I relocated to the Solomon Islands and took a position in the newly formed Children's Division of the Ministry for Women, Youth, and Children's Affairs (MWYCA)[7] in Honiara for one year. It was during this experience that the specific interest for this research was formed.

During that first year in Honiara, and reflecting on it afterwards, I was struck by how regularly conversations revolved around what appeared to be the incongruity of development

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[5] For example, see opinion pieces published online for the Guardian (Blackledge 2013; Mohamud 2013) and Aljazeera (Zakaria 2014).

[6] At the time, AYAD was the youth stream of what is now known as the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program. See www.australianaidvolunteers.gov.au.

[7] Now the Ministry for Women, Youth, Children's and Family Affairs (MWYCFA).

programming and the Australian-led regional intervention with localised practices. To my admittedly naïve and idealistic eyes, a number of approaches just didn't seem to fit, and local strengths and practices seemed to be largely ignored. I grew interested in the post-conflict context in Solomon Islands, and keen to explore how conflict management and peacebuilding practices could be improved upon. I questioned whether more effort made towards listening to local voices, and localising peacebuilding and development initiatives, would result in strengthening communities and their ability to manage conflict and build peace in a constructive and non-violent manner.

Critical theorists in the peace and conflict studies literature echoed my personal experience. As discussed in Chapter Two, contemporary peace and conflict resolution literature, including that focused on the Pacific, increasingly emphasises the value of grassroots, local and indigenous models of conflict resolution and peacemaking (Bleiker and Brigg 2011; Boege 2007; Ginty 2003; Shaw and Waldorf 2010)**.** Local approaches to conflict management were receiving increased attention due to their higher levels of relevance and legitimacy from within the communities involved, their process-oriented approaches that allow for different perceptions of time, their consensus-based approach that allows for broader participation, and their focus on restoring community relations. These values resonated with what I saw as much needed in the Solomon Islands.

## 3.2.1 Developing the research project

This study began as a broad area of interest, only later narrowing to a specific topic once opportunities and interests collided. Yet the principles and philosophy of the research methodology were clear from the beginning. I initially compiled a methodology with the aim of achieving congruence with the Melanesian context and the Peace Studies discipline, as well with my personal values for social justice and positive social change. Wanting to produce practically relevant research, my initial research proposal entailed a commitment to research that was action-oriented. It stated:

> This research will seek to inform and enrich current and future peacebuilding practice, and be culturally relevant, useful, and practical for Melanesian communities and Solomon Islands in particular. Ideally, it will be able to propose potential and realistic methods of peacebuilding and conflict transformation which will be culturally relevant and valuable in Melanesia. It will be people/community focused, with proposals being

constructed from and influenced by case studies and qualitative research. I will be particularly willing to cooperate, share, and work with other organizations who are also considering the role of *kastom* in peacebuilding and reconciliation in the current Melanesian context.

[…] I have seen how the transition from academic discussion to practical, realistic proposals can become blurred and confused. This research will endeavor to apply critical thinking and analysis to its own life cycle, responding pragmatically to challenges, and allowing the content to guide the result. The relationship between means and ends is respected, which is to say the method and fluidity of the research will need to be as considerate of complex circumstances, fluidity, and cultural influences, as it will advise is necessary in the cultural transformation and peacebuilding discourse in Melanesia.[8]

Initially I proposed research that would integrate with an existing process or organisation in Solomon Islands, to enable the research to be beneficial for current practice or programmes in country. The research was intended to facilitate a two-way process of grounding international peacebuilding theory into local practices and realities, and also informing broader theory from such local practices. With limited time and resources, I was aware that I could not conduct 'action research' in its pure form. Rather I heeded McTaggart's warning against becoming 'bedazzled with the bright light of a pristine set of "principles"', which can lead to a judgemental moral high ground. Instead, she suggests 'general principles can provide useful guidance to assess the appropriateness and validity of examples and formulate plans for concrete action' (McTaggart 1997, 25). This resonated with me as I had not 'chosen' action research as a research strategy, but was already committed to its principles before being aware of it as a specific approach, evident in the above excerpt of the initial research proposal. In an effort to be guided by action research principles, I intended to approach local and international organisations working in Solomon Islands to seek opportunities for collaboration, or projects I could conduct research alongside, to offer feedback to an existing action.

I did not need to approach any organisations, however, as in late 2010 I was contacted by the TRC Research Manager through mutual contacts and asked to assist with the research and writing for the gender component of the commission's final report – what would become the

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[8] Excerpt of research proposal for Masters of Research at UNE, 2009.

chapter on women. Financial support for my position was sought through the AVID program, and in April 2011 I returned to Solomon Islands to assume a position as a research officer with the TRC, tasked with preparing and drafting the chapter on women's experiences of the conflict. The following twelve months working at the TRC provided what I was initially seeking when I first prepared my research proposal: an opportunity to work with, and conduct research alongside, an existing institution or program concerned with issues relating to conflict and peace in Solomon Islands. Building on the interests and problems I had encountered when previously living in the country, my research aimed to offer an exploration of the friction between importing globalised and donor-driven institutions such as a TRC into Solomon Islands as a post-conflict peacebuilding mechanism.

### 3.2.2  Reflecting on and integrating lived practice

Living and working in the Solomon Islands for two years, including one year at the TRC, undoubtedly influenced my opinion on the importance and approach of conducting ethical research in a Melanesian context. I had the opportunity to orient myself with the geography of the country, learn the lingua franca, Pijin, and through the work at the TRC become more informed about the conflict and its dynamics, and importantly, how people would (or would not) talk about it. Spending twelve months as a research officer with the TRC meant that I not only talked and researched the conflict and its effects during work hours, but found that many people outside of work wanted to share their views with me. Being a foreigner, I was frequently engaged in conversations with Solomon Islanders about where I was from and what I was doing in Honiara. Countless acquaintances openly shared their opinions, thoughts and stories – if not on the TRC, then on their experiences during the conflict or their thoughts on reconciliation. While these everyday conversations were not formal interviews, they contributed to the 'listening' and '*tok stori*' methods I used for this research (discussed below) and are thus included as a method under 'participant observation and informal discussions'.

Working at the TRC also enabled and strengthened my academic research in a few notable ways related to the research design. Overall, it provided a means to participate and observe the TRC firsthand as well as contribute directly to the process, fulfilling my initial desires for participatory and action-oriented research. Immersing myself in the TRC and its work meant that my academic research was sidelined, yet I was simultaneously and organically

conducting ethnographic research – immersed in the setting I would later be reflecting upon. The everyday conversations and experiences I was having, and the notes I was making, were leaving layers of understanding of my topic before I officially and technically began the more concerted effort of research via interviews, documentary analysis and literature review. For this reason I have included participatory observation as a key method of data collection below.

Key lessons learned during the TRC's work and research practices were identified and implemented into this study and methodology. Of note, throughout the work of the TRC there was an overwhelming sense of research fatigue among villagers when approached by staff to discuss the period of conflict. Many were reluctant to talk of the past, and participation was often induced by TRC staff, who drew attention to the potential benefits and changes the TRC could make through its final report.[9] With the sensitive nature of post-conflict research and the general research fatigue encountered in mind, the methods were adjusted as follows.

First, trust and rapport with interview participants were considered not just valuable but in most cases necessary. Waldrip and Taylor (1999, 255) also emphasise this when researching in Melanesia, emphasising:

> It is of utmost importance that […] sufficient trust be established between the researcher and the local people, otherwise the researcher is quite likely to be given an answer that is incongruent with local peoples' actual perceptions or beliefs.

Such answers are not intentionally misleading, but may result from an attempt to save face, avoid conflict, preserve the relationship, or to tell the inquirer what is perceived they want to hear (Waldrip and Taylor 1999, 256). Thus, interviews for this study were primarily conducted with colleagues and trusted acquaintances, with whom trust and rapport were already established.

Second, familiarity with Solomon Islands culture, *kastoms*, and Pijin was also necessary to allow participants to speak freely in their lingua franca. While eliminating the need for

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[9] This dilemma is discussed in greater detail in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

interpreters and subsequent risks to the integrity of the data, the ability to conduct interviews in Pijin noticeably contributed to a relaxed and informal setting in which interlocutors appeared engaged and open. It was noticed that even when interviewing Solomon Islanders who were highly educated, literate and fluent English speakers, Pijin was still the preferred means of communication.

Finally, the potential for the research to have applicable and ongoing benefits for the Solomon Islands and the broader region was a significant factor for the research participants. In contrast to the sense of research fatigue that was noted during the TRC's research, participants in this research – those already involved with the TRC process – mostly contributed with enthusiasm and insightful reflection. Many participants requested to have their names used in the research for transparency (see Section 3.7 below) and appeared to value the opportunity to reflect on peacebuilding and reconciliation in Solomon Islands generally, and to discuss the TRC for the benefit of future Pacific nations that may undertake a similar transitional justice process.

## 3.3    Theoretical frameworks and research approach

The primary purpose of this chapter is to present the methodological approach of the research. The discussion above was necessary to place this material in context, so that by considering the values and goals of the research I can now illustrate why the following theoretical paradigms and methods are most appropriate. In this section, I will explore the epistemological approach to this research. Minichiello et al. (1990, 100) explain that different epistemological positions generate different methodologies:

> The way we go about getting at knowledge and the techniques we use to collect evidence are directly related to our image of social reality; the way in which we think we can know it and the way in which we think it ought to be studied.

Here I discuss three research approaches that guided and shaped this methodology: peace research, Pacific research and indigenous epistemologies, and practice and action research.

### 3.3.1  Peace research

Peace studies and transitional justice are both relatively recent fields of study. Despite having 'ancient origins', peace research only formalised as a discipline following the Second World

War, when its own academic institutions and professional journals were established (Rogers and Ramsbotham 1999, 740). Transitional justice research has established even more recently; there is no professional association of transitional justice researchers and a journal dedicated to publishing scholarly articles on the subject was only recently introduced [10] (Baxter 2009, 325). Neither field of study has prescribed methodological approaches to research, and due to the sensitivity inherent to peace, conflict and human rights, research can be challenging for new and experienced researchers alike (Baxter 2009, 325).

As outlined in Chapter Two, peace studies and transitional justice are multidisciplinary fields. Peace research overlaps with and draws from fields such as philosophy, psychology, jurisprudence, politics, international relations, sociology and anthropology (Rogers and Ramsbotham 1999, 742). On the one hand, theorists argue that the multifaceted nature of violent conflict warrants such a multidisciplinary approach to research; on the other hand, the interdisciplinary nature of peace research is criticised for lacking a distinctive peace research methodology and theoretical base (Rogers and Ramsbotham 1999, 751). Rogers and Ramsbotham explain that what distinguishes peace research from other disciplines is its central concern with peace and conflict, its holistic approach, and its normative commitment to the analysis of conditions for non-violent social and political change (Rogers and Ramsbotham 1999, 742).

### 3.3.2  Pacific research and indigenous epistemologies

> The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 1)

From the outset of this research it was clear that being an outsider, and researching conflict specifically, was a challenging position to occupy. Research practices in the Pacific have been coloured by the experience of colonisation. Writing about experiences conducting research in an Indigenous Australian community McTaggart (1999, 497) warns of the challenges:

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[10] The *International Journal of Transitional Justice* was established in 2007, to consolidate cross-disciplinary research on transitional justice. See www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/ijtj/about.html

> The conventional research purpose of generating 'understanding' has been seriously challenged as a form of exploitation, typically imposing categories, meanings, homogeneity, and stereotyping on disadvantaged groups, all of which the people portrayed deny, resent, and regard as unhelpful. In cross-cultural situations, especially those where Western researchers work among indigenous people, these challenges are at their sharpest.

While in the above passage, McTaggart is referring to research in an Indigenous Australian community, the key challenge remains pertinent to any outsider researching in an indigenous context. That is, how to conduct research without replicating structures of violence and discrimination.

Recent trends in postcolonial societies such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada show an emergence of indigenous approaches to research. Nabobo-baba (2006, 24) explains that:

> Similar trends are being observed in the pacific, with a number of people working to define research approaches that are applicable to the region. Such indigenous approaches are based on the assumption that knowing and knowledge are not accultural, but are products of, and thus influenced by, particular culture, and can best be understood by way of research techniques that reflect that culture.

Pacific Islanders have increasingly focused on Pacific research methodologies and indigenous epistemologies, either as the substantive focus of research, or as a complement to their own studies (see for example Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2002; Nabobo-Baba 2006; Maebuta 2010; and Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Similarly, 'outsiders' have written about their experiences of seeking to conduct culturally sensitive research in the Pacific (see for example Monson 2009; Vallance 2007 and 2008; Vella 2011; Waldrip and Taylor 1999).

Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2002, 381) suggest that 'what has been missing from the development literature is systematic, careful examination of how differing indigenous peoples construct knowledge – that is, indigenous epistemology', explaining indigenous epistemology to mean 'a cultural group's ways of thinking and of creating, (re)formulating, and theorizing about knowledge via traditional discourses and media of communication, anchoring the truth of the discourse in culture'. Maebuta warns that peace research that ignores indigenous knowledge and practices in the Pacific is likely to be resisted (2010, 1).

Being committed to peace research principles, including the close relationship between theory and practice, this research sought to respect and value indigenous knowledge and research practices. First, this required a deeper understanding of the relationship between the construction of knowledge in the 'West' and in the Pacific. Recognising the problematic nature of defining the 'West' or 'developed' in relation and contrast to 'Melanesia', Brown (2008, 183) notes that 'profound differences' exist, yet warns that:

> In some important ways and sites, however, the complex relationships between Melanesia and the West are imagined in terms of sharp polarities – borders of the mind – between categories of traditional (primitive or backward), a-historical and undeveloped on the one hand, and modern, rational, progressive and developed on the other.

Wallace (2009, 525) agrees, suggesting the discourse on the Pacific has 'been simplified, or essentialized, in many analyses that refer to tradition *vs* modernity'. This mutually exclusive dichotomy creates rigid categories and does not give credence to the complex challenges Melanesian countries are experiencing in navigating processes of rapid change. Rather, Teaiwa (2006, 75) describes, such changes are often presented as a lineal transgression between polarities that have been drawn from other familiar models of knowing, such as from 'more Pacific to less Pacific, less European to more European, less modern to more modern, more exotic to more familiar'. While such an analysis of change assumes an 'inevitable march towards mimicking former and current colonizers', recently another trend has emerged in which change is described as the Pacific having the characteristics of other developing world contexts – 'the pacific is only in danger of becoming more and more Third World' (Teaiwa 2006, 77). According to Teaiwa:

> The ultimate problem with the comparisons and analogies I have discussed so far is their reduction of very complex histories and realities to simple characteristics and features, combined with their insistence on analyzing politics and history separately from culture. (2006, 82)

The practice of labelling and categorising change in the Pacific in this way has far-reaching practical consequences. In addition to influencing the formation of identity in the region, it directly informs the frameworks for policy orientation toward Melanesia, which 'have limited capacity for engagement with a reality that they have in important ways misconceived' (Brown 2008, 184). The imposition of such Western forms of knowledge is evident in much

development literature and policy material on the Pacific Islands, which contains a 'strong element of a judgemental inference of the "right" way to "develop" premised on western economic and cultural norms' (Wallace 2009, 525). The transference of these modes of knowledge to a place with entirely different cultural norms is unsurprisingly mostly unsuccessful. Recognition of this has seen contemporary moves to decolonise research methods and an increased interest in indigenous approaches to research and practice, which identify the need to locate research in the realities of the indigenous culture being investigated (Nabobo-Baba 2006, 24).

Indigenous knowledge systems and research approaches offer holistic perspectives eschewing disciplinary divisions, in contrast to Western, disciplinary approaches to knowledge which have been criticised as being introduced by colonisers as 'part of the homogenization of the world' (Wood 2006, 37). Wood (2006, 36) explains:

> Disciplines that separate the spiritual from the political, literature from history, or economics from psychology, for example, misconstrue how most people in Oceania live. Resorting to interdisciplinary approaches – the remedy chosen by some – does not solve the problems associated with dividing into parts what people experience as a whole.

Wallace (2009, 527) similarly recognises practices of subordinating knowledge in the Pacific:

> The 'selective use of "knowledge", particularly that which excludes indigenous knowledge, maintains hegemonic relationships, undermining and devaluing local knowledge by emphasizing western values and systems. A growing body of work from Pacific Islander writers argue that development literature is full of misrepresentations that fail to understand indigenous peoples' forms of representation.

An indigenous epistemological approach is concerned with 'the process through which knowledge is constructed and validated, and the role of that process in shaping thinking and behaviour' (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2002, 382). It therefore encourages researchers to rely on place-specific values, pedagogies, philosophies and epistemologies unique to the local context (Wood 2006, 33). Teaiwa also stresses this point, concerned that 'some assertions of indigenous difference from 'the West' […] do not account for *changes* in indigenous ways of knowing and being' (2006, 75). This caution serves to highlight the importance of understanding the dynamic nature of indigenous epistemology and warns against attempting

to generalise an overall 'indigenous' approach to knowledge practices. This is particularly relevant to the discussion of hybridity in Chapter Two, and its use throughout this thesis.

Acknowledging there is no universal 'pacific research methodology', and without being prescriptive, Vallance (2007, 11) proposes preconditions required to constitute a defensible Melanesian methodology, as follows:

1. The research must be grounded in a Melanesian world view that respects Melanesian ontology and epistemology;

2. The research program: questions; processes; and outcomes, must respect and focus upon the Melanesian experience;

3. The research must share Melanesian values in a manner that is exemplified in data collection and analysis;

4. The research must be grounded in the Melanesian community experience and consolidate that life-force integration between all participants, including the natural and spiritual worlds;

5. While not requiring that all researchers be ethnically Melanesian, the lived experience of Melanesian culture is a requisite of all participants, including the researchers;

6. That the research outcomes be developed, publicised and moved toward action and policy in ways that fosters the life of the Melanesian community.

### *Practical advice for Melanesian research*

Being aware of the sensitive nature of being an outsider conducting research in a Melanesian context, on the topic of peace and conflict, I sought to follow the guidance of writers such as those mentioned above in order to conduct ethical research, whilst simultaneously remaining cautious not to unwaveringly accept any essentialised discourse defining an indigenous approach to research. These writers have put forward a range of suggestions for ethical and respectful methods, many of which are consistent with one another, and with my personal experience of Melanesian cultures and *kastom*s.

Perhaps most important is to be considerate of and respect local *kastoms* and cultures, understanding this will manifest differently according to the community or persons involved. Cultural protocol is influential across a number of aspects of interaction, such as determining appropriate language and gestures, clothing and general physical presentation, as well as appropriate gifts or food that should be offered (Nabobo-Baba 2006, 27). Nabobo-Baba (2006, 25–6) suggests that in order to be ethical, an indigenous research approach must support and affirm existing protocols of relationships, ceremony and knowledge acquisition to ensure that the research benefits the community it works in, and is reciprocal of the love, support and resources the community may provide.

In addition to these physical expressions of local cultures, it is necessary to be aware of how knowledge is managed and governed. In Melanesian societies, knowledge can be a highly valued resource, one which cannot be expected to be shared. Before this occurs, it is necessary to build trust and rapport with participants and interlocutors. This involves sharing information about yourself and your experiences and contributing to a relationship of mutual obligation, without which they will not be prepared to share their thoughts, feelings or experiences (Waldrip and Taylor 1999, 252).

Being concerned with producing knowledge that is useful, appropriate and reflective of the specific research context, an indigenous approach to research is regarded as an ethical approach, as it is framed in a context that the participants can appreciate and trust, and it is likely to increase the accuracy of the data collected from participants, and therefore its overall credibility (Nabobo-Baba 2006, 24). An indigenous approach is also considered essential to produce knowledge that resonates with those involved and is congruent with the communities whom the research is for: 'rural village-level development has a better chance of being sustainable, meaningful, and directly pertinent to people's immediate needs if it is grounded in their knowledge systems' (Gegeo and Watson-Gego 2002, 401).

Finally, cross-checking the information with trusted local participants and reporting back to chiefs, elders and research participants is also crucial (Nabobo-baba 2006, 26; Waldrip and Taylor 1999). This not only serves to strengthen the validity and reliability of the data, but also shows respect to the research participants and community, allowing them to hear

firsthand the results, correct or change any information, and have ownership over the research that affects them and to which they have contributed.

### 3.3.3  Practice-based, action-oriented research

Both peace research and Pacific research seek to understand the socioculturally determined aspects of knowledge, experiences, language, behaviours and worldviews of local people (Waldrip and Taylor 1999, 259). An interpretive research approach considers how people construct their experiences and their worlds, and develop understanding and attach meaning through their interaction with the social world. While an interpretive approach to research provides insight into understanding an indigenous epistemology, Wood (2006) argues research in the Pacific should not conclude with generalised theory or analysis. Rather, Wood (2006, 33) advocates for practice-based research, an approach that 'generally de-emphasizes not only disciplinary concerns but also efforts to compose interpretations' (2006, 33). Wood (2006, 42) explains that in a practice-based research approach:

> Practices are researched not to help answer academic questions, as they are in discipline-based research. Nor are practices used as the basis for formulating abstract descriptions or analyses, as they are in interpretation-based approaches. Researchers who emphasize practices consider the activities of everyday life important enough by themselves to justify lifetimes of study.

A practice-based research approach appreciates that knowledge can be learned through creating interpretations, but such knowledge is meaningless unless it is practised (Ayau and Tengan 2002, cited in Wood 2006, 44). Maebuta supports the call for practice-based perspectives when researching peace practices in the Solomon Islands, arguing that it holds practical implication with respect to the research design; 'understanding the framework for indigenous knowledge and skills which are of crucial importance to peace research in the Pacific' (2010, 6).

A crucial value test of peace research is its pragmatic pay-off in terms of better insights into practical problems and improved policies and responses: 'When all goes well, practice informs theory and theory is properly questioned as to its practical implications' (Rogers and Ramsbotham 1999, 753; see also Schnabel 2001, 194). Similarly, the real test for action research lies in its potential effectiveness to be used for 'practical solutions to issues of

pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities' (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 4). In Solomon Islands, Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2002, 381) highlight the differences between Western and Melanesian paradigms of knowledge, and draw parallels between indigenous knowledge and the process of action research:

> The extractive, textual nature of knowledge is an Anglo-European, top-down assumption congruent with modernization, even when applied by those critical of modernization. To the contrary, when villagers apply indigenous knowledge in development, they are involved in a process of constantly (re)theorizing, (re)creating, and (re)structuring knowledge.

This thesis attempts to (re)theorise, (re)create, and (re)structure knowledge pertaining to the TRC, through the lens of Solomon Islanders and others who worked and contributed to the TRC process.

## 3.4 Data collection: Research site and methods

Following the year spent working at the TRC, I narrowed the research topic from peace and conflict in the Solomon Islands to focus explicitly on the commission. This was done to utilise my experience of working with the TRC and seeing it operate firsthand, as well as to draw from the interlocutors with whom I had established relationships built on trust and rapport. I sought permission to conduct research from the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD), with a letter of support from Reverend Sam Ata, Chairman of the commission. I was granted a research permit in December 2011, which after being extended once was valid until April 2014.[11]

The majority of the interviews were conducted with former TRC staff in early 2012, as the TRC was winding up its work and only core administrative staff remained. Former staff members were often frequenting the TRC office, where I was still located, to tie up loose ends of their contracts, and were invited to participate in the research.

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[11] Copies of the two research permits are provided as Appendix B and C.

I continued to stay in the country on a full-time basis until the end of 2012. During that time I conducted interviews with former staff and interested persons at opportune times, and casually discussed my research with a range of people. I then returned to Honiara twice in 2013, in June–July for a period of three weeks, and in November for four weeks. While the purpose of these visits was not related to this research, during them I conducted a few interviews that I had not had the chance to do earlier, and met up with many respondents casually, which allowed me to double-check some key concepts and translations. I again visited Honiara in August 2014 for work purposes, and did not conduct any research at that time. In March 2015 I returned to Honiara to work for a non-government organisation (NGO) until August 2015, as I finalised and prepared the thesis for submission. The time spent living and volunteering in the Solomon Islands before working at the TRC, during the TRC's operation, and while conducting and writing this research afterwards totalled approximately four years, over a six year period. This extended time in country enabled me to encounter, experience and learn from every day experiences as well as the specific research activities. I became fluent in Pijin and spent much time 'storying' with colleagues, friends and acquaintances – Solomon Islanders and foreigners alike.

In sum, the empirical work undertaken included: twelve months working at the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission; forty-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former workers of the TRC, stakeholders, and other key persons; analysis of documents such as reports, media and public interviews relating to the TRC, or peace and reconciliation in Solomon Islands more broadly; and critical readings of existing scholarly literature on TRC's and post-conflict Solomon Islands.

Using multiple methods, also known as triangulation, is a research practice that involves utilising different techniques to collect data in the study of the same phenomenon (Minichiello et al. 1990, 222). It is a means of enhancing reliability and validity of the data, and decreasing possible bias. In turn, it is criticised by some theorists as an attempt to create a 'complete picture', which is in fact a positivist method of research and inconsistent with qualitative, interpretive research (Minichiello et al. 1990, 223). Multiple methods were employed for this research to provide flexibility to adapt approaches to particular situations, and to enhance the validity of the findings, rather than in an attempt to create a 'complete picture'.

### 3.4.1 Participant observation, informal observations and discussions

The immersion that my experience at the TRC and time spent living in the Solomon Islands allowed was one of the most important aspects of the research process, and a unique contribution of this research to the burgeoning discourse on transitional justice in Solomon Islands. Being immersed in the TRC and thus able to draw on my personal experiences, observations and reflections while working at the commission, has allowed me to utilise participant observation and ethnographic methods for peace and transitional justice research.

The extended time to which this research lends itself to is particularly valuable in a Melanesian context, where cross-cultural communication, trust and rapport are essential to not only arrange and conduct interviews or informal conversations, but also to ensure the credibility of the information provided. As Waldrip and Taylor note, extended time allows the researcher to be considered more credible in the local context, and elicits more revelations on the research topic:

> I find that as I work to establish rich communicative relationships with local people, more is revealed to me about the subject of my investigation and the more credible to the people becomes my research. These relationships develop only after the people begin to trust and value my friendship. When they hardly know me, they feel justified in not revealing their valued beliefs to me. (Waldrip and Taylor 1999, 254)

This last point particularly resonates with my knowledge and experience of conducting research in Solomon Islands. Longstanding relationships, trust, and an ability to communicate in not just local language, but with sensitivity to local nuances in communication, are essential. Without a trusting relationship, an understanding of where the researcher fits, or a sense of 'fairness,' there is no obligation on behalf of the interlocutor to provide information or knowledge (Waldrip and Taylor 1999, 251). As mentioned earlier, I personally believe this to be such an important factor in researching peace and conflict in Solomon Islands that I specifically shaped this research topic based on who I had formed these relationships with. Without these relationships being concentrated at the TRC, the research would have undoubtedly taken a different focus.

Observation is a basic qualitative research technique (Bouma 1996, 177), and can be done as a relative outsider or as a participant observer (Leedy and Ormrod 2001, 158). Bouma (1996, 177) explains the difference:

> In non-participant observation, the observer is not part of the action but stands apart and looks on […] By comparison, in participant observation the observer becomes part of that which is observed. Participant observers use their position in a group and their own experiences of a process in order to gain information about it.

Bouma suggests that 'while the perceptions and perspectives of informants gained through interviews may be very useful, there is nothing like being part of the action' (1996, 177). Being part of the action, however, requires the observer to not only register what is happening 'out there', but to also register their own reactions and understandings of what is happening – 'the observer's subjectivity is an explicit resource used to enable the research' (Bouma 1996, 177). Participant observation allows the researcher to observe a phenomenon as it occurs, while actively engaging and participating in the process. Field notes were made throughout my time in the Solomons, particularly during my time at the TRC, which were used to complement the research data and validate research findings.

Through my personal experiences of working at the TRC I both directly experienced and observed the everyday mechanics of the commission. I began at the TRC in April 2011. My previous experience of living in the Solomon Islands and ability to speak Pijin allowed me to 'get cracking', so to speak. The commission's final report was due in February 2012, and there was a lot to achieve before then. Under the guidance of the research manager, I was responsible for researching and drafting the women's chapter for the final report. In the first few months I organised a research plan, arranged for staff to accompany me for the provincial research, and conducted research in several locations outside of Honiara. Once back in the capital I compiled a literature review for the research and drafted notes for the chapter on women in collaboration with the research manager. I also met with women's groups and representatives, and attended public hearings in Honiara.

Working at the TRC, I participated in its day-to-day operations and regularly engaged with the statement takers and researchers, exhumations officers, media and communications staff, administrators and human resources, as well as upper management and the commissioners. I

attended information sessions, conducted meetings with women, and spent hours and hours on end working in the makeshift office alongside the TRC staff. Being in an 'officer' position, and not a manager – as many expatriates were – was positive for this academic research, as I was perceived as a peer and was able to build more equitable relationships. Importantly, I experienced the daily grind and everyday challenges of working in the TRC alongside my colleagues, as detailed in Chapter Seven. Experiencing the everyday challenges and the major incidents of the TRC alongside the staff had a twofold beneficial effect for this research. Firstly, I was foremost a peer and colleague. Secondly, when interviewing colleagues about their experiences of the TRC, I found their reflections would corroborate my ongoing analysis, and vice versa, which added a level of validity to the data and information I was receiving, interpreting and analysing.

In this ethnographic and participant observation setting, as well as in formal interviews (detailed below), I was influenced by, and thus utilised, two approaches to eliciting information and respecting the stories shared with me, and those who shared them – *tok stori* or 'storying'  and listening. For this research, *tok stori* and listening occurred within two mainstream methods of research – participant observation and in-depth interviews.

## Tok stori

*Tok stori* or 'storying' refers to a Melanesian cultural practice of sharing knowledge, and is an integral part of all indigenous Pacific research (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 144). In the research methods literature it may be likened to unstructured interviews or open-ended interviews. As the methodology was designed to be congruent with the indigenous context, *tok stori* was considered a relevant and practical method of gathering empirical material. It was also a natural and preferred means of communication and spending time, either in the TRC, for example, during casual conversations that filled time during extended power cuts, or outside of the TRC during everyday interactions in Honiara and elsewhere; for example, in taxis, when meeting new people, or to pass time of an evening. Like unstructured interviews, which 'tend to be more spontaneous and free-flowing, with topics arising from the situation or behavior at hand' (Esterberg 2002, 89), *tok stori* is situational, with enquiries and discussions arising naturally. It allows for a fluid interaction between the researcher and the respondent, and quite simply, can be referred to as 'talking,' signifying its informal and conversational

style (Marvasti 2004, 20). The benefits of *tok stori*, however, go beyond the sharing of information, but also lay foundations for building trusting and respectful relationships. In a range of situations in this research, *tok stori* was a means to build relationships, share myself and my history, as well as be shared with. As Waldrip and Taylor (1999, 252) explain:

> Unless local people perceive that they know something about me or that they have a meaningful relationship with me, they will not be prepared to share something about themselves. They need to perceive that they can share the ownership of their knowledge and beliefs with me, and become empowered. The interview process could be conceived as cultural cooperation with Melanesian people.

Utilising *tok stori* as a research method was advantageous as it allowed conversations to be fluid and flexible, which allows interlocutors to allude to matters of concern. *Tok stori* provided the participants with opportunities to raise matters of concern or discuss areas of interest in a culturally relevant manner. While seemingly simple, *tok stori* requires a level of familiarity and respect for cultural modes of communication and an awareness of the cultural nuances that may be easily overlooked. For example, as Upton (2006, 9) describes, to someone not familiar with the culture, silence may be interpreted as tacit agreement, when rather it is usually a sign that 'people are unhappy, or that something is troubling them […] This is a good cue to slow down, backtrack, and try to understand what is going on from a different perspective'.

### *Listening*

Listening was also an important approach in this research methodology. Prior to working at the TRC I worked as a case manager for families affected by the devastating 2009 Victorian bushfires. In this role I undertook training on counselling and strengths-based approaches to social work practice that included developing skills such as active listening. I found these communication skills helpful in my role as a case manager to demonstrate care, draw on my client's strengths, and promote empowering social work practice. These techniques were also immensely valuable in my role as a researcher at the TRC, as well as in the research conducted for this study.

I first learned about 'listening' as a research method from the CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, who employed it in their research as 'a comprehensive and systematic exploration of

the ideas and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance efforts' (CDA 2010, 1). The authors explain the value of listening for understanding local perspectives of aid and development:

> Those who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, environmental conservation, human rights, and peace-building efforts can learn a great deal by listening to the experiences, analyses and suggestions of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such international efforts. (CDA 2010, 1)

In CDA's listening project, conversations were not prearranged, except for appointments with government officials and others who required advance notice. Rather, they visited towns and engaged people in conversations, on the streets, in marketplaces, etc. They found that people in many different places told them that no-one had asked for their opinion on aid like this before, or that this was the first time that representatives of international NGOs had talked to them like this: 'People are happy that someone wants to listen to them and they willingly share their experiences, appreciation, and suggestions of how agencies and their staff could improve the effectiveness of their efforts' (CDA 2010, 2).

This reflects my personal experiences of travelling around the Solomon Islands and storying with a range of people – in marketplaces, on public transport, in remote areas, at community events or just being in town. Often in these organic settings, genuine conversations are had in which rich, honest and reflective information is shared. Listening is a respectful and natural form of communication in Solomon Islands, where there is a culture of not questioning those in authority, and value in sharing knowledge. By employing listening techniques in this research, I aimed to replicate this respectful, natural form of communication with those who chose to share their stories with me.

### 3.4.2  Interviews

*Research participants*

After reading and researching Pacific research methodologies, I concluded that as an 'outsider', albeit an involved one, relationships built on trust and rapport were necessary to conduct meaningful and ethical peace research. I thus reflected on my position after working at the TRC and considered where I had already established those relationships, and identified

the former staff and stakeholders of the TRC as key informants with valuable experiences and stories to share. While this may seem like somewhat of a backwards approach to a research design, I concluded it was the safest way to ensure ethical research. In light of access to the interlocutors I had, and my familiarity with the context and topic, I utilised non-probability sampling, specifically purposive and snowball sampling approaches. Purposive sampling was used to interview those with whom I had already established relationships, and who had been involved in establishing or implementing the TRC, including former members of the SICA Peace Office, others involved with the TRC's establishment, TRC staff (including statement takers, data entry staff, researchers, exhumation officers, office managers, administrative officers, commissioners), stakeholders (from ICTJ and UNDP) and government ministry staff.

Snowball sampling allowed me to access stakeholders and former workers in the TRC process whom I did not know personally. Snowball sampling is an approach that 'relies on the researcher's knowledge of a social situation', as it involves using a group of informants to recommend other potential informants, and so on (Minichiello et al. 1990, 198). This method was particularly useful for obtaining introductions to those who had been involved with the establishment of the TRC, and other leaders and representatives with whom I was not already acquainted. To access these informants, I asked participants from the non-probability sampling group if there was anyone else they thought I should talk to *fo stori folom,* or to continue the story. I then asked for an introduction, either via email or phone, or permission to use their name as the mutual contact. Many of those accessed through this technique were in leadership positions and comfortable in an interview setting without having a prior relationship. Interview participants accessed through this method included former members of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) Peace Office – the body that first proposed a truth commission in Solomon Islands, those involved with the TRC's establishment, eminent persons, church and community leaders and journalists.

In total, I conducted in-depth interviews with 41 people.[12] Of these, 26 were former staff members of the TRC, 6 were stakeholders, 3 were SICA Peace Office members, and 6 others who were community or church leaders, eminent persons, or journalists. My extended stay in Honiara meant that I was able to approach potential interviewees and invite their participation without pressuring them into a limited 'field trip' itinerary. The time spent between interviews allowed me to consider and reconsider the data I was continually gathering, to begin data analysis, and to check and re-check the data with research participants, elders and TRC staff. The time also allowed access to a greater number of interviewees, and for snowball sampling to organically occur.

The majority of the interviewees had at some point in the TRC's operation worked 'on the ground', implementing TRC activities at the village, community and government level. As 'translators' or 'intermediaries' of human rights research and truth-seeking, they occupied the difficult 'middle' between global ideas of human rights and local sociocultural understandings (Merry 2006), experiencing many of the challenges and tensions of implementing the TRC firsthand. They were thus able to reflect on their experiences as workers and representatives of the TRC, as well as on their personal, family and community interpretations and understanding of the TRC process.

### Interview setting and process

> We interview people to understand what life is like from perspectives other than our own. We try to move beyond our own experiences and ideas and *really* understand the other person's point of view. (Esterberg 2002, 87)

Interviews with former TRC staff were arranged in person, and once interest in participation was confirmed, a suitable time and place to meet was arranged for a future date. Planning a future time and place for the interview rather than conducting it on the spot was a purposeful decision to allow participants to reconsider their participation, and not feel obliged to acquiesce to my invitation. Interviews with other stakeholders were arranged either in person

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[12] A list of interviewees is provided in Appendix A. This includes dates and locations of interviews, gender, and position in relation to the truth commission (within the confines of ethics approval and confidentiality agreements).

or via telephone or email. A date and time was established, and a place suitable for the interview confirmed. Interview settings ranged from cafes, meeting rooms in offices, the interviewee's or my workplace, or occasionally, on the balcony of my house. An effort was made to choose a setting convenient and welcoming to the participant, and where they would be comfortable. Many of the interviews were conducted over a shared meal or cold drinks.

At the beginning of each interview I explained the purpose of the research and the general topics of interest – their experience of the TRC and opinion on whether it was beneficial for the country or not. I provided an information sheet[13] and talked through its contents, and if agreeable, asked for them to sign a consent form.[14] On the consent form, interviewees indicated if they preferred to remain completely anonymous, or have their name used. Some interviewees wished to remain anonymous, however were happy for the position or workplace to be noted as long as it was not identifying. Thus in some cases I have withheld the gender of the interviewee. Permission was granted in all but one interview to allow recording.

Interviews were semi-structured and typically lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. The style and formality of the interview differed according to the participant – for example, interviews with government representatives, eminent persons and church leaders were slightly more formal and structured. Care was taken for the interviews to take the form of a conversation rather than giving the impression of interrogation, as Waldrip and Taylor warn is necessary for Melanesian contexts (1999, 257). The interviews usually followed either *tok stori* or recursive models. For example, some participants preferred to hear the general topic or line of inquiry and then *tok stori* for a length of time, encapsulating their key points and thoughts. At times I asked questions in a way to encourage response in the form of a story, and used active listening techniques to encourage their narrative and allow the interlocutor to talk freely without interrupting (Kumar 2005, 125). This style of interview was useful as the

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[13] A copy of the information sheet is provided in Appendix D.

[14] A copy of the consent form is provided in Appendix E. As many of the interviewees were either former TRC workers or worked closely with the Commission, they were very familiar with interview practices such as consent forms and using a voice recorder, having used them themselves in their work. This undoubtedly added to the ease and relaxed tone of the interview, as even these slightly 'formal' elements of the process were familiar and non-threatening.

interlocutors not only provided information and data, but the context and background provided in their stories could be used in data analysis to provide clarification and corroborate other forms of data (Minichiello et al. 1990, 117).

Prior to the interviews I prepared a list of topics and questions I was interested in covering, and relied on these when the interviewees preferred me to ask questions or guide the conversation. Questions were designed to elicit stories and rich, contextual responses, rather than yes or no responses. The questions were also designed to suit the Melanesian context, and adopted a funnelling technique. Funnelling is when the researcher begins by asking broad questions, then as the participants engage in conversation, the interviewer guides the conversations towards more specific issues of interest. This allows the interview process to be a more relaxed and non-threatening conversation (Minichiello et al. 1990, 116) and is familiar in the Pacific, referred to as *talanoa* in Fiji (Nabobo-baba 2006). Typically I would begin with general questions such as enquiring where they were from (in terms of their 'home' or provincial identity), their work or study history, and how they came to be involved with the TRC. I would then narrow the conversation, engaging in conversation about the TRC, such as enquiring about the specifics of their role, the challenges they faced, and what they viewed as positive outcomes of their work and the work of the TRC. After this I would ask more general questions on peace, conflict, reconciliation and truth-telling.

A majority of the interviews were conducted soon after the TRC had submitted the final report to the prime minister and the government. Allocating a dedicated time and space to reflect on the TRC's journey allowed many interviewees to reflect on their personal experiences and share their overall thoughts on the process. Many of the interviewees did not require many probing questions, but readily engaged in *tok stori* at length about their perspective on the TRC process, and on reconciliation, truth-telling and peacebuilding in Solomon Islands more generally. In many ways, it seemed that in lieu of official debrief processes, the interviews were an opportunity for those involved with the TRC to reflect on and unpack their experiences.

An interesting difference was noted between interviewing younger staff members of the TRC, and those who were in management positions, or church and community leaders. Those who were older or who had typically held leadership positions and were familiar with interviews

usually had a set idea or opinion that they wanted to convey, and answered questions in objective and diplomatic fashions. The younger staff members, however, were generally more readily open and reflective during their interviews, keen to consolidate their experiences with a vision for a peaceful future for Solomon Islands. They clearly appreciated being listened to and having their opinions asked. As CDA's listening project found, often only 'key stakeholders' within the community are heard (CDA 2010, 3). While many NGO workers, researchers and journalists interested in the TRC would have spoken to the commissioners or management staff, the younger staff and those in administrative positions clearly valued being listened to, and participated with enthusiasm and reflection.

### 3.4.3  Documentary analysis

Interviews and participant observation were complemented by documentary analysis. Also referred to as 'grey literature', the term 'documents' refers to a range of written material or documents that are not commercially published (Mathews 2004, 125). This may include letters, communiques, technical reports, working papers, evaluations, news clippings and media articles. In this research, the term 'documents' refers to any relevant source of information that I collected during my time in the Solomon Islands and at the TRC, as well as online.  Some research participants gave recommendations regarding documents also.

These have included:[15]

- SICA Peace Office documents

- Early planning documents for the TRC

- TRC progress reports

- Media clippings from the two major Solomon Island newspapers, as well as Australian and New Zealand print media

- NGO reports

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[15] Documents cited throughout the thesis have their bibliographic details included in the reference list.

- Conference presentations (including those of TRC Commissioners)

- Radio interviews with commissioners and other scholars

- Parliamentary documents

- Solomon Island Government documents and MNURP reports

- Stakeholder final reports

- The final report of the Solomon Islands TRC (including transcripts of the public hearings)

Using documents for research purposes has limitations as well as advantages. On one hand, challenges include identification and acquisition of documents, as well as lack of editorial control, which raises questions as to authenticity and reliability (Mathews 2004, 125). On the other hand, as Merriam (1988, 109) writes:

> Because they exist independent of a research agenda, they are non-reactive – that is, unaffected by the research process. They are a product of the context in which they were produced and therefore grounded in the real world.

In light of these observations, research questions were used to gather and select relevant documents. Documents were gathered from trusted and official institutions, considered in light of the context in which they were developed, and the material was used as supporting evidence or to cross-reference topics that arose from interviews or participant observation. The TRC report has yet to be publicly released (despite being unofficially released), and there is limited published material relating to the TRC process or transitional justice in Solomon Islands more generally. In light of this, the documents I collected were viewed as a rich source of data. Incorporating documentary analysis into the findings of this research has allowed for a greater understanding and richer analysis than would have been otherwise possible.

### 3.4.4  Review of published literature

While the literature review in Chapter Two provides an account of the fields of peacebuilding and transitional justice and a theoretical foundation for the analysis of the findings in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, reviewing published literature has also been a method of developing the research topic and research questions. The identification and analysis of published literature has served several purposes, namely:

- To identify gaps in existing research on peacebuilding and transitional justice in order to identify where and how this research may be most applicable and useful (included in Chapter Two);

- To develop and contextualise the research questions with reference to the fields of study (included in Chapter Two);

- To identify appropriate methods for pursuing these research questions and to inform the overall research approach (included in Chapter Three);

- To develop a theoretical framework with which to analyse and interpret the primary data (included in Chapter Three);

- To develop a clear account of the historical context of reconciliation and peacebuilding practice in Solomon Islands, before and after the 1998–2003 conflict (included in Chapter Four);

- To bring the findings and insights from this project into dialogue with current understandings in the literature of peacebuilding in Melanesia (included in Chapter Eight).

## 3.5   Language and translations

Participant observation, *tok stori*, daily interactions and formal interviews were conducted in either English or Pijin. English was used when interviewing foreigners, and either Pijin, or a mix of Pijin and English, were used in all other interactions. While English is the official language in Solomon Islands, it is common for verbal interactions to be conducted in either

Pijin or local languages. As such, most participants had varying ability and confidence to communicate in English. Despite English ability, it was clear that Pijin was a preferred mode of oral communication. For example, even those who had lived at length overseas in English speaking countries and completed university degrees in English, preferred to converse in Pijin, employing English only to clarify concepts or arguments. For more formal interviews with people in positions of power or representatives, such as politicians or church members, conversations often started in English and then as the formalities eased and my competence at Pijin was demonstrated, shifted to Pijin.

Interview recordings were transcribed and translated into English for the purpose of data analysis. I translated and transcribed the bulk of the interviews myself; however, due to time constraints, I employed the assistance of three others to assist with transcriptions. One was a New Zealand volunteer fluent in Pijin who had previous translation experience. The other two were Solomon Islanders fluent in English; one of whom had previously assisted another researcher with interview and focus group translations and transcriptions. The transcriptions completed by these three assistants were then cross-checked by me, to clarify any confusing or technical wordings, and to also provide me the opportunity to re-listen to all the interviews and be immersed in the data. All three assistants signed a confidentially agreement and were not involved with the TRC.

Wanting this research to be relevant, accessible and applicable to Solomon Islanders and Pacific Islanders, the decision to translate the interviews into English was a considered one. My decision to do so was supported by the following factors. First, while Pijin is the lingua franca in Solomon Islands, there is no widely used generic or accepted standard for written Pijin. Unlike Bislama or Tok Pisin in neighbouring Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, Pijin is not often represented in written form. Aside from occasional posters or slogans, almost all written correspondence, media, textbooks, and official documents are presented in English. There is a Pijin translation of the Bible, and a Solomon Islands Pijin dictionary; however, English materials are commonly used. Second, in order to maintain the integrity of the stories, translations were made as close to the verbal expressions as possible, without undermining the use of expression. Translated directly, Pijin can appear simplistic. Rather, tone, intonation and expression were used to more accurately translate the Pijin terms used into English. Third, large excerpts of interviews have been used in this thesis to provide the context or background

of the interlocutor's expression. Solomon Islanders are skilled and adept orators and storytellers. Merely pulling out one-liners would not do justice to the stories they shared.

A challenge with this process was the time required to complete transcriptions. This meant that more time was allocated to this task than initially envisaged. While I was aware of the extended time transcriptions would take, I decided to commit to completing them for a number of reasons. Firstly, I conducted many of the interviews at a time that was opportune for my participants – i.e., soon after their contracts had finished at the TRC. At the time I was not in a psychological space to be immersed in the interviews, and thus decided to record them so I could listen back, transcribe, and be reminded of them at a later date when I was more prepared for data analysis. Secondly, I was aware that the process of *tok stori* meant that often information may be couched in rich contextual descriptions. As such, I was reluctant to rely on my memory or note taking, but preferred to be able fully immerse myself in the conversation, and to use large sections of the transcriptions to describe and contextualise throughout the thesis.

## 3.6   Ethical matters

> Research can do harm, and researchers must recognise this and avoid or minimise that harm. (Smyth and Robinson 2001, 208)

The endeavour to conduct research that was considered ethical – by those who were involved and whom this research directly affects – was at the forefront of this research. Much of the previous discussion has outlined the efforts made to ensure the research was ethical and considerate of the context in which it took place and the people whom it affected. Here I note official ethical standards this research satisfied, particularly in relation to gaining access and ensuring confidentiality in the field.

The research topic and method of data collection were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the University of New England prior to the commencement of research, in March 2011.[16] Among the HREC's requirements were consent forms to be signed

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[16] A copy of the HREC research approval is provided in Appendix F.

by interviewees and a plain English information sheet explaining the project to participants. Usually written information sheets and individual consent forms would not be appropriate in the Solomon Islands context; however, those whom I interviewed were literate in English and, through working at the TRC, familiar with the meaning of 'informed consent'. I also complied with the HREC standards in terms of maintaining confidentiality, as noted below. In addition to the University's ethics process, I obtained a research permit from the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) in Solomon Islands with the support of the Chairman of the Solomon Islands TRC. This involved a completed application form, a copy of the research proposal, and a copy of my curriculum vitae. I received approval from the Ministry in December 2011, and began conducting interviews in Honiara in early 2012. I also unofficially sought support and approval from the TRC Commissioners.

These ethical requirements, however, represent minimum standards only. A number of further considerations were taken to ensure the research was consistent with best-practice for post-conflict research in a Melanesian context. This required critical reflections on the cultural implications of the conduct and outcome of the research. As Maebuta (2011, 62) argues:

> The ethical challenges in regard to language, traditional reciprocity and communal consent are worthy of consideration because they have *kastom* (cultural) significance. In most indigenous communities in the Solomon Islands, respecting *kastom* is considered the only way to conduct ethical research.

### 3.6.1 Measures to ensure confidentiality

This research was granted approval from the University of New England's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) prior to data collection. Procedures within that protocol emphasise and enforce the protection of confidentiality and rights of the research subjects. As noted above, some interviewees requested their names be used in the interest of transparency,[17] and thus the consent form was amended to include this option upon approval of the HREC.[18] Also as noted above, three transcribers were engaged to assist in the transcription of recorded

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[17] See Appendix A for a list of interviewees.

[18] See Appendix E for a copy of the participant consent form.

interviews. These persons were in no way connected to the Solomon Islands TRC and all three signed a confidentiality agreement. All data were kept on a password protected computer or in a locked filing cabinet. The data will be kept for five years following the submission of the thesis, and then destroyed. As the primary investigator, I have been the only person with access to this data.

### 3.6.2   Ethical challenges: Power, representation and participation

Alongside and firmly woven within discourses of peace research, indigenous research and action research are the complex issues of power, representation and participation. In cross-cultural, post-conflict research these issues provide particular ethical challenges. Transitional justice and peacebuilding scholars recognise the concern that 'stories continue to be told and interpreted through the eyes and mouths of elite intellectuals' (Peterson 2012, 14) and that conferences and workshops are 'dominated by the same pool of mostly Western researchers' (Baxter 2009, 325).

Being reflexive in the research process has meant being aware of the privilege, baggage, views and values in which I, as the researcher, bring into the study. In light of these insights, I sought to create a research design that was transparent, reflexive, ethical and considerate. This has impacted the research topic and questions, saw me becoming involved with the TRC myself, affected whom I decided to interview, how interviews were conducted, and how data was analysed and presented. This has been detailed above.  In an attempt to address some of these issues and ethical challenges, I committed to a participatory research design.

Understanding that local researchers are likely to be sensitive to nuances and relationships that the outsider researcher may not notice, their participation provides a valuable emic perspective (Waldrip and Taylor 1999, 259). This is not to say the outsider researcher has no role, but that they will have a different perspective. Therefore 'ideally, a collaborative research study would combine insider and outsider views' (Waldrip and Taylor 1999, 258). Hermann (2001, 82) supports this by suggesting the differences between insider and outsider research roles have distinct implications for the study of conflict, and that the differences between access, local knowledge and experience, and distance – physically and mentally – of the conflict provide the insiders and outsiders respectively with different advantages

(Hermann 2001, 82). With my experience of living in Honiara for two years before commencing the research for this thesis, extended social networks in Honiara, ability to converse in Solomon Islands Pijin, and an awareness of cultural protocols and sensitivities regarding research, my position is well described by Hermann (2001, 79) as an 'involved outsider'.

For this research, participation was necessary not only for ethical reasons, but to also direct the research topic towards one that was useful and practical for those to whom it related, and to support the validity of the information received and interpretations made. While the research was conducted within the parameters of a university doctorate program – that is, with a sole researcher and writer – I have sought to reflect on issues of power and representation and to ensure and respect participation of Solomon Islanders. I am aware that I will personally benefit from the research, and was concerned as to how the research could be reciprocal and ethical. Efforts made included:

- Seeking approval and support from the commissioners of the TRC for conducting this research;

- Enquiring with colleagues at the TRC as to practical and relevant research questions;

- Deciding on research questions that would produce useful information for the Solomon Islands, the Pacific region, and other post-conflict societies;

- Adopting a dialogic and semi-structured approach to interviews to allow interlocutors to cover a range of topics as they saw relevant or important;

- Prioritising the voices of the interlocutors in the thesis by placing their voices, perceptions and explanations at the fore. This has meant including large excerpts of the interview transcripts, in order to allow their voices to be heard;

- Continuing the conversations regarding the research topic over an extended period of time, checking and re-checking the information I received and the interpretations I made with trusted acquaintances in Solomon Islands;

- Keeping in regular contact with those involved in the research about its progress;

- Providing participants and others involved with the TRC with copies of papers I periodically produced, inviting comments, questions or clarifications.

While these efforts have been made, I recognise that the stories I tell and the analysis I make in this thesis are coloured by my own experiences in Solomon Islands and my own interpretations of interviews, observations, documentary analysis and experiences of working at the TRC and simply living in Solomon Islands.

## 3.7    Data analysis, interpretation and presentation

Qualitative research is generally inductive – that is, the hypotheses and theory that emerge from the research are usually generated from the data itself, in an ongoing and cyclical process of data gathering and analysis (Alston and Bowles 2003, 206). In this way, qualitative research allows for description of certain situations, settings or processes, interpretation and insights into the nature of a particular phenomenon, considering the validity of certain assumptions, theories or generalisations within real-world contexts, and evaluating particular policies, practices or innovations (Leedy and Ormrod 2001, 148).

Methods of data collection employed resulted in fieldwork notes, transcripts of interviews, various documents and written reflections. Collecting multiple types of fieldwork data allowed me to capture a variety of perspectives that contributed towards the data analysis. In qualitative research, there is no one agreement on how to perform data analysis. This is considered a strength of qualitative research as the flexibility allows researchers to be open to develop new theories (Alston and Bowles 2003, 203–4). While the practice-based approach of this research provided a sound basis on which to conduct data collection, it offered little assistance in the task of data analysis. For this purpose, techniques were adapted from grounded theory.

Practice-based research and grounded theory complement one another because both place importance on empirical data collection. In grounded theory analysis, researchers begin with a research question, investigate it, and then develop an explanation for what they have found. The researcher 'immerses themselves in the data to find conceptual meaning and develop explanations about a phenomena and, in some cases, this can lead to the development of new theories' (Minichiello et al. 2008, 283). This involves a process of thematic analysis, when

data is analysed by themes through an inductive process. This means that themes emerge from the data rather than the research imposing the themes onto the data.

Data analysis for this study began during data collection, and was verified and tested as the research process proceeded. Field notes were examined and recurring themes and patterns noted. Interviews and transcribing occurred on an ongoing basis, as did the preliminary coding of the categories and emerging themes. These were incorporated into the fieldwork as guiding topics on which to focus or draw attention to. Transcripts of the interviews were summarised and verbally discussed with interlocutors and others on an informal basis to check for interpretation and preliminary codes and emerging themes were expanded on. At the same time, documentary data was being collected, analysed and coded for categories and emerging themes. The analysis of documentary data was then incorporated into the empirical data analysis.

The research questions were used to guide the analysis of the data. Patterns identified from the analysis of transcripts, field notes and documents were coded and themes and sub-themes emerged. Where necessary, specific themes and sub-themes were reorganised and major themes were elaborated. The final analysis occurred after all the data had been analysed for categories and emerging themes and the critical features and challenges of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission had been identified and compared with the features of peacebuilding, transitional justice and truth commissions examined in Chapter Two. The findings from the research are presented in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. Chapter Eight presents a discussion of these findings and a conclusion for the thesis.

Throughout the thesis, the names of interlocutors are only used where written and signed consent was provided to do so.[19] For many this was important for purposes of transparency. In cases where the interlocutor preferred to remain anonymous two random alphabet letters are used in lieu of their initials, and where consent was provided, their position in relation to the TRC is noted. In instances where the interlocutor indicated they would like a specific

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[19] See Appendix A for a list of interviewees.

comment to be made anonymously, or where the details provided may disclose their identity, the comments are anonymised.

## 3.8    Reliability, validity and broader applicability of research findings

> It is obviously difficult for in-depth interviewers to know the difference between exaggeration and distortion purposefully employed, and authentic perspectives which are inevitably biased and subjective. The answer is that the in-depth interviewer cannot be 100% sure about the difference. However, the qualitative research is not primarily geared to finding out the truth per se but rather the truth as the informant sees it to be. (Minichiello et al. 1990, 128)

The findings of this research relate to how those involved with the TRC viewed it as a process of truth-seeking, reconciliation and peacebuilding in the Solomon Islands. Efforts made to ensure ethical research also address the issue of bias in interviews, to a degree. The prior established relationship and trust between me and the participants provided a situation where interviews were relaxed, open and reflective. Personally, I did not have a formed opinion about whether the TRC was 'good or not' for the Solomon Islands, and I let this be known to the participants. I expressed interest in seeking their personal opinions about the process.

What is important to recognise is that the information and stories that the interlocutors shared are their versions of events; their stories, in their words. It is not a definitive or objective account of the truth and reconciliation commission, but a series of personal perspectives, about how they viewed it happening. Throughout the interviews, I was mindful that 'people can hold logically contradictory views simultaneously and that these form a valid part of the account' (Minichiello et al. 1990, 129). The efforts of this study have been to narrate and present their accounts.

In an effort to reduce bias, I have employed multiple research methods in order to corroborate and validate the research data where possible. This was attained by combining the interview data with participant observation, informal discussions and document analysis. I have also critically read literature on the Solomon Islands conflict and post-conflict efforts to build peace so as to contextualise the data that emerged from this research.

Another way in which I have sought to minimise bias has been to constantly check and re-check the data and findings with trusted participants and Solomon Islander acquaintances and

academics (Bouma 1996, 184). This has involved regular conversations with colleagues from the TRC; providing copies of draft papers to former colleagues and asking for their opinion and perspectives; and discussing the findings with Solomon Islander academics, one of whom was involved with the establishment of the TRC. This has not only been a method of ensuring validity of the findings, but also a way to ensure transparency of the research and share the results with those whom it directly relates and affects.

The research approach also raises questions of external validity and broader applicability. A common methodological challenge identified in Melanesia is that the diversity for which it is well-known creates a context that resists generalisations (Braithwaite et al. 2010; Dinnen 2003, 8). Like many qualitative studies, a weakness and limitation of this research is the ability to compare variables in different conditions (Alston and Bowles 2003, 205). While the research is exploratory, the in-depth nature of the qualitative methodology and the flexibility to check and re-check the findings mean that it is well placed to provide insight into the mechanics of a TRC 'on the ground' and comment on its potential as a peacebuilding mechanism. These findings may prove useful to any future TRCs to be established in the region or a similar setting, and will hopefully contribute to the dialogue on transitional justice globally, which routinely calls for more in-depth, qualitative and ethnographic research of TRCs. Yet the diversity of the Solomon Islands, and the region more generally, is not taken for granted; indeed, a key conclusion of the research relates to the importance of contextualisation and localisation. Thus, the research is limited in so much as the conclusions cannot be automatically applied to a different place and time. Rather, the key argument for the thesis rings true for the nature of research and broader applicability – the importance to consider the local context and build on local strengths and practices.

## 3.9 Conclusion

This research seeks to explore and reflect on the experiences of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission in order to ascertain its potential for peacebuilding in Melanesia or similar settings. The research methodology and design thus draws on the values and guidelines from peace research, and inextricably acknowledges the context in which it takes place. Peace research calls for context-specific research geared towards creating positive social change, using methods that accentuate action, practice and participation. These

approaches are widely acknowledged as not only ethical, but necessary for social research in Melanesia and the Pacific.

Researching peace and conflict in the Solomon Islands has been a sensitive and challenging process. The research design needed to be guided by a methodology that was congruent with the epistemology and ontology of the Melanesian context, the peace studies discipline, as well as myself as researcher and the participants involved. Care has been taken to document these stories in a way that shares the experience of the interlocutors, as well as offering practical and relevant analysis to guide future peace practice and transitional justice policy in Melanesian and Pacific Islander settings.

The next chapter provides further detail about the context of the research, offering a background of the Solomon Islands, noting in particular approaches to managing conflict. It provides a history of the 1998–2003 conflict, the efforts to broker peace and reconciliation, and draws out the emerging themes and challenges of post-conflict peacebuilding to describe the context in which the TRC was established and implemented.

# 4. Conflict, peacebuilding and the TRC: The Solomon Islands context

## 4.1    Introduction

The TRC was a new 'actor' on the 'crowded stage' of post-conflict peacebuilding in Solomon Islands (Kabutaulaka 2005a). Operating seven years after the end of the 1998–2003 conflict,[20] it was one of many efforts made towards building peace and reconciliation. The purpose of this chapter is to provide context for the Solomon Islands TRC, and this research. It does this by describing and analysing the Solomon Islands context and outlining historical and contemporary factors relating to conflict, dispute resolution, reconciliation and peacebuilding in Solomon Islands societies.

Here, it is important to acknowledge and recognise the final report of the TRC, *Confronting the Truth for a Better Solomon Islands* (Ata et al. 2012),[21] which offers readers a comprehensive account of the conflict, including lengthy and detailed firsthand accounts and transcriptions of almost all testimony presented at the public hearings.[22] The report presents the historical background, the antecedents, events and timelines of the violence, and its impact on Solomon Islanders and their communities. It also has chapters dedicated to the impacts on health and education services, and on women and children.

A body of literature details and provides analysis of the Solomon Islands conflict and subsequent peacebuilding efforts. The timeline and events of the 1998–2003 conflict, including analyses of the historical causes and roots of the violence are comprehensively

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[20] The 1998–2003 conflict in Solomon Islands, referred to as 'the tensions', ended with the arrival of a regional police and military intervention in June 2003, discussed in further detail below.

[21] Although not officially released or endorsed by Parliament, the final report of the Solomon Islands TRC was unofficially released by its editor, Bishop Terry Brown. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five. The report is available from: http://pacificpolitics.com/2013/01/solomon-islands-trc-final-report/.

[22] Due to time and resource constraints, the final public hearing was not transcribed.

addressed in a number of published texts (see Allen 2013; Bennett 2002; Fraenkel 2004; Moore 2004). Likewise, efforts towards post-conflict peacebuilding are detailed (Braithwaite et al. 2010; Maebuta and Spence 2009). Also examined is women's involvement in the peace process (see Leslie and Boso 2003; Monson 2013; Paina 2000; Pollard 2000a, 2000b; Webber and Johnson 2008) and more recently, analysis of the post-conflict period and the TRC has been discussed (Guthrey 2015; Harris Rimmer 2010; Jeffery 2013 and 2014; Vella 2014a and 2014b), as well as attention to the relationship between development aid and transitional justice in Solomon Islands (Dicker 2015). The published literature review prepared for the World Bank's Justice Delivered Locally project (Goddard 2010) offers a valuable summary of the nature of dispute resolution in Solomon Islands from early European contact until today, and the project's final research report (Allen et al. 2013) provides a rich and informative description and analysis of how justice is conceptualised, practiced and delivered in contemporary Solomon Islands societies. McDougall and Kere's (2011) contribution on conflict and peacemaking in the Solomon Islands also provides a useful overview of the common traits and practices of conflict management in Solomon Islands today. Other published collections look at state-building, peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the broader Pacific (see Brigg and Bleiker 2011; Dinnen et al. 2003; Fry and Tabutaulaka 2008; Henderson and Watson 2005). This chapter draws on these and other resources.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first offers a general overview of the Solomon Islands, described in two parts: a brief historical context from European contact in the sixteenth century until independence in 1978; and a note of key features of contemporary Solomon Islands society, describing the interplay of *kastom*, Christianity and the state in conflict management. This discussion provides a background for the data and analysis in Chapters Six and Seven. The second section covers the 1998–2003 conflict, including a note on its historical causes and an outline of the conflict's major events. The third section focuses on various peacebuilding, reconciliation and post-conflict justice efforts that occurred during and after the conflict. This is not a comprehensive stocktake of all efforts, but rather demonstrates the range of attempts at peacebuilding made prior to the implementation of the TRC. The final section draws out some of the broad post-conflict challenges, illustrating the context within which the TRC operated.

## 4.2 Solomon Islands: Conflict, reconciliation and peace

> In order to understand the present Solomon Islands we need to look to the past and the nature of society and place. We may talk of Solomon Islands as having become an independent state in 1978, but all this is very recent, as is any sense of national identity. (Bennett 2002, 2)

The Solomon Islands is a double archipelago of almost 1000 islands in a region in the Pacific known as Melanesia, located between Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu (see Figure 4.1). The country is comprised of six substantial, rugged islands – Choiseul, New Georgia, Guadalcanal, Malaita, Makira and Isabel – and hundreds of smaller islands and atolls, many of which are uninhabited (see Figure 4.2). The Solomon Islands is located to the north-east of Australia and spreads over 1,800 kilometres, from Shortland Island in the west, to Tikopia and Anuta in the east. From Rennell and Bellona Islands in the south, the country reaches 900 kilometres north to Ontong Java atoll. The country occupies an area of 777,000 square kilometres, of which 96 per cent is sea (Bennett 1987, 5).
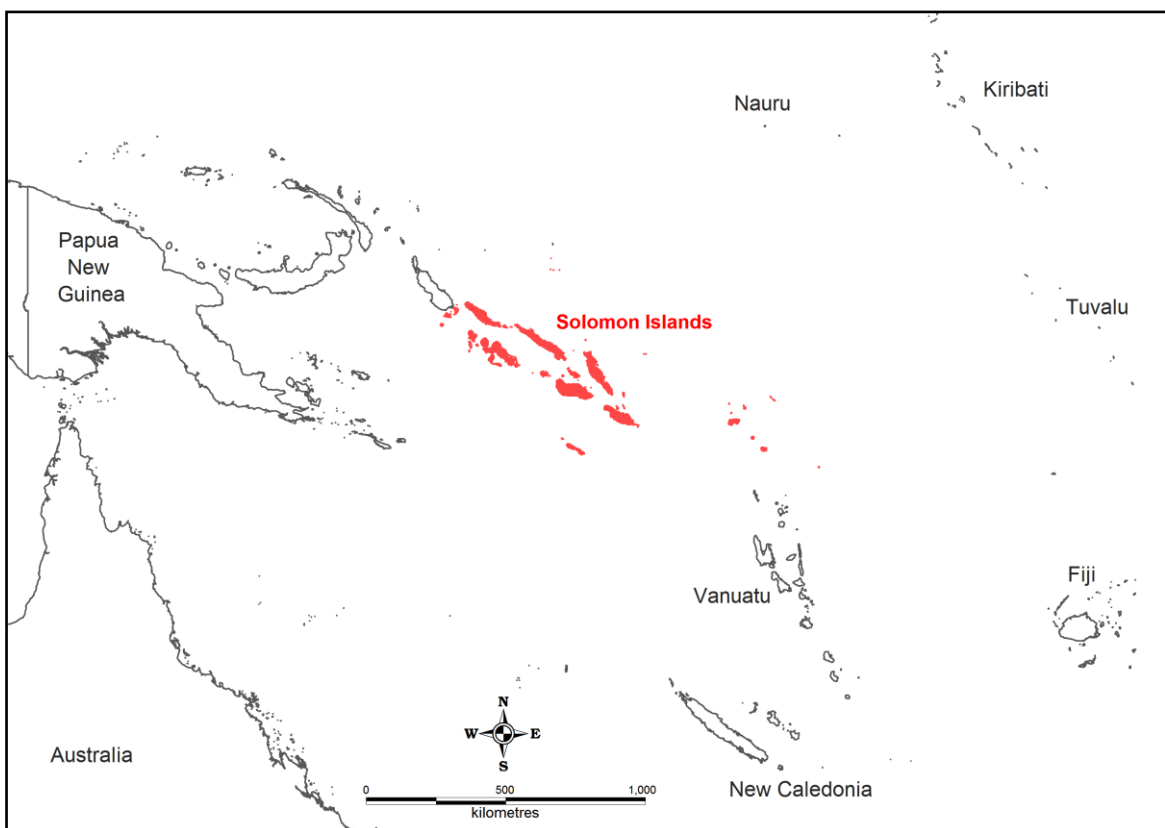


**Figure 4.1** Map of Solomon Islands in south-west Pacific region.

## 4.2.1  Historical context

Prior to European contact and the arrival of missions and colonial structures, people of the Solomon Islands had complex forms of social organisation. Societies were often small scale and without centralised political and administrative structures; rather power was diffused, albeit usually across the male population (Dinnen 2003, 8). Localised identity, connection to place and kinship were, as they are today, key characteristics of societies and local worldviews, and as Bennett (2002, 2) describes, 'livelihood and affection evoked attachment to home places'. People of the Solomon Islands were not highly mobile outside of their 'home places'; however, there was significant mobility within them: 'Many groups moved from site to site over some kilometres, motivated by population growth, quarrels, defence, natural disasters, and the search for accessible garden land' (Bennett 2002, 2). Although the islands had not been politically united prior to colonisation, the communities were not isolated, with complex networks in both the western and eastern parts of the Solomon Islands. Rather than separating the communities, the ocean brought people together, facilitating trade, interaction and warfare between the islands (McDougall and Kere 2011, 147).

Established practices to manage disputes and conflicts varied across the archipelago, between the various established small-scale societies. Dinnen (2003, 8) warns against generalising and oversimplifying these practices, but notes broad observations of dispute management in the indigenous societies of the Pacific, which were interwoven with everyday life:

> Rather than constituting a separate domain administered and enforced through discrete institutions and personnel, 'law' and 'justice' constituted an undifferentiated aspect of everyday social and political life […] Disputes were defined and addressed within an elaborate complex of kinship, status and social relations.

Conflicts involving those linked together through kinship or social or economic association were more likely to be addressed through the use of restorative approaches, with retributive or punitive approaches more likely to be used in serious breaches or cases in which parties did not have a prior binding relationship (Dinnen 2003, 9). Resolution processes typically involved discussions and negotiations brokered by chiefs or prominent local leaders, the payment of compensation and/or the exchange of gifts: 'Notions of reciprocity and equivalence were crucial to the redress of wrongs, as they were to other aspects of social and economic life' (Dinnen 2003, 8–9). Goddard (2010, 9) points out that while mechanisms of

dispute resolution varied across time and space in Solomon Islands, historically 'disputes were not taken into court or 'moot-like' meetings but were addressed variously by direct action (warfare, revenge attacks), the sanction of sorcery, headmen's or big men's interventions, and compensation payments'.

The earliest recorded contact between European explorers and the people of Solomon Islands occurred in 1568, when Spanish cartographers gave the name 'Solomon Islands' to the islands reached by Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana (Allen 2013, 31; Pollard and Wale 2004, 582). Due to a mapping error, however, contact with European explorers was brief, and the islands were 'lost' to Western sailors for another 200 years, until whalers and traders increasingly frequented the islands (Pollard and Wale 2004, 582). The introduction of traders, labour recruiters, plantations and missions to the islands saw the nature of movement and migration shift from a process previously regulated by blood and land ties, marriages and inter-tribal war and compensation, to one facilitated by religious and economic opportunities and expatriates (Liloqula 2000, 2). From the 1860s, thousands of Solomon Islanders were recruited to work on plantations in Queensland, Fiji, Samoa and New Zealand, with some labour traders engaged in the practice of 'black-birding', in which Solomon Islanders were forcibly taken as indentured labourers (Bennett 2002, 3; Pollard and Wale 2004, 582).

In 1893, Solomon Islands was formally (albeit reluctantly) annexed by the British to regulate trade and appease nearby colonies 'that feared the ambitions of other imperial nations' (Bennett 2002, 3). Except for Japanese occupation during the Second World War, Britain retained control until 1976. Colonial structures and missions spread their power and influence across the islands, albeit unevenly across time and space (Allen and Dinnen 2010, 303). As in many colonial states worldwide, the national boundaries drawn uniting the islands as a nation-state did not reflect the view that the people had of themselves or those around them (Goddard 2010, 5). Personal identities and loyalties were, and continue to remain, strongest with local kinship groups. Solomon Islands scholar Kabutaulaka (2002, 4) explains:

> For many Solomon Islanders national consciousness is often only skin deep: peel it off and you find a person with allegiances to a particular *wantok* or ethnic group; most people carry competing identities between their island and their country.

In the late nineteenth century colonial authorities and missions introduced formal laws and tribunals, yet customary methods of dispute resolution continued, and the notion of 'customary law' gained currency despite lacking a definition or unified understanding as to what exactly it encompassed (Goddard 2010, 28). In the twentieth century, official attempts were made to accommodate these customary approaches in negotiating quasi-legal structures such as the Native courts in 1942; 'the notion of "customary law", as distinct from criminal and civil law, was introduced' (Goddard 2010, 10).

The Second World War played out between Allied and Japanese forces on the Solomon Islands and 'made a very strong impression on Solomon Islanders and precipitated a reevaluation of their relationship with their colonial masters' (Allen 2013, 76). Resentment towards the colonial structures paved the way for an emergence of 'micronationalisms' in Malaita and Guadalcanal (see Allen 2013, 73–85). This saw the Maasina Rule of Malaita and Moro Movement of Guadalcanal attempt to reassert traditional identities and authority, articulating a dichotomy between local *kastom* and British rule (Allen 2013; Goddard 2010).

When Solomon Islands gained independence in 1978, the country inherited the Westminster style system of government, but little state infrastructure. While Christianity had become mostly naturalised, the inherited political structures were unsuccessfully transplanted onto Melanesian foundations:

> Few Solomon Islanders own the national system as theirs. Introduced by the colonial ruler, it is seen still as a foreign superstructure, not a product of their efforts, so they lack both commitment to it and critique of it. (Bennett 2002, 14)

Since independence, those in power have done little to adapt or modify these structures, instead benefitting from the high degree of personal power afforded to them within the system (Bennett 2002, 1). This has been met with little resistance from the electorate, as Bennett (2002, 7–8) explains:

> With little formal education and literacy, Solomon Islanders seemed content to not interrogate the process or the candidates closely. Their aspirations were uncomplicated. Most wanted some cash income from crops or local employment to supplement their subsistence living and, like most of us, schools, medical treatment, transport to friends and family, markets and services close at hand to provide a good life for their children. They wanted peace and security, which in the pre-European Solomons had been often

tenuous, but by 1978 […] this seemed almost an established fact of life in the 'Happy Isles'.

## 4.2.2 Contemporary context

In fact, the provinces are no more 'natural' to the islands than the unity imposed by the British as a protectorate in the 1890s – the 'nation' is thus a collection of villages, descent groups and language groups, all of which have thoroughly local agendas.
(Moore 2004, 158)

Today, Solomon Islanders live across nine provinces and the capital Honiara (see Figure 4.2). The population of just over half a million speak around 80 languages, sharing Pijin as a lingua franca. Approximately 85 per cent of the population reside in rural areas on customary-owned land and practice subsistence livelihoods in village settings, such as gardening, fishing and hunting (Allen and Dinnen 2010, 303). Participation in the cash economy in the villages is limited, relying mostly on activities such as cash cropping (coconuts, cacao), fishing and garden production for local markets (Pollard and Wale 2004, 581). While many villagers are not dependent on the formal economy for their livelihood, they struggle to earn money for basic items, clothing, transportation and school fees (McDougall and Kere 2011, 141).
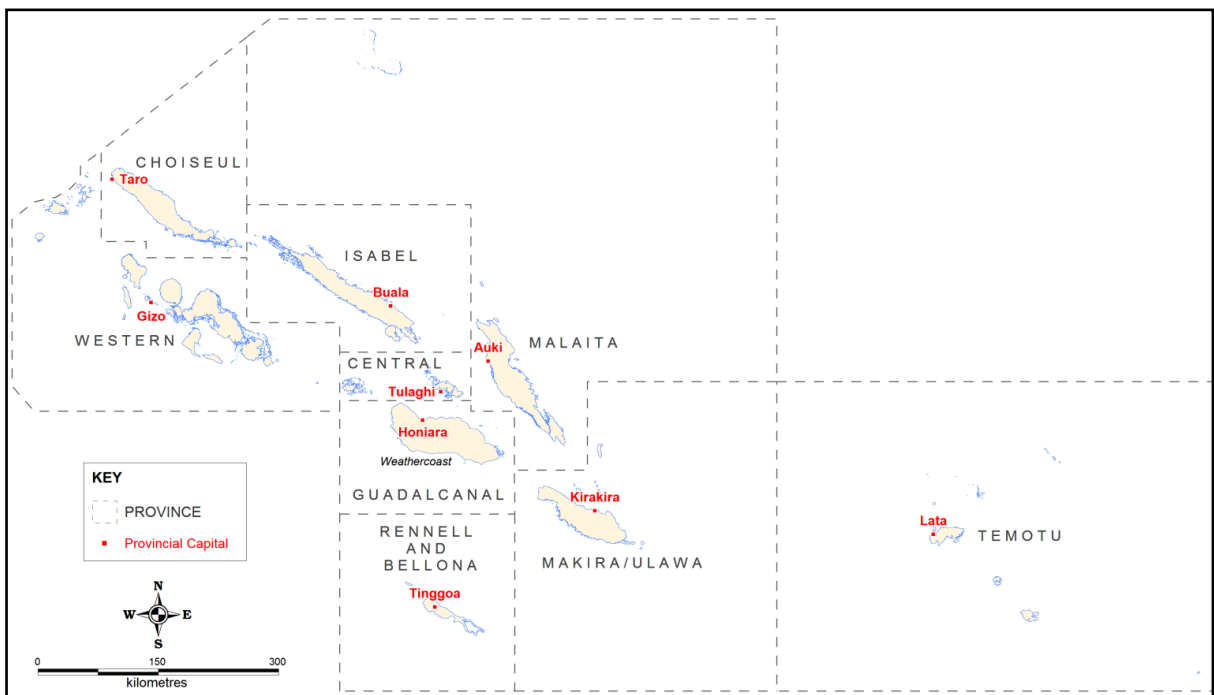


**Figure 4.2** Map of Solomon Islands showing provincial boundaries.

Communication across the islands is a challenge. There are two national newspapers; however, the majority of the population is illiterate or semi-literate (Moore 2004, 95). Radio services are a valuable means of communication across the archipelago, and telecommunication services are steadily improving, with increasing coverage and access to satellite internet available through the main telecommunications companies. While the majority of Solomon Islanders live in rural or remote areas, villages are highly networked and interlinked: 'Even rural Melanesian villages can be strikingly cosmopolitan places, where residents are constantly dealing with people who speak different languages and where intercultural marriages are common' (MacDougall and Kere 2011, 147).

With national development focusing on the capital, a concentration of infrastructure and economic opportunities developed in Honiara (Pollard and Wale 2004, 582). Regional aspirations thus emerged in response to this concentration in the capital, with many believing Honiara was unfairly benefitting from the nation's resources (Bennett 2002, 8). This resentment was felt not only in the distant provinces, islands or atolls, but also on Guadalcanal, especially along the southern coast known as the Weathercoast, which: 'was distant in terms of markets, services, and communication; its geographical proximity not mirroring accessibility' (Bennett 2002, 8).

Localised identity and connection to place continued to be central to Solomon Islanders' worldview. Communally owned land provides food, social security and is the basis for collective identity: 'land remains fundamental to the shared practical, economic and symbolic world of most Melanesians' (Brown 2008, 192). Traditional land tenure systems vary across the islands between matrilineal, patrilineal and cognatic systems. Importantly, these differ between Guadalcanal and Malaita: 'Guale mostly have a matrilineal system of kinship and land inheritance, but Malaitans mostly have a cognatic system – allowing kinship links to be traced through any combination of men and women – and a patrilineal bias in their land inheritance system' (Moore 2004, 103).

Across Melanesia, and in Solomon Islands, social organisation and identity centre on extended families, kinship ties and local clans or tribes; however, these can shift and re-focus depending on the context (Allen 2013, 10; Moore 2004, 27; see also Leach et al. 2012). The term *wantok*, which literally translates into 'one talk', refers to speakers of the same language

groups and denotes a relationship of shared origin and obligation, yet can also shift depending on the context (Moore 2004, 27). So as Brigg (2009, 153) explains, 'in a village context, one's *wantoks* are direct kin, but as one moves further away from local contexts one's pool of *wantoks* expands'. Depending on the circumstances, a Solomon Islander's identity may be tied to language groups, provincial allegiances, or if further away, as a Solomon Islander, Melanesian, or Pacific Islander (Allen 2013, 10; Brown 2008, 188). While obligations and loyalties relating to these kinship obligations can be a driver of conflict, the loyalty and obligations provided under the nature of *wantok* relationships are also a source of security and safety. In terms of broader peacebuilding, Brigg (2009) and Braithwaite et al. (2010) see strengths and opportunities of *wantokism* in forming national identities and nation-building.

The state is peripheral to the majority of Solomon Islanders, who have minimal interaction with state institutions (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 13; McDougall and Kere 2011, 141; Pollard and Wale 2004, 591). Local cultural and church institutions and leaders, however, hold varying levels of influence and value in their communities, as McDougall and Kere note (2011, 141):

> Colonial Christian missions were more effective than the government in penetrating Solomon Islands society, with approximately 98 per cent of residents now identifying as Christian. Missions also provide infrastructure, including schools, clinics, transportation, and commercial networks.

Although several Christian denominations are present in Solomon Islands, most Solomon Islanders share basic doctrines (McDougall and Kere 2011, 156). In 1967, the major Christian denominations formed the Solomon Islands' Christian Association, a peak body for the five denominations to which over ninety per cent of Solomon Islanders hold allegiance to (Moore 2004, 31; Pollard and Wale 2004, 591). Christianity introduced new ways of conceptualising enemies and strangers, facilitating reconciliation of former enemies (Bennett 2002, 4), as McDougall and Kere (2011, 148) describe:

> Christianity posits a generic humanity that is neutral – all united under God […] Christianity has become an important part of a shared national culture and a crucial part of peacemaking in the contemporary Solomon Islands.

Pollard and Wale (2004, 591) describe the churches as 'the most significant institution, with broad networks that reach to the grassroots'. Christianity has arguably been one impact of

globalisation that has been unifying, and when linked with *kastom* and indigenous practices of reconciliation, has been crucial in contemporary peacemaking and conflict resolution (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 15).

Approaches to conflict resolution and local justice systems vary across the islands, so that one cannot speak of or define a distinct Solomon Islands practice of conflict management. Yet broad observations can be made about the nature of conflict management and the keeping of peace across the archipelago. Preserving relationships and maintaining societal equilibrium is a priority for Solomon Islanders; social harmony is important (Moore 2004, 28). Moore cites Stritecky's description of social harmony in Solomon Islands:

> Solomon Islanders speak highly of persons who show humility, patience, and a controlled temper. They respond favourably to those whose demeanour is circumspect and deferent. Polite behaviour demands that people make requests of one another in a stylistically apologetic way that leaves the addressee with apparent options, minimizes imposition, and maximizes the interlocutor's dependence on the addressee for help. Solomon Islanders avoid confrontation and express anxiety about social interactions that are likely to result in cross words, hurt feelings, or embarrassment. They are able to mobilise many forms of evasive social action in order to circumvent discordant interactions. (Stritecky 2001, 64, cited in Moore 2004, 28)

When disputes do occur, resolution is aimed at either creating change or restoring relationships (Moore 2004, 28). In contemporary Solomon Islands societies, norms and practices governing conflict and reconciliation are shaped by overlapping systems of the state, Christianity and local *kastom*; however, 'the composition, effectiveness and legitimacy of these institutions vary significantly across the country, such that it is not possible to talk of a uniform system of local justice' (Allen et al. 2013, x). Depending on accessibility, Solomon Islanders are pragmatic in utilising different approaches to serve different interests or needs. For example, McDougall and Kere (2011, 151) explain:

> While church resolution usually aims to reaffirm the unity of the disputants as a family or as a community under God, customary dispute settlement often aims to redefine group boundaries and reinstate productive relations between distinct groups.

### Kastom

*Kastom* is a Pijin term widely used across the Solomon Islands and Melanesia. It is highly subjective and without formal definition. Rather, it has 'taken on specific historical, political

and place-based meanings' (Allen et al. 2013, 6). Broadly defined, *kastom* encompasses indigenous ideologies, relationship to and management of land, moral frameworks, dispute management, gender relations and social organisation (White 1993, 492). It contains an explicitly political dimension, serving to empower indigenous traditions and practices, both within communities and as a stance towards the state or outside actors, such as in Maasina Rule and the Moro Movements mentioned above (Akin 2004, 300; Allen 2013, 16). Although often associated with the past, *kastom* is not to be conflated with antiquated custom; it is a contemporary, dynamic, fluid and evolving construct, existing alongside and in interplay with contemporary state structures and Christianity (Allen et al. 2013, 34; Brown 2008, 190). For example, customary exchanges are often opened and closed by Christian prayers (McDougall and Kere 2011, 148), as were the TRC public hearings and events. Importantly, *kastom* is not historically static or unchanging, so that *kastom* today cannot be isolated from Western or Christian knowledge systems or values which have been introduced and appropriated (Goddard 2010, 28).

Recent research for the Justice Delivered Locally project found that in local-level disputes, the *kastom* system was 'by far the most commonly invoked' (Allen et al. 2013, 34). The authors (Allen et al. 2013, 66) found that:

> The state system is regarded as "introduced" or foreign (often referred to as "white man's law"), wheras *kastom* and the church, despite also incorporating many introduced features, are seen as representing a more indigenous approach to dispute management.

While the *kastoms* of Solomon Islands societies vary across space and time, Moore (2004, 27) suggests that enough similarities can be distinguished to at least understand it as a region-wide distinct indigenous cultural development that has broad relatability:

> [It] appeals because of the diverse construction that can be applied to it by both the most modern 'educated' and 'sophisticated' citizens of Melanesia, and the 'grassroots' (traditional rural) people living in isolated mountain villages.

Contemporary *kastom* approaches to conflict management vary across the Solomon Islands, however they share important features, such as reconciliation processes comprising the exchange of goods, negotiations, dialogue, speeches and an opening of space for interaction (McDougall and Kere 2011, 151). The word 'reconciliation' itself is often used by Pijin

speaking Solomon Islanders to describe this process. The mutual exchange of traditional items of wealth, such as shell money or feather money, pigs and taro, as well as modern goods or money, serve to 'cover' the original offence, after which it is usually not appropriate to speak of again (McDougall and Kere 2011, 153). This process of reconciliation is often referred to as 'doing' reconciliation or *kastom,* signifying the importance of conceptualising reconciliation as something that is purposefully done, rather than a state of being, which will be discussed further in Chapter Six. The original offence or issues are thus addressed through a process of restoring productive working relationships or societal equilibrium (McDougall and Kere 2011, 151; Pollard and Wale 2004, 588). In this process of brokering peace, reconciliation and compensation are inseparable, as the exchange made is aimed towards stopping the conflict so that reconciliation can occur (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 15). Compensation 'can clear the way for reconciliation, lessening bitterness' (Bennett 2002, 14). The process inherently involves justice, as understood locally:

> *There is justice in reconciliation […] Once the compensation has been given, and it has been responded by the other party, the justice is already dealt. So, you see, reconciliation and justice, in our context, you cannot separate them. They are both there. (Interview with Commissioner Kamilo Teke)*

Once a reconciliation process has taken place, the original insult or conflict itself is not necessarily forgotten, but the ongoing ramifications such as retribution or payback are extinguished, allowing the community or those involved to move forward (Interview with Bishop Terry Brown). Father Arkwright (2003, 181) explains:

> Compensation is a word that comes with a vast variety of meanings and ramifications. Mainly it has something to do with restoration or recognition of injured dignity or status. It is what is due to the person, not in material possessions but to restore a relationship.

Compensation payments are usually made between groups following negotiations and a discussion of grievances, with the exchanged items distributed amongst the parties involved, signifying that reconciliation has occurred. Reconciliation practices in Solomon Islands are centred around these primarily interpersonal, inter-familial and inter-communal processes, which focus mostly on restoring relationships. As one TRC staff member explained:

*The understanding of people in the village, if they say reconciliation, there will be two parties, and there will be a symbolic exchange of maybe goods and money. Which symbolises that you're sorry and things like that. Not necessarily repaying everything […] It symbolises understanding that a problem has happened, and we forget it. It should be addressed. And then, don't do it again […] If there's any problem next time, it will mean it's a different problem. (Interview with ED)*

Once compensation has been made and reconciliation has taken place, the dispute in question usually earns a silence. A Solomon Islander staff member of ICTJ explained:

*Telling stories, that's something that people normally do, here in Solomon Islands. Nothing is secret, everyone talks. But with the past, and the kind of stories where someone was hurt, I'm not too sure if people come out and talk about it […] [Instead, you] have a process where you do something for the other, you solve the problem, then you don't talk about it. You don't talk about it. So truth doesn't necessarily come out. That's the normal way for solving problems in Solomon Islands. You don't talk about it. Yeah.*

*[…] You recognise the problem, but you don't talk about it anymore. And that's the thing here. Although the society is one which talks a lot, when it comes to these sorts of issues, you don't talk about it, but you do something about it. You do reconciliation. (Interview with BO)*

Locating post-conflict peacebuilding practices into this local contextual understanding of reconciliation is necessary to understand the critical features and potential for operating a truth and reconciliation commission in Melanesia. In a context where the term 'reconciliation' itself refers to a practice and fairly specific processes, the use of the term in the title of the Solomon Islands TRC has been misleading for the wider Solomon Islander population, who assumed that the commission would facilitate reconciliation, *as it is understood locally*. This is discussed in depth in Chapter Six.

## 4.3   Tensions and conflict, 1998–2003

Although often referred to as an 'ethnic conflict' or 'ethnic tensions',  the causes of the 1998–2003 Solomon Islands conflict lie in complex and interrelated historical, socioeconomic, development and land issues rather than an intractable divide between the groups involved (Kabutaulaka 2002, 4; Maebuta and Spence 2009, 7). While the two main parties to the conflict were divided along ethnic lines, labelling the conflict as one driven by ethnicity is misleading. The provincial groups involved were not homogenous entities, but comprised of

different language and cultural groups, and there was a long history of intermarriage and interaction between the provinces involved (McDougall and Kere 2011, 146). The international media at the time, likely influenced by the then recent conflicts in Rwanda and the Balkans, glossed over the complex roots and nature of the conflict, adopting the 'ethnic' rhetoric to explain the violence (Allen 2013, 11; Bennett 2002, 11). This terminology was adopted by Solomon Islanders, and within and beyond the country the conflict became known as 'the ethnic tensions'. During the interviews for this research, the term used to refer to the 1998–2003 conflict ranged amongst the participants, from 'the social unrest', 'the tensions' to 'the war'. In this thesis, it is referred to as either 'the conflict' or 'the tensions'.

The initial stages of the conflict, from 1998 to 2000, played out between citizens and militant groups from the two most populated provinces in Solomon Islands, Malaita and Guadalcanal. Following the Second World War, the country's capital was moved from Tulagi, in Central Province, located between Guadalcanal and Malaita provinces, to Honiara on the north coast of Guadalcanal, to utilise the infrastructure established there during the war. Over generations, migrants from across the islands, particularly Malaita,[23] were drawn to the town to capitalise on the economic and educational opportunities available (Pollard and Wale 2004, 583).

Many settlers on Guadalcanal originally obtained permission for settlement, land and resource use from local landowners; however, the increasing development of, and migration to, the province over time led to resentment amongst the people of Guadalcanal, who came to view the migrants as disrespectful guests on their land (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 18). With a large proportion of the settlers originating from Malaita, tensions began to escalate between the two groups. A number of factors influenced the burgeoning schism between the indigenous Guadalcanal and the settler population, including the extension of the settlements beyond originally agreed upon conditions, the at times difficult relations between settler and host populations causing some of the Guadalcanal population to feel marginalised on their own

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[23] A number of factors led to people from Malaita being over-represented in the migrant flow to Guadalcanal, such as the high population density in Malaita and their previous experience and familiarity with emigrating for labour; until the middle of the twentieth century, almost three-quarters of plantation labour within the Solomons was comprised of Malaitans (Pollard and Wale 2004, 583).

land, and the apparent lack of economic benefit to the indigenous people of Guadalcanal from the investments in Honiara township and the plantations on their land, worsened by the perceived domination and success by settlers in reaping economic opportunities from those same investments (Liloqula 2000, 2; Pollard and Wale 2004, 583). Resentment grew and was exacerbated by instances of violence between Malaitans and local Guadalcanal people, including a number of murders of Guale men, such as an oft-cited incident in Mount Austen (Pollard and Wale 2004, 583). These killings became the basis of a 1988 petition by Guadalcanal leaders to the government that called for an end to such violence, greater provincial autonomy through the adoption of a federal government system, and the return of alienated land to Guadalcanal land owners (Franekel 2004, 47; Moore 2004, 104; Pollard and Wale 2004, 583).

After grievances raised were continually left unaddressed, further demands were made to the government by Guadalcanal representatives in 1998. Resentment continued to grow until late 1998, when a group of Guadalcanal men initiated a series of attacks on predominantly Malaitan migrant settlements on northern Guadalcanal (Pollard and Wale 2004, 584). Soon after, in 1999, Harold Keke and close relative, Joseph Sangu, formed a militant group, the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) – later called the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) – and began to violently evict and harass Malaitan settlers in rural parts of the island (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 23).

Hearing rumours and news of the evictions, thousands of Malaitan families pre-emptively fled to avoid the violence. Panic rose as settlements were violently destroyed and human rights abuses such as rape and murder were committed (Pollard and Wale 2004, 584). While the level of conflict-related violence was comparatively low when compared with other conflicts worldwide, it was a significant change in the country colloquially known as 'the Happy Isles'. From 1998 to 1999, between 20,000 to 30,000 people were displaced from rural Guadalancal, losing their homes, livelihoods and possessions, fleeing either into inland bush, Honiara or to Malaita. Pollard and Wale (2004, 584) note the effect of the violence on both Guadalcanal and Malaita:

> By 2000, rural Guadalcanal had been essentially cleared of all migrants, but the cost had been the closure of all industries, the closure of almost every school, and deprivation of access to medical facilities for most Guadalcanal people. Thousands of Malaitans had

lost their livelihood and all they owned. Many were forced to return to a 'home' they had never known. This has in turn led to many internal problems and tensions in Malaita.

Following a request from the Bartholomew Ulufa'alu and the Solomon Islands Government for assistance, the Commonwealth Secretariat sent former Fijian Prime Minister and 1987 coup leader, Major General Sitiveni Rabuka and Ade Adefuye from Nigeria to Solomon Islands as special envoys to facilitate negotiations. A small number of unarmed police officers from Vanuatu and Fiji were also deployed. They brokered the Honiara Peace Accord and the follow up Panatina Agreement. These agreements called for the militants to disarm, and provided for compensation payments to the provincial governments of Guadalcanal and Malaita to be distributed to militants and displaced persons (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 26). The distribution of these funds became a new source of grievance in both Guadalcanal and Malaita, and a cause of resentment amongst Solomon Islanders from other provinces. These agreements failed to broker peace and violence continued to escalate.

Displaced Malaitans grew frustrated at the government's failure to assist them or apprehend the Guadalcanal militants. Malaitan boys and men formed vigilante groups, and in 2000 the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) formed to retaliate against the Guadalcanal militants. While some could sympathise with or understand the Guadalcanal claims to land, the violence committed against their families in the forced evictions and the perceived threat to Honiara by Guadalcanal militants gave cause for retaliation under the guise of self-defence and security (Ata et al. 2012, 246–8).

Supported by a number of prominent Malaitans, and with strong links to the Malaitan dominated police force, the MEF raided and captured Auki police armoury, arming themselves with high-powered military-style weapons. Honiara was blockaded by MEF militants at the town boundaries, and skirmishes broke out around the capital between militant groups from the two provinces. Guadalcanal militants were relegated to the outskirts of the capital and rural Guadalcanal, and also established road blocks on the outskirts of town. Thousands of Malaitan settlers had already fled rural Guadalcanal to Honiara and Malaita, and indigenous Guadalcanal people fled the Malaitan-dominated capital to safety in home villages around the province. The blockade of Honiara isolated those in the capital from the

foodstuffs of the gardens in Guadalcanal, and those in Guadalcanal from essential items and medicines in Honiara.

Meanwhile, local efforts for peace and reconciliation saw Solomon Islanders working together in a range of concerted civil society responses, such as the efforts made by Women for Peace (Paina 2000; Pollard 2000a, 2000b) and the mediating and peacemaking work conducted by church brothers and sisters (Carter 2006), noted below. Communities worked together to protect one another despite provincial identity. For example, a colleague at the TRC told me of how his community in Guadalcanal organised a *chupu* [form of compensation in Guadalcanal] comprising of pigs, shell money and thousands of Solomons dollars to give the militants in order to keep the Malaitans in their community safe. The Prime Minister at the time, Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, requested assistance from Australia and New Zealand to bring a stop to the violence, and while some monetary assistance was provided, there was very little support or human resources provided from the larger neighbours.

On 5 June 2000, the MEF took over the police armoury in Honiara and staged a coup, forcing Prime Minister Ulufa'alu to resign and deposing his government. Parliament met under duress and elected Manasseh Sogavare as the new Prime Minister with MEF support (Kabutaulaka 2002, 2). In the following months, a time often referred to as 'the height of the tension', violence and atrocities by both militant groups reached its peak, particularly against civilians (Pollard and Wale 2004, 584). The state was essentially 'hijacked' and manipulated to serve individuals' and groups' private interests (Kabutaulaka 2002, 3). Many settlers from other provinces fled Honiara and returned to their home provinces at this time. A climate of fear pervaded communities, so that people did not feel free to move around, as one female TRC statement taker who was in north Malaita explained:

> *I felt at that time, I felt afraid. I didn't feel secure. When I went to the garden or the store […] I didn't feel secure because I was afraid that at any time any truck that belonged to those who joined the Malaita Eagles would stop on the road and ask for money or ask for something like goods […] Even to go from village to village we did not feel secure. During that time, we couldn't be involved in any kind of activity […] Everything had to be stopped because we didn't have freedom because we were afraid. (Interview with MR)*

The conflict dynamics extended to Western Province, which had already suffered from 'the spillover effect' of the ten year crisis in neighbouring Bougainville. Malaitans in the provincial capital, Gizo, were threatened and forced to leave. Ex-militants from Bougainville were allegedly invited by the Western Province provincial government to provide security; however, they too contributed to the climate of fear and violence, looting the police armoury and shooting a Malaitan man (Moore 2004, 13).

In October 2000, an Australian-brokered peace plan between the two militant forces and the national government was signed in Townsville. The agreement was negotiated over just six days with financial and logistical support provided by the Australian government. Attendees included members of the Guadalcanal and Malaita provincial governments, the national government, and the MEF and IFM – excluding Harold Keke and his supporters. The Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) (Solomon Islands Government 2000) provided an almost unconditional amnesty for those who had been involved in the conflict, if they disarmed and handed over their weapons. The TPA also outlined provisions regarding development agendas, enquiries into land acquisition and property claims on Guadalcanal, and compensation for lost and damaged property resulting from the conflict. Intra-party dialogues did not take place prior to the agreement, and financial incentives, in the form of compensation packages, made it easier for participants to agree rather than disagree to the peace agreement, which was 'more focused upon recovery tasks than addressing the conflict drivers and dynamics' (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 14). The agreement was criticised by civil society groups: 'the TPA failed to provide a basis for the reinstitution of civil order, nor did it address deep issues underlying the origins of the conflict' (Pollard and Wale 2004, 586).

The TPA contained serious flaws. The agreement was made by members of the two militant groups and the government; civil society members and women's groups who had become active advocating for peace were not included in the talks. The agreement did not recognise the factions within the militants' groups, rather assuming they were cohesive entities with a clear chain of command (Kabutaulaka 2002, 14). And the agreement neglected issues of justice and accountability, as Kabutaulaka (2002, 14) noted:

> Those who engaged in criminal activities during the crisis were not apprehended or held accountable in a meaningful way. Instead, they were given blanket amnesty and not

> even required to apologize to the nation […] Justice was not seen as an important component of the peace process.

An amnesty law proposed in the TPA was passed in December 2000, and in April 2001 a second amnesty law was implemented (Harris Rimmer 2010, 3).

The TPA was successful in temporarily halting open armed hostilities; however, it overestimated the ability of the government to implement the provisions (Braithwaite et al. 2010; Kabutaulaka 2002). Following the signing of the agreement, there was an escalation in lawlessness, crime and corruption, as individuals and groups demanded state funds in the name of compensation. Violence and crime continued as ex-militants returned home to Malaita, and fighting intensified on the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal amongst a fragmented Guadalcanal militia. Prominent IFM leader, Harold Keke, did not attend or cooperate in the TPA. With his supporters, Keke formed the Guadalcanal Liberation Front (GLF), and continued to exert violent control on the remote Weathercoast of Guadalcanal. In the climate of lawlessness and proliferation of weapons, many ex-militants were unwilling to disarm (Pollard and Wale 2004, 586).

The TPA did, however, establish a framework for building peace by establishing the indigenous Peace Monitoring Council  (PMC) and an International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT), who together took responsibility for collecting weapons from militants and communities (Hegarty 2003, 4). At the time, the IPMT was a reassuring presence to Solomon Islanders, building confidence and hope that the conflict would soon be resolved (Moore 2004, 150). The Peace Monitoring Council later became the National Peace Council, and is described below.

Following the TPA, a Joint Operation was formed with paramilitary police, ex-MEF and ex-IFM militants to capture Keke and his supporters. However, they also terrorised local villagers, with state-owned weapons and ships, shooting at the villages from the government patrol boat and setting fire to houses (Kabutaulaka 2002, 28; Moore 2004, 151). The Joint Operation set up camp in villages along the Weathercoast in an attempt to capture Keke; adding to the suffering of the communities who were caught between the opposing groups (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 39).

Violence and terror on the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal, and lawlessness in Malaita and Honiara, continued until the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) again asked for international assistance from regional neighbours. Following the Pacific Islands Forum in June 2003, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was formed. The Solomon Islands Parliament passed domestic legislation providing legal framework for the deployment of international personnel to Solomon Islands, and in July 2003, supported by the Pacific Islands Forum, RAMSI arrived in Solomon Islands. The Australian-led mission initially consisted of 330 police officers, 1,800 regional military personnel and about 80 civilian personnel. The mission was welcomed and supported by Solomon Islanders eager to see an end to the violence and maintained popular support throughout its operation (Nanau 2008, 149).

In addition to its own show of military strength, RAMSI was able to 'piggy-back' off the network of peace monitors established by the National Peace Council, providing an armed, independent and neutral force to facilitate disarmament (Interview with Mary-Louise O'Callaghan). In a climate where Solomon Islanders were motivated and dedicated to ending the conflict and violence, RAMSI provided the means to see it end. With the support and participation of Solomon Islanders, RAMSI 'disarmed militants, destroyed guns, restored order, began a purge of government departments and the police force, and prepared evidence to take all manner of criminals to trial' (Bennett 2005, 438). Harold Keke and his group were soon arrested. RAMSI is discussed further below.

During the five years of violent conflict, citizens from across the country were affected and particular hotspots saw escalated crime, violence, mass displacement and heightened insecurity. The proliferation of high powered weapons created an environment of insecurity and fear. Nevertheless, it is important not to overstate the nature or consequences of the conflict and to similarly acknowledge the efforts of communities to maintain peace and order at the time. While Solomon Islanders across the archipelago suffered from the breakdown of centralised services, such as education and health provisions, the violence that manifested was primarily concentrated on Guadalcanal and Malaita (Moore 2004, 63). A Solomon Islander staff member of ICTJ relayed the indifference some of the population in outer islands have towards the conflict:

*Some did not even hear about it [...] if you ask them, they are not really interested in it, it's just something that happened in Honiara. Just some ships might not have visited them for a period of six months or one year. They are totally far. Very far. (Interview with BO)*

The strength of local institutions and their ability to maintain social order meant that the majority of Solomon Islanders were able to live in situations of relative peace (McDougall and Kere 2011, 142). John Roughan, founder of the Solomon Islands Development Trust, recounted to me a conversation he had with two senior Australian police, after he asked them to allow him to pose a question:

*I said 'How long would Sydney last if it had no police force, no security force, no army, how long?' They both looked at each other and they said, 'About a week.' I said, 'That's alright. This so-called failed state lasted five years.'*

## 4.4   Peacebuilding, reconciliation, and post-conflict justice

In total, there were an estimated 200 conflict related deaths[24] and approximately 35,000 people, or ten per cent of the population, were displaced from their homes, many losing their possessions and livelihoods (Norwegian Refugee Council 2004, 5). Civilians suffered from human rights abuses such as torture, abduction and sexual violence. The economy was bankrupted, government-run services were severely disrupted; the parliamentary system was abused and corrupted and the police force was divided and compromised (Allen 2006, 310; Hegarty 2003, 5). Older grievances that were previously unaddressed resurfaced, communities disintegrated, families suffered break-ups, and people across the country were traumatised.

The outbreak in violence was beyond the capacity of local leaders and typical methods of conflict management, yet communities in the affected areas nevertheless tried to cope with the issues they were facing. Attempts to broker peace made during and after the conflict saw activities implemented by the government, by an increasingly active civil society, and by external actors. Maebuta and Spence (2009) and Braithwaite et al. (2010) provide comprehensive overviews of such efforts. In addition to those noted above, such as the

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[24] The TRC final report (Ata et al. 2012) lists the names of two hundred people whose violent deaths were attributed to the conflict; however, unofficial estimates say this number could be much higher.

Honiara Peace Accord and the Townsville Peace Agreement, further peacebuilding attempts are noted below to demonstrate the range of efforts and the key features of each.

## 4.4.1 Solomon Islands Government attempts to broker peace and reconciliation

The Solomon Islands Government made several official attempts to broker peace by hosting reconciliation ceremonies and facilitating peace and cease-fire agreements. However, the state was weak, compromised, and unprepared to manage the violence. Kabutaulauka (2002, 3) explains how this worsened following the June 2000 coup:

> The state was 'hijacked' by individuals and groups who manipulated it to serve private interests. The locus of power was no longer vested in the state and its institutions, but was shifted to the hands of individuals and groups who used the state to legitimate the assertion of their interests. Therefore, the state could not act as an effective mediator in the peace process.

### Public reconciliation feast, May 1999

In an early attempt to broker peace, a government funded *kastom* feast was held at Honiara's cultural village. The event was opened by a church service and reconciliatory prayers were offered. Leaders and elders from Guadalcanal and Malaita, dressed in traditional outfits, exchanged shell money and pigs. Cheques of SI$100,000 were presented to the premiers of both Malaita and Guadalcanal from the government as 'compensation' (Kabutaulaka 2002, 11). Within an hour of the government-funded public reconciliation feast, violence broke out on the Guadalcanal plains (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 15). Long-term resident and Australian journalist Mary-Louise O'Callaghan described the reconciliation feast during an interview as being driven from the top down:

> *Eventually they tried to do big reconciliations, and it was that whole thing of reconciliation from on top, with the funding and massive amounts of pigs and whatever. And it's totally unreal for the people on the ground, it's not addressing any of the issues. Everyone participates 'cause, why not? You know, nothing else is happening in Honiara or wherever, you know, it's a big event, but it doesn't mean that there's a genuine engagement.*

Although the government attempted to draw on *kastom* in its effort to bring about reconciliation, the event did not garner community support or ownership or genuinely resemble traditional customary practices 'wherein the symbolic rather than the material aspect

is of tantamount importance' (Pollard and Wale 2004, 589). Kabutaulaka (2002, 11) notes a number of problematic factors about this attempt at adopting *kastom* to halt the conflict. First, there was no consensus on what constitutes a *kastom* process across the different groups involved. Second, IFM members were absent from the feast as there was the incorrect assumption that the 'big men' present represented or could control the militants. Third, that while the feast was an important symbolic gesture it did not address the issues raised by the IFM and the demands of the Guadalcanal people. Traditionally, compensation is offered following dialogue and negotiations, when the causes of a conflict have been addressed or resolved. Offering monetary compensation without addressing these issues was insulting and neglected the underlying causes of the conflict.

### Compensation payments

While compensation is an accepted and expected activity in Solomon Islands *kastom* and traditional reconciliation practices, the government-funded system of compensation that emerged during the conflict was, 'in reality, just bribes and blackmail' (Moore 2004, 219). The compensation payments and packages provided for in a number of accords, and paid by the national and provincial governments, caused a disturbing trend whereby the peace process was monetised and a government compensation culture established. For example, following the TPA the government paid out SI$100,000 (approx. AUD $16,000) to families of people killed in the conflict, setting precedent on the monetary value of a life. The compensation process established under the TPA was corrupted by politicians and ex-militants, and millions were paid in either fraudulent claims or bribes for disarmament (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 47). The payments almost bankrupted the state, and gave cause for new resentments, grievances and cycles of violence.

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

The Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace (MNURP) was created at the time of the Townsville agreement in an attempt to institutionalise peacemaking approaches and to implement the compensation process provided for under the TPA. It was initially established as a Department of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace (DNURP), located within the Ministry of Provincial Government, National Reconciliation and Peace and Home Affairs. Solomon Islands is one of only three countries in the world with a Ministry dedicated to these

issues (Parliamentary Inquiry 2009, 203; Solomon Islands Government n.d.). However, it was not immune to the corruption and extortion that plagued the compensation process. The DNURP staff lacked the capacity to manage and control the funds and many false claims were filed, including by the Permanent Secretary. Maebuta and Spence (2009, 16) explain:

> The process of compensation was subject to political wrangling, corruption and extortion, during which both combatants and political representatives filled their bank accounts. The former permanent secretary of DNURP, for example, has been charged and convicted of making a false claim for compensation in 2005.

The department was officially established as a Ministry in 2006, and was responsible for policies to address the impacts of the tensions. Rather than directly addressing the drivers of conflict, the expectation of the MNURP was to strengthen the existing and ongoing peace processes of community groups around the country, as the former Permanent Secretary of MNURP Joy Kere described:

> The Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation, and Peace is more or less consolidating the work that has been done through local peacemaking. Consolidating, representing people, pulling them together, putting an official stamp of approval on what people have already done – giving them that official recognition. I think that is what has come back to us from a lot of these reconciliation ceremonies that we've been to: that people want the government to be there, to take the lead. (Kere, in McDougall and Kere 2011, 157)

There was no direct partnership between MNURP and RAMSI, as the Ministry did not come under any of the regional mission's core pillars. A revised corporate plan for the MNURP, created in 2006, included a key objective to conduct national consultation on the TRC and establish the TRC. In 2008 the Minister for Peace and Reconciliation, Hon. Sam Iduri introduced the Truth and Reconciliation Bill to parliament, and the Ministry was responsible for establishing the commission. The TRC was established as an independent body; however, the Permanent Secretary of MNURP served as the commission's accountant, administering funds from the government budgets (discussed further in Chapter Five).

### 4.4.2 Churches and civil society

Civil society in Solomon Islands has historically included church organisations, women's organisations and a number of overseas NGOs that have been present since before

independence, such as the Red Cross, the Foundation for Peoples of the South Pacific, Scouts and Girl Guides (Roughan 2005, 423). More recently there have also been sports clubs, economic organisations, civic groups, local NGOs and international development NGOs (Roughan 2005, 423).

During the conflict, civil society actors formalised and proved resilient in advocating for peace: 'Most of the reconciliation work that has mattered has been located in civil society, led by chiefs, women, churches and militants from inside their prison cells' (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 146). Civil society groups brought Solomon Islanders from across the provinces and so-called 'ethnic' divides together to provide alternative voices for social change, deliver humanitarian relief, and initiate and contribute towards reconciliation and peacebuilding activities (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 132; Moore 2004, 34). Members of civil society groups worked bravely in a climate of fear of violence, at risk from militants' threats and violence. Several civil society actors were targeted for attacks and at times forced to flee with their families to home provinces or overseas (Kabutaulaka 2002, 25). Here, a few key efforts of building peace through the churches and civil society are noted.

### Civil Society Network

Following the coup in June 2000, a group called the Civil Society Network (CSN) formed to coordinate and manage concerted responses to the conflict. John Roughan (2005, 429–28) explained the CSN as:

> A loose coalition of individuals, organisations and groups of people who sometimes worked jointly and sometimes acted unilaterally. However all were concerned with where the nation was heading, all opposed the lawlessness, and all were prepared to critique government action and act as an alternative voice.

The CSN was important in the context of the weakened state; however, its members were often excluded or deterred from peace talks, being seen as a threat to the militants' and government's claim on power (Kabutaulaka 2002, 24–26). The network was able to mobilise local and overseas responses, such as a National Peace Conference held on the neutral territory of HMNZS *Te Kaha* in August 2000 where 150 delegates met. Militants were intentionally excluded, however, and as such the resulting communique was subsequently ignored (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 37). Recognising the grievances of civilians on all sides of

the conflict, the conference called for the establishment of a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a means to end the conflict and prompt reconciliation. Matthew Wale, a strong advocate of the TRC and later a member of parliament when the TRC Bill was passed, was a leader in the CSN.

### Church efforts to restore peace

Drawing from their large support base and their central role in communities, churches and church-based organisations played valuable and meaningful roles mediating, peacebuilding and facilitating reconciliation during and after the conflict. As Moore (2004, 222) highlights:

> The Christian denominations are one of the main sources of sensible advice and practical help in all communities, particularly in rural areas. Christian leaders are trusted, listened to, and have shown their dedication to the nation more than any other group in the Solomon Islands.

During the conflict, local church organisations and members mediated between the militant groups at great personal risk. They escorted kidnapped victims to safety, provided a means of communication between the warring militant groups, and gave humanitarian support, housing and feeding displaced families and caring for those injured. The Melanesian Brothers of the Anglican Church (*tasiu*) were said to have been more effective at making peace than the police or the state, setting up camps between the militants bunkers, and convincing both sides to return the bodies of their murdered enemies to their families – important for grieving and burial purposes (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 132). In an effort to broker peace with Keke and his supporters, a team of *tasiu* travelled to the Weathercoast where they were captured and brutally killed by Keke's group, an act of violence that shocked the country (Carter 2006).

The churches continued to actively promote peace and reconciliation activities after the arrival of RAMSI. Many of the weapons returned to the PMC, IPMT or RAMSI were surrendered via the Melanesian Brothers. Church groups and organisations offered psychosocial support, facilitated training in peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and facilitated and funded inter- and intra- community reconciliation activities (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 23). During the conflict, SICA established a Peace Office staffed by volunteers, which advocated for the TRC and facilitated the initial processes which lead to its formation. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

### Women for Peace

Historically, women were active participants in traditional conflict resolution and peacemaking in the Solomon Islands. During and after the conflict, women played leading roles advocating for peace and promoting reconciliation through a range of organisations and church groups (Leslie 2002; Liloqula 2000; Monson 2013; Paina 2000; Pollard 2000a, 2000b). In 2000, women in Honiara held a roundtable discussion, resulting in the Women's Communiqué on Peace, which outlined planned activities to contribute constructively and meaningfully to the peace process (Pollard 2000a, 44). This led to the formation of the Women for Peace group, and the Guadalcanal Women for Peace (Paina 2000). Consisting of women of all ages, denominations, and provinces, the groups drew strength and inspiration from maternal imagery and Christian principles to effectively reach out and engage militants and leaders in dialogue (Monson 2013).

Women for Peace members prayed together, visited the militant camps and bunkers, and shared food and prayer with the militant men and boys, persuading them to lay down their arms. They exchanged essential store-bought items from Honiara with garden produce from rural Guadalcanal, creating markets near the militants' check points that provided a place for women to meet and maintain connections (Maebuta and Spence 2013, 28). They also met with government and police representatives, provided women's representation at ceasefire talks, conducted weekly prayer meetings, encouraged the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-militants, and visited displaced families, providing them food and resources (Pollard 2000a, 45). While undertaking these tasks, the women were simultaneously building trusting relationships with each other, across the conflict divisions.

### National Peace Council

The Townsville Peace Agreement led to the establishment of a Peace Monitoring Council (PMC), supported by the International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT). The PMC comprised eminent Solomon Islanders and ex-combatants from both sides of the conflict. A managing body of councillors was based mostly in Honiara, and outposts in the communities were staffed by field monitors (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 16). Field monitors were chosen depending on their reputation, and included chiefs, church members, teachers and other community leaders. Objectives of the PMC involved assisting in local level reconciliations,

encouraging disarmament, collecting weapons, and promoting a Weapons Free Village Campaign: 'The PMC had no enforcement authority; it relied on persuasion, advocacy, and *wantok* relationships to facilitate confidence building processes and encourage disarmament' (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 17). For their size and reliance on non-forceful measures, the PMC and IPMT were relatively successful. The Weapons Free Villages campaign certified around four hundred villages and a *wakabaot for pis* (walk for peace) in 2002 in Honiara attracted up to 10,000 people (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 39; Maebuta and Spence 2009, 17).

The IPMT withdrew in mid-2002, and in early 2003 the Peace Monitoring Council became the National Peace Council (NPC), tasked with continuing the work of the PMC and IPMT and facilitating processes aimed at building national unity (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 18). With field workers located at the grassroots, the NPC served as ad hoc intermediaries between the grassroots and the government, advocating for peace and disseminating information relating to the peace process:

> At times the IPMT and PMC, and its later iteration the National Peace Council (NPC), were viewed as *de facto* police, given that the police force was party to the conflict, and communities approached them for advice and help on regulating criminal activities. (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 17)

The NPC assisted in facilitating local reconciliations; for example, by providing transport and funds to purchase items and foodstuffs for feasts. Sir Alfred Soaki, a highly respected member of the NPC and the first indigenous police commissioner of Solomon Islands, was assassinated while working for the Council (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 41). Former police sergeant, Edmund Sae, was arrested for the murder, but managed to escape from Rove Central Prison and has since eluded capture or arrest (Moore 2004, 191; SBS 2014).

Although technically under the direction of MNURP, funding arrangements and the political climate meant that the NPC mostly operated independently of the Ministry and the Solomon Islands Government: 'Different funding provisions meant that MNURP staff often felt like the poor cousins to the NPC and IPMT, who were better resourced and had much more reach and presence' (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 18–19). Braithwaite et al. (2010, 132) argue the PMC and NPC played 'undervalued and highly multidimensional roles in promoting peace and reconciliation'. Following RAMSI's arrival and its state-building agenda, reconciliation

and peacebuilding were left in the hands of the NPC. However funding for the council was uncertain, and eventually cut in 2006 by the Sogavare government. As Kabutaulaka clearly stated at the time: 'It is problematic that the only institution working on building the nation at the community and individual level has an uncertain future' (Kabutaulaka 2005a, 420). Braithwaite et al. (2010, 41) are critical of the termination of the council, arguing:

> The government at the time was no fan of the leadership of the NPC and did not like the way it provided a platform for leaders who were not supporters of the government. The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID, the lead NPC funder) provided technical assistance to the government for the production of reports that were hatchet jobs on the work of the NPC.

### 4.4.3 RAMSI

Australia's eventual intervention in Solomon Islands was a marked shift in its foreign policy, especially considering that previous requests for assistance made by the Solomon Islands Government had been ignored.[25] Following the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001 and the bombings in Bali in 2002, Australia invoked a security rationale for an increasingly interventionist role in the Pacific (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 49; Dinnen 2012, 63; Fry 2008).

RAMSI was an Australian-led intervention invited by the Solomon Islands Government to restore law and order under the Pijin-named mission *Operation Helpem Fren*. One of the longer peacekeeping missions in the world, RAMSI arrived in July 2003 and stayed for ten years, transitioning to bi-lateral aid in 2013 (Coppel 2012). The mission centred on three core pillars that capture its ethos of state-building as a means to peace making: law and justice, economic governance and machinery of government (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 155). Efforts included the removal of weapons, criminal prosecutions, institutional strengthening and capacity building (for more on RAMSI see Coppel 2012; Fraenkel et al. 2014; Wielders 2008). An independent review of RAMSI released in 2014 estimates that Australian expenditure on the mission came to AUD$2,400 million, and New Zealand's expenditure

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[25] For more on Australia's decision to intervene in the Solomon Islands see Kabutaulaka 2005b.

NZ$347.5 million. Together this amounted to roughly AUD$2.7 billion, of which the vast majority was spent offshore, such as on tax-free salaries of RAMSI personnel (Fraenkel et al. 2014, 84). In the decade before RAMSI, Solomon Islands received 3 per cent of Australia's aid to Oceania. During the RAMSI mission this increased to over 24 per cent, making Solomon Islands the third largest recipient of Australian aid at the time (Hayward-Jones 2014, 6).

The whole of government approach taken by RAMSI brought the intervention international praise in policy and security circles, and the mission continually received a high approval rating from Solomon Islanders through its annual People's Survey.[26] Yet critical Solomon Islanders and foreign commentators debated its presence and agenda, some warning of local resistance to the international intervention (see Allen 2006, 2009; Nanau 2008). Analyses of the mission critique its liberal state-building focus, question its suitability for the Solomon Islands context, and warn that popular support for the mission indicated a lack of confidence in Solomon Islands' own institutions and dependency on external assistance (Allen and Dinnen 2010; Barbara 2008; Dinnen 2012; Powles 2006).

While RAMSI's criminal justice approach to law and order was coherent with imported Western modes of governance, it sat uncomfortably alongside local *kastom* methods of managing conflicts that contain participatory, restorative and communal characteristics more akin to restorative justice processes (Dinnen 2003, 4).[27] Peacebuilding and reconciliation were not included in the mandate of RAMSI, nor did it work in direct partnership with the MNURP. While RAMSI has done a great deal to improve law and order in the Solomon Islands, it is noted that 'one of the greatest mistakes of the mission has been to assume that law and order equals peace and security' (Powles 2006, 10).

Although RAMSI was not responsible for peace and reconciliation, its sheer size and presence no doubt affected the 'intellectual space' of post-conflict peacebuilding, taking centre stage in

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[26] These surveys, and more on RAMSI, are available from the RAMSI website, http://www.ramsi.org/media/peoples-survey/.

[27] For further discussion and examples of restorative justice in the Pacific, see Dinnen et al. 2003.

the theatre of post-conflict peacebuilding, relegating indigenous actors to the sidelines (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 77; Kabutaulaka 2005, 420). For example, Kabutaulaka (2005a, 420) reflects on the effect of RAMSI on the proposal of a TRC:

> I observed with interest, for example, that discussions for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission within the Solomon Islands' Christian Association (SICA) evaporated after RAMSI's arrival. Perhaps people assumed that RAMSI would solve the country's problems and so there was no need for such a commission.

Other commentators have noted similar concerns. Allen and Dinnen (2010, 323) question if RAMSI's 'haste to arrest, prosecute, liberalise and state-build' allowed sufficient space for indigenous methods of peace-making. Ken Averre (2008, 10), former Public Solicitor in the Solomon Islands, noted that it was 'particularly apparent' there was 'opposition on the part of Canberra to even contemplate any form of truth and reconciliation process whilst the RAMSI process was underway'. AusAID provided funding to the TRC, and the exhumations team of the TRC worked with RAMSI officers in the difficult task of returning bodies to their families. Nevertheless, during the TRC's operations, RAMSI 'adopted a wary but watchful stance' (Fraenkel et al. 2014, 82), and a number of interviewees to this research commented on the lack of support for the TRC from RAMSI and Australian representatives.

### The tension trials

Despite the amnesty laws of 2000 and 2001, the domestic legislation enabling RAMSI contained no restrictions regarding criminal prosecutions (Harris Rimmer 2010, 3). Substantial resources and support for the 'tension trials' saw the criminal justice system bolstered through RAMSI's law and order component (see Averre 2008). The Office of the Director for Public Prosecutions, the Public Solicitors Office, the courts, the RSIPF and the prisons were strengthened by a large contingent of foreign staff. By 2008, over 6,300 arrests had been made, including of 160 police officers: 'On a per capita basis, especially considering that the conflict did not affect the whole nation, these arrest figures are extraordinary, on par with Rwanda' (Harris Rimmer 2010, 4). Braithwaite et al. (2010, 87) also note the high number of convictions, concluding 'the number of arrests and incarcerations per capita, more so per conflict death, exceeds that in any case of post-conflict justice the authors know of'. The high number of criminal cases burdened the court system, resulting in extended remand times of up to three or four years in some cases (Averre 2008, 4).While a number of 'big fish'

were incarcerated, many major figures were not, causing ongoing resentment amongst the population (Harris Rimmer 2010, 4). Despite the reportedly high number of rape and sexual violence crimes committed during the conflict (Amnesty International 2004, 26-28), no cases of rape or sexual violence were included in the tension trials (Ata et al. 2012, 587).

Averre (2008, 10) questioned the relationship between the tension trials and the broader reconciliation processes, suggesting that:

> Whilst there were some reconciliations it is clear that the criminal trial process hampered reconciliation and that a mix of criminal justice and truth and reconciliation process may have resulted in a stronger reconciliation at a national level than has been achieved by the criminal justice process alone.

Averre (2008, 7) points to the acceptance and rehabilitation of ex-militants in the community to suggest that Solomon Islanders have a level of understanding about the nature of the conflict and the motivations of those who took part, which can facilitate reconciliation outside of the prisons. While many citizens may want criminal prosecutions for perpetrators, Averre suggests this level of understanding about the conflict and the ex-militants was vastly different from the perception of Australian officials who saw those involved as 'criminals' (2008, 7). A detailed discussion of Solomon Islander perspectives of reconciliation is provided in Chapter Six.

## 4.5 Transitional justice and post-conflict challenges in Solomon Islands

There was no master plan of 'transitional justice' in Solomon Islands, yet the range of attempts to cease violence and broker peace fit into a transitional justice framework in what Jeffery (2014, par. 2) terms an 'organically evolving sequence'. The multiple measures employed to address the abuses that occurred have prompted scholars to analyse the post-conflict efforts in Solomon Islands from a transitional justice perspective (Dicker 2015; Guthrey 2015; Harris Rimmer 2010; Jeffery 2013, 2014). Jeffery (2014, par. 2) describes the multiple methods as evolving 'into a comprehensive approach to addressing past human rights violations'.

For a 'transitional justice' context, the Solomon Islands case is unique in a number of aspects (Harris Rimmer 2010, 8). For example, scholars point to the fact Solomon Islands was not transitioning from authoritarian rule to democracy, being a democracy prior to the conflict (Jeffery 2014), but rather from 'war' to peace as is more common in other Asia and Pacific contexts; the multiple approaches and sequencing of measures taken – peace (amnesties) before justice (trials), followed by truth (TRC) several years later – was unique (Harris Rimmer 2010, 8; Jeffery 2014); and the scale of the conflict and the country being smaller by comparison to other global examples, prompting the question of 'whether retributive and restorative justice debates take on different meanings in very small communities?' (Harris Rimmer 2010, 9).

While these various measures are viewed as attempts to address abuses of the past, it is important to consider the original purpose and intended outcomes of their implementation in order to assess their success and impact. For example, to what extent do the Solomon Islands Government and people wish to respond to the conflict using a human rights framework? While the country has ratified a number of international human rights conventions (see OHCHR 2012, 32–41), there is a common perception amongst the population that human rights principles may conflict with customary practices (OHCHR and PIFS 2009, 9), leading to resistance to the term 'human rights' by many Solomon Islanders, who describe it as a 'white man's idea' or *wei blong waet man*. In a critique of the liberal peace discourse in which transitional justice is embedded, Gready and Robins (2014, 343) note how human rights discourse can disempower rather than emancipate intended beneficiaries of transitional justice mechanisms:

> [P]articularly the most disempowered, who have both the greatest need for and least access to the language of rights. This is an articulation of the fact that in a state where only elites know what rights are, they can become something that is largely claimed *on behalf of* victims rather than by victims themselves.

While the Solomon Islands TRC may be seen as an attempt to facilitate truth regarding human rights abuses, the following chapters will show original intentions for the commission were of a different nature, embedded in a Melanesian conceptualisation of reconciliation – an attempt to prompt reconciliation (as understood locally) during the conflict in order to move forward with justice and peace. Chapter Five will outline these initial intentions and early

developments of the TRC. Chapters Six and Seven will then demonstrate how the shift in focus from a mechanism oriented to prompting reconciliation and subsequent justice, to one which primarily focused on truth-seeking and documenting abuses of human rights, caused a number of theoretical, methodological and practical challenges. Chapter Eight will conclude the thesis, arguing that on paper, the TRC was ultimately successful in its truth-seeking mandate in so much as it conducted the activities to which it was committed, completing and submitting a final report. Yet, in many regards there was a 'veneer of adaptation' – a relatively superficial commitment to adapting to local context while allowing a normative formulation of a truth commission to be implemented in this particular post-conflict environment. Thus reconciliation, as understood locally, was neglected, and expectations of the TRC's mandate were raised and unmet.

The Solomon Islands now enjoys relative law and order, yet peace is nevertheless 'uneasy' (Jeffery 2013, 172). The model of intervention that saw RAMSI restore law and order was one based on a liberal state-building design, a top-down approach with a focus on the economy and rule of law. Whether this was the most appropriate approach, or efficient use of the resources that were poured into the mission, is debated (see Hayward-Jones 2014) and is not the focus of this research. Rather, here I note the emerging themes and lessons that can be learnt from the multiple efforts to broker peace and transform conflict during and after the tensions. It was in this context, with the following existing issues and challenges, that the Solomon Islands TRC was established, realised and subsequently ignored by the government of the day.

### 4.5.1   Fragile localised systems of justice

This chapter has illustrated that Solomon Islanders typically employ a combination of Christian, state-based and local or *kastom* practices to maintain order and peace in communities.  Value is placed on maintaining relationships and a societal equilibrium. When disputes or conflict do arise, reconciliation practices – while varying across the archipelago – are generally aimed towards restoring relationships, or creating change (Moore 2004, 28). As Moore (2004, 216) vividly depicts:

> Solomon Islanders recognise complex symbolic links between human relationships, lands, gardens, music, dance, everyday thoughts, speech, their ancestors, and now

Christianity, but this cosmological balance is fragile and rather like living comfortably in the vortex of a cyclone.

During the 1998–2003 conflict, *kastom* was 'manipulated' and the practice of compensation exploited as various actors sought personal financial gain, enabling and entrenching a government compensation culture (Allen 2013, 16; Fraenkel 2004). Localised practices and *kastom*, however, were also invoked in various peacebuilding initiatives, as was Christianity, and continue to be influential factors in contemporary conflict management across the country (Pollard 2000a; Monson 2013). In a review of state-building and peacebuilding in Solomon Islands, Braithwaite et al. suggest that the failure to enable and support conflict management practices at the village level by chiefs and churches has been the most crucial weakness in the justice system: 'This was the form of justice that the People's Surveys showed 90 per cent of citizens value most highly' (2010, 139).

Despite the highly resourced criminal justice process led by RAMSI, Solomon Islands communities persisted in pursuing justice, as understood locally, through other means, such as local reconciliations facilitated by church and community leaders, reconciliations by militants themselves within prisons, and supporting calls for a broader reconciliation program such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The demand for these measures demonstrated dissatisfaction with pursuing criminal proceedings alone (Harris Rimmer 2010, 10). However, localised justice systems are not a panacea. They are fragile and require attention, and practices that incorporate local and restorative processes in conjunction with formal retributive approaches need to be strengthened. Although state, church and *kastom* systems for managing disputes exist and overlap, the recent Justice Delivered Locally research found that in many places systems of justice and dispute management were fragile, under stress, or have broken down altogether; for example, 'due to the entanglement of chiefs and local leaders in parochial and self-interested power struggles' (Allen et al. 2013, xi). The research also found that while Solomon Islanders have a preference for non-state systems of justice, they still viewed the state as a legitimate actor in local level conflict management and wished these services to be improved (Allen et al. 2013, xi). The authors conclude that 'many people in rural Solomon Islands do not have access to either effective state or adequate local systems to enable them to mediate or equitably and durably manage and resolve the disputes they face' (Allen et al. 2013, 79).

## 4.5.2 Localised conflict dynamics

A second theme that emerges from post-conflict peace and reconciliation efforts has been the question of 'who' it is that needs to be reconciled. Despite the ethnic rhetoric of the conflict, and the numerous reconciliatory events between representatives of 'Guadalcanal' and 'Malaita', the dynamics of the violence, and therefore the potential spaces for peacebuilding, were much more complicated and localised. As McDougall and Kere (2011, 146) explain, 'distrust and fear between Malaitan and Guadalcanal people *resulted* from the conflict, but they were not necessarily the most important *causes*'. The conflict dynamics were much more fragmented, and the causes deep-rooted and intersecting.

While the initial stages of the conflict played out along provincial identity lines, violence was committed within, as well as between, community and provincial groups: 'The civil strife in the Solomons was not one conflict but multiple conflicts; violence occurred not only between strangers of different ethnic groups but also among friends, neighbours, and families' (McDougall and Kere 2011, 146). Without functioning law and order at the time, room was made for a range of conflicts to resurface, as interviewee Commissioner Caroline Laore explained:

> *So when you take out the ability of the country for law and order a lot of conflict came out, so that's why it's not only Malaita and Guadalcanal. You have land cases, family problems, you have all kinds of even jealousy, even cases that go back hundred years came up. There was violence, the rape of girls, all these things.*

After 2000, militants from Guadalcanal split, and Keke and his supporters committed atrocities in rural areas of the province. Malaitan ex-militants returned to Malaita or stayed in Honiara, often intimidating, looting and threatening citizens. State-owned ships and weapons were used in the joint operation to capture Keke, further terrorising the local villages. Older grievances, land disputes and intra- and inter- family disputes that had previously been unaddressed resurfaced and became drivers of further conflict and violence. Inflated demands for compensation for infractions within communities were made. Accusations of not supporting the local militants – or being a 'spear' – were made and violence threatened or committed as a punishment (Ata et al. 2012). In the research I conducted at the TRC, it was found that in the reported cases of rape and sexual assault, the perpetrator was often of the same provincial identity as the victim, and that violence of this nature was committed as an

act of punishment to a woman or her family following unmet demands for compensation and accusations of being a 'spear'.[28]

### 4.5.3  Ongoing drivers of conflict

The TRC 'identified a set of underlying socio-historical features, which upon merging at a particular moment, generated an unstable situation and might be considered as the "roots" of the conflict' (Ata et al. 2012, 735). It goes on to list them as:

- The hybridisation of pre-colonial forms of social organization with modern elements, particularly the adaption of local "bigman" and *wantok* systems to the requirements of state politics.

- The legacy of colonial domination which a) had given little room to indigenous participation in decision-making and precluded the formation of indigenous leadership beyond the local level and; b) had sown the seed for future conflict with large-scale land alienations.

- A decolonisation process which placed a Western state model over a plethora of semi-autonomous social entities.

- The adoption of the Westminster parliamentary model despite widespread demand for an alternative system of governance.

- Uneven distribution of development investment after independence.

- Uncontrolled internal migrations supported by the 1978 Constitution that generated pressure on land resources on Guadalcanal.

- A sequence of national Governments unable to promote nation-building.

(Ata et al. 2012, 735)

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[28] See Ata et al., 470–99, and Chapter Five.

The continuation of a number of underlying issues and grievances that led to the violence provides a third challenge and emerging theme for post-conflict peacebuilding in Solomon Islands. While causes of the conflict are intersecting and complex, and some of the conditions that exacerbated these issues were specific to the time and place, many drivers of the conflict remain today. Pollard and Wale (2004, 586) explain:

> The underlying feelings of injustice that fuelled the conflict – ones that almost every Guadalcanal person felt strongly, and that most Malaitans could easily identify with as well – have not been successfully addressed, and the economic circumstances continue to perpetuate injustice.

Jeffery (2013, 172) echoes this concern, warning any improvements for human rights, justice and peace achieved thus far will 'all be in vain if the underlying causes of the conflict, particularly disputes over the land tenure system and chronic deprivation and underdevelopment are not adequately addressed'. Centralisation of infrastructure and services in Honiara continues to encourage migration to the capital. Combined with a large youth bulge in the population, a school system that pushes students out of the education system, and limited employment opportunities in the capital, there is a contingent of young, underemployed people with nothing to do (Ata et al. 2012, 768).

The state continues to be 'riddled with corruption', although improvements have been made towards anti-corruption and transparency, including a media prepared to report on these issues (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 151). Resentment is felt towards the government by ex-militants and victims from all sides of the conflict for failing to address grievances as they were raised and contain the violence as it erupted. Land issues at the heart of the conflict continue to be unaddressed, and are continually worsened by the presence of resource extraction industries such as logging and mining.

Also, the project of nation-building remains an area in need of attention and nuanced approaches. The National Peace Council saw this as a need for post-conflict peacebuilding, and their unrealised strategic plan outlined activities designed to foster nation-building via civil society (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 5). Allen and Dinnen (2013, par. 2) also draw attention to the 'much larger and more significant transitional challenges facing this small Pacific island country' that are occurring 'in and around the state, as well as above and beneath it',

such as strengthening formal and informal institutions, resource management, urban planning and development, and local-level challenges facing communities.

### 4.5.4  Widespread and unaddressed psychosocial needs

A fourth challenge identified for post-conflict reconciliation and peacebuilding in Solomon Islands is addressing the psychosocial impact of the conflict on its people. UNICEF reported (2005, 19) that 'it is difficult to overstate the psychosocial impact of this trauma', and that the trauma experienced was not confined to direct victims or displaced people, but extended to citizens throughout the country who experienced a severe undermining of their sense of personal security and their confidence in the future. Considering the relatively stable peace that existed prior to the conflict, the violence and atrocities experienced and witnessed by the population had a deep impact. In an interview, Australian journalist and long-term Solomon Islands resident Mary-Louise O'Callaghan described the shock of the violence and subsequent feelings of guilt and shame, even for those who were not directly related in conflict events:

> *I'd been living here since the late '80s, and it'd been an incredibly peaceful place, pretty non-violent – I mean there was domestic violence definitely, and a little bit of violence and some deaths in relation to land disputes occasionally, but the sort of stuff that happened during the Tensions, just wasn't even close to that. We didn't have the problem of the sort of endemic violence that you find in PNG, for whatever reason. So most of the society was in shock [...] Some people had very bad feelings about Solomons and about themselves, or about Malaita if that's where they were from.*

Many Solomon Islanders to whom I spoke during my time at the TRC and for this research mentioned the need to 'heal'. Often placing their hand on their heart, several said it needed to happen 'in here' first. While churches and NGOs have conducted mental health, counselling and trauma training, formal delivery of these services is practically non-existent, and informal support of this nature appears to remain weak. An analysis of mental health services in Solomon Islands is beyond the scope of this thesis; rather, here I make note of the need for increased attention and more nuanced approaches to post-conflict trauma in particular and mental health more generally.

## 4.5.5 Need for local champions for reconciliation and peacebuilding

A final theme and salient lesson that emerges from an analysis of the post-conflict context in Solomon Islands is the value and necessity of local actors in the peacebuilding processes, and the importance of bottom-up nation-building. While RAMSI's top-down, state-building agenda quickly restored law and order and strengthened institutions, thus allowing a secure space for nation-building and peacebuilding processes to take place, it is clear that security and state-building are not synonymous with peace and nation-building.

External actors were correct to see reconciliation as 'something Solomon Islanders must demand, initiate and lead' (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 81). Yet, more awareness, reflection and sensitivity was needed to acknowledge that even though they were not directly responsible for reconciliation or peacebuilding, that the actions of external actors still had an enormous bearing on local perceptions and priorities, as explained by Kabutaulaka (2005a, 409):

> During the process of post-conflict nation-building, citizens and the national government can easily be marginalised, overwhelmed and reduced to being audience/spectators in the building of their country. This is particularly the case in countries like Solomon Islands where violent conflicts have further weakened already weak states. Consequently, the scripts for nation-building will invariably be written by foreign actors and will be influenced by their interests, their definitions of what constitutes nation-building, and their perceptions of what the country should look like. This can frustrate locals to the extent that they quietly withdraw from participating.

For all the peacebuilding efforts made after the conflict, those grounded in Solomon Islands communities are the ones consistently praised, such as the efforts by women's groups, church groups, and the NPC (Braithwaite et al. 2010; Maebuta and Spence 2009). Much can be learned from the efforts made by the NPC, as Braithwaite et al. (2010, 42) note:

> The greatest tragedy of the dismantling of the NPC was that it had dispersed networks on the ground, in the villages, encouraging traditional leaders to mediate conflicts (including all-important land disputes) locally, to support the local rebuilding of the legitimacy of the Solomon Islands police, to watch for weapons, to provide an early warning of rekindling hot-spots and to involve schoolteachers and churches in peace education and assisting children recovering from trauma.

The NPC activities were led and conducted by Solomon Islanders, they promoted and facilitated reconciliation between aggrieved parties, and they did not limit their support to

conflict-related disputes, but understood the interconnected nature of the violence and community disputes. Support provided for reconciliation allowed parties to meet, negotiate and reconcile, but did not constitute the actual compensation payments. With field workers located in the villages, supported by respected leaders in Honiara, the NPC had reach and presence.

## 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the Solomon Islands, focusing specifically on the nature of conflict, dispute resolution and reconciliation practices. It has shown the complexity of the conflict dynamics and the multifaceted efforts at brokering peace by a variety of actors. Importantly, it has noted that reconciliation can take place through state (where available), Christian, or *kastom* processes, or a combination thereof, being 'complementary or alternative paths to the same end goal' (McDougall and Kere 2011, 148). This discussion provides a contextual background for the findings discussed in Chapters Six and Seven.

Importantly in this chapter, key themes and critical features of the post-conflict context in which the TRC was eventually implemented have been identified. These include the need for strengthened localised systems of dispute management and justice; acknowledgement and response to the localised conflict dynamics; addressing the ongoing drivers of conflict; acknowledging and response to the widespread trauma amongst the population; and finally the importance of the leadership, guidance and participation of Solomon Islanders in the peace process.

Chapter Five will consider the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission in detail, tracing its establishment and the initial hopes and visions of forming a commission, describing how it operated in reality, touching on the challenges and hurdles it faced, before findings and analysis of those challenges are presented in Chapters Six and Seven and Eight.

# 5. Establishing the Solomon Islands TRC: Background, visions and operation

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a comprehensive background to the Solomon Islands TRC. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first looks at the early efforts made towards establishing the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the visions and hopes for what it was to achieve. The second looks at the various processes of establishing the TRC, through a series of committees and government endorsement. The third section documents the events, key features, and activities of the TRC while it was in operation, from January 2010 until January 2012. The public perception of the TRC, and the everyday realities and challenges of implementing the TRC, are discussed in detail in Chapters Six and Seven.

## 5.2 Early efforts, visions and hopes: A civil society approach

Civil society actors played a critical role in the formation of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The idea for a TRC was first proposed at the 'height' of the conflict, in 2000, at a CSN organised peace conference. At the time, members of a Peace Office established within SICA were advocating for peace agreements and seeking ways to end the fighting and to secure peace (UNDP 2011, 3). The SICA Peace Office advocated for the TRC as a potential means to 'build national unity' through truth-telling, reconciliation and justice or amnesty processes (SICA 2002, 6). Conceptualising reconciliation as it is understood locally – that is, as inherent in the process of ending conflict as much as denoting restored relationships after it, as described in Chapter Four – the TRC was seen by those in the SICA Peace Office as 'one way to move the country forward from conflict' (Interview with LA). Influenced by the establishment of truth commissions around the world such as in Sierra Leona and South Africa, the SICA Peace Office conducted research into the suitability of establishing a TRC in Solomon Islands. Matthew Wale, a member of the SICA Peace Office at the time, and later a member of parliament when the TRC Act was passed, undertook a study tour to South Africa to examine the TRC that was established there (UNDP 2011, 3).

Following a church leaders' conference in August 2002, a working committee called the Truth and Reconciliation Reference Group (TRRG) was established. A request for support was made to the Commonwealth Secretariat, resulting in a visit to Honiara by the head of the Human Rights Unit at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London, who was also the former principal legal counsel to the South African TRC. Mr. Hanif Valley met with the TRRG over a one week consultation in Honiara, during which a framework for a Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission was prepared (SICA 2002, 2). The framework, published as a small pink pamphlet, became the basis for a community-wide dialogue process, the outcome of which was hoped to be a 'truth and reconciliation process that is appropriate to the context of our society and issues but builds on experiences of other countries' (SICA 2002, 2). It proposed a TRC 'as a way of facilitating a sustainable peace in Solomon Islands' (SICA 2002, 3).

The framework considered the sociopolitical context of Solomon Islands at that time, noting factors befitting the implementation of a TRC, such as that there had yet to be prosecutions for conflict-related crimes, former militants continued to retain weapons and exercise influence, and there was uncertainty as to future peace (SICA 2002, 5). A number of key features and strengths of the Solomon Islands were also noted as congruent with the proposed commission. These included an impartial and independent judiciary; strength of *kastom* and reconciliation traditions; strength of Christian faith; a relatively short period of active armed conflict; a relatively limited number of incidents; and the small number of perpetrators (SICA 2002, 6). According to the framework, truth was seen as a path to reconciliation. Reconciliation – on a range of levels – was described as the priority:

> The goal of the process is to build national unity. The process should target reconciliation as its primary outcome, but we must find and know the truth in order to reconcile […] Reconciliation between victim and perpetrator, perpetrator and village and *within the nation as a whole* should be the primary goal of the truth, justice and reconciliation process in Solomon Islands. (SICA 2002, 6 and 11)

The SICA Peace Office conducted a community-wide dialogue process on the proposed TRC framework, from November 2002 until August 2003. Responses from the consultations were reportedly positive (Interviews with former SICA Peace Office members), endorsing the establishment of a TRC. There was 'really strong support for it at that point in time'

(Interview with Bob Pollard). One of the SICA Peace Office members involved with the consultations explained that the TRC was seen as a potential means to achieving justice, as conceptualised locally through a process of reconciliation:

> Because at that time people were really hurting […] and they said 'we really like this idea.' Because, one thing I remember, one woman, she said, 'even if they take them to court, it won't heal what we've been through. They spoiled our things and killed my son. So I need something beyond the court to help to heal the hurt inside my heart.'
>
> […] Inside the pillars of the TRC, one of them was justice. And for us, we thought they would come up with, for example to heal this woman, something in kastom. This man who did something wrong, he should go make it right. Or if he spoiled property he should go put something to make it right. That's the kind of thing we hoped to happen. (Interview with LA)

The TRRG met again in October 2003 to consider the results of the dialogue process and to finalise a submission to the SICA Executive and to Cabinet for consideration.

While the SICA Peace Office had been influenced by the TRC in South Africa, they were conscious of the need to adopt a mechanism to suit the Solomon Islands context. The early stages of developing a TRC saw a process of consultative and participatory dialogue and planning amongst the civil society, as Bob Pollard explained:

> So the Peace Office basically made the recommendation to report back to the SICA Executive saying we support it, it's something we should pursue further. And so from there, some work was done, there was a bit of drafting, on what a Solomon Islands TRC might look like, and then there was a second workshop held, in which point we sort of worked out some of the nuts and bolts of what a Solomon Islands TRC might do, and that was where we had the Chief Justice involved […] and church, women, community leaders were involved. It was good work. We really sort of thrashed out some of the issues and talked about how we might move forward. And that was where the idea really started to take shape, from there. And once that was put together, we were then really waiting for the right time for Parliament, for it to be supported. And it took a while.

Following the arrival of RAMSI in 2003, and its law and order agenda, momentum for a TRC stalled. As noted in Chapter Four, peacebuilding and reconciliation were not in RAMSI's mandate, nor did RAMSI work in direct partnership with the MNURP. Yet its sheer size and whole-of-government approach dominated the 'intellectual space' of post-conflict peacebuilding (Kabutaulaka 2005a, 420). The Australian Government and RAMSI were not

supportive of a TRC, focusing instead on the three pillars of RAMSI's mission and its focus on criminal justice: 'Australian thinking was that a Truth and Reconciliation Commission would give "mixed messages" concerning the core criminal enforcement, rule-of-law focus of the mission' (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 157). The government at the time was apprehensive about the idea of implementing a TRC, a SICA Peace Office member recalling being told, 'you'll dig up old wounds, and cause trouble for another conflict' (Interview with LA). The SICA Peace Office member explained, 'they were afraid. They said it's no good to open up […] They would rather let the past lie in the past and not dig it up'.

Over time the SICA Peace Office was subsumed into SICA and lost momentum to advocate for and champion the TRC; a former member explaining they had 'run out of steam' and after repeated attempts at lobbying the government of the day, 'just wanted someone to take it on and go with it' (Interview with LA). Without the backing of the Solomon Islands Government, RAMSI, or a strong leader or organisation to champion it, reconciliation, and with it the TRC, was 'crowded' off the policy agenda (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 81; Kabutaulaka 2005a).

## 5.3   Establishing the TRC: Government responsibilities

In 2005, a review of RAMSI by the Pacific Islands Forum Eminent Persons Group (PIF EPG) noted momentum towards reconciliation had been lost and recommended for the MNURP to advise on establishing a TRC based on international models that did not involve amnesty (PIF EPG 2005, 7). A change in the Solomon Islands government in 2006 saw 'reconciliation' feature on the policy agenda and a policy of support for a TRC (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 86). In December 2006, the MNURP submitted a cabinet paper on the proposed TRC to parliament, and in January 2007 it was approved. A steering committee was established which, together with the MNURP, was tasked to prepare a terms of reference for the TRC to submit for cabinet approval. Later that year, the newly elected government led by Prime Minister Derek Sikua made national reconciliation and rehabilitation a key priority, which provided further support to the TRC as a means to promote national unity and reconciliation, and the TRC became part of the overall government Medium Term Development Strategy 2008–2010, coming under the responsibility of the MNURP.

Steering committee members were chosen to represent the churches, NGOs, women and youth, and to include those with knowledge of the law, the conflict, restorative justice and Solomon Islands society and tradition. Members included (Ata et al. 2012, 1190–91):

| | |
|---|---|
| Chairman of the Law Reform Commission | Judge Frank Kabui (Chair) |
| Chairman of National Peace Council | Paul Tovua (Deputy Chair) |
| Representative of the Government Executive | Sam Alasia |
| Representative of the Opposition Group | Hon. Milner Tozaka |
| Representative of SICA | Matthew Wale |
| Representative of Women | Dr. Alice Pollard |
| Attorney General's Chamber | Ranjit Hewagama |
| Permanent Secretary, MNURP | Joy Kiriau Kere |
| Youth Representative | Joe Billy Oge |
| Secretary | Ruth Liloqula |
| Under Secretary, Special Duty MPS | Justus Denni |

The steering committee was expected to consult with relevant stakeholders in the peace and reconciliation process; define the commission and the scope of its work; prepare a process to appoint the commissioners; and to draft the TRC Bill to present to parliament (Ata et al., 2012, 1191). Consultations were held with civil society across the country in which strong support was shown for the establishment of a TRC.

In 2008 Matthew Wale, a former member of the SICA Peace Office, prominent leader of the CSN, and advocate for the TRC, was elected to parliament in a by-election. In April that year, the steering committee submitted its report to the government recommending the establishment of a TRC. The Minister for National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace, Hon. Sam Iduri, introduced a Bill to parliament to establish the commission, and on 28 August 2008, parliament passed the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act (No. 5 of 2008)*[29] (referred to as the TRC Act in this thesis) with a strong majority.

According to the TRC Act, the commission was to be established as an independent statutory authority with a timeframe of one year, with the possibility of an extension for a further year. The commission was mandated to 'promote national unity and reconciliation' (TRC Act 2008, 5[1a-d]) by:

- engaging all stakeholders in the reconciliation process;

- examining the nature, antecedents, root causes, accountability or responsibility for and the extent of, human rights violations or abuses which occurred between the 1st of January 1998 and RAMSI's arrival on the 23rd July 2003;

- considering impacts on health, education, legal and other sectors;

- devising policy options or measures that may prevent similar situations or a repetition of such events in the future. (TRC Act 2008, 5[1a-d])

According to the TRC Act, the commission was also 'to restore the human dignity of victims and promote reconciliation' by providing an opportunity for victims and perpetrators to give personal accounts of their experiences, therefore 'creating a climate which fosters constructive interchange between victims and perpetrators, giving special attention to the subject of sexual abuses and to the experiences of children within the armed conflict' (TRC Act 2008, 5[2c]).

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[29] Access to full text of the TRC Act is available at
http://www.paclii.org/sb/legis/num_act/tarca2008371/

The commission could not grant amnesty or provide compensation; however, according to Section 7 of the TRC Act, no evidence or statement given to the commission would be admissible in a court of law and no witnesses were to be compelled to incriminate themselves or their family (7[1-4]). This drew some criticism from human rights groups such as Amnesty International who released a statement saying 'that information collected by the TRC should be available to the investigation and prosecution authorities' and that the limitations 'could in fact lead to impunity' (Amnesty International 2009). In evidence provided to the 2009 Parliamentary Inquiry into RAMSI, TRC Chairman Sam Ata explained that this limitation was to ensure the TRC focused on reconciliation between individuals and communities:

> The TRC does not take the place of our laws. Our criminal justice system is there, it is a different process and the TRC is another process. Actually, it is not a commission that people should be frightened of. It is not to prosecute any one [sic]. It is actually to help people, the so-called perpetrators or the victims of the violence. (Evidence provided to Parliamentary Inquiry 2009, 202)

Pursuant to the TRC Act (Schedule 1, Section 2), a National Selection Committee was formed to select the TRC Commissioners in February 2009. Again, broad representation across society was a priority and members of the selection committee were chosen to represent the Solomon Islands Government, the opposition, Solomon Islands churches, Ministry of Provincial Government, SICA Federation of Women and traditional leaders. The committee was chaired by then Chief Justice, Sir Albert Palmer.

The TRC Act stipulated that of the five commissioners, three were to be Solomon Islands nationals, and two non-nationals. Such a model of 'hybrid commissions' are generally established 'to avoid (or minimise) suspicions of bias when local investigative skills and expertise may be lacking' (Gonzalez and Varney 2013, 19). For the Solomon Islands, the international commissioners were expected to bring strong international human rights experience to the TRC, and to increase the trust of the community in the objectivity of the TRC. The two non-national commissioners were selected from a list provided by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights Regional Office in Fiji, and a public call for nominations was made to elect the three national commissioners, a process that also raised the public profile of the commission. For example, a two page lift-out in the Solomon Star (SIG 2009) entailed a call for nominations as well as a series of frequently asked questions and

answers about the commission, its mandate, amnesty, reconciliation, the role of the commissioners, and the nomination and selection process (see Figure 5.1). Following selection, the names of the proposed commissioners, including a Chair and Deputy Chair, were submitted to the Solomon Islands Prime Minister on 22 April 2009.
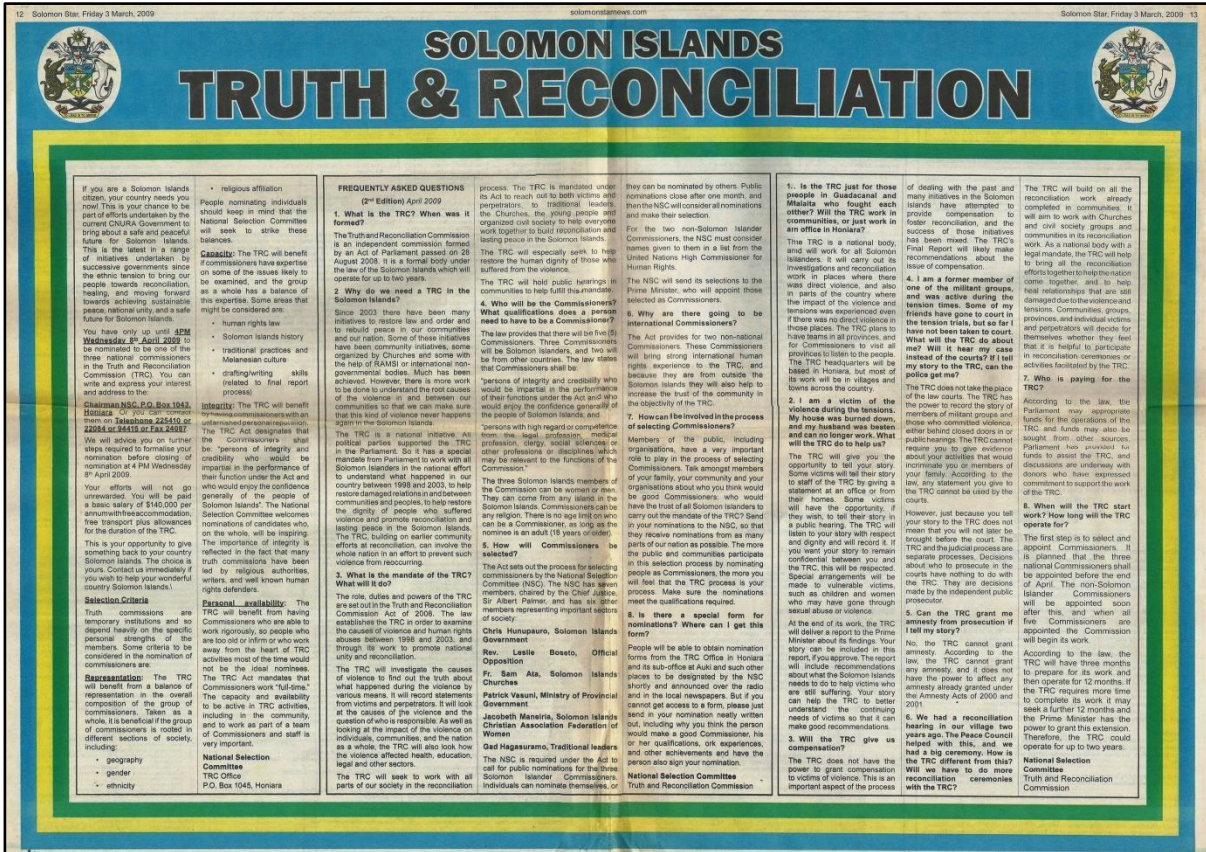


**Figure 5.1** Lift-out from the Solomon Star with call for nominations and frequently asked questions about the Solomon Islands TRC. Source: Solomon Islands Government 2009a.

The two non-national commissioners selected were Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi of Fiji, a lawyer, distinguished member of the Great Council of Chiefs in Fiji and former Vice President of Fiji; and Sofia Macher of Peru, a human rights activist and a former commissioner from the TRC in Peru. The three national commissioners were chosen to represent the three provinces most involved in the conflict. They were Reverend Sam Ata of Malaita Province, a theologian and former Dean of the Saint Barnabas Cathedral in Honiara; Caroline Laore of Western Province, a former Permanent Secretary; and George Kejoa of Guadalcanal, a former parliamentarian. Mr Kejoa passed away during the commission's operation in 2010 and was

later replaced by Kamilo Teke of Guadalcanal, also a former parliamentarian, in late 2011. Sam Ata was chosen to be the Chair of the commission, and Sofia Macher the Deputy Chair.

When the TRC began its operations in 2010, RAMSI had been present in the country for over six years. Thus the context in which the TRC established, within the midst of an ongoing external intervention, was vastly different from the one in which it was initially conceived, during the period of conflict. Peace, in a limited sense, had been restored, and the pursuit of criminal justice had been prioritised, with the 'tension trials' mostly complete. Operating against the backdrop of the high number of prosecutions and trials from conflict-related crimes made the TRC unique compared to truth commissions globally (Harris Rimmer 2010, 9). A former member of the SICA Peace Office explained the commission was conceptualised as a mechanism of nation-building as well as reconciliation,

> *Someone has said 'Solomon Islands has been conceived but not born.' So I quite agree with that. And so the biggest challenge for us is to bring this country together. And the aim of the TRC is that, to bring this country together. But we have to deal with certain issues like killings, family division, these are things that are still like walls between people, between different provinces, between the government, between the people. And those walls have to come down. (Interview with VG)*

Braithwaite et al. (2010, 87–88) explain how rather than having to decide between justice, truth and reconciliation, the Solomon Islands TRC was oriented towards creating a space for shared storytelling and constructing a narrative of the conflict years:

> More of the emphasis can be on the nation-building opportunity that truth about the past and reconciliation for the future can deliver in a post-conflict environment […] The truth and reconciliation process in Solomon Islands provides an opportunity for citizens to tell their stories and to hear those of others, to discover what it means to be a Solomon Islander. It provides an important vehicle for linking people in different parts of the archipelago through shared storytelling and the understanding and empathy this is likely to generate. (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 87)

The TRC Act stated clearly that the commission was not intended to affect criminal accountability (2008, 7[1-4]), but its object and function 'shall be to promote national unity and reconciliation' (5[1]). Commissioner Sofia Macher told Pricilla Hayner (2011, 71) that 'the main focus was to advance reconciliation and to facilitate a 'consensual collective memory' of the past'.

After passing the TRC Act, the Solomon Islands Government requested assistance from the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) in designing the TRC. The ICTJ provided technical assistance to the TRC, the MNURP and to civil society actors, such as awareness and training workshops with church leaders and media personnel. Daniela Gavshon (ICTJ 2010, 2), then head of ICTJ in Honiara, described her office's role as:

> [U]sing its comparative experience to advise the TRC as issues arise, present it with various options, and in some cases anticipate some of the obstacles that the TRC may confront. The aim is that the TRC will be able to combine comparative experience with local context and go forward with a commission that is the most suitable for the people of Solomon Islands.

By this time, RAMSI had accepted the commission, and members of the Participating Police Force (PPF) who were serving as technical advisors to the RSIPF provided support for the commission's exhumations program (Fraenkel et al. 2014, 82–3). The Australian Government also provided financial support to the commission (see Figure 5.2). Braithwaite et al. (2010, 157) question whether this was an example of 'mission creep' but instead suggest RAMSI 'had learned to listen' and 'be responsive to peacebuilding specificities articulated by local voices'. Nevertheless, Australia and RAMSI still 'kept their distance' as the initial Deputy Executive Secretary of the TRC explained: 'I think that Australia was also wary of the fact that there was some rumours connected to RAMSI and all that, so I think they decided not to be seen directly involved in the work of the TRC' (Interview with David Tuhanuku). Bob Pollard, a former SICA Peace office member who was also the in-country manager for the AusAID-funded volunteer program that supported my position at the TRC, also spoke about the Australian Government's tentative position in relation to the commission:

> *Well RAMSI were always opposed to the TRC, or more Australia, the Australian peace experts were always saying no, a TRC isn't a good idea, it will cause more trouble [...] Well basically the interesting thing, from our perspective, they were saying the same thing as the eccentric Christians, just forgive and forget and move on [...]*
>
> *LV: And do you remember when it shifted? I mean, AusAID gave financial support to the TRC.*
>
> *Did it ever shift? I'm not sure it ever really shifted. Maybe begrudgingly, but even getting you as a volunteer, AusAID really grilled me over it. I think, if it hadn't been for*

*my involvement - I suspect that AusAID decided it wasn't a fight worth having at that point and they let you carry on.*

A change in the Solomon Islands Government in 2010 to one less supportive of the TRC saw a drop again in political will and support of the commission. Bishop Terry Brown described the TRC being 'under-funded by the government and kind of left on its own, in danger of being seen to be too close to the opposition'.

The TRC directly acquired funds from two key sources – the Solomon Islands Government and donors[30] – but did not directly manage its own finances, an arrangement that was to be problematic, as detailed in Chapter Six. Government funds from the development and recurrent budgets were administered through the MNURP, with the Permanent Secretary, Joy Kere, acting as the commission's accountant. Donor funds from the European Union, UNDP, AusAID and NZAID were channelled through the International Support Facility (ISF), established within UNDP solely to manage the finances for the TRC. The ISF was tasked with providing administrative support to the commission and was not supposed to be part of its decision-making processes. The ISF was seen as a means to ensure the independence of the commission, creating a barrier between the donors and the sensitive work involved in the truth and reconciliation processes. So as not to be seen as interfering with the work of the TRC, donors maintained low visibility and no logos were included in TRC documents or banners, so that the process would be seen as government, rather than donor, driven (UNDP 2011, 27).

The ISF was also a means to streamline the financial arrangements between the donors and the TRC. Donor funds totalled just over US$3.5 million. Of this the European Union contributed the largest amount, providing almost half of the donor budget. Figure 5.2 presents a breakdown of the donor funds.

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[30] Various other donors contributed to individual aspects of the TRC's operation. For example, UN Women provided funds to assist with the research for the women's chapter and for the provision of counselling (UNDP 2011, 3), and the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva provided funds through the Solomon Islands Red Cross for the exhumation team, to assist with logistics, coffins, and construction materials for graves (Ata et al. 2012, 696).
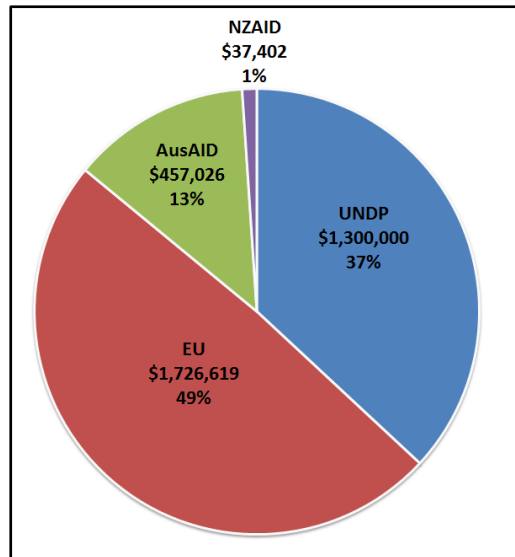
**Figure 5.2** Donor funds provided to the TRC. Source: Adapted from UNDP 2011, 4.

## 5.4    TRC in operation: Starting on the back foot

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former Chair of the South African TRC, was invited to officially launch the commission and inaugurate the new commissioners. His visit was planned for April 2009, presenting imminent deadlines for the commissioners to be mobilised and the TRC established. Although the two non-national commissioners had been appointed in time for Tutu's visit, lengthy delays in securing their contracts meant they were not present at the launch, and did not arrive in the country until five months later.

The launch of the Solomon Islands TRC and Desmond Tutu's visit was widely reported in local and regional media (see for example Australia Network News 2009a; SIBC 2009; Tuhaika 2009). Thousands attended the opening event at Lawson Tama stadium, where the former Nobel Peace Laureate spoke of the need for forgiveness as a prerequisite to peace (Ata et al. 2012, 1196). Prime Minister Derek Sikua told the crowd 'the launching of the Commission is a vital part of the efforts as Solomon Islands continues to work towards closure of a most challenging chapter in the history of the country' (SIBC 2009).

The rush to launch the commission during Tutu's visit meant the TRC began on the back foot, working tirelessly to meet day-to-day operational challenges, to the neglect of the broader administrative planning and conceptual considerations inherent in implementing a truth

commission. Serving as the first Deputy Executive Secretary of the TRC and responsible for much of the early work in establishing the commission, David Tuhanuku attempted to delay the launch of the TRC, but was told:

> It would be good that the TRC would form at the time that Desmond Tutu was coming. I could sense that it would be really embarrassing for the government if Tutu came and there was no TRC [...] And I think what is relevant here is that we were not prepared. The logistics were not there, we didn't have the mechanisms or the processes in place when we decided to get started [...] I feel that we could have done better. We didn't have the opportunity to be able to really think through how we are going to make the concept of truth and truth-seeking and reconciliation work in the Solomon Islands.

Following the highly publicised, momentum-generating launch in April, the operational starting date of the TRC was further delayed, reportedly due to 'red tape in the United Nations Development Program' (Australia Network News 2009b) until October, pending the arrival of the two international commissioners.[31] Both international commissioners spoke of the frustration and disturbance this caused in their personal and professional lives, and the consequence of the delays on the public profile of the commission. Commissioner Joni Madraiwiwi lamented that:

> Huge momentum was lost, because for the two or three days that Archbishop Tutu was there, there was just blanket coverage of his visit. And there was huge goodwill generated by that. But then it was dissipated in those five months.

The international commissioners arrived in early October 2009, and later that month the commissioners and the Deputy Executive Secretary conducted a study tour with the ICTJ to Timor-Leste to learn about the CAVR process, the only TRC in the broader Asia–Pacific region (ICTJ 2010). The TRC Act was amended to accommodate the delays (Solomon Islands Government 2009b), and the Solomon Islands TRC officially began on 15 January 2010. Over a year later, in March 2011, the commission was granted an extension of one year, extending its term to 15 January 2012 (Ata et al. 2012, 1187).

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[31] According to the TRC Act (Schedule 2, Section 3 5[2]), the quorum of the commission required three members to be present, including one non-national commissioner.

The financial arrangement and ongoing delays in funding from both the Solomon Islands Government and the ISF caused ongoing frustration and tension between the new TRC administration, the ISF and MNURP. Senior TRC staff and commissioners felt the lack of control over its own finances were an impingement on the TRC's independence and a poorly planned system considering the time constraints of the commission. As David Tuhanuku explained:

> *I had a lot of confrontations with the Permanent Secretary about the independence of the Commission [...] When I came in I found that the government signed an agreement with the UNDP, and all the international assistance was going to come through UNDP [...] meaning they would follow their own processes. Now the UNDP processes are very slow, and I was dealing with an organisation that had a definite timeframe, and I could see that it would cause a lot of problems.*

And problems indeed ensued. Daniela Gavshon (ICTJ 2010, 2), the head of the ICTJ office in Solomon Islands noted the financial arrangement as a challenge of the TRC:

> The government and the TRC have so far had different views on how the government's funding to the TRC should be administered, which could affect the independence of the commission […] Regarding the administration of foreign donor funding, the mechanisms for this can sometimes be slow and cumbersome. For example, it took several months to issue contracts for the international commissioners. This may have been inevitable, but it has delayed the TRC's work.

The management of finances was consistently raised by senior managers and commissioners during interviews as a major challenge of the TRC. Several interviewees noted the difficult relationship with the permanent secretary of MNURP in terms of releasing funds, which Commissioner Caroline Laore described as 'a begging bowl existence. We had a bowl and we begged for one more spoon and one more spoon. So there were a lot of delays'. The ISF was physically located with UNDP in a separate office to the TRC which led to a feeling of disconnect and lack of support for the TRC administrators, managers and commissioners. One senior manager said 'ISF should have sat with us. ICTJ should also have done this. Whenever people are involved in one project they should come under one roof' (Interview with SM). The forms, systems and time-consuming processes of UNDP did not suit the fluidity and reflexivity required for the TRC process, with Honiara-based staff often awaiting approval from regional and head offices, 'with them, Fiji was involved, New York was involved. All these people are involved' (Interview with SM). Commissioner Sofia Macher elaborated:

*The design for me was a disaster, really a disaster. This I think is part of the problem in Solomon Islands. They design an administration that is all in the UNDP office and not based in the TRC. For me, this is crazy. Because if you are not part of the office and the dynamic of the office, and especially if you have a project which is working with social processes, you can't calculate how many materials you need and schedule the time and organise all this. When you talk about social process, probably you plan to have a meeting with the leaders, I don't know, from some community, and something happens in that community and they decide to not go to the meeting, or the weather, or something changes!*

*If you are not part of the dynamic of the office, you cannot understand if you change dates, you cancel the activity, you create a new one because there is an opportunity. Or if some people are here, so ok, we organise this […] So I think the design of the project, for me, was really unworkable. Because these people in the UNDP are a part of all the process, because in the UNDP all is standardised, that's ok, all have a form to fill. But doesn't matter, if you know the form, you can organise and prepare your life in relation of the form. But if you have this type of organisation [the TRC], and you have the person outside, they don't understand nothing. For me, really, it was so damaging for me, so damaging. So frustrating.*

Aside from the lack of control over its own finances, lengthy processes and ongoing funding delays from the MNURP and ISF caused significant frustration and delays for the TRC, as detailed in Chapter Seven. The ISF was insufficiently staffed for its first year and due to UNDP's lengthy processes in recruiting international staff, an ISF project coordinator was not recruited until December 2010, a year after the project had begun (UNDP 2011, 8). This had serious consequences as the TRC was attempting to establish and fulfil its mandate within an initial timeframe of just one year. Procuring office equipment, meeting financial commitments and paying staff became a source of great difficulty and frustration.  The TRC's research manager, Ludwig Huber, described the situation:

*UNDP took some seven months to buy a couple of digital voice recorders. Hired us two cars, but they didn't think that the cars need fuel, so we had cars, but we didn't have fuel to move them. Very nice cars. But we had to pay for own fuel. I couldn't send my guys out for interviews. I mean, it's a lot of bureaucratic crap.*

Once recruited, the ISF project coordinator maintained regular contact with the TRC administration, facilitating financial processes and providing support. Nevertheless, the ISF project coordinator explained that 'the whole existence of ISF was against the will of TRC, because the TRC wanted to, and had planned to, have its own budget, to implement the way

they liked […] As you can see from what I'm saying, it's not really easy to work with TRC, because we sort of existed against the will of the TRC' (Interview with ISF Project Coordinator, Ladislav Koubek).

The commission consisted of skeleton staff for several months following the arrival of the international commissioners. The TRC Act had stipulated that the Executive Secretary be non-national, and again due to lengthy delays with ISF and UNDP the position was not filled until June 2010. The hired personnel sat with the ISF at the UNDP office, and left after six months, after which the position was changed to a national position and assumed by the then Deputy Executive Secretary. The research manager, who had previously worked at the Peruvian TRC, also did not arrive until June 2010. In the following months the bulk of the field and operational staff were hired, including fieldworkers, statement takers, researchers, media and communication officers, the exhumations team, data entry staff and transcribers.

Aside from myself, another volunteer from New Zealand, the two international commissioners, the initial executive secretary and the research manager, the commission was staffed entirely by Solomon Islanders. The staff came from a range of backgrounds and educational levels, and many had firsthand experience of the conflict and its consequences. Recruiting staff with the professional capacity to undertake the work was an ongoing challenge, worsened by the funding delays and subsequent lengthy delays in their remuneration. When asked about the biggest challenges in his role, the research manager remarked:

> *Everything! I mean, no money. No trained staff. No time. No commitment. No, or very low, professional capacity to do this kind of work […] And time. Time is always a problem. I mean, we started working, and started statement taking in last year, December. In January, they stopped because they didn't get paid. (Interview with Ludwig Huber)*

In total, the TRC employed approximately 170 staff, funded by either the Solomon Islands government, the ISF or UNDP, or seconded from MNURP, and two international volunteers. Comparatively, this is on the smaller side compared with other commissions worldwide. An OHCHR (2006, 15) report on truth commissions notes that recent commissions have typically had between 200–500 staff members at their peak, and the CAVR in Timor-Leste had over 500 staff – including 7 commissioners and 28 regional commissioners (Hayner 2011, 270).

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More on staff capacity and associated challenges is discussed in Chapter Seven. Almost all professional staff at the Solomon Islands TRC were located at the head office in Honiara, aside from the UNDP and ISF staff that were located in separate offices. The TRC also established two smaller regional offices in Auki, Malaita, and Gizo, Western Province, to liaise with provincial stakeholders, facilitate TRC activities, and coordinate and support fieldworkers in the provinces.

### 5.4.1  TRC activities

To achieve its mandate, the commission undertook activities commensurate with truth commissions worldwide. These included statement taking and the compilation of a database to document the incidents of human rights abuses; regional and thematic public hearings; research and investigations that included closed hearings; and an exhumations program to return the bodies of those killed to their families for proper burial. There were also dedicated reconciliation and women's programs, which will be discussed in further detail in Chapters Six and Seven respectively.

A media and communications team was established and fieldworkers were employed and trained to travel around the provinces and raise awareness of the commission and prepare communities for upcoming visits from statement takers. At the request of the TRC, the ICTJ facilitated training for journalists on reporting on the TRC, and in conjunction with SICA, held awareness raising workshops for SICA members. A series of community awareness meetings were held by the commissioners in Honiara with stakeholders to explain the mandate of the TRC. Attendees included church leaders, traditional leaders, women, youth, government officers as well as victims of the conflict and ex-combatants. Reverend Sam Ata, Chairman of the commission, also conducted consultations and awareness programs throughout the country during the course of the commission.

A series of eleven public hearings were held that were either relayed on the radio, televised, and/or publicised in local and regional media (see for example Fox 2010a, 2010b; Osifelo 2011a, 2011c, 2011d; Palmer 2010a, 2010b; Wickham and Gridneff 2010;). School students lined the entrance in the first public hearing where testimony from victims was heard, 'a symbol that the proceedings are not just about the country's past but also its future' (Fox

2010b, par. 3). The commissioners explained the commission's role to 'end this silence' and that they would not pass judgements but that the hearings were 'moments to listen with respect and compassion' (Palmer 2010a, par. 17). The remaining public hearings were either thematic – focusing on women, youth, ex-combatants or national leaders – or regional – focusing on Malaita, Guadalcanal, Western Region (Western Province and Choiseul), Central Region (Isabel and Renbel) and Eastern Region (Makira and Temotu) (see Figure 5.3). In total, 169 people testified at the public hearings.

Two counsellors were recruited to offer counselling support to those who testified at the public hearings. Counselling support was provided for up to two weeks before and after giving testimony. Neither person employed as counsellors had counselling nor trauma-related qualifications, although they had experienced counselling victims prior to the TRC, and had received short-term training through church networks (UNDP 2011, 5).
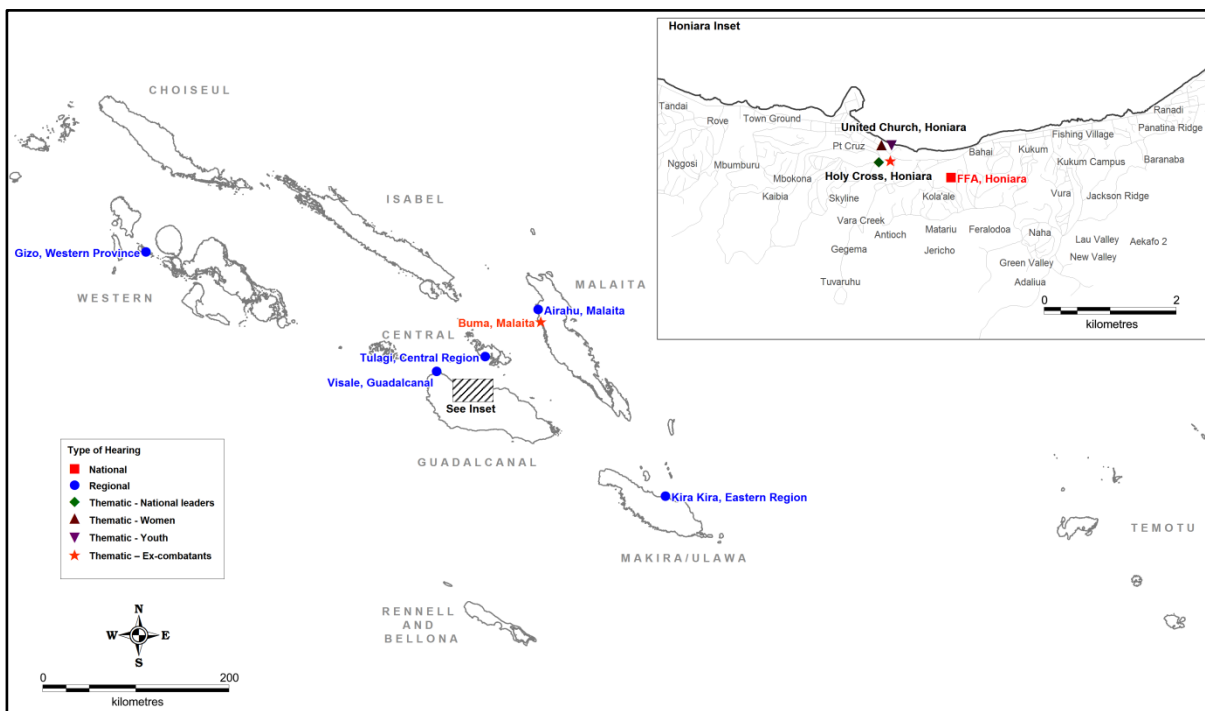


**Figure 5.3** Map indicating the location and type of the TRC's public hearings.

In addition to the public hearings, closed hearings were also held in which a further 100 persons provided testimony. These closed hearings predominately catered for retired police officers, ex-combatants, politicians and other key civil society leaders.

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Statement taking was one of the core activities of the TRC, underpinning the truth-seeking and truth-telling mandate. It involved a team of statement takers gathering testimonies from those affected by the conflict – either victims or perpetrators. Statement taking served a dual purpose for the TRC. On one hand, it was a means to collect primary data for the TRC report and compile a database of human rights abuses that occurred during the conflict; and on the other it was an opportunity for those affected by the conflict to tell their story and have it formally documented. The assumptions underlying the truth-telling activities and the challenges experienced by statement takers and the TRC are detailed in Chapter Six.

The statement taking forms were prepared by an external consultant in early 2010, and in two weeks over September and October 22 statement takers and the TRC staff (ten at that point) attended a two-week training to prepare for the collection of statements. Statement takers collected testimony from victims and in some, but comparatively far fewer cases, ex-combatants across the country, focusing particularly on Honiara, Guadalcanal and Malaita. Testimony was classified on the statement taking forms according to six human rights violations: torture and ill-treatment, sexual violation, property violation, forced displacement, death, and abduction, illegal detention or disappearance. Pending the provision of consent, statement takers recorded the testimony on hand-held recording devices, which were later transcribed by a team of three transcribers at the head office. Statement givers were able to provide their testimony in Pijin or their local language. The commission initially set targets to collect 5,000 statements, with half being from women. In the end the TRC was able to collect 2,361 statements, with 879, or 37 per cent, being from women. More about the challenges of reaching gender targets in statement taking is discussed in Chapter Seven.

The research manager compiled the data made available from the statements and the transcriptions of the testimonies. Additionally, the research team conducted field work, interviews, focus groups and analysis of secondary sources of information. The research team prepared a series of case studies to be included in the final report, focusing on women, youth, ex-combatants and militant groups, and regional histories. The onerous task of preparing and compiling the final report mostly fell on the shoulders of the research manager, without whom the final report may not have been completed.

Finally, perhaps one of the most important yet sensitive programs in terms of reconciliation and healing was the exhumations program. Activities undertaken by the exhumations team included identifying graves from those killed during the conflict, talking with families of those deceased and integrating *kastom* and religious principals into their work. Prior to conducting the exhumations, Chairman Sam Ata explained the importance of the process for healing to the public:

> With all these stories of people wanting to see the remains of their loved ones or at least soil from where their loved ones are buried in, do you think we are healed now? Are we ready to move on when all these remains untouched – no result? Are we ready to move on now? (Puia 2010a, par. 14)

Close to 150 graves were discovered by the exhumations team, of which only four were successfully exhumed and remains returned to the deceased's families for proper burials. The exhumations team worked with the Director of Public Prosecutions, RAMSI's Participating Police Force and other judicial authorities so that measures could be taken to guarantee the chain of custody of the collected evidence and manage any related cases that could be investigated.

The findings of the commission were prepared in a final report that offered a narrative of the conflict and its antecedents, and documented excerpts of some of the statements and testimony. Annexes included transcripts of the public hearings,[32] and a lengthy list documenting recipients of compensation payments during the conflict. The report also offers an analysis of human rights violations and provides policy recommendations to the Solomon Islands Government. The commission was mandated to hand the final report to the prime minister and upon receiving the report, the prime minister was to 'cause it to be laid before Parliament and the report be made available to the public' and 'as far as practicable implement the recommendations of the report' (TRC Act 2008 17[1-4]).

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[32] All but the last public hearing were transcribed. The last public hearing was a thematic hearing for the National Leaders, and was not transcribed due to time restrictions (Ata et al. 2012, 1212).

In February 2012, the commission presented its five volume final report to Solomon Islands Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo at an official ceremony in Honiara. The prime minister accepted the report, saying that 'it marks the closure of an important chapter to a long process of reconciliation and truth-seeking' (Puia 2012, par. 22). Thirteen months after receiving the report, Lilo had not yet tabled it in parliament or released it to the public, as required by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act (2008).[33] After a lengthy silence on the topic of the TRC report, during which several prominent questions regarding its release were raised,[34] Prime Minister Lilo announced a further six month delay. Referring to the 'sensitivity' of the report, he defended the delay saying 'we do not want to rush into releasing the report because we want to handle the issues in a responsible way' (Rakai 2013, par. 9).

One month later, in April 2013, an electronic copy of the report was unofficially released by the editor of the report, long term Solomon Islands resident, and retired Bishop, Dr Terry Brown. The Canadian national released the report to SICA, social[35] and mainstream media in Solomon Islands, international newspaper and radio stations, and a network of researchers (Brown 2013a). Within days the electronic copy of the report and the press release was made available on a Google drive web page.[36] In a press release accompanying and explaining the

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[33] Section 16 (1) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act states, 'The Commission shall submit a report of its work to the Prime Minister at the end of its operations.' Section 17 states, ' (1) The Prime Minister on receiving the report of the Commission, shall cause it to be laid before Parliament and the report be made available to the public. (2) The Government shall as far as practicable implement the recommendations of the report. (3) The Government shall, upon the release of the report of the Commission appoint a person or a body to monitor the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission and provide necessary resources to facilitate its implementation.'

[34] There have been a number of prominent calls for the report's release in mainstream (see Dawea 2013a; Namosuaia 2012; Osifelo 2012; SIBC 2012; Solomon Star 2012) and social media, by the Chairman of the Commission, the editor of the report, a former police commissioner, politicians, ex-combatants, and victims of the conflict.

[35] In recent years, social media, in particular Facebook groups, have become a vibrant platform for discussion regarding Solomon Islands social, political, and economic issues. Many prominent Solomon Islanders contribute to online discussions, which often are subsequently reported in mainstream media.

[36] Available at: https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0BxDPP_frqUgyZ2xTcXctNWZPclk&usp=sharing.

unofficial release, Bishop Terry Brown referred to the inaction and lengthy delays of the prime minister and the message this is sending to victims of the conflict:

> The report has not even been shared with the Ministry of National Reconciliation, Unity and Peace, which would have the primary responsibility for implementing it […] It is not good enough to forgive the perpetrators and forget the victims, which seems to be the approach of the government. (Brown 2013b, par. 2)

The prime minister has raised the report's length and sensitivity as justification to delay its release – both of which were foreseen outcomes of the commission – however, political motives are more likely. According to Bishop Terry Brown, the prime minister's delay is likely because 'there may well be some political issues of people mentioned in the report who are part of his government' (Brown 2013a, par. 3). Matthew Wale, a member of the opposition party at the time, reminded the prime minister that, like the length and sensitivity of the report, the need for its public release was foreseen, saying 'parliament knew this at the first place that was why it passed the TRC Act' (Namosuaia 2013, par. 11).  In response to the prime minister's accusation that Bishop Terry Brown acted illegally by releasing the report (Cooney 2013), Wale in turn criticised Lilo's delay as 'unlawful because the Act does not give the PM any power to delay or summarise the report' (Namosuaia 2013, par. 8). Following critique of the unofficial release, Bishop Terry Brown explained:

> It would be even worse to do reconciliation first and have all the facts come out later. That would reopen wounds and destroy the reconciliation that has taken place. As the TRC Report was the one mandated document to provide the facts (the truth), the sooner it is in the public forum, the better. (Dawea 2013, par. 6)

In the independent review of RAMSI released in 2014, the authors (one of whom was former TRC Commissioner Joni Madraiwiwi) noted the occasional lack of transparency of the Solomon Islands Government and a tendency to not release reports, further recommending that the TRC report be released, stating it is 'a monumental five-volume report full of exceptionally-valuable detail about the history of the *tensions*, which we recommend be released to the public' (Fraenkel et al. 2014, 78).

## 5.5   Conclusion

This chapter began by detailing the initial visions for the Solomon Islands TRC; notably, as a mechanism proposed to prompt reconciliation in a time of relative lawlessness and escalating violence. The commission was advocated for, and closely related to, the church and civil society network, which conceived the potential commission to be integrated with localised reconciliation practices. The context in which it was established several years later, however, was clearly vastly different. Rather than adapt to the local context and build on localised conflict management practices, the TRC was donor-funded and emulated a normative truth commission based on international human rights, conducting activities typical of truth commissions worldwide – statement taking, establishing a database, research and investigations, public hearings, public outreach and communications, and a final report with recommendations (OHCHR 2006, 17–20).

The final report was handed over to the prime minister within the allocated timeframe, and in light of the achievements and activities it completed, the Solomon Islands TRC could be considered a 'success' in so much as it fulfilled its mandated duties and produced a final report. Considering the circumstances, this was a challenging and remarkable achievement in itself. This success, however, was arguably superficial, a performance of reconciliation in the theatre of post-conflict peacebuilding. As observed in Chapter Four, a wider perspective of post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation in the Solomon Islands reveals the TRC to be a minor player on an already crowded stage. Indeed, many Solomon Islanders were unaware of the TRC, and those familiar with its acronym or name were often unaware of its role or mandate.

Although the TRC was initiated by the CSN and SICA Peace Office, once officially established it was ultimately government driven and suffered from many challenges typical of donor-funded and government administered projects in Solomon Islands. Aside from the bureaucratic challenges this presented, the shift away from its civil society beginnings also saw it further removed from the grassroots and the intended beneficiaries of the process.

So, how was the TRC viewed by Solomon Islanders? Was it useful, and does it provide a potential model of peacebuilding for other countries in the region or further abroad? What

lessons can be gleaned from the experience of the Solomon Islands TRC? The remainder of this thesis addresses these questions, providing a detailed description, discussion, and analysis of the methodological, operational and practical challenges faced by the commission, and in light of the Solomon Islands' experience, the potential that TRCs offer for peacebuilding in similar settings.

In facing a range of challenges, the Solomon Islands TRC was not unique. Tepperman (2002, 144) posits that 'in the end, truth commissions face two basic types of problems: those that are avoidable and those that are inherent'. The avoidable challenges relate to how the commission is established, conducted and followed up, which theoretically, should be minimised in future commissions as they can learn from previous experiences (Tepperman 2002, 144). The inherent challenges, however, are less easily sidestepped: 'Reconciliation turns out to be tremendously difficult to achieve or even understand. Truth too often remains elusive' (Tepperman 2002, 144).

Chapter Six will review and analyse the inherent and conceptual challenges of pursuing 'truth' and 'reconciliation' in post-conflict Solomon Islands, and Chapter Seven will note and discuss the more practical and avoidable challenges of the administration, management and human resourcing of such an endeavour. The findings presented will be from the perspectives of those who were 'in the middle' or 'translators' of the TRC's mandate (Merry 2006) – the staff and stakeholders of the Solomon Islands TRC. The purpose of this analysis is to take heed of Tepperman's (2002, 144) approach to the avoidable and inherent challenges of truth commissions: 'The most appropriate response to such problems, however, should not be to blame the commissions for what they cannot accomplish, but to appreciate them for what they indisputably can.'

# 6. Inherent challenges: Truth and reconciliation

## 6.1  Introduction

This chapter begins to address the research question pertaining to how the Solomon Islands TRC worked in practice. It focuses solely on the two inherent challenges that dominate the discourse on truth and reconciliation commissions – the dilemma of the definition and pursuit of both 'truth' and 'reconciliation'. Tepperman (2002) distinguishes these inherent challenges from those that are 'avoidable' in a truth commission. Unlike 'avoidable challenges' (addressed in Chapter Seven), the challenges inherent to pursuing truth and reconciliation that are outlined in this chapter are less easily sidestepped.

In investigating these challenges, this chapter illustrates and examines the friction caused by transposing a globalised truth mechanism into the Solomon Islands. Local understanding of, and associated resistances and challenges to, pursuing truth and reconciliation through a formalised government-sanctioned commission are examined. Notably, when imported into different contexts and translated across languages, the core terminology of truth commissions 'may have subtle but important differences' (Hayner 2011, 233). In the Solomon Islands' experience, truth, reconciliation and transitional justice were translated and interpreted according to local worldviews, and aligned with localised understanding and perspectives of conflict management, dispute resolution and peacebuilding, as detailed in Chapter Four.

I am wary of the negative lens that is cast when one focuses on the challenges of any endeavour. Thus I am keen to highlight that the objective of the discussions presented in this chapter, and subsequently in Chapter Seven, are not to place blame for what the commission was unable to achieve. Rather, these chapters aim to learn from the valuable and unique experiences of the first Pacific Island nation to implement a TRC and to understand how such challenges manifested, as a means to appreciate the potential of TRCs for peacebuilding in a Melanesian or similar context. As McAdams posits (2011, 312), if rather than viewing 'truth' and 'reconciliation' as tangible outcomes of the TRC, but instead seeing it as 'a *process* in which the outcome is uncertain but the undertaking is valued in itself', then the TRC can be analysed for its potential to contribute towards peacebuilding.

## 6.2  Truth-seeking and truth-telling

The previous chapter showed that early advocates of the Solomon Islands TRC were primarily concerned with bringing an end to the conflict and searching for a means to move forward from the violence that had occurred. Aiming to support the cessation of violence and restoration of peace in the community, the SICA Peace Office proposed a framework for a TRC as a path to forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as a means for documenting the conflict-related experiences (SICA 2002, 3). Truth was seen as important to individualise guilt for the crimes committed and to 'avert ascribing collective guilt to whole communities or ethnic groups' (SICA 2002, 3), while acknowledging and addressing the atrocities that had happened. Former SICA Peace Office member Bob Pollard reiterated the importance of truth, asking 'what does it do to a society when you have violence and it has been ignored?' (Interview with Bob Pollard).

In considering the risks of seeking truth through a commission, potential implications were assessed against local conditions and cultural practices. Regarding the risk of reigniting conflict by encouraging public truth-telling, Bob Pollard explained that it was seen as a worthwhile gamble, considering local cultural practices:

> *I mean in the Solomons, there is that sense of clan loyalty. We [SICA Peace Office] talked about that, we knew that was a risk of the TRC. I think some of the arguments against that were that if it's not written down, then you can imagine some of these accounts could easily become made into myths much greater than what actually happened […] I call them myths not in the sense of them being false, but myths in the sense that they shape people's lives. They'll be there, we already have them.*
>
> *[…] So does the TRC, does it make it worse if it's written down, and documented and formalised? Maybe so, but I guess the call back then was that the risk of violence recycling was higher if we didn't have a go at a TRC than if we did.  So that was a calculated risk. That was a gamble.*

The commission's truth-seeking activities served two primary purposes. On one hand, they were a means to research the events and human rights abuses that occurred during the period of conflict. This would address impunity concerns and attribute responsibility for the conflict, while also providing an authoritative and impartial narrative of the conflict that would educate the country and future generations about what had happened, where, why and by whom it was

carried out. On the other hand, the truth-seeking activities gave victims, perpetrators and other affected persons an opportunity to be heard and to have their experiences acknowledged and respected. The TRC Act (5[2]) stipulated how 'truth' would be conceptualised and investigated, mandating the TRC to:

(a) investigate and report on the causes, nature and extent of the violations and abuses […] to the fullest degree possible, including their antecedents, the context in which the violations and abuses occurred, the question of whether those violations and abuses were the result of deliberate planning, policy or authorization by any government, group or individual, and the role of both internal and external factors in the conflict;

(b) inquire into and report on the facts and circumstances surrounding the raid of police armouries and the destruction or damage caused to public property for the purposes of reconciliation;

(c) work to help restore the human dignity of victims and promote reconciliation by providing an opportunity for victims to give an account of the violations and abuses suffered and for perpetrators to relate their experiences, and by creating a climate which fosters constructive interchange between victims and perpetrators, giving special attention to the subject of sexual abuses and to the experiences of children within the armed conflict.

The Act further stipulated truth-seeking activities to be conducted commensurate with truth commissions worldwide (2008, 6[1a-d]). These included investigation and research, public hearings, closed hearings in special circumstances, statement taking, and where deemed necessary and in agreement with the Director of Public Prosecutions, the exhumation of bodies.

### Statement taking

The TRC Act did not specify a minimum number of statements to be collected, nor did it predicate how the statement taking should take place. The commission, however, set the ambitious target of collecting 5000 statements, aiming for 50 per cent to be from women, and 30 per cent from youth. To achieve this, the commission implemented a program similar to

statement taking and TRC programs globally. Considering the logistical challenges characteristic of the Solomon Islands such as remoteness, lack of transport and communication infrastructure, volatile weather conditions, and a high level of lingual diversity, this was a considerable undertaking.  As will be discussed below, additional complexities associated with local cultural practices relating to conflict, reconciliation and sensitive issues such as death and sexual violence created further challenges for the statement taking program.

The statement taking program followed a poorly planned and implemented awareness program, the challenges of which are noted in Chapter Seven (see Section 7.4). Statement taking operations were overseen by the head of research and the national coordinator for statement taking, with additional support provided by two regional managers for Guadalcanal and Malaita provinces. Teams of statement takers were recruited according to their provincial background, to ensure proficiency in the languages used by deponents.

Like many TRC activities, the statement taking program suffered from lengthy delays in securing finances, and recruiting and mobilising staff. Statement takers attended a two week training prior to mobilising in communities. In addition to the two provinces most involved in the conflict, statement taking was also conducted in Western Province, Choiseul, Makira and Temotu (see Figure 6.1).[37]

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[37] By province, numbers were Guadalcanal/Honiara, 1,323; Malaita, 756; Western Province, 100; Choiseul, 32; Makira-Ulawa, 103; and Temotu, 47 (Ata et al. 2012, 1210).
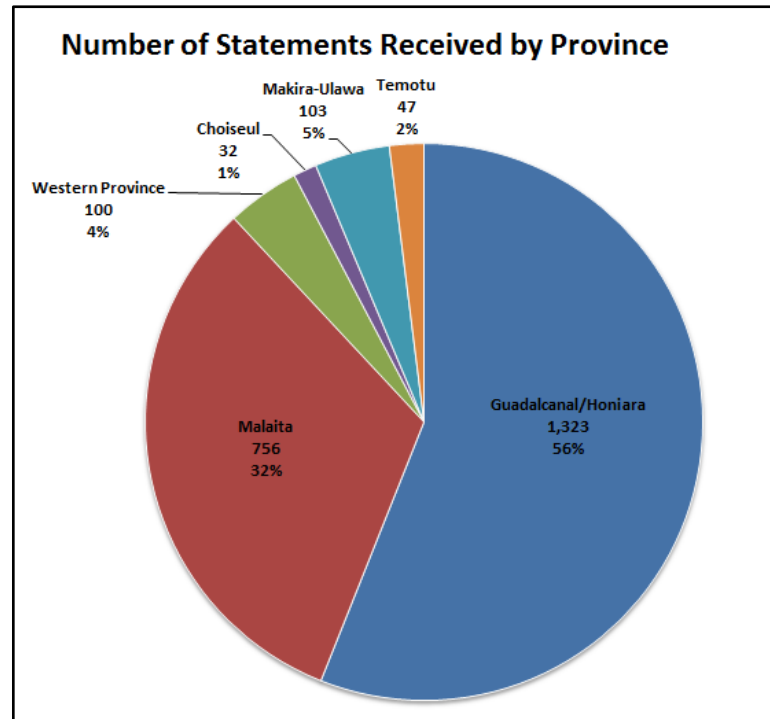
**Figure 6.1** Number of statements received by province. Source: Adapted from data available in Ata et al. 2014, 1210.

In many ways, the statement takers were the front line of the TRC, travelling to remote locations through difficult terrain (often on foot, see Figure 6.2) and personally engaging with communities throughout the provinces. Due to a poor communication and awareness raising strategy prior to statement taking (as will be discussed in Chapter Seven), communities generally had little or no forewarning of the arrival of statement takers. Often they were mistaken as government officers assessing claims of displacement and lost property for compensation payments. While statement takers were usually warmly welcomed, shown generous hospitality and given the time of community leaders and members to discuss their work program, it was nonetheless clear that upon learning about the TRC's mandate, communities were suspicious and wary of the program's intentions.

**Figure 6.2** Statement takers walking between villages on the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal.

I accompanied one team of statement takers to several villages on the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal in order to conduct research alongside their statement taking program. The following excerpt of my personal field notes reflected on the journey:

*After a 3am start, two hours of collecting other staff in a Hilux and driving to the boat launch near Visale, we boarded an OBM [outboard motorised canoe] equipped with a 40 horsepower engine for our trip to the Weathercoast. We have been on standby to go for several days, but every day have been told 'maybe tomorrow'. It has been frustrating. After several hours of boat travel, we pull up to the shore at a village barely visible through the foliage. We are told to wait while one of the skippers jumps into the waist high water and wades into shore, holding a letter above his head. He delivers it to a young man standing on the shore, wades back to the boat, and we continue on our journey.*

*The note is from a colleague in the statement taking team at the TRC who is from the area but was not able to join this trip as he was away taking statements in Makira. The letter introduced our team of statement takers and researchers to the village Chief and notified them of our pending arrival in a few days' time, on our return trip to Honiara.*

*Apart from this village, which received this letter on our way past, the other villages we visited were unaware of our arrival, and of the role and purpose of the Commission. Thus when arriving to communities it was necessary to present to the 'big man' or chief of the village to explain the purpose of the visit. The chief would then call a community meeting for that afternoon, either by word of mouth or the blowing of a conch shell. Once most of the members of the community had presented (of those that were around – many women, for example, were away in their gardens), we then presented an awareness talk to the community.*

*The awareness talks were conducted in central locations in the village, often under a big shady tree that served as a community meeting spot, where smooth white rocks created a paved sitting area.[38] The statement takers did not have a specific agenda for raising awareness or introducing their mandate, and in each location it was completed on an ad hoc and as needs basis. The statement takers were clearly used to the process, and took to the public speaking role with skill and ease. They took turns to cover key topics such as:*

- *A description of the TRC;*

- *A brief history of the TRC in Solomon Islands, and truth commissions in other countries;*

- *The purpose of a TRC;*

- *The scope of the TRC's work;*

- *How information collected would be used;*

- *Privacy and confidentiality of information provided to the TRC;*

- *The process of statement taking, such as voluntary participation, that statements are taken from individuals and families, and not from the community as a whole, and that statements can be provided from anyone, no matter where they were residing at the time of the tensions;*

- *And importantly, that compensation and amnesty would not be provided by the TRC.*

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[38] See Figure 6.3

*The need for the statement taking teams to conduct awareness talks as they conducted their activities was clearly a time-consuming burden placed on the statement takers. In conversations about the process, statement takers often noted that a higher level of pre-existing awareness as to their role and arrival would have assisted them to complete their task of collecting statements. Many suggested awareness raising teams to visit villages a set time before the statement takers (for example, 2 weeks prior), to not only communicate the role and activities of the TRC, but to directly plan the arrival of the statement taking team and allow the village to prepare for their arrival. For example, by ensuring those who wished to provide a statement were in attendance. This would be particularly important to capture the voices of women, many of whom spend their days in the garden. (Personal field notes, 2011)*



**Figure 6.3** Statement taking staff conducting an awareness talk in Kolina village, south Guadalcanal.

The Weathercoast witnessed a high degree of violence during the conflict (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3), and as such a high number of residents were directly affected and thus eligible to provide a statement to the TRC. This was in contrast to Malaita, where statement takers soon realised that many of those who were directly impacted by the conflict had at some point returned to Honiara, and thus struggled to reach their quotas. In Malaita, statement takers tried

various techniques, such as visiting villages on market days in order to access a number of people in the one location (see Figure 6.4). Like those in Guadalcanal, they also experienced difficulty due to a lack of awareness of the TRC and of their program and arrival, as one statement taker explained:

> *The communities totally did not know what the TRC was, or had even heard of the TRC. But those who had a radio, they may have heard of the TRC program on the radio, but they didn't really understand it. And those who maybe could read and write a little bit, they would read the Solomon Star or something like that, or hear stories from their friends. But most people, no. When we went to the communities, we had to arrange to make awareness at the same time, and then take statements afterwards, so that they understood what the TRC was first, and then we would take their statements. (Interview with MR)*



**Figure 6.4** Statement takers in Malaita visited villages on market days to take advantage of the congregation of people. Photo taken in Silolo, north Malaita.

Statement takers described feeling pressured by their managers to reach targets, while struggling to deal with the logistical and access challenges associated with travelling to remote locations on boat, truck or foot, as one statement taker described:

> *You go to one village and one or two are victims. And then it's a long way to walk. By the time you go climb the hill and get to the middle of the bush, to take one statement. No wonder my number is small. And the places are not close. (Interview with HM)*

Such avoidable challenges were endemic to the TRC overall and are discussed in detail in Chapter Seven. The inherent challenges of defining, seeking and documenting 'truth', however, were a further challenge statement takers faced, and are explored below.

### 6.2.1  Framing 'truth-telling'

As the normative assumptions underlying truth commissions continue to propagate the idea that 'truth' is necessary, desirable and achievable to fulfil peacebuilding aims, critics question whether it is feasible to even 'establish anything that should actually be called, with a straight face, "truth"' (Tepperman 2002, 129–30). The nature of truth is a complex and elusive concept, especially in post-conflict, divided societies, and defining truth a contentious task (Chapman 2009a, 96). The final report of a TRC and the truth it documents must be understood in the context in which it was produced. Here I draw attention to three factors which framed the collection and portrayal of truth via the collection of statements and testimony for the Solomon Islands TRC.

The first factor considers whose truth is sought, and for what purpose do people participate? While situated in the present, the stories, experiences and 'truths' provided to the truth commission were oriented towards perceived and desired future outcomes – whether it be forgiveness, acknowledgement, rehabilitation or reparation. As Andrews (2003, 62) explains:

> Truth commissions are conduits for collective memory, and that memory, like all memory, is constantly changing. The "national narratives" about a country's traumatic

past which emerge from proceedings of truth commissions document stories of the past, and these stories are in turn firmly situated in the circumstances of the present.[39]

Largely perceived as a means to communicating grievances to the government, deponents may have focused more on matters which were important *at the particular point in time of statement taking*, such as requests for economic support in the area, development initiatives, and compensation for property which was lost or destroyed during the conflict.

Unlike the South African Commission, the Solomon Islands TRC did not offer amnesty to those confessing crimes. Rather, it reminded those providing testimony at public hearings that they were not obliged to disclose information that may incriminate themselves or their families. Some interviewees noted the lack of participation and disclosure by ex-combatants and perpetrators of crimes during the conflict in the public hearings, commenting that the commission collected 'the truth of the victims. It was mostly their stories. So it's not even the whole truth, if there is such a thing' (Interview with Mary-Louise O'Callaghan). A TRC staff member echoed this point, noting:

> *I believe that there are more incidents of violence that should come out and be faced to the public, but it hasn't come out. The TRC is good because it exposes the truth. But I don't think it exposes the whole truth. Like the public hearing for victims, it exposes the truth about how the victims suffer, what experience they went through and what kind of violence they faced. The public hearing for militants, it was a bit different because the former militants, they didn't talk about what actually happened, what they did and why they did it. They kept blaming other people. (Interview with SL)*

Many ex-combatants took the opportunity of the public hearing to explain or defend their participation or their actions and ask for forgiveness, rather than to admit or disclose information regarding crimes or violence that had previously been withheld. They framed their stories within a narrative of victimhood, explaining and justifying how they came to be in the position of 'militant', and apologising for the actions they had done (see transcriptions of testimony available in volume 4, Ata et al. 2012). Braithwaite et al. (2010, 147) note that

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[39] Hayner (2011, 158) also highlights the ways that psychological trauma affects the information gathered, warning truth commissions should be prepared for discrepancies that may result from collecting testimony from traumatised deponents.

ex-militants had been able to maintain two identities, a major challenge for peacebuilding in Solomon Islands:

> [T]hey managed a backstage identity as combatants and a front-stage identity as victims, so as to maximise large compensation payments from the government. Successive governments have served the nation poorly by paying them.

Similarly, victims also 'framed' their narrative according to perceived future benefits – the contribution towards government policy clearly a strong motivating factor to participate in the commission's truth-seeking activities, more so than the purported cathartic effect of sharing one's story or having it acknowledged. The regional manager for Guadalcanal explained: 'They want to share their story to make recommendations. Because I think it's no purpose to tell my story if nothing comes after it' (Interview with Andrew Sugalonga).

A second factor framing the truth collected by the TRC was the methodology of accessing and gathering 'truth'. The content of testimony provided to a statement taker is typically dependent on the questions asked, or the form that is used to guide the interview process. Statement taking forms must therefore be structured carefully so that the testimony is not overly determined by rigid categories of standardised legal boxes (Nesiah 2006, 21). In a Melanesian context, where *tok stori* is a cultural and accepted method of sharing information (see Chapter Three, Section 3.4.1), it was especially important that the statement taking process was planned around this culturally appropriate mode of communicating.

While the statement taking forms for the TRC were indeed comprised of standardised legal boxes, the process of providing a statement involved telling one's story to the statement taker, who then coded the information on the forms as it was received, and later prepared a short written summary of the statement. Pending the provision of consent, the conversation was recorded on a digital device and later transcribed at the head office, for analysis by the research team and commissioners. These transcripts proved valuable to provide context and story to the data that was captured by the statement taking forms and are thus used prolifically throughout the final report to illustrate the violations that occurred and give voice to their survivors (see Ata et al. 2012).

This process of statement taking had a number of implications for the collection of personal narratives. Statement givers were provided little direction apart from being invited to tell their

experiences of the conflict, and any specific violations or events that they experienced or witnessed. While allowing the statement giver to *stori* avoided over-determining the topic of conversation, it may have excluded topics that they did not voluntarily initiate and which the statement taker did not enquire about. Differing motivations behind disclosure would have also impacted the content of the narratives provided to the commission.

As will be discussed below, elements of statement taking contradicted local cultural practices and were regularly resisted. Approaching villages and asking for victims of the conflict to come forward and document a statement was perceived by many statement takers to be incongruent with local *kastom* and practices of conflict management, as detailed in Chapter Four. Yet the overall goal of compiling a public account of the conflict was generally valued; anecdotally, many of those providing testimony reported the process as cathartic, as a statement taker described during an interview:

> *How I see it, the majority of people feel good to tell their stories, because it's hard to hold back what causes pain in your heart, or for your heart to be sore for a long time. So when somebody goes out and asks, 'how do you feel' and 'how do you think about those tensions', those people feel free to tell their story. They feel healed. When they tell about what is inside of them. (Interview with BW)*

An ICTJ staff member, however, warned of the problematic response to encouraging an unfamiliar approach:

> *I don't like if we try to impose something which people have never come across before, and then we try and tell them that this is a good way to do things. We should not do that. Like for example, telling everyone to come out and tell their stories, encourage people to try and influence people to tell their stories - I do not think that is the right way to do things. […] Because I feel like if we make people story, then they will sit down and say, 'ok, because you want a story, I'll tell a story', but they will tell you a different story. They don't tell you the truth.*

Rather than replicate a truth-seeking program akin to truth commissions globally, the Solomon Islands TRC needed a methodology better suited to the nature of research and reconciliation in Solomon Islands – suggestions for how this could be done are compiled in Chapter Eight.

A third factor that framed the particular truth that was documented also related to the methodology of truth-seeking: specifically, the human rights lens adopted by the Solomon Islands TRC to guide investigations, coding, analysis and report writing. With a mandate guiding the topics, themes and time periods to be examined, the Solomon Islands TRC was limited to hearing a certain truth, framed by particular questions centred on human rights as defined in international law but not yet frequently adopted or accepted by Solomon Islands communities. One statement taker explained how she translated the questions on the statement taking forms so they would be culturally acceptable to discuss:

> *We turn the questions around, make it inside a story or so forth, so that they can tell their story. Because I think some of the questions about the human rights violations, they are really very direct questions [...] Some other statement takers I worked with, in the workshop, we talked about that too. We talked about how even though we have these direct questions, we must not directly ask them. You must talk around the question, or put it in a story, then at the end you can ask it. (Interview with MR)*

Whilst the statement takers attempted to navigate these frictions, translating not just the form's questions into vernacular, but also asking them in a way that was culturally acceptable, they were then required to code the data on the statement taking forms according to the six human rights violations identified.[40] The subsequent data analysis, which focused primarily on the language of human rights, was a strain on the TRC's limited resources and staff capacity. The statements received by the TRC were processed by data entry staff, and accompanying recordings translated and transcribed.

Hayner warns that the standard methodology of TRCs in terms of taking detailed testimony to be fed into a database requires so much energy that 'this approach tends to define the very nature of a truth commission process, and through its coding and data entry sheets, the truth that the commission will collect' (2011, 82). Instead, she asks if it would be worthwhile for future truth commissions to reconsider their methodology and not simply follow the path of previous commissions. Indeed, if 'reconciliation' or peacebuilding are the goals or intended

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[40] The Commission identified six human rights violations that were considered common to the conflict and included on the statement taker forms: killings, abduction and illegal detention, torture and ill-treatment, sexual violence, property violation and forced displacement.

outcomes of the TRC process, then for a Melanesian context, the methodology of a truth commission would need to be seriously re-worked (see Chapter Eight for suggestions on how this could be done).

## 6.2.2  Resistance and research fatigue

Following the five-year conflict, a number of government departments and NGOs visited conflict-affected villages to conduct surveys, research or projects addressing the impacts and losses experienced. These enquiries raised the hopes of families and communities that compensation would be provided for losses incurred, rehabilitation provided to former combatants, or that the community would benefit from development assistance. As community expectations went mostly unmet, many in these communities grew increasingly suspicious of, and apathetic towards, visitors conducting research or needs assessments. Many interviewees explained this as the reason many Solomon Islanders were initially resistant to the TRC field staff, such as one researcher who said:

> *One of their complaints is that it is just another group of people coming to get information without actually giving them what they want [...] They were cross with the TRC, they asked 'what kind of things is this group doing?' Because a lot of groups had come before and talked to them about the period of the tensions. So they think 'why are these people coming and lying to us?' (Interview with Daniel Fenua)*

A statement taker working in Malaita described this resistance as a key challenge of her role:

> *Approaching people is not that easy, because people say, 'Why should I give my story to you? The government doesn't do anything. There have been lots of surveys already around here but nothing has happened. Nothing has happened for us.' So even though we went to work in the field, people hesitated to give their stories. (Interview with HM)*

The challenge for TRC fieldworkers to enquire about their mandate was further complicated by cultural practices and *kastom* that govern conflict management in Solomon Islands, which may necessitate a public silence about a conflict or issue once it has been resolved and reconciled (as discussed in Chapter Four). One statement taker from Guadalcanal likened statement taking to the Guale expression '*asimabulu*', a vernacular term that refers to talking about serious matters from the past (such as death), or literally, digging up rotten and smelly things, and implied *kastom* must be followed to do so sensitively and appropriately:

> *So if you want to do this* asimabulu*, you must do 'red money' [shell money of traditional value often used in* kastom *and as compensation] to revive the case. For the TRC, in Guadalcanal, this is what we are doing –we are doing* asimabulu. *And people are only willing to participate because they are looking forward to the reparation [from the government] (Interview with RG)*

Statement takers and researchers reported regularly encountering resistance to their truth-seeking activities. To some extent this could have been mitigated by an improved communication and awareness strategy, as will be discussed further in Chapter Seven. For example, interviewees described many people being unaware of and suspicious of the TRC's mandate or purpose, suspecting it to be a means for RAMSI or the RSIPF to make further arrests. Others were frightened of talking to the TRC due to the close proximity of perpetrators or the knowledge that weapons remained in the community. Yet the most problematic cause of resistance reported by TRC field staff, considering the reconciliation and nation-building mandate of the TRC, stemmed from the belief that truth-telling was incompatible with local *kastom*. If the topics of concerns were sensitive (such as relating to a death or sexual violence), or if the matter had previously been reconciled, it was considered inappropriate to speak of or 'dig up'. As one TRC researcher explained:

> *Some people are really complaining yeah! Some of the complaints are that 'Hey you people who worked at the TRC, you don't solve any problems, you just instigate and fuel the problems'. Especially when we take very sensitive information about people being killed and things like that. So their view is that 'you came and just fuel the problems', they say 'let it just die, we buried the past. Just let it be.' That's the view that they have. (Interview with Daniel Fenua)*

The majority of field staff interviewees reported that arriving to a village and speaking about sensitive topics was considered culturally inappropriate or *tabu* and violating local *kastom*. They explained that enquiring about sensitive topics or past conflicts can cause insult and warrant a demand for compensation in its own right to rectify the insult. Depending on the nature of the initial insult, this could vary. For example, after one female statement taker arrived in a village wearing trousers[41] and neglected to put on a *lava-lava*[42] upon arrival, the

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[41] Some villages ascribe to particular dress codes. In general, women wear skirts, dresses or other loose attire from their waist down.

Chief asked her for compensation of ten or twenty dollars. A more serious example occurred in the exhumations program, which had a difficult task considering talking about deceased persons is inherently sensitive and can be *tabu*. A member of the TRC's exhumations team travelled to south Guadalcanal, and made enquiries regarding the deaths of men from the area. A village elder related to the deceased grew offended and subsequently demanded SBD$10,000 from the commission as compensation (Ata et al. 2012, 699).

### 6.2.3   Local perspectives of truth-telling

Unless accompanied by some form of compensation, many people initially did not want to talk to TRC field staff. To overcome this resistance and hesitation, field workers explained to communities that the TRC would compile a final report based on the information gathered, which would include recommendations for future policy, reforms and reparations. This provided deponents with motivation to share their stories and an audience in mind to frame their narrative – the government. Without the possibility of some kind of 'compensation' in the form of recommendations for policy changes and reparations, many would not have felt it appropriate to talk to the commission's statement takers, as a Guale statement taker explained:

> *Actually, statement taking contradicts some of our culture in Solomon Islands. Here, what you find, is that anything in the past from a long time ago, people like to forget and don't want to talk about it. They'll say, 'oh its finished'. In the area I worked in, I found that the statement takers always came across a challenge where the people say 'what are you doing with what we tell you?' Because it's part of their tradition and culture, so you should put in place something. Traditionally you would use pigs or money, we call it a* chupu *[form of compensation in Guadalcanal]. You must do that before you ask questions from a long time ago. So it's really contradicting our people, to go and dig back and talk about something that's already past.*

As noted above, resistance to recalling the past was an ongoing challenge for statement takers, who were perceived as 'digging up' previously reconciled matters:

> *Lots of people, when we go, they say, 'it's hard for us to say', some of them refuse, they say 'oh it's hard for us to tell, because what you're asking is in the past and so we have forgotten these things.' Some people who lost their loved ones or something like that,*

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[42] A large piece of material, similar to a sarong.

*it's hard for them to tell what happened in the past, it's like they've forgotten it but we go and dig back what happened in the past and we try and make them talk. (Interview with BW)*

As described in Chapter Four (see Section 4.2.2), once a matter has been reconciled, the initial conflict or wrongdoing is usually not spoken of again publicly, nor can it be used to justify further retribution or payback. Early advocates of the TRC acknowledged these unique local conflict management practices that inhibit public disclosure following reconciliation, and recognised that this was reinforced by a Christian doctrine of forgiveness. Bob Pollard described how the SICA Peace Office grappled with the place and purpose for truth considering the cultural tendencies toward silence:

> *At that point in time [post TPA], there were some in the Churches who were saying the Church's message is to forgive and forget, and we were there saying well where on earth did that come from? You know, that ain't Christian. That's the most damaging thing you can do. And so what does it mean? There were some really big questions such as 'what does forgiveness mean in a Christian context' and, 'what is the place for truth?' Some really quite powerful statements made by the former Chief Justice. He made a point, I guess coming from the Guadalcanal perspective, from the Weathercoast, he said Melanesian culture isn't really good at getting the truth.*
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> *[…] I think there was a sense of, yeah that's right, we talk about compensation and peace, but in Melanesian culture, it's not based on truth. If someone accuses you of doing something, the question isn't did they or didn't they, the question is how can we bring peace back, you know, so you have this compensation. But often, it's a good question, did they or didn't they? So he was saying, culturally, we're not good at dealing with, at handling truth. But for this case, if we don't, face the truth, we will be paying the price over and over again. So that was the sort of idea behind it.*

In a context where public truth-telling is fraught with cultural implications, a TRC was seen as a means to sanction a formal space to permit the telling of truth regarding the conflict for the sake of ongoing and future peace. In this regard, the TRC could have created a legitimate space to have a directed discussion and 'a chance to deal with what happened and why. And learn from it' (Interview with Bob Pollard). Another SICA Peace Office member explained:

> *How we look at it, the culture here, people, if something happens and people have heard about it. Then they come together to sort it out. Then how I see this mechanism, the TRC, we hear that something big has happened, but we haven't heard of the individual atrocities. And we need to hear them so we can sort them out. Because how can we resolve things that we don't know about. (Interview with LA)*

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Despite these initial visions and intentions, observations of the hesitations of conflict-affected populations to openly discuss the past and feedback from the commission fieldworkers indicate that these challenges were not appropriately prepared for or managed during implementation of the TRC.

On a positive note, it was generally agreed amongst interviewees that documenting 'truth' – as in the narrative and events of the conflict and the people and parties involved – was a valuable outcome of the commission. While there was no widespread policy of secrecy or official suppression of information during the conflict, the history and events of the conflict are not widely known. This is due to a range of factors, such as the country's cultural and linguistic diversity; the isolation of some of the most affected communities; the fear instilled in many victims; the continuing presence of ex-combatants in some communities; and cultural practices of shame and silence that may prohibit public disclosure of certain incidents. As such, many Solomon Islanders are unaware of – *and curious about* – the events and details of the conflict in other locations, and expressed an interest to understand why the conflict happened and who 'started it'.

A number of interviewees explained that it was only through their work at the TRC that they had come to learn of many of the major instances of conflict-related violence. This appeared to have a profound effect, especially on the younger staff who were adolescents during the conflict. One staff member explained attending a public hearing promped feelings of empathy with the victims, describing it as:

> *A unique experience, because as a Solomon Islander, and I stay in Honiara, I hear rumours only, about what happened. I didn't experience the ethnic tensions first hand […] I just heard about it only and I saw it on the news and heard about it on the radio, like that. But for me to actually come face to face with the victims, no. This public hearing, it changed how I see the crisis that happened.*

> *[…] It made me think and to know that what happened was actually true and it wasn't just lies. They weren't lies, the things that happened. I didn't think that this kind of violence happened in Solomon Islands. When I joined the public hearing, I was a little bit shocked, like 'wow, is that really true? That really happened?' To see the people who had gone through this violence, nothing has been done for them. So I just tried to put myself inside their place. (Interview with SL)*

As well as enabling empathetic responses, the TRC also opened avenues to question stereotypes, stories and history that might otherwise be considered too sensitive to talk about, thus sanctioning a discussion that would not have otherwise been had, such as the underlying causes of the conflict. This was described by the first Deputy Executive Secretary of the TRC:

> *The process allows people to story, and giving the opportunity and making people think about normal or conventional thinking about a lot of things. Like conflicting parties. Like Guadalcanal and Malaita. When you talk about the fighting, it gives you the opportunity to be able to share with people and stir up the thinking of people to think about some underlying issues that may have contributed to the cause of the areas or general attitudes of people, what they claim to be* kastom *which caused them to conflict. The grievances that other people have. (Interview with David Tuhanuku)*

Commissioner Joni Madraiwiwi echoed these sentiments, further explaining that while the TRC encourages Solomon Islanders to break the silence embedded in cultural practice and tell their stories, more importantly, their voices must not fall on deaf ears:

> *Because I think until the TRC process began, I think there was both a reluctance and possibly a fear about just saying anything – given the prevalence of militants around in prominent positions.*
>
> *I think it was a defensive mechanism, and I think it was understandable in the circumstances, and I think, you know, to expect them to have been more vocal and to have spoken out, I think is really to misunderstand Solomon Islands society and the way it is. I mean, people don't usually draw attention to their problems. It's not, it's almost, culturally it's not appropriate. And I think that's not only true of the Solomons. I think throughout the Pacific that's the case.*
>
> *I think the role of the TRC in that context, is really to encourage them. I think by the process of, truth-seeking and telling their stories, allowing them to come forward and share their experiences more widely. And I hope that that whole process sort of develops some sort of dynamic of its own. Or at least makes it more comfortable for people who were previously loathe to do something like that, for all sorts of reasons, but perhaps mainly cultural – to be able to be more forthcoming.*
>
> *Of course, I see a significant problem being that I think they have to be assured – or have to be comfortable that something will come out of them telling their stories.* That it's not just an echo chamber which in the end, ends up with nothing. *You know, that it leads to maybe more government initiatives, something that contributes to some sort of improvement in their lives. That they see something tangible in it, you know.* That it's, I think, the beginning of something more promising.

### 6.2.4  Is talking healing?

The need to clean a wound so that it can heal is a metaphor often associated with TRC processes (e.g., Hayner 2011, 145). At the official opening of the Solomon Islands TRC, Archbishop Desmond Tutu addressed the crowd at the local outdoor stadium, saying 'to achieve lasting peace requires courage […] what you are doing is opening old wounds and applying a potent medicine that would heal the wound' (Tuhaika and Sireheti 2009, par. 2). Chairman of the TRC, Reverend Sam Ata, echoed this sentiment on several occasions, saying for example, 'definitely it will open old wounds, it's good to deal with those old wounds and get them healed' (Fox 2010a, par. 7). This idea is also encapsulated in the title of the final report, 'Confronting the Truth for a Better Solomon Islands' (Ata et al. 2012). While the imagery is effective and the deal promising, research warns the transitional justice field against simplistic assumptions relating to the healing power of truth processes (Hayner 2011, 161; see for example Hamber 2009; Mendeloff 2004, 2009).

Proponents of truth-telling typically draw on Western models of psychotherapy to suggest the process is cathartic for participants, and assume that participants are 'autonomous individuals with the capacity to choose freely how to engage in institutional processes' (Ross 2010, 75). Hayner (2011, 146) notes it is often asserted that 'simply giving victims and witnesses a chance to tell their stories to an official commission […] can help them regain their dignity and begin to recover'. As Hayner (2011, 147) also points out, truth commissions do not offer victims long-term therapy but a one-time opportunity to tell their story: a vastly different process from that involving a therapist and patient (Mendeloff 2004, 363–65). Not only are formal therapy and testifying different processes, it is questionable if either is cathartic in Melanesia. Given the high number of victims who provide statements in addition to those who testify at public hearings, and the short operational timeframe, truth commissions in general are not well placed to provide psychological support (Hayner 2011, 151). Yet, they may make recommendations for this to happen in the country, as the Solomon Islands TRC did (Ata et al. 2012, 759).

In Solomon Islands, support is often sourced through informal community organisations, churches, traditional leaders or extended families and friends. There are very limited formal counselling services in Honiara, and practically none in the provinces. Although formal

psychological services are not widely available in the Solomon Islands, many people have been trained in basic counselling skills through church-based networks and NGOs, particularly during and after the conflict. Addressing mental health needs continue to be a major challenge, and numerous requests were made by community members and leaders for improved mental health services in communities.

In light of the preceding discussion in this chapter, it can be seen that the Solomon Islands TRC was geared towards truth-seeking rather than truth-telling. Statement takers described being under pressure to reach quotas by their managers, and when in the field were often directed to 'victims' by community leaders and members. Statement taking was conducted without the presence of counsellors or mental health workers and for the majority of deponents, the statement taker was the only direct contact they had with the commission. Nevertheless, as already noted, the actual process of providing statements allowed for a more cathartic process of storytelling and appeared to work well in the context. For the statement taking processes that I observed, I was impressed by the ability of deponents to deliver a clear, purposeful, and often concise narrative. While this may have served as a cathartic process for some, the need for ongoing counselling and psycho-social support beyond the one-off event of statement taking remained abundantly clear.

Staff capacity to communicate sensitively with the traumatised population was also important. As well as personal and professional skills, this was also dependent on the cultural appropriateness of the interaction. For example, an exhumations officer described how she felt it wasn't appropriate to talk with grief-stricken elders:

> *I'm not really mature enough to do that, I don't know what words to use and what time I'm supposed to talk, how to talk to them so that I don't upset them further. Because they would cry. It's not that I couldn't do it, but they were old men and women, so I had to learn to talk in a way that was mature to handle those kinds of cases. I learned those kinds of things especially from my colleagues. (Interview with Anna Pitaboe)*

The Solomon Islands TRC attempted to provide psychological support to those who testified at public hearings – providing accommodation and per diems to deponents for several days pre- and post- the public hearings, and arranging counselling sessions to assist those testifying to prepare and debrief for the public event. The counselling approach relied on a narrow Christian doctrine, which at times was inappropriate to the need expressed. No ongoing

support was offered to those participants who later returned to their villages or places of residence in Honiara, however, and this service was limited to those who testified at public hearings only.

Notwithstanding, many reportedly found the process of giving a statement or testifying to be cathartic, and appeared to appreciate the opportunity to have their experiences heard and acknowledged. It was communicated to me on several occasions that community consultations often involved the same village, church, women and youth leaders as representatives of their respective communities. By directly talking with a range of people in the villages, however, many individuals felt their voices were being directly heard by the TRC, and in turn, by the Solomon Islands Government.

The opportunity to disclose their stories in an anonymous and confidential environment was also reassuring and encouraging for some deponents. Statement takers described how reassuring participants about the confidentiality of their statements and conversations created a safe space that encouraged truth-telling. One statement taker said she saw the process was 'healing' for those giving statements:

> *Some of them tell it to you, they say, 'oh we feel free when you come because it's something hard to tell to others.' Because they trust you too. Because your conversations are confidential. So what is inside them, they tell it to you. So for some people, you can tell from their appearance and their body. Like some of them, when they tell their stories, afterwards you look at them and they look free, their faces smile. (Interview with BW)*

Public hearings were powerful events, providing a unique opportunity for victims to publicly and directly relate their experiences to a wide audience and have their experiences acknowledged. Prior to joining the commission, Commissioner Kamilo Teke[43] testified at the regional public hearing held in Visale, and described it as a cathartic process:

> *As a victim yes, I spoke out. I told the stories, my story. I felt much better after my public exposure. It's only natural that if you keep something in yourself and you do not*

[43] Commissioner Kamilo Teke replaced Commission George Kejoa following his death, as the representative for Guadalcanal province.

*share with others and do not expose, that thing will eventually boil up and cause much
bigger problems within yourself. So after I went to the counselling, which encouraged
me to expose in the public hearing, and after I spoke out and I told my story in the
public hearing, I felt much better and I felt release.*

Personal impacts of truth-telling experiences differ for every person (Hayner 2011, 161).
While some may feel the process to be cathartic and empowering, and benefit from feeling
acknowledged and supported by the commission, they may later feel much worse, once
adrenaline subsides, especially if expectations are unmet (Hayner 2011, 162). A natural
expectation accompanying truth-telling is that what is told will be heard. Andrews observes
that 'Truth commissions are one way of mediating memories […] Citizens of a nation come
together in a communal activity of telling and *listening* to stories of one another; and through
such a process the stories of individuals become transformed into threads of a new national
narrative' (2003, 45–6; emphasis added). While 'listening' is a key element, in Solomon
Islands it is yet to be seen how the stories have been heard. Aside from the lack of official
acknowledgement or public release of the final report by the government, there appeared to be
little local ownership or interest in the process. The TRC research manager remarked,
'nobody cares what the TRC says, it's not a big issue here. Probably nothing will happen'
(Interview with Ludwig Huber).

While documenting truth was generally viewed to be a positive outcome (albeit the means by
which it is accessed remains an issue), one interviewee warned of a possible consequence of
the official recognition and publication of the truth commission findings. He suggested that as
people come to learn of the specific incidents of violence, it may incite future conflict,
particularly for those from Malaita:

> *Ok, another thing too, those who were not born yet, and those who were very small at
> that time, for them to look at it [the final report] they might interpret it wrong. Some
> might see it and say 'oh those people killed us too much', so that might come out too.*
>
> *[…] Like even now, some people hear stories from a long time before, when another
> tribe might have come to kill people from their tribe – they've heard the stories. If one
> tribe raided another tribe one time. Or if one tribe killed people from another tribe. So,
> no matter it's a long time since, some people still remember. They might not kill you,
> but if they see you in town and they'll want to fight. So children might read this, and
> then that feeling will come out. They will still see them as the enemy and the difference
> will continue.*

*[…] So I see this final report, and it's good that you find out truth, but some people might interpret it differently. Those who are educated, it's alright. And for those who are leaders. It's good for the country. It's good for the upper level. But within small, within the grassroots, and some people who don't know what really happened during the tensions, they will just find out. So when they know, they will look at the negative side. For sure, that one would be hard. (Interview with NR)*

When I asked Bishop Terry Brown about this perspective, he acknowledged the risk involved. He explained that while public truth-telling in a church environment usually meant the audience was committed to forgiveness, doing so in a public sphere did not come with the same assurances. He also pointed to the practice of 'avoidance relationships' whereby based on past circumstances, people may purposefully avoid one another (such as married couples and their previous partners). This practice can be challenging in small societies, thus he noted the risk of public disclosure creating further avoidance relationships, as well as demands for compensation or retaliation amongst family members of victims who were not previously aware of details from conflict-related violence.

## 6.3   Reconciliation

After someone takes away your daughter, tortures her, abducts her, and then denies ever having done it – would you ever want to "reconcile" with those responsible? That word makes no sense here. The political discourse of reconciliation is profoundly immoral, because it denies the reality of what people have experienced. It isn't reasonable to expect someone to reconcile after what happened here. (Anonymous statement in Ata et al. 2012, 714)

The TRC Act included the term 'reconciliation' in its title and as a key objective in its mandate, yet did not define the term. As discussed in Chapter Two, reconciliation suffers from a lack of definitional clarity in the wider peacebuilding literature: its 'basic problem is that no-one agrees how to define it or do it' (Bloomfield 2006, 4). And some question whether reconciliation should even be a goal in post-conflict contexts (Ware 2014).

Yet 'reconciliation' remains a priority in both the peacebuilding and transitional justice discourses, particularly in relation to truth commissions. As in the Solomon Islands, the term is often included in the title of truth commissions (Gonzalez 2014a, 7) and considered a plausible outcome of their mandate: 'the strength of a truth commission process is in advancing reconciliation on a national or political level' (Hayner 2011, 183). Yet its

ambiguity can cause significant confusion, 'and – in some cases – misplaced expectations or fears' (Gonzalez 2014a, 7).

As with truth-telling and truth-seeking, the inherent challenge of pursuing reconciliation is further complicated by the friction of importing a globalised mechanism into a local context where the terms and goals themselves are interpreted through the lens of local worldviews and therefore given particular meanings and interpretations. As described in Chapter Four, 'reconciliation' is a term used widely in Pijin, and Solomon Islanders have a strong understanding of how to 'do' reconciliation, usually through a combination of Christian, customary or state processes on inter-personal, familial or communal levels. Thus the term in the title of the Solomon Islands TRC was 'translated' into Solomon Islands vernacular, and associated with particular expectations of what the commission would facilitate or achieve.

Since the tensions, where possible and necessary, many communities have conducted their own post-conflict reconciliation ceremonies without government intervention or support. For instance, in situations where there was violence or conflict within a village and members needed to reconcile to enable peaceful co-existence. But for conflicts with people from outside the community, the process has not been as necessary, nor easily addressed. For example, one statement taker explained how her community resolved their internal disputes; however, she has yet to reconcile with the people who harassed and stole from her family during the tensions in Malaita:

> *Ever since, I've had the memories of them coming to spoil my family and how they took my personal items, which I don't feel good about, they should come and ask for us to reconcile and I would accept. They should come and ask me. But for me to go and approach them, is not acceptable. Because they did something to me and it's no good that they don't come and ask me and I'm ready to reconcile. (Interview with MR)*

On a national level, Braithwaite et al. (2010, 81) explain that overall, reconciliation has been neglected:

> A combination of RAMSI not demanding it, crowding it off the policy agenda with other important matters of statebuilding and Melanesian patience about getting around to reconciliation meant that reconciliation languished for years with little attention.

As detailed in Chapter Five, a reconciliation program was intended to be a priority of the commission's mandate at the conception of the TRC. The early framework for the commission proposed by SICA (2002, 11) conceptualised reconciliation as occurring on multiple societal levels – presenting it as an interpersonal and inter-village process, as well as a national process. The framework drew on local interpretations of reconciliation; articulating it must incorporate custom law, custom law chiefs and churches (2002, 11). It also referred to reconciliation in Solomon Islands as 'along the lines of a restorative justice process' that would occur alongside the truth-telling process: 'it does not await the end of the issuing or publication of the truth report' (SICA 2002, 11).

The TRC Act, however, did not stipulate how reconciliation would be defined, conducted or promoted, rather implying that it would manifest as a result of the TRC's truth-seeking activities. According to the Act, the overall function of the commission was to 'promote national unity and reconciliation' (2008, 5[1]), including 'to work to help restore the human dignity of victims and promote reconciliation by providing an opportunity for victims to give an account of the violations and abuses suffered and for perpetrators to relate their experiences' (TRC Act 2008, 5[2c]).

### *Public hearings*

Public hearings can be time consuming to prepare and implement, and do not usually offer truth commissions any new information (Hayner 2011, 218). Hayner notes that they do, however, lend a range of benefits to the truth commission process: they offer a chance for victims and survivors to directly relate their stories to a public audience; provide an opportunity for the commission to formally acknowledge and symbolically apologise for past wrongs; encourage public understanding and sympathy for the victims; reduce the likelihood of the denial of truth; and importantly, increase public awareness and support of the commission's work (2011, 218).

Such benefits were relevant to the Solomon Islands TRC. In total, eleven public hearings were held across the provinces, at which close to 170 people testified. An additional hearing was also held for inmates at Rove prison; however, it was not able to be public as planned (Osifelo 2011d). Interviewees described the public hearings as powerful events, allowing victims and ex-combatants to relay their experiences firsthand, and for the wider community to engage

directly with the testimonies and the TRC. National and provincial government members, local leaders, representatives of schools, youth groups, women's groups and local business members attended the various hearings, and many others were involved in their preparation and operation, through catering, providing accommodation, transport and media services. The RSIPF and RAMSI were also involved for security purposes.

The majority of the public hearings were held in churches. Participants for the public hearings were selected through the TRC's regional managers and offices. Six public hearings were national hearings, each with a separate thematic focus. The first public hearing was dedicated to hearing testimony from victims. Two hearings were held consecutively that heard exclusively from women and youth; another two focused on ex-combatants, one each in Malaita and Guadalcanal; and the final hearing heard from national leaders. In addition to these thematic hearings there were five regional public hearings, representing and located in Malaita, Guadalcanal, Western Province (Gizo), Central Region (Tulagi) and Eastern Region (Kira Kira) (see Table 6.1 below, or Figure 5.3 in Chapter Five for a map of their locations).

A typical public hearing saw the commissioners sit at a long table, joined at the side by the deponent providing testimony (see Figure 6.5 below). Positioned behind the deponent sat one or two of the counsellors, whom they had usually spent time with in the preceding days. The person providing testimony was introduced by one of the commissioners and reminded that they should not disclose information that would incriminate themselves or their families. They then provided testimony, either improvised or from a prepared written speech, after which a commissioner thanked them for their story. They were usually not questioned or cross-examined.

**Table 6.1** Public hearings conducted by the Solomon Islands TRC, with venue and dates.

| Venue | Type | Dates |
|---|---|---|
| FFA, Honiara | National | 9–10 March 2010 |
| Airahu, Malaita | Regional | 27–29 May 2010 |
| Visale, Guadalcanal | Regional | 23–26 June 2010 |
| Gizo, Western Province | Regional | 13–15 July 2010 |
| Tulagi, Central Region | Regional | 9–10 September 2010 |
| Kira Kira, Eastern Region | Regional | 27–29 October 2010 |
| United Church, Honiara | Thematic - Women | 22–26 November 2010 |
| United Church, Honiara | Thematic - Youth | 22–26 November 2010 |
| Buma, Malaita | Thematic – Ex-combatants (Malaita) | 2–3 May 2011 |
| Holy Cross, Honiara | Thematic – Ex-combatants (Guadalcanal) | 11–12 May 2011 |
| Holy Cross, Honiara | Thematic, National leaders | 3–4 November 2011 |

**Figure 6.5** Public hearing held in a church in Visale. Source: UNDP 2011, 13.

Public hearings for victims and perpetrators were purposefully held separately; however, as the events were public, anyone was free to attend. One anecdote shared with me during an interview told of how a TRC staff member witnessed the testimony of an ex-militant who had held him at gunpoint during the conflict. After hearing him testify and explain how he had personally suffered and come to be associated with a militant group, the TRC staff member was prepared to forgive him. Similarly, some former militants who attended the public hearings in which they heard testimony from victims approached them afterwards to express regret and apologise for what they had done during the conflict.

### 6.3.1   Local perspectives of reconciliation

While localised approaches to conflict management are often regarded as preferable in Solomon Islands, they have significant flaws (see Chapter Four). Importantly in the post-conflict context, even when localised approaches to reconciliation are effective, they are limited by familial, tribal or community networks. While similarities may be recognised in

characteristics of reconciliation across the islands, there is no authoritative or common practice of reconciling multiple communities or tribal groups.

> *In order for the country to move on, we must reconcile. That's the main thought of the people. But how we reconcile, what time we reconcile, who we reconcile with, all these things, they need to be talked about. (Interview with Davinia Osiramoa)*

Attempting to define, let alone implement or promote, reconciliation in post-conflict Solomon Islands is a problematic and troublesome endeavour. While Solomon Islanders generally have a clear explanation of what and how traditional or local reconciliation practices look like, they also acknowledge the discrepancies between these definitions and what reconciliation often looks like today. As discussed in Chapter Four, the term 'reconciliation' is widely used in Solomon Islands, and when asked, interviewees had a fairly consistent description of a reconciliation processes. Typically, it was defined as occurring on inter-personal and inter-communal levels – a process of repairing relationships that have been damaged by a dispute. This often included elements of *kastom* or church-based practices, such as dialogue, prayer, apologies, shaking hands, *kastom* ceremonies or the payment or exchange of compensation (Allen et al. 2013, 79). In more serious matters, it may involve police and state-based judicial processes.

While the practices of reconciliation differ across the archipelago so that a Solomon Islands approach is not homogenous, two key characteristics were frequently noted. First, the importance of restoring relationships and societal equilibrium, usually through some combination of dialogue, prayer, exchange or compensation. And second, the notion of 'forgetting' or 'moving on' from the conflict once reconciliation had occurred, so that the ongoing ramifications of conflict, such as retribution or payback, are extinguished and relationships can be restored. For example, this was a common explanation of reconciliation:

> *Two parties come together and have to talk and give sort of some things like compensation, or this group have to give so much like this, then just reconcile between […] They have to talk between them, exchange with shell money or food. So that if one group sees the other group somewhere, they will not fight each other or be angry but have peace between them and forgive each other. (Interview with BW)*

These characteristics typically describe 'traditional' reconciliation, or ideal practices of local reconciliation processes. Some communities maintain specific guidelines as to how local

reconciliation processes are conducted, including values or amounts of compensation due for specific infractions. As reconciliation practices vary, however, negotiating reconciliations between different communities can be problematic, and conflicts can be (and often are) manipulated for social or economic gain. One TRC researcher referred to this as the 'prostitution of culture':

> Before it used to include so many traditional materials, like shell money. But now it has evolved to involve a lot of cash, huge cash. So the expectation people have now is not like in the past, so I think that government really needs to step in.
>
> But when we talk about traditional reconciliation, usually it is between two local parties only. Like two tribes, so they exchange gifts. That's how it should happen. But now it doesn't work because people have been intoxicated with money. (Interview with Daniel Fenua)

Braithwaite et al. (2010, 81) identify the reliance on compensation, or 'justice', before reconciliation as an obstacle in post-conflict Solomon Islands, as the value and worth of the compensation becomes a focus of the process and distracts from the higher goal of restoring relationships. Rather, the emphasis on compensation is used to justify extortion and corruption.

> Contrast this with Bougainville. There would certainly be negotiation of what payments (traditional or in *kina*) would be made before the scheduling of the formal reconciliation meeting. But in Bougainville this was viewed simply as a step towards the important thing, which was the reconciliation. Usually gifts were given in a spirit of symbolising how precious was the spilt blood, rather than in a spirit of compensation. There was rarely in Bougainville a philosophy of compensation before reconciliation. (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 81; see also Howley 2002)

In terms of post-conflict justice, reconciliation and peacebuilding in Solomon Islands, the priority for many communities has been to heal themselves, before reaching out across community, provincial or 'ethnic' divisions (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 23). Many interviewees stressed the need to reconcile in one's heart, before reconciling with others. Considering the interpersonal and intra-communal nature of much of the violence during the conflict, former Permanent Secretary for MNURP Joy Kere emphasised the importance of reconciliation within, and not just between, the provinces:

It has to happen within communities and families […] Much of the killing, atrocities, and violence occurred within extended families. We have to rebuild, ward by ward, community by community, tribe by tribe, family by family (McDougall and Kere 2011, 144).

As noted in Chapter Four, depending on the nature of the dispute and access to government services, the formal state-based justice system may also be invoked and utilised. Nevertheless, reconciliation – as understood locally – would often still be desired. For example, even after serving a jail sentence, perpetrators may still seek to conduct reconciliation with a victim or their family. A TRC manager explained how conflict was managed in his home province of Guadalcanal:

*But when it comes to bigger things, like murder, it goes through the white man system. In the end, the parties in the village will reconcile. It doesn't matter if I kill another man, I will still give shell money,* chupu*, pig. Then we would shake hands. Then, we forget about everything. But this man would still need justice. Like me, I would still have to go to court and go to prison. (Interview with Andrew Sugalonga).*

In these cases, formal retributive measures may represent some form of justice, while reconciliation facilitated between the families involved would be an effort to restore relationships or societal equilibrium. For example, the Prison Fellowship International's Sycamore Tree project in Solomon Islands has proved successful at facilitating meaningful reconciliation with inmates and their victim's families. The Christian restorative justice approach places emphasis on Christian reconciliation rather than monetary compensation, and is well respected amongst many former combatants (see Braithwaite et al. 2010, 83). Braithwaite et al. explain that the reason the project has been successful is that:

The combatants in a sense own the program. Because the state has nothing to do with it, compensation bids to the state do not crowd out the genuine interpersonal and inter-group work of reconciliation. (2010, 148)

While reconciliation processes and practices vary across the islands, and communities may have different vernacular terms for reconciliation practices, each with different meanings and implications, using the term in the title of the TRC nevertheless gestured towards a process of reconciliation, *as understood locally*. This was ultimately misleading and raised high expectations that to date have gone unmet, as a Solomon Islander staff member of ICTJ explained:

*Initially I found it hard to understand what the concept behind [the TRC] was. But the thing that stood out was the word 'reconciliation'. I mean, that word comes out any time the country goes through some turmoil. So when I looked at the truth and reconciliation commission, that word 'reconciliation' stood out in my mind. I think it would be something to make everyone reconcile. That's what I thought [...] When I look around, people around the country and surrounding me, they had the same impression which I initially had. That this would be about reconciliation. But as I later realised when I went through my work, I saw that ok, it's just* promoting *reconciliation, but it's not* doing *reconciliation. (Interview with BO)*

## 6.3.2 'What will you do with our stories?' National reconciliation and the TRC

Nobody talks of reconciliation because nobody wants to think about it. It's not that anybody is actively opposed to it, but it's that victims are not recognized. It is only for big men and ex-militants. We small people are forgotten therefore reconciliation has no meaning for me. (Anonymous victim from Ravu village on the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal, in Ata et al. 2012, 714)

The lack of clarity over whether the TRC would facilitate, promote or pursue reconciliation, and at what level this would take place, remained an unresolved and persistent challenge throughout the TRC's lifespan, and is an ongoing challenge for the Solomon Islands Government and the MNURP. This ambiguity was an inherent challenge for TRC field staff to overcome in order to entice participation in the TRC's truth-seeking activities, and a major driver of the resistance and research fatigue observed and experienced by TRC field staff. One local women's leader expressed her frustration to me at being repeatedly asked to participate in research on the conflict, asking 'How long will we need to give information? After the paper and the ink runs out, then what'?

Much of the suspicion and weariness on behalf of members of the public stemmed from a concern within communities as to how reconciliation would be achieved and who would benefit from their participation in the TRC activities. A Malaitan female statement taker explained:

*The men ask lots of questions, like 'What are you [the TRC] going to do after this? What is the government going to do for us? It's no good if you come and waste our time to take our stories and then you all benefit from what we've given you.' We heard this a lot! Because they say it's no good that they give their stories, but 'you take money for doing it'. (Interview with BW)*

Although the TRC acted independently from the government, many Solomon Islanders perceived it as an arm of the state – which had itself been a party to the conflict (see Chapter Four). They felt that as they had been wronged by the state, they were therefore entitled to compensation from the state. Many Solomon Islanders expressed anger and frustration at statement takers, for receiving a government salary to conduct the research into their suffering and loss. One TRC researcher told how a Chief was cross and said to him, 'You, the government pays you. Us, the government doesn't pay us' (Interview with ED). Another interviewee said that the state was only interested in people's lives outside of Honiara when it wanted to extract something, be it resources, knowledge or, in this case, stories of the conflict. A lot of resentment was, and continues to be, directed towards the government by people across the provinces for conflict-related issues: for failure to address the concerns of the Guadalcanal people when they were raised in 1988 and again in 1998; for the inability of the police force to provide security to the population during the 1998–2003 conflict; and for its part in terrorising villagers in Guadalcanal in the Joint Operation to capture Harold Keke. A TRC researcher explained:

> *But who caused the tension? That's another question! Because when you look at what caused the tension, you find out that if only the government lived up to its expectations of that time, it would have avoided the biggest impact of the tensions. (Interview with Daniel Fenua)*

For many interviewees, poor leadership at the political level was a root cause of the conflict, and an inhibitor of post-conflict reconciliation.

Throughout and following conflict, the Solomon Islands Government attempted to facilitate reconciliation on a national scale, such as by bankrolling compensation payments and hosting or facilitating reconciliation ceremonies between representatives of the provinces of Guadalcanal and Malaita. However, provinces are not homogenous entities; they consist of multiple language and cultural groups, and are not meaningfully represented as a whole by political leaders. Thus, as was seen with the reconciliation feast held in 1999 (see Section 4.4.1), symbolic reconciliation between the leaders of the two provinces resonates little with those who were directly involved and impacted by the conflict. While the initial stages of the conflict played out along provincial identity lines, violence was committed within, as well as

between, families, communities and provincial groups, and reconciliation therefore needs to reflect these conflict dynamics (McDougall and Kere 2011, 146).

For the TRC to have directly facilitated interpersonal reconciliation on a national scale, it would have needed to have brought the relevant parties together. Commissioner Caroline Laore acknowledged the need (and cost) of physically bringing together the parties involved in the conflict or dispute to enable reconciliation:

> *We were able during the public hearing to hear from victims saying I forgive you for what you have done to me [...] I think they really meant it. But they don't have the support, for example, if you want to bring the perpetrator of this victim, he might be living 20 miles away so you need to pay for the fuel, accommodation, find who he is, bring them here, for them to reconcile. (Interview with Commissioner Caroline Laore)*

This was also told to Braithwaite et al. (2010, 82) by prominent Solomon Islands lawyer and former MEF spokesperson, Andrew Nori:

> Ultimately, Nori felt reconciliation must deal with 'real harms against real individuals' as opposed to 'unreal harms against "Guadalcanal" or "Malaitans"'. For this reason, he favoured a government repository of individual complaints – 'this was take from or done to me' – as a foundation for real reconciliation.

While the TRC did not facilitate this interpersonal approach to reconciliation, it recognised it as a precondition to forgiveness. The final report states:

> Forgiveness as a part of reconciliation suggests that the victim is supposed to know the offender and the latter is expected to be sorry. For forgiveness to be granted, it must first be pursued. However, for some people this remains a difficult step. Ultimately there should be no preconditions placed in the path of reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has laid down no conditions, but rather offers guidelines and takes steps to facilitate the process. (Ata et al. 2012, 705–6)

Forgiveness, importantly, does not preclude the demand for justice. In the predominantly Christian nation, interviewees explained that there was no obligation to forgive or reconcile serious crimes. A female Malaitan statement taker explained:

> *The victims, for example, in murder cases, most victim family would not accept reconciliation. Because they still have those memories of what happened. Or it will take time for them to accept to reconcile. (Interview with MR)*

The Amnesty Acts of 2000 and 2001 were met by critique by civil society at the time, and the TRC was purposefully not equipped to grant amnesty. A later proposed 'Forgiveness Bill' to provide amnesty to those testifying at the Solomon Islands TRC was also met with resistance and was not introduced (Australia Network News 2009c; Oso 2010; Puia 2010b). Commissioner Sofia Macher shared her surprise at the ongoing local demand for justice amid a culture of pronounced Christianity and prominent rhetoric of forgiveness:

> *What the Commissioners thought about justice, it was amazing. Because there is not a big presence of human rights, no. I was surprised how the Commissioners are convinced about the necessity of bringing the perpetrators to justice. And they don't want amnesty. I was surprised that they had clear ideas about this.*
>
> *[…] Because they don't mention this. Because when you listen to the victims, and also how the counselling push the victims to forgiveness, a little manipulate the victims, it was a disaster. They also were so ideological with the churches. It's not based in rights - church and God dominate the life. And in counselling they are encouraged to forgive. So that's why I'm surprised, because nobody asked for justice, in all this time, they say, 'I forgive'. C'mon…*

In the final report (Ata et al. Volume 3, 706), the commissioners acknowledged that in Solomon Islands:

> Reconciliation is generally understood as a process in which the community helps the offender and victim to live together again in a renewed relationship. This process in no way suggests that the victim simply forgives and forgets the past, but rather an opportunity is provided for the offender to share the victim's perspective in a mutually supportive environment.

In one anecdote, the TRC did act as a facilitator of interpersonal reconciliation, albeit unintentionally. To open the public hearing for ex-combatants in Guadalcanal, the TRC provided a *chupu* to sanction the event and allow for the discussion that would take place on sensitive and previously reconciled topics. The Guale ex-combatants presented the *chupu* to representatives of the Malaita Provincial Government on behalf of Malaitans, and to representatives of Guadalcanal Provincial Government on behalf of people from Guadalcanal. The ceremony was moving for those involved, and in return, the following day, representatives of the Malaitan Provincial Government and some Malaitan national leaders assisted ex-combatants from Malaita to present a *chupu* to the ex-combatants from Guadalcanal (see Figure 6.6). Following the two-day public hearing, a debrief gathering took

place at a local hotel and the ex-combatants from Guadalcanal hosted a gathering for ex-combatants from Malaita, before returning to their villages. A Guale TRC staff member was present and described the program:

> It was a simple programme where they have some from the former Malaita Eagle Force and some from the Guadalcanal militant groups talking and then they exchange some small gifts and they shook hands and hugged each other. I think that was one of the greatest moments I will not forget. It was very emotional, they actually acknowledged what TRC did. (Interview with Benjamin Afuga)



Two ex-combatants embrace each other during a brief reconciliation ceremony yesterday at Holy Cross after the closing of the truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) hearing while being witnessed by Fr Sam Ata, right. More on pages 13.

# EX-COMBATANTS RECONCILE

**Figure 6.6** Image and headline on the front page of the Solomon Star depicting reconciliation between ex-combatants at a TRC public hearing. Source: (Osifelo 2011b).

While the reconciliation was moving for those involved, it was limited to ex-combatants. While the TRC did not intend or plan to give preferential treatment to ex- combatants, this became an unintended consequence, and an example of ex-combatants being privileged over victims. In another example, ex-combatants were able to leverage their position to increase their daily allowance from SBD$100 per day (as given to other deponents testifying at public hearings) to SBD$300 per day.

The potential to benefit from participation in the TRC's program was a motivating factor for victims, witnesses and ex-combatants alike. While monetary assistance was provided only to those who attended public hearing events in the form of daily allowances, TRC field staff explained that the commission's mandate to compile a final report, including recommendations for future policy and reforms, was a key motivating factor encouraging participation in research and statement taking. Without this promise of 'exchange' in the form of government policy addressing the issues raised through the stories of conflict and suffering, many statement givers may not have participated in the process. This 'exchange', which could also simply be viewed as the government fulfilling its mandate as outlined in the TRC Act, provided a potential process by which the government could participate in a reconciliation process premised on similar values to traditional reconciliation – an acknowledgment of harm suffered and compensation to acknowledge this and restore the relationship. 'Compensation', in this regard, could take the form of reparations as recommended in the final report, exhumations, memorials, rehabilitation, or institutional reforms.

### 6.3.3  Awaiting a reconciliation program that never came

> To define what precisely is meant by reconciliation remains one of the great incomplete tasks of the nation. (Ata et al. 2012, 716)

This chapter has shown that the process of seeking truth was generally assumed by the public and staff to be in relation to a process of facilitating reconciliation (including rehabilitation and reparation), and not for the documentation of the conflict or the purported cathartic effect of truth-telling alone. For many workers at the TRC, there was to be a distinct reconciliation program which never eventuated, as a TRC researcher explained:

> *For example, with the TRC now, what we are doing now is that we have written a report and submitted it to government, and then after reconciliation will happen. That is how I understand the process now. But I think if we want people involved in it, and at the same time to give people ownership, I think sometimes it's good for us to spend some money to bring together people from the villages. (Interview with ED)*

It was widely agreed amongst TRC staff that a reconciliation programme conducted alongside the truth-seeking programme would have encouraged greater ownership over the whole process. However, a vision of what this would look like was never clarified. Commissioner Joni Madraiwiwi explained how the commission unintentionally focused on truth more than

reconciliation, and that a dedicated reconciliation program was planned, but eventually sidelined:

> *I think that that we had decided in the second year, that we'd concentrate on reconciliation. But somehow I think because of the all sorts of the delays, I think any sort of reconciliation program was probably scaled down, if not completely abandoned.*

The ISF conceptualised the overall truth-seeking work of the commission to be a pathway towards reconciliation. In the ISF final report (UNDP 2011, 15), reconciliation was described as a broad goal achieved across all components of the TRC's work:

> All of the programmatic activities of the TRC were all seen as facilitation to reconciliation [...] Reconciliation activities have been mainstreamed into other programmatic activities of the TRC to ensure full achievement of the TRC mandate. Reconciliation was conducted through media outreach, exhumations, public and thematic hearings as well as through extensive consultations with key stakeholders and families.

TRC communication materials listed reconciliation as a dedicated program of the commission. However, no such program was planned or implemented beyond the Chairman's community consultations. The final report dedicated a chapter to national unity and reconciliation (Ata et al. 2012, 704–31), in which a general overview of reconciliation was provided, and recommendations stemming from the provincial consultations were offered (718–25).The report acknowledged that the commission could not, nor did it try to, achieve national reconciliation, stating, 'The Commission has had no presumption of achieving national reconciliation in the course of its work (Ata et al. 2012, 714). It goes on to say:

> Perhaps the more reasonable goal for the Government is to promote reconciliation rather than to achieve it, as indicated in the TRC Act 2008 that created the Commission. Despite a general sense of disappointment, there has been little serious reflection in the media or public about what reconciliation might really mean, or what might be required to attain it, in a society such as Solomon Islands, where communities have been long divided not only by ethnicity and physical isolation, but by economic conditions and opportunity. In reality, reconciliation is a voluntary act that cannot be imposed or by any other legal measure. Rather, it requires a very wide range of activities to address deeply conflicted and fractured relationships. (Ata et al. 2012, 725)

When it became clearer to TRC staff that the TRC was not going to initiate or facilitate reconciliation as a dedicated program, hopes were, and arguably still are, pinned on the

realisation of the recommendations in the final report. As a statement taker explained, without the 'exchange' of government-led reconciliation in return for their stories, those who gave their statements feel short-changed, and, contrary to the ideal goal of reconciliation, are further angered by the government's inaction:

> *What the TRC did, most people are not really satisfied with. They said, 'what's the outcome where you come and take our stories only?' So that's people inside the communities, they are stuck now. (Interview with MR)*

A TRC researcher explained, 'The whole deal of reconciliation did not really happen. True reconciliation comes after if the government implements the report' (Interview with Daniel Fenua). Interviewees referred to the recommendations in the final report as tokens of reparations and reconciliation that could be offered to the public by the government. Commissioner Kamilo Teke emphasised the integral role of the recommendations:

> *I think that the very important aspects of the report are the conclusion and recommendations. So I concede the recommendation is very vitally important and highly recommend that Solomon Islands national government must deliver on the recommendations, must really consider them and make decisions.*

The inaction of the government regarding the report's release and following the included recommendations illustrates the very dissatisfaction the commission captured regarding peace and reconciliation in Solomon Islands, when it quoted the testimony of ex-militant Adrian Ronia at a public hearing in the final report (Ata et al. 2012, 716):

> I would like to say ten years has lapsed and the talk in the media, courtroom, streets, villages, mountains, valleys, and islands and oceans is still peace and reconciliation. Why has all this been prolonged for another ten years without addressing our demands, without any answers or results?

## 6.4   Conclusion

In considering the inherent challenges of pursuing truth and reconciliation in the Solomon Islands, this chapter has problematised the use of a globalised transitional justice mechanism in post-conflict Melanesia. While both 'truth' and 'reconciliation' were, for the most part, appealing and desired objectives in post-conflict Solomon Islands, how these terms were interpreted and the values with which they were imbued was particular to the context. The

previous chapter showed that the TRC was proposed by civil society actors as a means to secure peace – employing truth as a means to facilitate reconciliation during a time of instability and violence. This chapter has described initial resistance to the truth-seeking activities of the commission, and the importance of the promised final report and recommendations to encourage participation. While pursuing truth was in some respects valued, an interviewee noted, 'it's good to hear the truth, but it's not healing' (Interview with LA). The process needs to move forward and action be taken to facilitate healing. A senior manager at the TRC elaborated:

> *The biggest question that is being asked is, after people tell their stories is, 'what will happen?' That's the biggest doubt people have, until today. 'What will you do with our stories?' We say that we will give it to parliament to have a look at it. 'What will Parliament do with it?' So, that raised a lot of doubt to people in Solomon Islands, whether the TRC would actually convince the government to address the outstanding issues. And when I say outstanding issues, you know, that in the minds of the people in Solomon Islands, there will be no true peace until you rehabilitate the great loss that they had.*
>
> *Like, in Solomon Islands, it's different from the concept that you from developed countries have. For us, compensation comes first before there is peace or reconciliation. But we introduce a reconciliation program. But we didn't introduce a compensation program. Or whatever you call it. You call it rehabilitation because you don't like compensation. But to us you cannot avoid it. So we go vice versa. Where people, they come forward, they go through the process of healing and maybe freedom, they have more freedom now than before, they can move around. But, they cannot forget what they have lost. So the government has to seriously look at this. (Interview with SM)*

In a country where storytelling is a familiar and valued component of local reconciliation practices, national truth-telling has potential as a means of reconciliation in Solomon Islands. Documenting the 'truth' and producing a final report, however, cannot be the end goal: the potential of a TRC for peacebuilding in Melanesia depends on the process in which the stories are told and received, and how that information is used for future action and justice, such as through the adoption and implementation of the recommendations. Learning from previous truth commissions, this was recognised by advocates of the TRC at the outset:

> From the experiences of other transitional societies, it is critical to the long term success of the peace process that the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission be mandatory on the government for implementation (SICA 2002, 4).

While reconciliation processes and ceremonies vary across the Solomon Islands, the TRC had potential to facilitate 'reconciliation' as understood locally. Aside from the inherent challenges, the commission faced a range of other challenges and obstacles in its operation. The following chapter notes these, continuing discussion of the research question and exploration of how the Solomon Islands TRC worked in practice.

# 7. Avoidable challenges

## 7.1    Introduction

This chapter continues to address the research question pertaining to how the Solomon Islands TRC worked in practice, and illustrates the unique experiences and challenges faced by the commission. In doing so, this chapter demonstrates the on-the-ground realities of the commission in contrast to international transitional justice and peacebuilding theory and practice. Truth commissions routinely encounter serious operational challenges, particularly given the transitional contexts in which they are frequently implemented. This chapter outlines and discusses the various 'avoidable' challenges experienced by the Solomon Islands TRC – that is, challenges relating to how the commission was established, conducted and followed up (Tepperman 2002, 144). While it is clear that many experiences and 'avoidable' challenges outlined in this chapter are interlinked and overlap with the 'inherent' challenges presented in Chapter Six, Tepperman (2002, 144) posits that by learning from the 'rapidly accumulating' experience of previous commissions, it should be possible to at least minimise these problems in future commissions.

This chapter primarily draws from interview material, which is frequently presented as excerpted transcripts throughout the chapter. For many interviewees, these challenges were of paramount importance, affecting their ability to fulfil their roles, achieve their work plans, and contribute positively to the commission. Many of the challenges discussed here are also documented in the final report of the TRC (see Ata et al. 2012, 1197–2000).

Challenges presented in this chapter are separated into six broad categories. These challenges address: (i) administration and management of the TRC, including planning, financial administration and relationships with key stakeholders; (ii) TRC personnel, focusing on the leadership within the commission, human resources, and staff wellbeing; (iii) public engagement, awareness and communication; (iv) operational challenges pertaining to the Solomon Islands context; (v) efforts to engage women in the TRC; and (vi) issues relating to the timing and duration of the TRC.

Being the first truth commission in the Pacific, the Solomon Islands TRC played a potentially valuable role by not only fulfilling its own mandate, but also through the generation of valuable experience and salient lessons for the greater region. This chapter draws attention to these challenges as a means to document and contribute to the cumulative knowledge of truth commissions for the effective implementation of TRCs globally, and for Pacific nations considering implementing their own TRC.

## 7.2    Administration and management

The management structure and the financial administration of the TRC were routinely identified as key challenges and sources of ongoing frustration by the majority of interviewees, including both former workers of the TRC and respective stakeholders. In light of the experience of prior commissions, the Solomon Islands TRC developed a strategic work plan that allowed for six months of pre-establishment preparation and three months of preparation once the commission began (Ata et al. 2012, 1198). However, ongoing administrative delays, including appointing and mobilising the international commissioners and securing funding, resulted in severe disruptions to the proposed work plan. These delays in establishing the TRC were discussed in Chapter Five, where it was noted that an amendment was made to the TRC Act 2008 regarding the commencement date of operations (Solomon Islands Government 2009b), and an extension was granted extending the term of its mandate for a further year, until 15 January 2012. To enable the commission to complete and submit an edited and printed final report, the commission was again extended a further six weeks to 28 February 2012 (Ata et al. 2012, 1187).

### 7.2.1 Preparation and planning

The Solomon Islands TRC was hardly unique amongst political and developmental projects in that with the benefit of hindsight, the need for more nuanced and considered planning from the beginning is abundantly clear. Indeed, many of the challenges and difficulties documented in this and the previous chapter could have been lessened or negated had more careful and considered planning taken place.

With over forty previous truth commissions conducted around the world, the Solomon Islands TRC was in the privileged position of being able to learn from previous commissions and the

challenges they had encountered. In retrospect, however, it was evident that the Solomon Islands TRC lacked a clear overarching vision and design, both in relation to inherent theoretical considerations such as those discussed in Chapter Six, as well as the more practical considerations documented in this chapter. Earlier planning documents by SICA and MNURP indicated the intention to learn from previous commissions, noting salient lessons and intentions. Once the commission was formally established under the TRC Act, initial intentions to implement these lessons were neglected as the wheels were quickly set in motion to launch the commission during Desmond Tutu's pending visit. The initial Deputy Executive Secretary, tasked with establishing the commission, explained:

> *We didn't have the time to plan. And I wish that I had more time to be able to plan. But then my hands were tied because there was a timeframe and then they already had their plans with Desmond Tutu. So I think our weakness is that we had to give way to political consideration rather than the interest of setting up the truth commission, and to discuss further the financial arrangements and the issue of the independence of the commission. (Interview with David Tuhanuku)*

As a result, Tuhanuku explained, planning and implementation occurred simultaneously, 'because you were tied up in all the circumstances, you were almost planning and executing on the run'. Initial demands to concurrently establish and implement policies and programmatic activities were a heavy burden for the understaffed commission. In addition to operating under time pressures, the commission also suffered from delays in the engagement of staff; a slow and cumbersome financial administration; and limited human resources and operational capacity, all of which combined to inhibit the planning process and are variously detailed below. Looking back, Tuhanuku believed the TRC had potential in the Solomon Islands, but needed to be more sensitively and specifically adapted to the context:

> *I believe it can work, but unfortunately we didn't have time to explore it and utilise it to the full. It can work, but it has to be planned and executed within the context of the country. In terms of the nature of the conflict, in terms of* kastom*, and the behaviour of people, like in this instance. We needed more time be able to work out how we could apply the idea. You know, for people in Guale, people in Malaita […] because Marovo, Roviana, Temotu, Makira, Rennel and Bellona, maybe if it is between two different groups, maybe the approach would be different too. So, we didn't have the time to be able to work out something that not only fits the Solomon Islands, but which fits the conflicting parties. The behaviour from Malaita is different from Guale, Guale is different from Malaita. We needed more time to work out how this should be done.*

*[…] What it needs is planning. For planning plenty of time to be able to work it out. No truth commission in any form that works better in Peru or South Africa, Sierra Leone, will work the same in Solomons. Because the thinking of the people, the nature of the conflict, who fought, who argued, is different.*

## 7.2.2 Financial administration

Challenges pertaining to budgetary allowances and financial administration are common for truth commissions globally (Hayner 2011, 216). As noted in Chapter Five, the Solomon Islands TRC suffered from a poorly designed financial management system. It experienced ongoing delays in securing funds for salaries and program activities, resulting in a range of operational challenges.

Sources of funding for TRCs vary: earlier commissions such as in Chile and Argentina were funded solely by their national governments, whereas more contemporary truth commissions tend to combine funds from national governments with support from the international community, as happened in the commissions in Guatemala, South Africa, and Liberia (Hayner 2011, 217). The Solomon Islands TRC was funded by the Solomon Islands Government and the international community, namely the European Union and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and foreign government donor support from Australia and New Zealand through their then respective aid programs.[44]

Funding from the Solomon Islands Government was provided through direct budgetary support and through MNURP. An initial commitment of SBD $5 million allocated as direct budgetary support to the TRC under the development budget of 2009–2010 was not provided as expected, and although provisions were made for the running cost of the TRC in the government's recurrent and development budget in 2010 and 2011, it was not the amount anticipated. These setbacks resulted in the TRC initially overspending and accruing financial commitments, later rectified with the support of the ISF and donors (Ata et al. 2012, 1198–99). Some interviewees strongly disagreed with channelling government funds through MNURP, which relegated the MNURP Permanent Secretary as the commission's accounting

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[44] See Figure 5.2 for a breakdown of funds provided by donors to the International Support Facility.

officer, saying it accorded a disproportionate amount of control over the funds to an office external to the TRC.

International donor funds were channelled through the ISF, a mechanism set up within UNDP purposefully established to administer and manage funds for the TRC. The ISF was a new mode of project management for UNDP, and the system was slow to operationalise in conjunction with the commission. The UNDP did not receive donor funds until June 2009, causing significant delays in contracting key staff for both the TRC and ISF. The internationally appointed Executive Secretary of the TRC arrived in April 2009 and the international commissioners arrived in October 2009. A project manager for the ISF did not arrive until December 2010, the same month the Executive Secretary suddenly resigned (Ata et al. 2012, 1204). The ISF struggled to recruit and retain staff, and was not fully staffed and functioning until early 2011, under the leadership of the newly recruited project manager. Considering the time constraints the TRC was operating under, these delays had significant impacts on the commission's proposed work plan.

Interviewees universally referred to the financial administration as a major cause of frustration and an impediment to delivering planned activities, advising that future truth commissions not replicate the model used. For the commissioners, administrators and managers of the TRC, frustration stemmed from a lack of financial control and the limited independence the arrangement afforded for them to develop and implement their work plan. The protocols for accessing and acquitting funds through ISF were variously referred to by interviewees as slow, cumbersome, inefficient and overly bureaucratic.

Administrators at the TRC were seconded government staff and adept at operating within the government system, whereby payments could be fast-tracked and made in cash – a necessary process at times for paying vendors in the largely informal economy. UNDP, however, did not have the financial mechanisms to execute this method of payment. While seemingly minor, the delays in payments for services or goods had far-reaching consequences in the small and networked communities in which the TRC was predominately operating. Considering the majority of the populations in Guadalcanal and Malaita, where the TRC focused its work, had been affected by the tensions, these infractions by what was perceived as a government body were further insults to communities that already resented the

government for conflict-related issues. The TRC regional manager for Guadalcanal explained how the delayed payments were a cause of interpersonal and community conflict:

> *I think from my experience, from my region, paying for things that we used was a problem. Such as paying for canoe hire. It was very slow which caused conflicts with the community. Like for me, as I'm from Guadalcanal, I feel guilty when I hire a boat but it takes a long time to pay for it. They get cross. (Interview with Andrew Sugalonga)*

Commissioner Caroline Laore, who has a background in accounting, stressed the importance of developing a financial system that is congruent with the context, especially considering the damage caused by delayed payments to vendors who were usually in conflict affected areas:

> *We have people calling saying you came to Malaita, you haven't paid your bill and it's like already six months now. You imagine the vendor. We are in post-conflict, they don't have that six or ten thousand dollars to have pending for the next six months. We just went and gave them more problems, and we expect them to have a bank account, we expect them to wait.*

> *[The system] should be in recognition of the fact that it's an informal setting, informal sector of this country, we are dealing with. People with no accounts, people who live in the rural area with no telephone. So we need to have the ability to pay the vendors in the rural area on a cash basis. For example the women who do the cooking, the women who sell at the market we go and get their potatoes and cabbage to cook for the public hearing and they have to leave in the evening to go back, so how can we pay them when they have to fill in the vendor form, they don't have a bank account, all these problems.*

> *[…] So what I'm saying is you need cash, you need ISF to have the facility, the cash to pay out all these truck drivers, boat owners, cabbage seller, rest house owners, they had leaf huts, we went and used them, so pay them.*

For operational and field staff, financial administration challenges manifested in delayed payments of their salaries, limited resources, lack of transportation and delays implementing their work plan. It was also a cause of an ongoing dispute regarding staff salaries and entitlements: depending on their respective position or program, personnel were contracted by either the government or UNDP, and thus subject to different award entitlements. Specifically, UNDP was exempt from paying tax and contributing towards staff's NPF, which lead to disgruntled staff and culminated in a staff strike.

Those managing the funds at ISF and UNDP also found the arrangement challenging and demanding as they balanced the need to be accountable to donors with providing financial

support to the TRC, without having an input into the commission's work plan. They were not in the position to question spending in case they were perceived as interfering with the TRCs independence (Interview with MB, donor representative). The ISF project coordinator described the tension, hesitatingly referring to the set-up as a 'lose-lose' relationship:

> *Because for TRC they just want to be so flexible and they're constantly changing things and they're not able to define anything in a clear way and so for them, they're losing 'cause having someone else managing the budget, it's slowing the process down at their side. And from UNDP's side, it was a problem because UNDP through ISF committed support to that institution, to TRC. And how do you provide and support an institution which is not able to define its work plan, to discuss the procurement planning, and yeah, basically planning is the key word. (Interview with Ladislav Koubek)*

Once the ISF was sufficiently staffed and managed, consistent dialogue between the TRC, ISF, UNDP and MNURP led to improved operational procedures. Nevertheless, interviewees universally agreed that a better system was needed in order to strike a balance between accountability and flexibility for a time-poor commission in a resource-poor setting.

### 7.2.3   Stakeholders and interested parties

The Solomon Islands TRC was established as an independent statutory authority. Protecting the independence and ensuring integrity of the commission was a key priority. This was particularly important considering the ongoing presence of those involved in the conflict in public and community life. However, it was often remarked by those outside of the commission that the TRC was not well connected with the public, and that 'their sense of independence was more a sense of isolation' (Interview with Bob Pollard). Many interviewees commented that the wider community were generally unaware of the TRC's purpose or mandate, and not engaged in the commission's activities.

The commission's stakeholders were mostly limited to those directly involved in its operation – ISF and UNDP, MNURP and ICTJ. Interviewees frequently lamented the minimal involvement of the churches. Churches in Solomon Islands not only have established networks and coverage across the archipelago, but many articulated they also have the moral authority to facilitate discussions on topics such as reconciliation and forgiveness. Although the TRC was initiated by the SICA Peace Office, and it enjoyed general support amongst SICA representatives, churches were not directly involved in the commission's operation

beyond hosting some of the public hearings in their buildings, offering prayers and support at these events and participating in stakeholder or civil society consultations. Commissioner Joni Madraiwiwi noted that more could have been done to cement a relationship between the churches and the TRC during Desmond Tutu's visit:

> *Looking back, while he was there, and if we [the international commissioners] were there, we could have actually used that to really seal our relationship with SICA. Because that really never developed to the point that I think it ought to have. I think we just assumed because Father Sam [Chairman Sam Ata] was there that it would be a no-brainer that a relationship would develop, but it never quite took off really.*
>
> *[…] I think, with the benefit of hindsight, my preference would have been to work more closely with the churches, because I think it's a good fit – reconciliation with the churches, given their spiritual role. But also because of their networks.*

A number of interviewees speculated that increased involvement of the churches would have encouraged greater community participation in TRC programs, and may have sparked a genuine conversation about healing, forgiveness and peacebuilding in the post-conflict communities:

> *I thought it would have been much better if the TRC had gone through, like, getting a lot more involvement with the churches, especially with SICA, Solomon Islands Christian Association [...]I think that had they gone through the churches, I think there would have been a lot more people that came out, instead of just a limited few.(Interview with MB, donor representative)*

Similarly, the relationship between the TRC and the various local, national and international NGOs did not develop to the extent that the commissioners would have liked or had intended. Some NGOs were reportedly hesitant to be involved with what was viewed as a political process. With limited resources and secretarial support, and under time pressure, the commissioners were unable to develop working relationships with the numerous organisations, as Sofia Macher described:

> *We organised meetings with the NGOs [...] But we don't have a secretary, we don't have anything. So organising meetings was a huge task. I remember at the beginning we organised at least two or three meetings with the NGOs and there are all these foreign people around the table and we try to convince them to be involved in the process and they are not interested. And probably also, we don't have too much to offer*

> *to them, because we also don't have anything. We only talk around. At the end, we can't organise anything.*

Thus the key stakeholders of the TRC were reduced to those involved in its operation. The relationships with ISF/UNDP and MNURP have been covered above in Section 7.2.2. Importantly, while the financial administration was a point of frustration for interviewees, the TRC appreciated the support of ISF, UNDP and MNURP, acknowledging the system at least enabled the TRC to be established (Ata et al. 2012, 1203–05). For UNDP, providing support to the TRC through the ISF was a new project model and in some ways, a gesture of goodwill, as the project was not a core part of UNDP's work plan, as explained by the ISF project coordinator:

> *From our side, it was actually a very unusual project also, because normally UNDP doesn't commit itself to projects where it has no say and no effect whatsoever on the outcomes and on the objective the project is planning to achieve. (Interview with Ladislav Koubek)*

Similarly, while the relationship between the TRC and MNURP was at times strained in terms of budget control, the MNURP was supportive of the TRC's work; for example, seconding staff to the commission, and offering their office as a temporary workspace when the TRC was moving between buildings. Commissioner Joni Madraiwiwi noted that while the relationship with MNURP 'wasn't warm', the independence of the commission was respected: 'To be fair to them, they never interfered. We never got telephone calls or anything like that.'

The working relationship between the TRC and ICTJ fluctuated. At times the support of ICTJ was well received and appreciated, especially in the early stages of establishing the commission when the ICTJ provided technical assistance. As the initial Deputy Exective Secretary of the commission explained, ICTJ staff helped him to interpret and implement the TRC Act:

> *All I had was the Act and the Cabinet Paper, setting out certain proposals which were accepted by Cabinet, and then it was up to me to decide how I could do it. But then I was fortunate that I had people from the ICTJ. I'd really like to acknowledge their assistance. The ICTJ came in, and they helped me work out how to put something in place, involve the relevant provisions of the Act, appoint Commissioners, and all that. And then set up the TRC. (Interview with David Tuhanuku)*

However, at other times during the TRC's operation, a number of staff and commissioners expressed that the ICTJ were interfering in the TRC's work by projecting a particular interpretation of how the TRC should be operated. Clearer policies were needed to delineate the role of ICTJ in supporting the TRC, to establish clearer expectations of what support ICTJ could offer, and to draw boundaries. Commissioner Sofia Macher explained that while ICTJ's expertise was appreciated and at times helpful, it was often felt as though they were attempting to direct the TRC's work rather than support the commissioners in their own vision for the commission:

> *For me, ICTJ was terrible. Probably they participated a lot in the creation of the TRC, help to write the Act, but they are so paternalist, and they think that they are in charge of the TRC [...] And they pretend to repeat how they organise the East Timor.*
>
> *[...] We needed the help of ICTJ. But they should follow* our *requests. Because there are different ways to organise the process. Different approaches. Different understandings. It's not the same. It's not like ICTJ have "the" way to organise a TRC. No, there are different ways. And that's why there is something that you can discuss, because you understand differently what you want. How you prepare, or how you involve the victims, how you involve the actors, the society, in this process – there are different ways.*

Like the ISF, ICTJ sat in a separate office to the TRC. One senior manager of the TRC explained that he would have preferred if they were all under the same roof, and had worked more closely together, with ICTJ supporting the commission's efforts to fulfil its mandate.

## 7.3   TRC personnel

> As is true with many processes, the success of a truth commission will be determined largely by the quality of the people who carry out the process. (Hayner 2011, 233)

Like a number of truth commissions globally, the Solomon Islands TRC consisted of commissioners, executive and deputy executive secretaries and departmental and regional managers, as depicted in Figure 7.1.
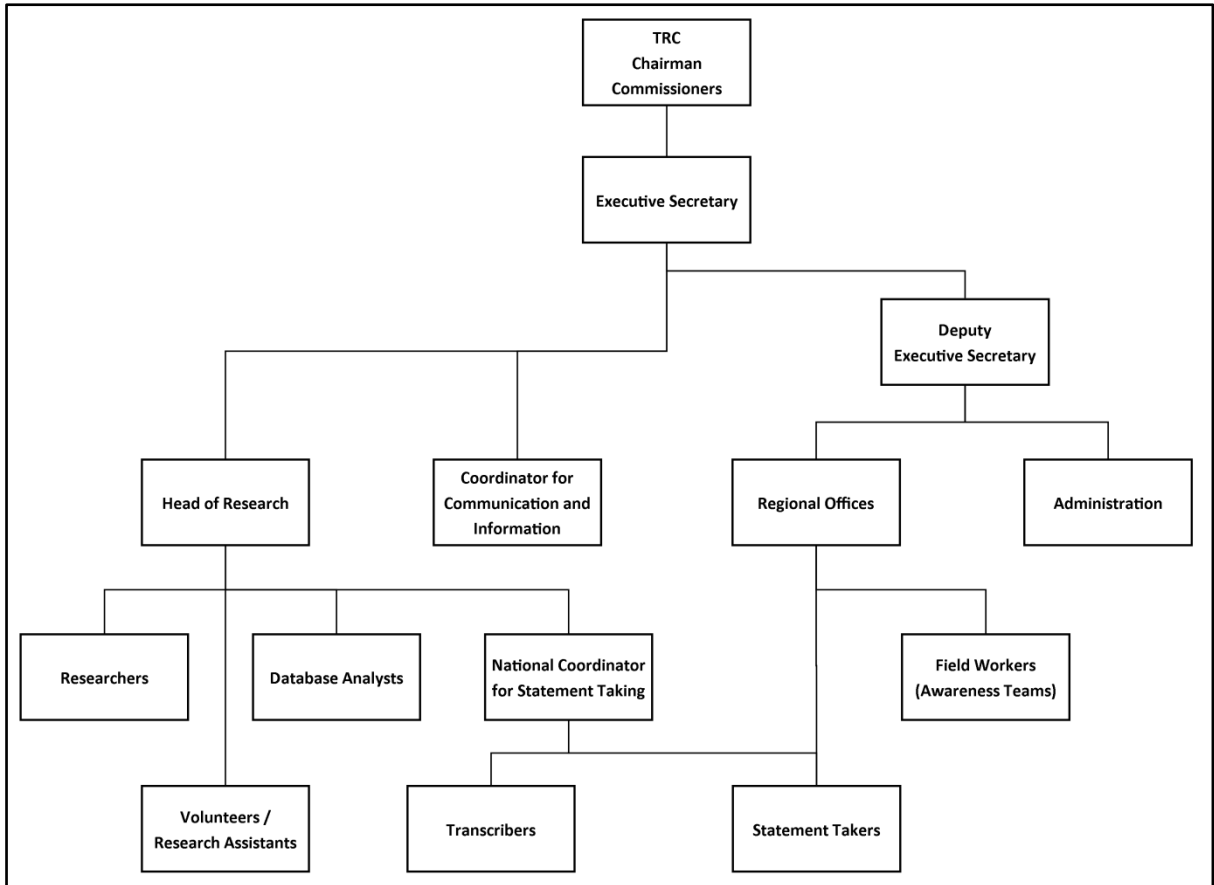
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**Figure 7.1** Organisational chart of the Solomon Islands TRC.

In a relatively small and highly networked society such as Solomon Islands, personal and political spheres are inherently interlinked. As such, staff appointments were made in consideration of personal reputation and public standing as well as ability and experience. The significance of the former was relevant as those with positive reputations and local standing were able to contribute favourably to the TRC's public work and reputation. An example includes that of a counsellor employed to provide support to testimony givers at public hearings who had a long and respected history of supporting victims during the crisis. Conversely, the ramifications of personal reputations were demonstrated when a known ex-combatant was hired as a fieldworker. While he had reportedly undergone rehabilitation and had committed to meeting the TRC objectives, his past reputation was well known within the community and negatively impacted the public's perception of the commission.

Complexities associated with balancing personal reputations and public perception with technical ability and merit present significant human resource challenges in highly networked

societies such as in Solomon Islands. While striving to provide a transparent and equal opportunity approach to the appointment of personnel, managers are simultaneously concerned with ensuring overall project objectives will be met. While considering personal reputation and public standing risks nepotism and favouritism, the personal reputation and public standing of TRC staff is relevant as it impacts the overall reputation of the commission.

## 7.3.1  Leadership

> Truth commissions derive their power to a large extent from the moral authority and competence of commissioners. Hence selecting suitable commissioners is a crucial factor in their good functioning. (de Grief 2013, 16)

The importance of the appointment and role of commissioners is well documented (de Grief 2013, 16–18; Gonzalez 2014b, 18–19). In the report of the Special Rapporteur to the UN, de Grief emphasised the importance of specific minimum selection criteria for the appointment of commissioners, in addition to the focus given to selection procedures (de Grief 2013, 18; Gonzalez 2014b, 19). While selection procedures aim to ensure equal representation across demographic and cultural identities in society, Gonzalez warns that such consultative appointment processes risk neglecting individual prestige and capacity (2014b, 19).

The Solomon Islands TRC lacked strong, inspirational leadership to champion its cause. While the SICA Peace Office initiated and advocated for a TRC, the eventual establishment of the commission was not a result of a united effort across the body of churches, but rather attributable to the efforts of few key individuals. As these individuals moved on, the wheels were set in motion to establish the TRC, with or without a dedicated leader, as former SICA Peace Office member Bob Pollard explained:

> *You have to ask yourself, you know, who are the local champions who really championed it? You know, after the SICA Peace Office, we abandoned our goals and our goal posts, no-one else really championed it really. Other people took the idea and made it happen. I mean, the TRC staff really worked very hard, but apart from the TRC, who really else was saying, you know, this is something we really want to support it. (Interview with Bob Pollard)*

Once appointed, the commissioners were the public face and leaders of the commission. Interviewees mostly agreed that the composition of the commission, being two non-nationals and three nationals, was appropriate for the context. The combination allowed for the

experience and expertise of the international staff to be utilised, and increased the perceived bipartisanship and validity of the commission. Meanwhile, ensuring a majority of the commissioners were nationals demonstrated local ownership, and made certain the commission had a sound understanding of the local context and the conflict history. Importantly, the international commissioners were seen as supporting the national commissioners to implement the mandate, rather than leading the commission, as Commissioner Kamilo Teke described:

> *The people from outside, like the international commissioners, and others, they are helping us. They are exposing their experience to us, so we can look from their experiences, take it, and make our own decisions.*

Both international commissioners were seen to offer unique and valuable contributions towards the TRC: Joni Madraiwiwi was particularly valued and respected as a Pacific Islander leader and lawyer, and Sofia Macher for her previous experience and knowledge of truth commissions and human rights. However, the disparity in remuneration between the international and national commissioners was a point of contention, causing the national commissioners to feel unappreciated for their local knowledge and expertise.

Importantly, both the international commissioners and the research manager were sensitive to the Solomon Islands workplace culture and did not attempt to enforce external perceptions of time and project management. For example, despite the time pressure and deadlines, Commissioner Sofia Macher was patient and supportive of local approaches:

> *But at the end, every public hearing, every activities, wow. Everything falls into place. But you see people sit under the tree, talking, nothing happens. But, it happens. But they have a different ways to communicate, timing, everything. And you don't know, you don't see. But it happens.*

Whether the position of executive secretary needed to be an international position in the Solomon Islands TRC was contentious. According to Hayner (2011, 212), the position of executive secretary is one of the most demanding in a truth commission, due to the public and political pressure of the position; the time constraints to achieve the work plan; and the range of activities that must be coordinated. The international appointment made to the position was neither experienced in truth commissions, nor in managing projects in a Pacific context, and resigned after six months in-country. The nationally-appointed deputy executive secretary was

then tasked with the role of executive secretary, without receiving adequate and necessary support to fulfil the role.

Finally, echoing the point above regarding the importance of personal reputation, the personal integrity and behaviour of the commissioners was especially open to scrutiny, both within and outside of the workplace. Therefore it was critical that the commissioners maintained a positive personal reputation and acted with integrity at all times. Within the workplace, interviewees commented on the importance of the commissioners and managers showing sound leadership, taking an interest in their work, demonstrating an understanding of the challenges they were facing in the field, and most importantly, supporting the work they were undertaking (discussed below in Section 7.3.3).

## 7.3.2  Human resources

Truth commissions require a diverse range of experienced staff. Hayner (2011, 213) notes that while some commissions have operated on minimal staff, truth commissions typically employ a large and diverse professional staff, such as counsellors or social workers, information system specialists, data entry staff, transcribers, interpreters, logistical coordinators and specialised technical advisors, such as forensic experts for exhumations. In Solomon Islands, recruiting, training and retaining staff with sufficient capacity was a major challenge. This was worsened by the initial lengthy delays of salary payments leading to the early resignation of some suitably qualified staff.[45] Staffing was also an issue for the ISF, as its project coordinator noted:

> *Staffing of the whole project on both sides was an issue from the very beginning. From a general perspective, if it had been staffed properly from the very beginning, it would go completely differently, a very different path. (Interview with Ladislav Koubek)*

In the early stages, the professional staff of the TRC was limited to the five commissioners, four managers and coordinators, and administration staff seconded from the government. An

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[45] This was the case for a qualified Solomon Islander woman who was initially responsible for conducting the research for the chapter on women in the TRC's final report – the position I came to be in later on.

initial hope of the commissioners was to attract well-educated academic personnel to staff the commission; however, securing such personnel was not possible and the commissioners adapted their expectations accordingly: 'I think in terms of staff, we had to make significant adaptations and really it sort of, I think, limited our flexibility. But I think that was a problem that was always going to be there' (Interview with Commissioner Joni Madraiwiwi).

Available positions were advertised in newspapers, and news of the employment opportunities spread through word-of-mouth. Appointed staff had a range of professional backgrounds, such as teaching, public service and NGO sector experienct. Some staff had previous experience with fieldwork and research, such as from the annual RAMSI people's survey,[46] or the Family Health and Safety Study.[47] Importantly, the commission made the commendable effort to recruit field staff and transcribers who could speak the several languages used across Guadalcanal and Malaitan provinces.

A number of staff were recent graduates and thus relatively young and inexperienced, yet they were eager workers and committed to developing their professional skills. Several remarked that their commitment to the TRC stemmed from feeling as though they were contributing to their country's peacebuilding process, as noted in further detail in Chapter Eight.

The research manager noted that while there was limited professional experience amongst the research team, there was 'a lot of goodwill […] I can't expect more. I expected at least commitment and this is what I got, they were very committed. They tried' (Interview with Ludwig Huber). Considering this was the first truth commission in the Pacific region, the

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[46] The RAMSI People's Survey was an independent annual survey conducted during RAMSI's presence in Solomon Islands. According to the RAMSI website, it 'provided a unique insight into the opinions of Solomon Islanders on a wide range of issues, including business and employment, law and order, public accountability and access to services.' For more information and copies of the annual reports, see: http://www.ramsi.org/media/peoples-survey/.

[47] The Solomon Islands Family Health and Safety Study (2009) was jointly conducted by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Solomon Islands Ministry for Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs (MWYCFA). The study was the first nationally representative research on violence against women and children in the country (SPC and MWYCA 2009). Available from http://www.pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/SolomonIslandsFamilyHealthandSafetyStudy1.pdf.

limited knowledge of how to implement and operationalise the TRC's activities was understandable. The provision of dedicated and comprehensive training to TRC personnel as part of the TRC's preparatory period would have capitalised on staff commitment and enthusiasm while building capacity to have better undertaken their work plans.

### 7.3.3 Staff wellbeing and vicarious trauma

It is not uncommon for staff of truth commissions to exhibit signs typical of post-traumatic stress or vicarious trauma (Hayner 2011, 159; Hamber 2009, 62–65). For example, Hayner (2011, 159) notes that in South Africa 'the impact of this trauma was well acknowledged at the commission, manifested in  short tempers, aggression, sleeplessness, nightmares, paranoia, headaches, ulcers, substance abuse problems, and other physical and behavioural problems'. Hearing distressing testimonies every day can have a significant impact on personnel who may not know how to process the pain they are witnessing (Hayner 2011, 159). At the Solomon Islands TRC, I often witnessed elements of vicarious trauma. In casual discussions at the office, many asked me about trauma, using terms they had learned in their TRC training to refer to symptoms that they were experiencing, such as flashbacks, nightmares and disturbed sleep.[48] As the majority of the field staff were from the two islands party to the conflict, many had their own personal memories of violence, insecurity and threat during the conflict that may have been easily evoked.

A statement taker described the personal effect of her work, after finishing at the Solomon Islands TRC:

> *At the start, I knew that this was part of my work. So when I heard these stories, I forgot them, left them behind. So they wouldn't spoil me when I was doing work. If I carried them around then I would not feel good, I'd feel sad and not sleep good. So I left it all behind. But now, it starts to come back. After I've had rest from the work. Because the TRC did not provide anyone to do debriefing for us or counselling us after our work. So now, sometimes I have bad nightmares, about death. So only now I'm feeling this. I*

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[48] Prior to working at the Solomon Islands TRC, I worked as a case manager for families affected by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires for eighteen months. In this role working with survivors of a catastrophic natural disaster, I became well versed and aware of the symptoms of vicarious trauma – a risk when working with traumatised clientele.

*didn't feel like this when I was doing the work. So now I start to think back about them. I think about some of the death cases that I took, or some who were really badly beaten, their jaw broken, like that. It didn't really affect me when I was going the work, but now that I've finished, it's just started. (Interview with HM)*

While TRC field staff were regularly confronted with stories of distress, trauma and violations, research has shown that vicarious trauma at truth commissions not only affects those working directly with victims, perpetrators and survivors. Hayner reports that in a number of commissions, the staff that are most disturbed by stories of violence and conflict are data entry staff, as they process a great number of statements while being isolated from the context and therefore unable to witness – and be reassured by – the resilience of the deponent (2011, 160).

Contrary to the interview excerpt above, the Solomon Islands TRC did attempt to provide psychological support to the staff, a common endeavour in recent truth commissions (Hamber 2009). However the service was minimal, and as noted above, many staff did not realise or utilise the support, and staff requests for psychological support or counselling were largely unmet.

Risks to health and physical wellbeing were also significant as field staff were often deployed in remote and isolated environments lacking access to services such as health, communication and transport. The risks that manifested from the sensitive nature of the work and the ongoing presence of a number of ex-combatants in communities are noted and discussed below in Section 7.5.3.

While staff faced difficult working conditions, many reported feeling unsupported by managers and pressured to complete more statements or research in order to reach the targets the commission had set.

*We worked so hard, and then we would come back to the office and hear that the office was not happy that we hadn't taken a lot of statements. We were cross! We sweat our ass off to do this work, and then they said we didn't do enough. (Interview with HM, female, statement taker)*

*The big men didn't really consider us workers. They wanted us to do more work, do more work. But they really didn't consider our welfare. It was hard to keep going on. (Interview with NR, male, TRC researcher)*

Some staff said that they felt their contribution to the TRC was unacknowledged. This was worsened by disputes over salaries and entitlements:

> *Yeah, the bosses did not acknowledge them. They don't consider how much the statement takers and researchers who went out in the field and put in their time and effort and their lives at risk to achieve this mandate. (Interview with SL, TRC staff member)*

While the report remains unreleased, ramifications continue for many TRC staff. In the highly networked societies of Solomon Islands, former TRC staff members and stakeholders expressed concern that their personal reputations had been damaged by their involvement with the TRC as long as the report went unreleased and the recommendations not enacted:

> *In the community where I come from, they say the TRC is a failure, and that those of us who worked at the TRC are con men. Even now when I come across people who I met during statement taking, they ask me, 'when will something happen?' And I don't know what to tell them […] So when I get called a con man, I don't feel good. But it's beyond my capacity. So if I meet a boss of the TRC on the street, I try and ask them about the progress of the TRC. And they say that the report has been submitted to Parliament and they don't know what will happen now. (Interview with RG, male, statement taker)*

A number of field staff expressed that they were hesitant to revisit villages where they had collected testimonies for the TRC. Statement takers talked about the personal responsibility they felt towards those who provided statements in the understanding that the government would consider the final report and act on the recommendations:

> *One thing I really want to do now is to push for the report and their recommendations. Because we were in the field. We were the ones that people saw. So if there is no rehabilitation or anything, they'll say that we are liars, and if we ever take a new job, and go to the same place, it will be hard for us to go, we'll have a bad name.*

> *They'll say that we are con men. And then in our following work, they'll have a bad image of us. Because for those who work in the office, they sit down in the office and do everything. But because we were in the field with the people, I am a bit worried, (Interview with SL, TRC staff member)*

## 7.4   Public awareness and communication

> *The TRC, when it was first introduced, people didn't believe the TRC. They didn't believe what the TRC was supposed to do. And that was the biggest hindrance the TRC*

*faced. This is just a trap or somehow for people to come out and get arrested. So it was really foreign. (Interview with TRC manager)*

Limited public awareness of the TRC and its mandate presented ongoing and pervasive challenges to the successful completion of TRC activities. As mentioned in previous chapters, TRC staff found that the wider population had minimal or no awareness of the TRC or its purpose. A robust awareness and communication strategy was needed to address recurring concerns, such as the fear that the TRC would implicate ex-combatants for arrest; the belief that the TRC may provide amnesty; confusion over the purpose of the TRC; and awareness of how the public could participate in the TRC process.

The TRC attempted to raise public awareness of its mandate through the use of fieldworkers and an awareness campaign. Being the first TRC in the Pacific meant that many of the coordinators and managers were working with an emerging model. Many of the challenges that plagued the commission were at their sharpest early on in its operation and thus strongly affected the awareness program that was scheduled to be completed at the beginning. Impacting challenges included delayed payments, poor planning and limited personnel and staff capacity. For example, due to delayed payments the work plan and activities were consistently delayed, fieldworkers were deployed during provincial elections and the Christmas period when communities were distracted or preoccupied with other commitments, and it was conducted at a time of seasonal bad weather. The time allowed for the awareness campaign was limited to a few months, considered by many to be far too short. Ideally, awareness campaigns in the field would have continued for the duration of the commission and arranged in a way to visit communities just prior to the arrival of statement takers.

### 7.4.1  Communication strategies and challenges

Conducting public awareness and executing a communication strategy across the archipelago was a difficult task. A large proportion of the population is functionally illiterate, and many in rural areas do not have access to mainstream media. The early skeleton staff of the TRC included a communications manager, and later two communication officers were recruited. A communication and awareness strategy was developed, and a number of activities implemented to raise awareness of the TRC. These included the production of a fifteen minute radio program, broadcast three times a week between March 2010 and November

2011; visits to schools in Honiara; the production of t-shirts, flyers and banners (see Figure 7.2); and an in-house TRC newsletter (Ata et al. 2012, 1206).
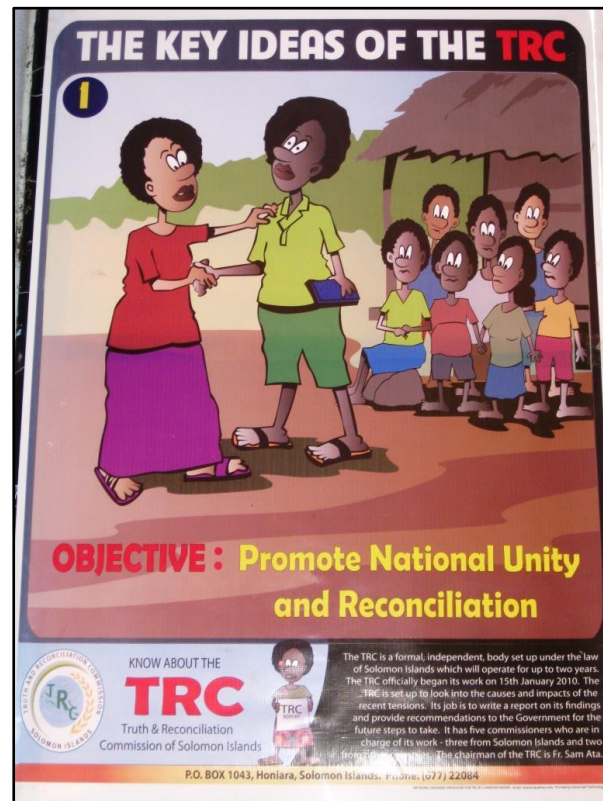


**Figure 7.2** Education banner produced for public awareness of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

These efforts, however, did not suffice. A staff member said the communications strategy was undermined by a lack of funding and lack of managerial support:

> *Because there was no fuel, no transport, no good pamphlets or brochures to distribute, things like that. No awareness materials were available. My colleague and I pushed hard for them, and they said it exceeded our budget and like that, it was just brushed aside. Later on, we both realised after we met with the bosses that they slowly scraped off our budget to meet other programs. So that made us both not able to do our work. (Interview with SL, TRC staff member)*

To support the commission, the ICTJ conducted workshops to raise awareness of the TRC – with SICA members in Malaita and Western Provinces, and for journalists reporting on the TRC. In an attempt to build public awareness and trust in the commission, the commissioners also conducted stakeholder awareness workshops for government and civil society leaders in

and around Honiara, Auki and Gizo on the TRC's mandate (Ata et al. 2012, 1206). To continue raising awareness of the TRC in 2011, Chairman Sam Ata travelled the country to conduct consultations with provincial government and civil society leaders and representatives.

An additional challenge that inhibited the TRC in obtaining a greater number of statements was community attendance during field visits. As communities were often unaware of the arrival of statement takers and researchers, or were given inadequate forewarning, residents were often unavailable to attend due to commitments that took them away from settlements, such as fishing or gardening. Improved planning and sufficient prior notification by the TRC to communities would have enabled residents to better prepare for the pending visits.

### 7.4.2   Limited awareness and common misconceptions

> *How I saw it, the people who stay in isolated places didn't know about it. Especially people who stay in the mountains, or communities which are far away from access to the centres. Like, within Auki, people have heard of it. Within Malu'u, some have. Outside of those places, they don't have any idea. (Interview with NR, male, TRC researcher)*

As described in Chapter Six, members of the public were often reluctant to engage with the TRC. While to some degree this was due to the sensitive nature of the topic and cultural taboos that restrict particular disclosures about past events, overall, the lack of understanding of the TRC, its role and purpose, was a major inhibiting factor. Two major misconceptions encountered by TRC staff have been touched on in the previous chapter, as they relate to the purpose of truth-seeking or truth-telling, and the definition and understanding of reconciliation in the Solomon Islands context and the role of the TRC in promoting or facilitating reconciliation. Several further challenges and misconceptions regarding the TRC tainted its reputation, which had a negative impact upon public engagement and trust.

Throughout the TRC's operation the public generally appeared to have minimal trust in the commission or its work. Understandably, in small and networked communities such as in Solomon Islands, the notions of anonymity and confidentiality are not familiar or reliable reassurances; particularly so when it relates to the disclosure of such sensitive and private topics. Fieldworkers described the importance of explaining the ability for statements to be

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given anonymously and in confidence, noting this reassurance allowed deponents to more openly engage with the commission's activities.

The interface between the criminal justice system and the TRC was another key point of confusion for the public. Being unclear on the role and mandate of the TRC, there was a widespread fear and misconception amongst the public, and particularly amongst ex-combatants, that the TRC was a means to gather evidence for further arrests. The initial Deputy Executive Secretary described the unfortunate timing of establishing the TRC at the same time as the prison in Auki was being expanded:

> *There was a rumour by these people that it was part of a trick of RAMSI to set up the Commission, to make sure that they would get the story out of people, and that will be used against them. Which is not true, according to the Act. The materials of the TRC should not be used for prosecution purposes. But that was very strong. And they threatened, they said they will kill me.(Interview with David Tuhanuku)*

This misconception continued for much of the TRC's operation. One staff member told how her involvement with the TRC caused conflict within her extended family, as her relatives had been involved with one of the militant groups and were fearful of returning to prison. This misconception also made the task of the researchers responsible for investigating the militant groups particularly challenging, as they were often met with weariness and suspicion:

> *They say that we come to find out information and then later they will go to prison. So that made the job a bit difficult. But when I clarified what we were doing, then there were no problems. Some that were difficult, I wouldn't force them to talk. (Interview with NR, male, TRC researcher)*

The belief that the TRC was linked to prosecutions worsened when an arrest was made at a closed hearing for former vigilante members from Western and Choiseul Provinces in Taro in September 2011. There was an existing warrant for the man's arrest, and knowing he was going to attend the hearing, the RSIPF presented to conduct the arrest. However, the reporting of the arrest implied that he was arrested at the hearing itself by RAMSI officers (Marau 2011). The event, and its reporting, broke the trust the TRC had managed to develop with ex-combatants and instigated backlash against the TRC (see Figure 7.3). In response, the Chairman of the TRC took out a full page advertisement in the Solomon Star to convey an

apology to the Premier, people and participants of Choiseul and Western Province (see Figure 7.4).



**TRC WANTED OUT**

**Arrest jeopardises hearing**

By DOUGLAS MARAU

THE Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearing organised for members of the now defunct 'black sharks' has hit a brick wall after RAMSI intervened and arrested one of the participants.

Seven members of the 'black sharks' were supposed to reveal their stories behind closed doors to the TRC starting yesterday in Taro, Choiseul Province.

However, after one of the leaders of the group gave his testimony yesterday, RAMSI officers and local officers rounded him up and had him arrested.

Reports reaching the Solomon Star said this has forced other members of the 'black shark' to call of the hearing.

According to reports reaching the Solomon Star the man who was arrested was believed to be a close associate of former Guadalcanal warlord Harold Keke.

Reports from Taro stated that the direction for his arrest came from the police hierarchy in Honiara.

The member of black

CONTINUED PAGE 2

**Figure 7.3** Front page headline demonstrating anger at TRC following arrest at closed hearing in Choiseul. Source: Marau 2011.

While there were a variety of opinions about the TRC and the merits of its mandate, interviewees agreed that without awareness of the TRC, communities were less willing to engage in its activities.

> *Because people who had not heard of the TRC and did not have a clear understanding, it was hard for them to talk. Or they would talk, but maybe hold something back. They would think, ok I'll story, but maybe some things I won't say, in case they pass the information on to wrong the people. So, awareness group must go first before the statement takers come. (Interview with MR, female, statement taker)*

Conversely, when individuals and communities understood the purpose of the TRC, they were more likely to engage and participate.

# TRC Apology

Last week the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) conducted closed hearings for former vigilant members from Western and Choiseul Provinces in Taro. Six participants were invited for the hearings: four had testified before the Truth Commission when RAMSI and police on Friday 2, September 2011; disrupted the process in which Samson Leketo, one of the participants was arrested.

According to local knowledge, Leketo is a security officer at a logging company in the Shortlands and before has in the recent past made regular trips to Taro. The intervention by RAMSI and police was therefore heavy handed and inappropriate as the authorities took advantage of TRC's processes activities to achieve their objectives

The TRC has in the past conducted two public hearings for former-combatants of Guadalcanal and Malaita and more than 100 closing hearings for politicians, leaders and individuals without any interference. The action taken by RAMSI and police in Taro was disrespectful to the national process. It in fact aborted the closed hearings as the remaining former combatants refused to appear.

What RAMSI and police has done undermined the confidence TRC has with the society and seriously called into question its independence.

The incident has also raised further concerns whether to request police participation in terms of providing security for future events.

On behalf of the TRC, I take this opportunity to sincerely say 'sorry' to the premiers, people and participants of Choiseul and Western Provinces for what happened. However, I want to thank the participants for their willingness and courage to come forward. I also want to extend my sincere gratitude to survivors of the tension, former-combatants, politicians and leaders who have testified before the Truth Commission.

The Commission also collected more than two thousand statements from individuals. Your contribution to this national process of healing and reconciliation is important because you believe in truth and justice to be the only way forward for the future peace of our nation.

The TRC is looking forward to further cooperation from all stake-holders, churches and Christian people of Solomon Islands in our endeavor of peacemaking. May God bless Solomon Islands and its effort to build a better nation.

**Fr. Sam Ata**
**CHAIRMAN**
**TRC**

**Figure 7.4** Full page ad in *Solomon Star* by the TRC offering an apology following the arrest at a closed hearing in Choiseul. Source: Ata 2011.

### 7.4.3  The importance of presence

Despite the various efforts made by the TRC to raise public awareness and interest in the commission, many people did not know about the commission until it's staff physically appeared in their villages, communities and towns. The awareness-raising conducted during various consultation workshops and stakeholder meetings did not trickle down to people at the grassroots, and despite efforts to utilise the radio and print media, the reach was not adequate to raise the required level of public understanding and subsequent participation. Broadly speaking, the commission and its work were not salient to the broader population until the TRC arrived in a community. Face-to-face interaction with the TRC was clearly an effective and necessary strategy, as stressed by a TRC researcher:

> *I mean, go and do face to face and make contact with them. Because some of them don't access the radio. Then when we go do awareness, we should give out anything like booklets or brochures. But how I see it, you must go and present them with the information. (Interview with NR, male, TRC researcher)*

Public hearings were an effective means to raise awareness of the purpose and goals of the commission. The hearings were an opportunity to clear doubt and clarify misconceptions about the commission's mandate and helped to build trust between the commission and the population. By giving an opportunity for provincial government and local leaders to directly participate in the program, the TRC was able to garner support, and the opportunity for all citizens to attend encouraged trust and participation in the overall process.

> *When we went to Makira, we went to where only the radio reaches, SIBC, but they know little about the TRC. Even Lata [provincial capital of Temotu], they have heard of it, but they know only a little about it. Not until the public hearing happened. Then those people living in Kira Kira [provincial capital of Makira] town, they came and joined the public hearing, and they see something is going on with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In Lata, where nobody reaches them, only people who attend the public hearing, they become familiar, but the rural people in Temotu Province - no. Same in Western Province, and in Choiseul. (Interview with Davinia Osiramoa, female, TRC Administrator)*

In hindsight, TRC fieldworkers noted the awareness campaign needed to be extended, so that fieldworkers could visit more locations and talk to more communities, preferably just prior to the arrival of statement takers:

*They must do this awareness in a way where everyone really understands what the TRC is, and how it works, so all the people should understand this before the statement takers go afterwards to take the stories.*

*[…]They have to walk. Go from community to community. Or if the communities are far away from each other, arrange a day where close communities, or neighbouring communities, can come to one place, especially a market place, or during Sundays, during church, or church programs, or at the clinic, then people will hear the story. (Interview with MR, female, statement taker)*

Statement takers described the importance of staying with the communities, eating and sleeping with them, not simply for logistical convenience, but to build trust and relationships between the public and the commission:

*You stay. You don't come and go, and just pass them. It is best for you to stay, and to explain to the people what you are doing. Hear the questions and their comments, and their bad comments too you must hear. And then you explain. Every time we went we had to explain the TRC good and clear. Stay in the village. And then when we had an awareness meeting, we told them to come to see us one by one, if they wanted to talk to us. Some didn't come to give statements, but they just came to ask questions. (Interview with HM, female, statement taker)*

## 7.5 Field and operational challenges

In addition to the core challenges related to the TRC mechanism discussed so far, there were a range of challenges that staff encountered that were particular to the Solomon Islands that may be particularly relevant for other Pacific contexts or similar settings.

### 7.5.1 Resources

The TRC office was basic, and severely under-resourced. During its operation, the TRC relocated offices four times, causing significant disturbances to staff. The offices were basic, one being a two storey house, with the TRC's reception set up in the kitchen area. In one transition, the research team were temporarily located in the meeting room of the MNURP office. Every office location suffered from extensive power cuts – a common occurrence

across Honiara.[49] An opportunity to promote the TRC as a stable, accessible and welcoming environment for the public was missed due to the ongoing relocation of the offices, and the basic facilities.

## 7.5.2  Transport and logistics

Access and an associated lack of transport infrastructure presented significant logistical challenges for the TRC staff. Being an archipelagic nation, the predominant form of inter-island transport is via passenger ships and privately owned outboard motorised (OBM) canoes (see Figure 7.5). Very limited and generally poorly maintained road networks on the islands also presented significant intra-island transportation challenges.



**Figure 7.5** Boat travel to remote villages in East Malaita on an OBM canoe.

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[49] When I arrived in 2011, the office (and Honiara) were experiencing power cuts for an average of four hours during the working day. It was not until late 2011 that funding was secured to purchase a generator, which allowed an uninterrupted supply of power.

Without dedicated vehicles for field operations, TRC personnel had to rely on the limited availability of public transportation or the hiring of costly private vehicles and OBM canoes. Field workers were also regularly required to walk long distances to access remote settlements, often having to navigate difficult terrain. Seasonal and often volatile weather patterns associated with the tropical climate also presented significant obstacles for travelling in the provinces. Statement takers frequently conveyed the difficulty of accessing communities:

> *Yeah, when we went to the field it was hard. There was no transport. We had to walk [...] We climbed hills. One time me and [my colleague] climbed a hill and we almost died. It rained. And we climbed a steep rocky hill, in East Malaita. And she slid. But we had to go take the statements. But when she slid she pulled my leg. Lucky I held the grass. There was a cliff! It was so hard! (Interview with HM, female, statement taker)*

These logistic, geographic and climatic challenges reiterate the essential need for sound, contextualised planning. Greater coordination between the various TRC teams would have enabled staff members to capitalise on boat transport that had been hired. In addition, the purchasing of transport vehicles such as OBM canoes and trucks for the TRC may have proven to be more cost effective and efficient than the dependence on public transport and the hiring of private vehicles and vessels. More effective transport mechanisms for the TRC would have enabled field teams to increase community coverage:

> *The thing that I found was difficult was transport. Especially if we were in one place for a few days, then we would have to walk three or four kilometres to other communities. Then, come back late in the evening, stay, then the next morning we would have to walk more. I think if they provided us with transport, we would have covered the whole island in three or six months only. Because then we could have moved faster. That was something I found hard. (Interview with MR, female, statement taker)*

### 7.5.3 Safety, security and privacy

Security is a common concern for truth commissions globally; many receive threats of violence and intimidation (Hayner 2011, 230). Twenty-four hour security was provided for the Solomon Islands TRC office, which is nevertheless common for many businesses and private residencies in Honiara. While threats to safety were not a particularly overt issue in the Solomon Islands, TRC commissioners and managers were conscious of the relevant security risks and responded accordingly.

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Travelling outside of Honiara presented particular security challenges. Staff and commissioners were at times subject to threats and harassment, requiring personnel to exercise caution while in the field. For example, when travelling to a province with a commissioner, we visited the police station on arrival to notify them of our presence and work plan. Field staff in particular faced higher security risks as they travelled in pairs or small groups to remote locations, often to where ex-militants lived. While staff were generally well received by the communities they visited and extended warm hospitality, there were some isolated reports by statement takers of harassment and intimidation:

> *We faced a lot of challenges when we came across perpetrators. They would rouse us and say 'eh, TRC, go out from here'. Yeah, they even said this to our face. They did this to us. They threatened us, they said we were coming to dig up stories of what people did. (Interview with MR, female, statement taker)*

These risks were particularly heightened for female statement takers travelling without male colleagues. Both male and female interviewees described drawing on localised practices to manage personal security, such as demonstrating potential kinship and belonging to place by using local language, as one female statement taker explained:

> *We were just two girls […] It was nice. It was hard too. Some places we went to, they weren't our places. So I was frightened. But it was good that I understood their language. I understood it, and I spoke it a bit. So that was one good thing about that. But yeah, it was hard […] Even we were afraid of anything like rape too. Because we were girls, walking around in the bush. (Interview with HM)*

Following the arrest at the Choiseul hearing there was greater hostility shown towards the TRC and its staff. For example, in assessing my own personal security, following an incident of demonstrated aggression regarding my affiliation with the TRC and the arrest in Choiseul, I made a conscious effort to not openly disclose outside of work hours that I was working at the commission.

Issues of safety, security and privacy were key concerns for those testifying or providing statements to the TRC. Perceived or actual threats to personal safety and reputation inhibited public engagement and participation. This included the fear of and intimidation by ex-combatants and the real or rumoured presence of high-powered weapons in communities that reportedly deterred some individuals testifying to the TRC.

Silence and testimony both carry risks in post-conflict contexts (Shaw and Waldorf 2010, 14). In Solomon Islands, silence might be a choice made out of respect for *kastom* and reconciliation that has already occurred, to avoid a confrontational situation, or it may just simply be the safest option. Silence, for cultural and pragmatic reasons, is often a choice made by women for their own protection and wellbeing, a resistance and challenge to the TRC further explored below.

Statement taking should be designed to allow victims to recount their experiences in a supportive and safe environment (OHCHR 2006, 17). Being a small and highly networked society, ensuring privacy and a 'supportive and safe environment' in Solomon Islands is extremely difficult. For example, along the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal, villages are densely populated with houses built close to one another. Efforts to ensure privacy involve finding a private verandah or location to sit at, and talking in hushed tones (see Figure 7.6). However, visibility remained an issue. Community members could easily identify who had spoken to the TRC, problematic as perpetrators and victims continue to live in close proximity.[50] Similarly, a female statement taker working in Malaita described the difficulty of ensuring privacy:

> *Some, most of them were afraid. They were very afraid. They were frightened because if they tell a story about killing or something, they won't say who did it. Some weren't afraid to tell, so they just said it. But when you are new to a place, people all come to see you. So to talk to someone you have to take them far to a place where you can get some privacy, so they are willing to talk and story. When you sit down in the village and story – it's hard. Some lie.*

> *[…] It's really hard [to find somewhere private]. Because it's a new thing. If you talk in the house then people can hear you. Some places are nice though. They give you respect – the chiefs talk about it. So that's good. (Interview with HM)*

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[50] I was later informed of other sensitive research that was conducted in the area where the researchers were personally threatened and forced to leave. The research that had been gathered was not included in that project's final report due to the risk it posed to the people who had participated.

**Figure 7.6** Collecting statements in a village setting using a voice recorder.

Also important is the issue of language and its implications for privacy. As statement takers were deployed to the provinces in which they could communicate in local languages, there was an increased likelihood that they may in some way be connected to the deponent, if not directly, then through family or clan networks. While this was not a major issue of concern for the interviewees, it certainly may have influenced the disclosure of sensitive crimes or issues. One female statement taker explained that some deponents would be reluctant to talk to someone whom they knew, suggesting:

> *It's good that when you go you take someone with you from a different place who can speak the same language as you. So that if you go to interview someone and they don't feel free to talk with you, then the other colleague can story with them, and they'll feel free to talk because they're a different girl or woman, from different village or different place, but they understand the same language. (Interview with MR)*

Again, an improved communication strategy clarifying the role and mandate of the TRC and providing adequate notification to communities about pending TRC visits would have addressed some key safety, security and privacy concerns. With better preparation, communities could plan for visits from TRC field staff, leaders could educate community members about the role and mandate of the TRC, designate a private space for statement

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taking to be conducted, and arrange culturally appropriate activities, such as women or youth only meetings (other possibilities are discussed in Chapter Eight).

## 7.6 Women and the TRC

Put simply, men and women experience conflict differently – typically, men represent a higher proportion of victims killed or imprisoned, and women represent a higher proportion of victims displaced and left in poverty (Hayner 2011, 85). Despite this understanding, gender has historically been neglected in truth commission processes, and abuses suffered by women tend to be under-reported to truth commissions (Nesiah 2006, 2; Hayner 2011, 86). While 'sexual abuse in particular is likely to be underreported' (OHCHR 2006, 22), entrenched social norms and cultural practices may also mask patterns of violence against women.

Improvements in the gender sensitivity of truth commissions reflect changes made since the late 1990s in the legal, political and sociological understanding of sexual violence in the context of conflict (Hayner 2011, 88).[51] Recent truth commissions typically present a focus on women's experiences of conflict, specifically name sexual violence as a human rights violation,[52] and explicitly include special attention of the experiences of women in their mandates (Hayner 2011, 89). Nevertheless, while increased gender sensitivity and inclusion is helpful, it does not ensure appropriate procedures are developed to achieve these goals. Numerous challenges relating to gender and truth commissions, and ideas to address them, are detailed in handbooks, reports and policy papers (see Nesiah 2006; Rubio-Marin 2006; World Bank 2006).

Common operating procedures to incorporate a gender perspective into truth commissions include ensuring that female statement-takers are available, women-only hearings are held, and women are allowed to testify anonymously (OHCHR 2006, 22). It is also recognised,

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[51] The Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court defined rape and other forms of sexual violence in certain conditions as a crime against humanity or war crime (Hayner 2011, 88; UN General Assembly 1998).

[52] Such as in Haiti, South Africa, Liberia, Timor-Leste, Peru, Sierra Leone, and Morocco (Hayner 2011, 89).

however, that even when women provide statements to truth commissions, many discuss only violations committed against their male relatives and not against themselves (Nesiah 2006, 30). This may be because they do not feel comfortable reporting on their own experiences or they negate the political significance of their own sacrifices: 'Whatever the reasons, subsequent research has suggested that this has resulted in significant underreporting of the crimes against women and a fundamentally distorted historical record' (Nesiah 2006, 17).

Women in Solomon Islands traditionally play an active role in conflict resolution and peace mediating processes (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 28). During the tensions, women drew strength from their Christian faith and gendered roles as mothers, forming a 'Women for Peace' group, advocating for peace with each other, government and community leaders, and militants (Monson 2013; Paina 2000; Pollard 2000a, 2000b; also see Chapter Four, Section 4.4.2). Despite these efforts, women's voices in post-conflict Solomon Islands have been sidelined – no women were included in the Townsville Peace talks, and 'RAMSI has done little to draw on women's experience of conflict resolution in Solomon Islands' (Harris Rimmer 2010, 11). Despite the high incidence of sexual violence perpetrated during the conflict (Amnesty International 2004; Ata et al. 2012, 470–499), not one case of conflict-related sexual violence has been prosecuted (Ata et al. 2012, 499). The TRC presented an opportunity for women's experiences of the conflict to be acknowledged and documented and for women to actively engage with transitional justice processes.

In accordance with contemporary truth commission practices, the Solomon Islands TRC Act specifically required special attention be given to the subject of sexual abuses (TRC Act 2008, 5[2c]). Early planning documents by MNURP demonstrated a desire to engage women in the truth commission process, and once established, the commission devised a gender plan, including quotas for gender representation in field staff, statements received, and a dedicated case study on the experiences of women during the conflict in the final report.

The following discussion outlines the level of women's engagement with the TRC, and specifically considers the challenges and complexity in researching and representing women, particularly on the topic of sexual violence.[53]

## 7.6.1 Women's engagement with the TRC

The TRC attempted to encourage women's engagement with the TRC through both structural decisions regarding the staffing and functioning of the commission, as well as through the public's participation in the commission processes. Statistically, the commission's results in this endeavour were relatively successful.

Two of the five commissioners were women, and considering that one male commissioner was ill and relatively inactive until the time of his death, this meant that for the most part the commission represented gender equality. Figure 7.7 shows that by comparison, this is relatively good. To compare with Timor-Leste, the geographically closest commission, just two of the seven national commissioners of the CAVR were women, and of the twenty-nine regional commissioners, just ten were women (Nesiah 2006, 10).

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[53] It is noted that sexual violations were not only committed against women. Of the 63 cases of sexual violence presented to the TRC, 17 per cent involved crimes against males (Ata et. al. 2012, 490).
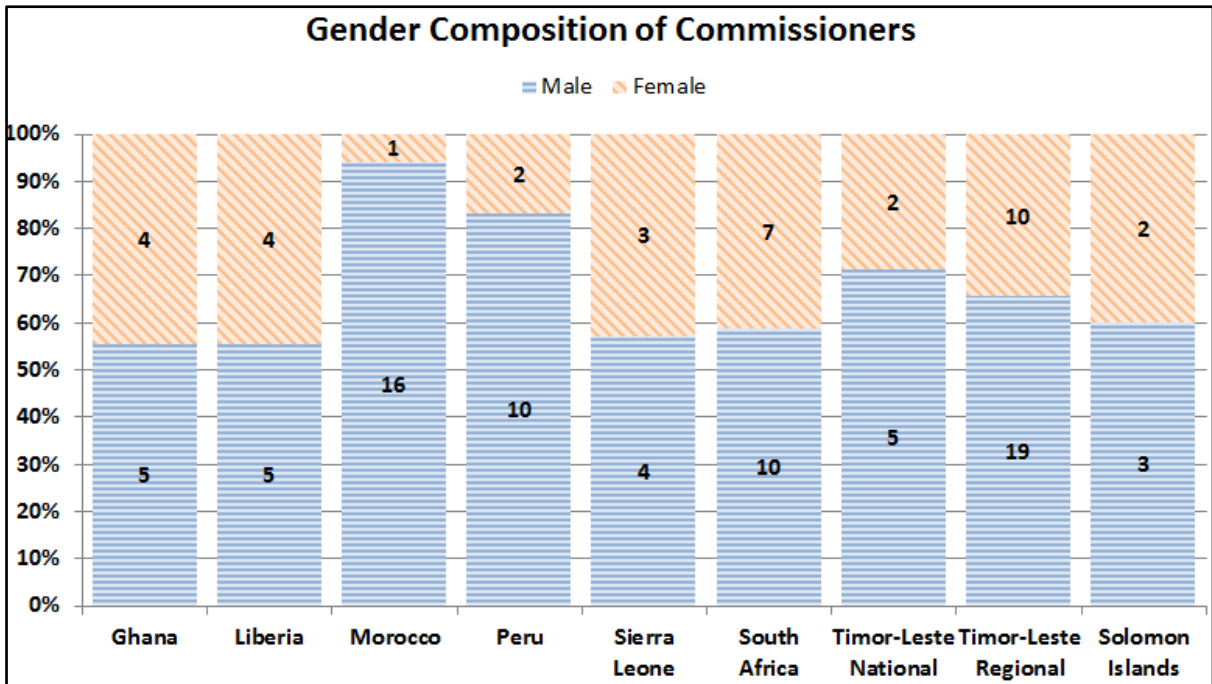
**Figure 7.7** Gender composition of commissioners in several truth commissions. Source: Data sourced in Nesiah 2006, 10.

Of a total thirty statement takers, fourteen were women, with each provincial team consisting of roughly half male and half female staff. Understanding the entrenched gender segregation across Solomon Islands communities, the research manager and statement-taking coordinator aimed to achieve equal gender representation in statement takers to increase the likelihood of equal gender representation in the statements received. While the TRC did not succeed in doing so, 879 (or 37 per cent) of the total 2,362 statements were made by female deponents – again a comparatively successful outcome when contrasted with other truth commissions globally (see Figure 7.8; Nesiah 2006, 18). The CAVR in Timor-Leste developed a number of methods to overcome cultural barriers that restricted women's participation in the truth commission process; however, just 21.4 per cent of the total statements collected were made by women (Harris Rimmer 2010, 12).
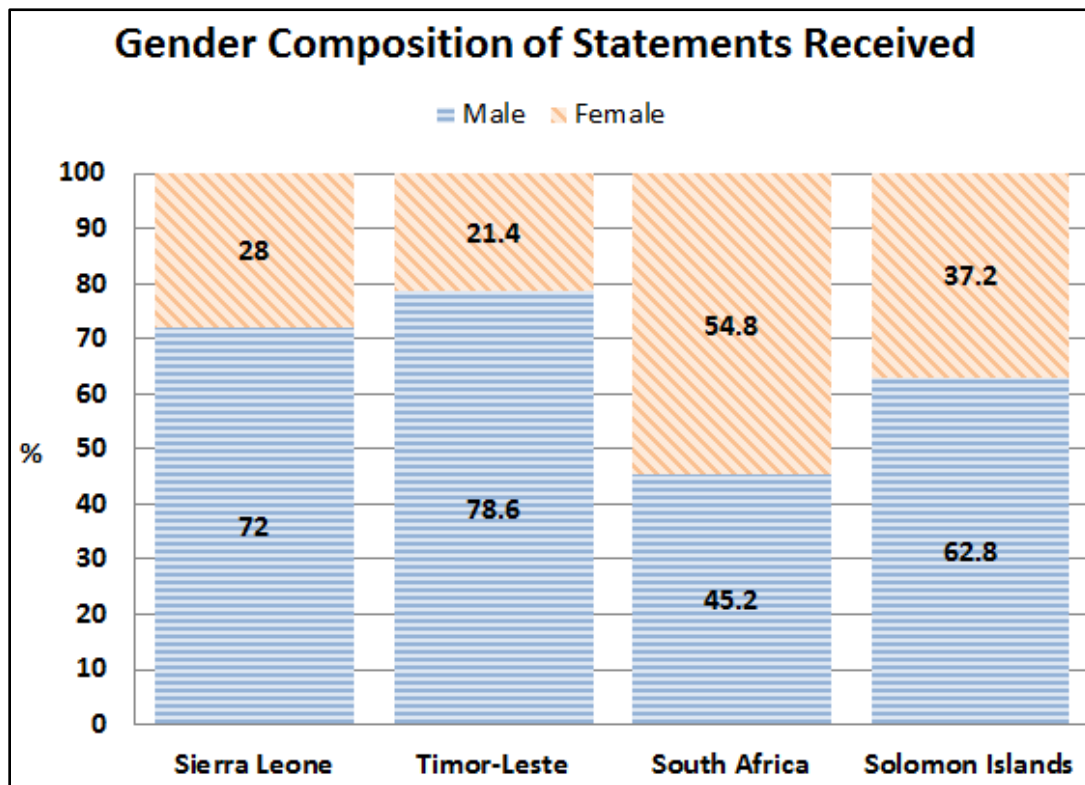
**Figure 7.8** Gender composition of statements received in Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste, South Africa and Solomon Islands. Data sourced from Nesiah 2006, 18 and Ata et al. 2012.

Public hearings varied in their gender representation. This was influenced by two public hearings being held for ex-militants at which only men testified, and one public hearing for national leaders, which predominantly consisted of men. Conversely, one public hearing was dedicated to 'women' (see Figure 7.9).
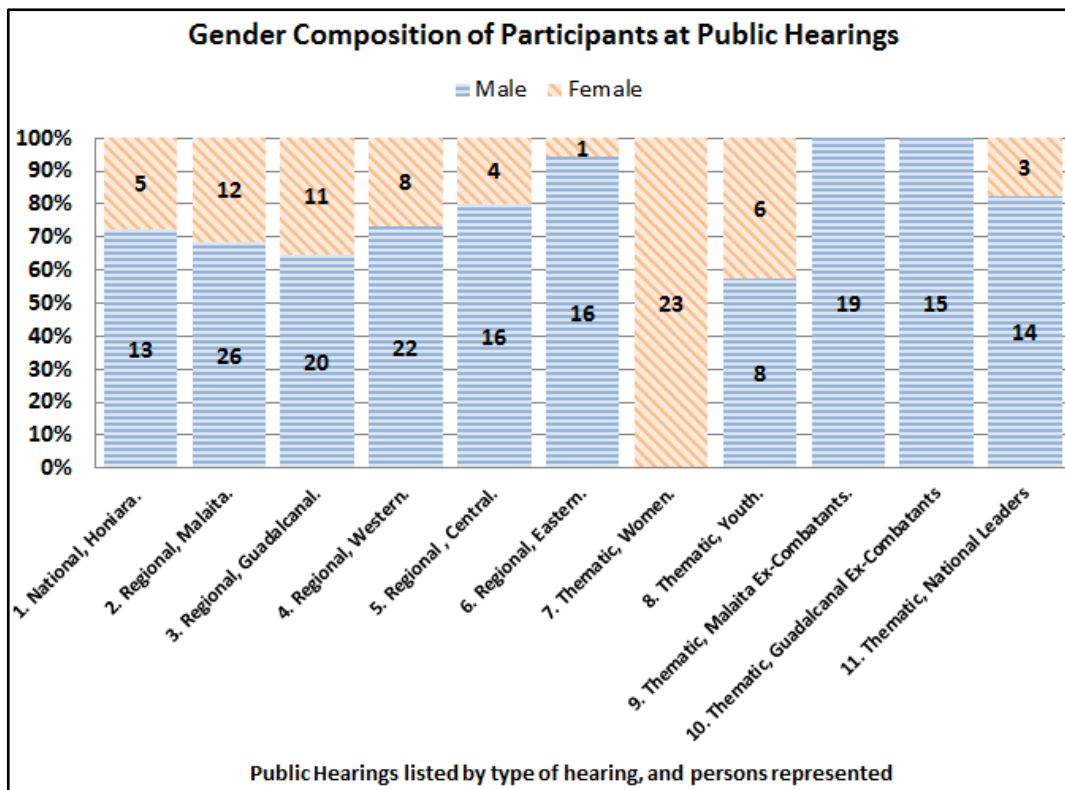
**Figure 7.9** Gender composition of public hearings. Source: Data sourced from Ata et al. 2012

Sexual violence was included as a human rights violation on statement taking forms, although statements pertaining to sexual violence were difficult to attain for reasons noted below. Sexual violence comprised three per cent of the human rights violations reported to the TRC; however, the commission noted that 'testimonies suggest that the real incidence was considerably higher' (Ata et al. 2012, 498). An in-depth case study on the experiences of women was also prepared and included as a chapter in the final report (Ata et al. 2012, 539–625). Over the course of the commission, three female researchers (including myself) were engaged to conduct the research into women's experiences during the conflict, particularly on the topic of sexual violence, which was not being represented in the statements received by the commission. For the in-depth case study on women, in addition to a review of the statements and testimony from public and close hearings, a further 100 in-depth interviews and eleven focus groups were conducted in Honiara, Guadalcanal, Malaita and Western Province (Ata et al. 2012, 541; see Figure 7.10). With the coordination and support of ICTJ, regional and national workshops were held for up to sixty Solomon Islander women to participate in the preparation of a women's submission to the TRC. The submission titled

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'Herem Kam: Stori Blong Mifala Olketa Mere' (Fangalasuu et al. 2011) was presented to the commissioners and referenced throughout the women's chapter of the final report of the TRC.



**Figure 7.10** In-depth interviews were conducted with women around Guadalcanal, Malaita and Western Province for the case study on women for the commission's final report.

While far from equal, on paper, the gendered representation in the Solomon Islands TRC fared comparatively well. However, statistics only tell one part of the story, and while useful for comparison on a global scale, they neglect the reality, complexity and challenges on the ground. Those working with the Solomon Islands TRC (including myself) would attest to the numerous challenges inhibiting a more robust, representative women's program that resonated with Solomon Islander women. Interviewees touched on these topics in relation to structural matters of the TRC, and public participation, as per the following discussion.

In terms of staffing, apart from the commissioners and the field staff, positions at the TRC were predominantly male dominated and women tended to fill administrative and housekeeping positions. One male interviewee who was in a management position spoke of

his understanding of the roles men and women should play in peace processes. Referring to the permanent secretary position of MNURP, at the time held by a woman, he stated:

> *I don't discriminate about a woman, but it should be a man. In Melanesian countries, women don't lead in the peace makers, it's always a man. Women go to garden, cook food, raise pigs. That's the role of the woman. I think that's one thing. Because that's how I think. I don't discriminate about women, but that's how I relate to this job and how actual things happen in the community.*

Such opinions of women's roles and private and public life are not uncommon, and the final report notes the entrenched gendered segregation and cultural practices pertaining to women and men in Solomon Islands limited the number of statements provided by women to the TRC (Ata et al. 2012, 541). Traditionally, men are the public leaders in families and communities and typically spokespersons for these groups, thus they are generally the ones to initially engage with outsiders, such as visiting TRC staff (Ata et al. 2012, 541). Women may not feel it is their place to speak on behalf of their family or community, or even themselves (Ata et al. 2012, 541). The final report notes the factors that inhibited women's participation in the statement taking process, such as the short notice of statement takers visiting villages and the high chance of women being away from villages, and the tendency for men to speak on behalf of the family and community (Ata et al. 2012, 541). For example, on the trip to the Weathercoast in which I participated (see Chapter Six), when the TRC statement takers conducted awareness talks and introductions with villages, men and women often sat separately, with clusters of women and children sitting close together. When opportunities for questions arose, no women at any of the villages on this field work trip asked any questions or made comments in public. Chiefs or pastors (all men) always spoke first, followed by other community members.[54]

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[54] Important to note, however, is that this lack of public participation does not mean that Solomon Islander women are not 'empowered' or hold influence in decision-making processes. During my time at the commission and in Solomon Islands, colleagues and friends have explained that in a family unit, women's opinions are often highly regarded, and that men will listen, consider and seek to represent them in public. While this does not address the serious lack of public participation by women in Solomon Islands, it is highlighted as a caution to consider local perceptions of 'empowerment' and voice, and what Solomon Islander women themselves consider meaningful public participation.

Also limiting women's engagement with the commission was the overall lack of awareness and understanding of what constituted a human rights violation. During my time working at the commission, statement takers described the need for public awareness and education on the topic of human rights, and violations thereof. They explained that while many people had experienced human rights violations, some were unaware that their experience qualified them to provide statements to the TRC. Gender-related crimes in particular are often resolved or managed according to local protocol or customary justice mechanisms. Women who experienced these crimes may have therefore been less inclined to provide statements.[55]

Cultural protocols influencing interaction between men and women vary across the Solomon Islands and within the provinces, impacting the TRC staff and members of the public alike. While men and women were mostly willing to provide statements to female statement takers, many women were not comfortable to provide statements to male statement takers – nor would it be considered appropriate for a male worker to interview a woman alone or in a private place. Furthermore, female statement takers were not always at ease interviewing men:

> *The hardest part is when I went and see a man there with the woman – it's hard for me to interview. Like I don't know how to approach the male, unless there was a male with me. Like for safety and security it's not really safe too, unless you've got someone to go with you so he can do introduction first and awareness. (Interview with BW, female, statement taker)*

This inhibited statement taking in general, and was worsened for sensitive matters considered *tabu* to discuss, such as sexual violence.

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[55] This point also raises questions as to the effect of taking these experiences and testimony, and reframing them in human rights discourse, so that the deponents are now classified as 'victims of human rights violations'. While human rights tools and language can be an empowering tool for human rights advocates, and the collection of statistics important in reinforcing a human rights culture, it begs the question of the effect on individual Solomon Islanders, and peacebuilding in their communities, of classifying human rights violations in a society that has not yet adopted human rights terminology.

## 7.6.2 Sexual violations: Struggles to 'get' stories and read silence

*If the story gets very serious, then they cannot talk about some of the violations that happened to them. If it's the kind of things about lost properties and belongings, they can talk about that. But if it's about rape or something like that, it's too hard to mention it. It's* tabu. *(Interview with HM)*

Arriving at the TRC in 2011, the research manager tasked me to research the occurrence and circumstances of conflict-related sexual violence. The commission had collected minimal statements pertaining to sexual violations. Statement takers described the topic as generally *tabu* for them to enquire about, or for the deponent to disclose:

*The bosses wanted lots of statements, and we had to take rape cases. But the boss expected Solomons to be like the other countries. But here, culture is a big influence. Because he wanted rape cases. He would ask, 'why no rape?' Man! Solomons is different, they don't say, oh you were raped, you were raped.' If I did that, they would ask compensation from me. And it would cause trouble. (Interview with HM, female, statement taker)*

The attitudes towards discussing any sex-related topic vary across the country, and the cultural ramifications in each place are different. For example, statement takers noted some locations were more open to discuss topics relating to one's sexual past, whereas in others it was completely forbidden. In some places, doing so would cause shame for the woman involved and perhaps lead to demands of compensation to 'cover the ears' of her male relatives. In other places, the woman's male relatives may demand compensation from the man in question, and perhaps also punish the woman. Some colleagues said that the TRC would have to pay compensation for even raising the topic. Commissioner Kamilo Teke explained:

*In the culture, there are many things inside. Especially for women. To ask people to tell their story out, it's not straightforward for them to talk. For example, rape. Rape and other activities, especially for young girls, it affects their lives forever now. In culture, the* kastom *of people, if you talk about it, you must pay compensation to the community as well. So for those reasons, they are frightened, they are reserved. Maybe some tell their stories, others will hide it, we don't know.*

Considering these conditions, unless deponents raised the violation in their testimony, sexual violence received little attention. When it was spoken of, it was often done by relatives or carers of the victim (Ata et al. 2012, 604). Women were more likely to relate stories of

displacement, loss of properties, and damage to their gardens or kitchens, instead of sexual violence, as these were the injustices that are continuing to affect their lives today in a tangible way that they feel free to discuss. If the topic of sexual violence was raised, it was often alluded to through euphemism or indirect language, such as 'he did something no good to me', or 'he took her outside and ...'.

### Consent, coercion and compensation

A particular challenge in researching sexual violence in Solomon Islands was defining the term locally. International legal literature and treaties to which the Solomon Islands is signatory provide a number of definitions of sexual violence in conflict that typically involve coercion or consent. The TRC used the definition of sexual violations offered by the Rome Statute to be 'forcing a person to engage in or be exposed to an act of a sexual nature by force, the threat of force, or by coercion by a state actor or a rebel group' (Ata et al. 2012, 470). Yet, as the TRC final report describes,

> The understanding and definition of "sexual violence" itself is influenced by established social norms […] Crimes of sexual violence committed during the tensions occurred against a backdrop of pre-existing cultural protocols such as arranged marriages and bride price, Christian doctrine, conflict-related disrupted social norms, debilitating fear and unrelenting threat.
>
> […] Sexual relations outside of marriage in Solomon Islands are complicated by cultural factors which set accepted and expected modes of behaviour. (Ata et al. 2012, 581)

So, while definitions of sexual violence in international agreements, and the Solomon Islands Penal Code, revolve around coercion and consent, when doing statement taking or research, the framing of the issue of sexual violence, its consequences and ramifications were based on local social and cultural constructions of what is considered either acceptable or prohibited in society. Thus, many conversations on the topic of sexual violence tended to involve the issue of compensation, and whether it had been paid appropriately or not for any sexual relations that were considered outside of the accepted norm. This was not solely in relation to non-consensual sexual activity, but any situation outside of marriage deemed inappropriate and in need of being compensated. Thus, when asked directly about sexual violence or its consequences, many women and men were likely to respond with comments on whether

appropriate compensation had been paid; for example, if a child was born, rather than if the act itself was consensual. The neglect of compensation was considered a violation, as the perceived crime had gone without redress. Generally, sexual violations that were committed against a married woman; resulted in an 'illegitimate' child; an act of violent conflict; or neglected to follow local *kastom* protocols of redress, such as compensation payments, were regarded as a breach of cultural protocol and more likely to be publicly condemned – consent was not the defining factor. Meanwhile, many incidents of sexual violence that occurred in the private or semi-private spheres such as homes, surrounding bushes or gardens, against young, unmarried girls were not widely acknowledged or discussed. Under the threat of guns and the distorted power structures during the conflict, families were unable to offer protection for their daughters and sisters. They were also prevented from attempting to seek justice through traditional means such as compensation, viewed by some as worsening an already serious crime.

A number of colleagues explained to me that once a woman was married, it was not appropriate to talk about previous partners or sexual encounters. The simple explanation of 'but they are married now' served to explain the difficulty of attaining statements regarding sexual violations (Interview with HM, female, statement taker).

> *Oh yeah, on the topic of sexual violence, I think in Malaita many cases like this happen but the women don't feel free to tell their stories, they hold back because of culture in Malaita, they are frightened, because many women this happen to them when they were young so they afraid to tell their stories in case the husband will hear and then goes to ask for compensation. So everywhere we go there are many cases of violence but no women feel free to tell what she went through in sexual violence. (Interview with BW, female, statement taker)*

Considering the years lapsed since the conflict, many of the survivors of sexual violence were likely married. For example, one survivor who was open to talking with me about sexual violence was unmarried and had a child from the rape – thus circumstances were more conducive to her disclosure.

Consideration of the local conditions that shape experience and disclosure, and cultural protocols around redressing violations, leads one to question what is relevant and important for the survivor or victim in such cases, and in what capacity does the truth commission play a

role in protecting human rights and restoring individual dignity. Or, put simply, how will the victims and survivors of sexual violence in Solomon Islands be any better off from participating in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

While it may be considered by outsiders that cultural practices of compensation neglect the needs of the victim, insomuch as the violation is somewhat annulled while potentially neglecting the specific needs of the victim of crime such as medical attention, counselling and pursuing justice through formal prosecution, we must question and consider how justice is perceived by the survivor. In a context where cultural practices such as compensation may serve as a form of reconciliation or justice that is accessible and removes culpability, blame and shame from the victim – or indeed 'restoration of dignity' – it is understandable that the neglect of this practice was considered by many to be the violation worth noting.

This is not to neglect the challenges to disclosure of sexual violence caused by the inequality of women, or to justify silence or cultural modes of redress, but to question the relevance and benefit of a human rights framework for grassroots victims. Does speaking directly to the commission serve individual needs for acknowledgement? While answering these questions is beyond the scope of this research, they are posed to question how TRCs as a globalised mechanism centred on human rights discourse serve the victims of conflict or the project of reconciliation in specific, conflict-affected communities.

### *How to say what cannot be told? Women's silence and sexual violence*

When the disclosure of personal or sensitive matter can be met with repercussions that further victimise or punish deponents, cause shame or instigate compensation demands, silence, for many women, is a pragmatic choice made in their own best interest – and a particular challenge for a truth commission.

Fiona Ross highlights the limitations of the cathartic model of truth-telling for women's involvement in the South African TRC, arguing that 'it is not necessarily a universal or transhistorical model and does not take account of the diversity of ways in which experience is articulated or otherwise made known and addressed' (2010, 81). Ross (2010, 81) explains how this impacted women's testimony at the South African TRC, with many choosing silence:

> In contexts in which women are often blamed for the harm they experience, especially when that harm is sexual, it ought not be surprising that many would prefer not to speak, or find themselves unable to do so, particularly when doing so incriminates not just another individual, but a set of cultural assumptions and the social forms that they shape. It takes courage both to speak of harms done and to be silent in their face and aftermath.

In the women's submission to the TRC, the importance of silence is noted: '[F]or women, sometimes their silence is louder, stronger, and safer than anything they say out loud because of the risks involved in telling their stories' (Fangalasuu et al. 2011, 13). As strong cultural taboos limit women's ability to discuss rape or sexual experiences, doing so would contravene cultural practices and risk further violence, shame or other repercussions. The women's submission suggests that 'truth-telling often separates families, communities, and individuals. This is why so often truth is strategically concealed' (Fangalasuu et al. 2011, 13). The cultural impetus for choosing silence is thus heightened by the very tangible issue of physical safety and security.

Female statement takers at the Solomon Islands TRC echoed this sentiment in relation to researching sexual violations, explaining that the cultures and *kastoms* in the communities prohibited disclosure about such sensitive topics, making their job difficult: 'Because for people in the Solomons, it's hard to tell out their story because they stand strong with their *kastom* and culture' (Interview with BW). Referring to the South African TRC, Ross says the commission found it very difficult to access statements about sexual violence, and that TRCs need to consider the structural causes for this silence, which 'may point to the limitations of particular discursive forms; some things simply cannot be articulated within the sanctioned languages and social spaces currently available to experience' (Ross 2010, 70 and 86).

Traditional taboos, *kastom* and culture may inhibit what 'truth' Solomon Islanders can openly discuss. In communal societies where individuals are not inherently autonomous, public truth-telling is therefore not necessarily the most appropriate means in which to gather information. During research in the villages of the Weathercoast, on the south of Guadalcanal, for example, women would readily recount the loss of their gardens, the pillage of their livestock and crops, and the destruction of their kitchen and utensils as major abuses they endured during the conflict. In north Malaita, women often followed stories of displacement, lost livelihoods and broken families with requests for material assistance. These narratives spoke of deep

trauma – more so than any I heard regarding sexual violence. Speaking in their roles as mothers and providers for their families was an accessible and acceptable standpoint for their narratives of trauma. Sexual violence, or other human rights violations such as killings, torture and ill-treatment, however, were not topics that could be discussed in this manner, if at all.

So what are the consequences for peacebuilding when a truth commission, via statement takers or researchers, comes into a village and asks about the occurrence of this crime? While it is important for it to be spoken about in the public arena, and for wider attitudinal change regarding women's rights, the TRC's approach seems incongruent with how it is treated in local culture. While the option to testify on these topics to truth commissions is important, it is also important that specific policies, mechanisms and procedures are developed to protect all deponents, and encourage truth-telling in a safe and culturally-sensitive manner. Some suggestions for how this can be achieved are discussed in Chapter Eight.

## 7.7    Timing and trust

Two core questions frame the issue of timing for truth commissions: when to begin, and how long to go on for (Hayner 2012, 215–16). Hayner suggests generally 'a truth commission should begin as soon as possible after a political transition, should work for two to three years, and should always be given a deadline for completion, even if this extendable' (Hayner 2012, 215).

### 7.7.1  When to start?

The first key question regarding the timing of a truth commission is when to start. Initiating a TRC soon after political transition or the end of conflict, as Hayner suggests, can be advantageous. Truth commissions can provide a means for new governments to consider how to move forward while channelling momentum for change into reform, address impunity, facilitate reparations for victims and serve as a 'centrepiece of a newfound peace' (Hayner 2011, 215). The sequencing of the Solomon Islands TRC and other post-conflict mechanisms, however, was unusual (Jeffery 2014).

Implemented in the midst of a well-funded and resourced regional intervention, the Solomon Islands TRC operated against the backdrop of RAMSI. The mission's efforts had already included a number of tasks typical of transitional contexts, such as the removal of weapons, criminal prosecutions, institutional strengthening and capacity-building. Substantial resources and support for the 'tension trials' resulted in a significant number of arrests and prosecutions, which made the case of the Solomon Islands TRC unusual in comparison with other post-conflict contexts (Jeffrey 2013, 11), as it was geared more towards nation-building rather than accountability (Harris Rimmer 2010, 9).

The TRC Bill was passed five years after the arrival of RAMSI, and once operations eventually commenced it had been ten years since the height of the tension. This was widely agreed amongst interviewees to have been 'too long'. As noted in earlier chapters, the time lag was problematic on one hand as people simply did not want to 'dig up' the past and worried it would reignite old issues, and on the other hand, because many of the interpersonal and intercommunal disputes that manifested during the tensions had since been resolved.

The length of time before implementing the truth commission was also problematic in terms of obtaining accurate information. Many deponents were unable to accurately recall specific details such as dates, which were required as part of the statement taker data collection forms.

However, the importance of having time between the cessation of conflict and arrival of RAMSI and the start of the TRC is evident. The majority of interviewees suggested sometime between one to five years after the end of the conflict would have been appropriate. It was clear that allowing at least a few years before implementing a TRC was necessary to allow for disputes to settle and to provide adequate time for people to gain confidence to speak out. There was a general agreement, however, that the Solomon Islands TRC should have commenced earlier than it did. It is important to note that a common theme reported by interviewees was that many underlying and unresolved issues pertaining to the conflict still remained and the TRC was beneficial despite having been implemented later than preferred.

### 7.7.2 When to finish?

*After you start and after time goes on, after you disseminate information, then people start to understand. Because when people go out they start to spread news. That the TRC is coming. (Interview with Anna Pitaboe, female, exhumations officer)*

The second question relating to the timing of truth commissions considers how long they should operate. The Solomon Islands TRC was given an initial operational timeframe of one year, which was later extended to two years. Contemporary truth commissions are typically given an operational timeframe to complete their work of at least two years. Considering the risk of losing momentum over time, Hayner (2011, 216) suggests commissions should not operate longer than three years, explaining:

> It is useful for the report to come out while there is still momentum of transition under way, when a spirit of reconciliation may still be in the air, and recommended reforms are more likely to be implemented.

The final report of the Solomon Islands TRC was handed to the government almost ten years after the violence ended, nine years into RAMSI's multifaceted intervention, and until today has yet to be tabled in parliament or released.

Arguably, many of the outcomes TRCs can purportedly achieve in post-conflict settings were already accomplished through RAMSI, effectively allowing the commission to be less pre-occupied with issues of 'transition' and more focused on its mandate to promote 'national unity and reconciliation'. As discussed in Chapters Four and Six, reconciliation in Melanesia is a lengthy and primarily interpersonal or intercommunal process. The previous chapter problematised the use of the term reconciliation for the truth commission process compared to how the term is understood locally. Even so, more time would have been beneficial and would likely have resulted in achieving better outcomes.

While the various and timely operational challenges and setbacks addressed in this chapter could have been somewhat mitigated, the allocation of dedicated time to enable public trust-building remains essential, particularly in the context of Melanesian settings. Public perception of, and engagement with, the Solomon Islands TRC changed significantly over time as trust was established and built. For example, positive and favourable views of the TRC were observed during the Chairman's provincial consultations, including a request for an extension of the TRCs term (Ata et al. 2012, 722–23). After statement taking had finished, one interviewee told how he was approached by people wanting to contribute their statements. Looking back, he saw that people just needed time:

*A lot of people were sitting and were watching what the TRC was doing. They didn't want to come out at the first place, until they were told by other people that what TRC did was ok, it was rewarding and really helped especially, the victims.*

*[…] So it took time for people, is a new concept and people don't know what was the work of TRC, people think it's a foreign thing. But then slowly they start to realise that TRC is here to help, and to make a report that will beneficial to them and the country as a whole. (Interview with Benjamin Afuga, statement taking coordinator)*

Most importantly, it took the two years of the TRC's operation for the public to begin to trust the TRC and begin to understand its mandate. Over time ex-combatants became reassured that they would not be arrested for testifying to the TRC, and that they could confidentially and anonymously give statements. Victims and survivors also began to trust that they could disclose their experiences in confidence.

While this evolution of public trust and confidence in the TRC could have been achieved earlier through increased awareness and more effective communication strategies, there is no doubt that time itself was essential and necessary. As the public had direct experience with the TRC, they became more engaged. Solomon Islanders needed to observe its operation, witness firsthand some of the associated activities and to see others engaging with the process. As time went on, people witnessed the TRC's operation and saw it was there to serve their interests:

*So then people will come out and come and tell them their stories. And then after all, everyone just starts to come out. Like, oh yeah, I'm one victim too, I'm one victim too. Like that. Everyone just starts to realise that the TRC is there and it's for helping us. (Interview with Eunice Hughes, TRC transcriber)*

Interviewees recommended that the TRC's term of operation should have been extended for two key reasons. Firstly, as a means to access more people within Malaita and Guadalcanal as well as to expand coverage to other provinces at a greater depth of detail than what had occurred. In consideration of the lack of transport infrastructure, remoteness of communities and the associated lengthy periods required for travelling, an extended time period could have been reasonably justified.

Secondly, statement takers indicated that with more time, a greater diversity of statements could have been recorded. As it was, the TRC was able to obtain a high number of statements

pertaining to forced displacement and lost properties (Ata et al. 2012, 737), most likely because these were easier violations to openly discuss, and the deponent may have felt it was in their best interest to record these losses supposing future reparations are made. Other human rights violations, however, were more difficult to discuss openly and statement takers reported significant difficulty in obtaining statements regarding these:

> *Because for us who went to do statement taking we do it quickly, and the majority of statements we take were ones who lose property. But we don't want only people with lost property but want also want people who were really victims, so that we have a good report when we submit to the government. So my thinking is to have more time for my work, to go and find who really victim and to have time to talk to them, because it's hard to talk with people. (Interview with BW, female, statement taker)*

While interviewees universally recommended the commission's mandate be extended, they still saw the benefit and necessity of a designated timeframe. Most interviewees suggested an extra one or two years would have been desirable, resulting in an overall time period of up to four years for the commission. Considering the challenges detailed in this chapter, an extended mandate in which to operate would be a reasonable suggestion.

## 7.8   Conclusion

This chapter has described the specific, place-based challenges faced by the Solomon Islands TRC. In doing so, it has heeded the call of transitional justice scholars to conduct empirical and place-based research on the experiences of truth commissions implemented in a range of cultural contexts. Combined with the previous chapter's discussion and analysis of the inherent challenge of pursuing 'truth' and 'reconciliation' in the Solomon Islands setting, this thesis has comprehensively considered the research question of how the Solomon Islands TRC operated in practice. In the concluding chapter, I will draw on the findings, reflections, suggestions and challenges documented so far to highlight the differences between international peacebuilding and truth commission practices and the experience of the Solomon Islands TRC. Furthermore, I will summarise and note the potential that truth commissions offer as a peacebuilding mechanism in a Melanesian or similar setting, and suggest recommendations for how a TRC could be reconceptualised to better fit the context.

# 8. Veneer of Adaptation: Leaving localised peacebuilding behind

> A truth and reconciliation process must be properly undertaken with great care or not at all. (SICA 2002, 3)

## 8.1   Introduction

This thesis has documented and explored the challenges of importing a transnational transitional justice mechanism into a Melanesian context for the purpose of peacebuilding and to 'promote national unity and reconciliation'. It has shown how the Solomon Islands TRC was initiated and established, and the early visions of its purpose and role in the peacebuilding process. This included an initial willingness and commitment to learn from the cumulative experience of over forty previous truth commissions conducted worldwide and to adapt from these experiences a mechanism to suit the unique context and conflict management practices of Solomon Islands. In detailing the realities and challenges experienced by the TRC in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, this thesis has shown that these initial ideals and goals to adapt a TRC to the Solomon Islands context were in practice not fully realised.

The Solomon Islands TRC was not unique in its challenges. Truth commissions around the world have struggled with myriad difficulties; their successes and limitations are the subject of intense debate and controversy in academic discourse and international policy circles. In many regards, despite facing a range of instrumental obstacles, the Solomon Islands TRC did manage to meet its obligations. The commission conducted an ambitious statement-taking program, held several national and regional public hearings, and submitted a final report to the government. Nevertheless, Solomon Islanders, international observers and researchers have questioned the objective and purpose of such an undertaking, and its contribution towards 'reconciliation' or 'peace'.

This concluding chapter is divided into three areas of discussion. First is an analysis of the Solomon Islands TRC in light of broader peacebuilding and transitional justice practice and the increased attention on hybridity and locally based and driven practice as outlined in Chapter Two. In particular, the inability to adapt and contextualise the commission and build

upon local practices is identified and discussed. While some changes were made to the form and function of the Solomon Islands TRC to better suit the context, these were relatively superficial and overall were inadequate for the task at hand. Second, I discuss the key influences that saw the TRC diverge from its localised beginnings, and examine the resulting outcomes: the misplaced emphasis on truth-seeking to the neglect of reconciliation, and the limited local ownership and buy-in of the TRC. Finally, I identify the potential that the TRC had in Solomon Islands and therefore may have in other Melanesian and similar contexts, and offer recommendations for how the TRC could have been adapted to better suit the context.

## 8.2   Rhetoric and realities

> A significant challenge facing all transformative approaches is the difficulty of translating their breadth and ambition into policy and practice. (Gready and Robins 2014, 355)

The experiences and challenges of the Solomon Islands TRC are symptomatic of the tension and disconnect between theory and practice often found in both the peacebuilding and transitional justice fields. A particular dilemma relevant to the Solomon Islands TRC is the negotiation between a return to interest in the locality and depth of transitional justice and a simultaneous global and institutional desire to promote a uniform approach or policy towards peacebuilding and transitional justice. This dilemma, Sriram (2007, 588) notes, underpins the critique of liberal peacebuilding: 'that peacebuilding activities, imposed or otherwise, are largely imported to post-conflict societies by the "international community" of international and regional organisations, bilateral donors and international NGOs'. The same critique, Sriram explains, can be applied to transitional justice (2007, 589):

> While an indigenous demand for accountability is undeniably significant in most, if not all, countries that have experienced conflict or mass atrocity and repression, the repertoires for accountability and reconciliation are formulated and funded largely by external actors.

Transitional justice literature warns against developing a generic template for truth commissions. Hayner (2011, 211) warns doing so risks violating a core principle on which truth commissions should be based: 'That each is nationally rooted, unique to each place, and

reflects a process of national ownership.' Shaw and Waldorf (2010, 4) echo this concern, noting that:

> Although policy makers and scholars now routinely recognise the importance of adapting mechanisms of transitional justice to local circumstances, such adaption tends to be conceptualised in ways that do not modify the foundational assumptions of transitional justice.

Shaw and Waldorf refer to the 2004 United Nations Security Council report on *The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies* (UNSC 2004, 1) to highlight the tension between the theory of espousing local approaches while touting a universal approach to justice and peace, which states:

> Success will depend on a number of critical factors, among them the need to ensure a common basis in international norms and standards to mobilize the necessary resources for a sustainable investment in justice. We must learn as well to eschew one-size-fits-all formulas and the importation of foreign models, and, instead, base our support on national assessments, national participation and national needs and aspirations.

Chapter Two described how traditional and indigenous methods of peacebuilding have increasingly received attention globally due to their relevance and potentially increased effectiveness with the communities within which they can be implemented. Yet, while there is a global move towards embracing and adapting to the 'local', 'local experiences, needs, and priorities often remain subsumed within international legal norms and national political agendas' and are viewed as another 'level' to consider and operate at, rather than a standpoint from which to consider and evaluate potential tools (Shaw and Waldorf 2010, 5–6). Although often repeated, there is a critical need for more than a superficial nod to understanding and appreciating the local context in which post-conflict peacebuilding mechanisms will be implemented, but rather to critically interrogate the ideas, premises and assumptions behind introduced mechanisms and to question their relevance to and resonance with the population.

Locating post-conflict peacebuilding practices into a local contextual understanding of reconciliation, justice and conflict management practices is necessary to understand the potential effectiveness of introduced mechanisms such as truth commissions. Through in-depth reflection and analysis of the Solomon Islands TRC, this thesis has demonstrated that the effectiveness of the transitional justice mechanism as a peacebuilding tool was severely

limited by the lack of appropriate contextualisation and interrogation of the underlying normative values and expectations of truth commissions.

The approaches to conflict management and reconciliation found in Solomon Islands outlined in Chapter Four illustrated local conflict management practices that are akin to restorative and transformative justice, designed to achieve societal 'balance' rather than punishment or criminal prosecutions alone. While RAMSI successfully restored law and order, its efforts have not – indeed could not – build peace and reconciliation across the country. Peacebuilding and reconciliation in Solomon Islands needs to be locally driven and owned, located at the community level, and directly include those involved in the dispute. In the fragile Melanesian balance of culture, Christianity and *kastom*, which Moore describes as living in the 'vortex of a cyclone', while RAMSI may have 'chased out the malevolent spirits […] this was hardly a cosmological solution' (2004, 216). Echoing this, Harris Rimmer points to the demand and establishment of a TRC as demonstrative that RAMSI's approach 'was insufficient to meet local needs for a more interpersonal feeling of justice and historical narrative' (2010, 10).

The violence experienced in Solomon Islands between 1998 and 2003 provided a new challenge to dispute management, justice mechanisms and peacebuilding practices in the Solomon Islands, as the scope of the conflict exceeded the scope and reach of reconciliation practices usually relied on. Approaches to peacebuilding broadly fell into two fundamental approaches: state-building and community-based reconciliation (see Maebuta and Spence 2009, 20–30). Chapter Four described some successful localised efforts to build peace; for example, by Women for Peace (Paina 2000; Pollard 2000a, 2000b) and local church organisations such as the Melanesian Brotherhood (Carter 2006; Maebuta and Spence 2009, 23–29). However, government attempts to formalise traditional reconciliation were corrupted and manipulated, serving to extort the state (Franekel 2004). In monetising the reconciliation process, the indigenous approach to managing conflict was inverted: compensation was offered as an incentive for peace rather than as a genuine exchange to instigate reconciliation (Fraenkel 2004; Maebuta and Spence 2009, 15). State-building efforts were supported and bolstered by the well-funded regional intervention.

At the time it was proposed and initially advocated for, the early vision and intention behind implementing a TRC in Solomon Islands for the purpose of peacebuilding was appropriate.

Chapter Five detailed how members of the SICA Peace Office were dedicated to finding new avenues by which to promote peace and end the conflict-related violence. Considering the sociopolitical context at the time, the SICA Peace Office members assessed the suitability for a truth and reconciliation commission. Conceiving reconciliation as a necessary process in order to prompt sustainable peace, the SICA Peace Office noted the strengths of the Solomon Islands that were conducive to a TRC and advocated for it as a means to instigate reconciliation and peace. Reconciliation was the destination, insomuch as it would prompt peace; truth was the means to arrive there.

Public consultations in anticipation of the TRC received a positive response for its establishment; however, these were conducted prior to and just after RAMSI's arrival, while the conflict was continuing and arms were prolific in the community. The local situation and motivation for a TRC was undoubtedly different at that time than when it was eventually implemented. The format of the TRC was not widely debated and its establishment and implementation were rushed, despite subsequent lengthy delays. With the privilege of hindsight, there are many modifications that could have been made to its design to adapt the idea to fit more comfortably to local conditions, as detailed below in Section 8.4.

In particular, the need to address the causes of the conflict and its consequences remain. Sporadic but consistent calls for the government of the day to table the TRC's report and address outstanding issues have been made by civil society groups (Solomon Star 2012, 2014); the Guadalcanal Premier (Dawea 2013a); the Chair of the TRC (Radio NZ International 2013a); Transparency Solomon Islands (Radio NZ International 2013b), victims of the conflict (SIBC 2014), academics (Radio NZ International 2013c), and former MEF commanders (Atkin 2015; Radio NZ International 2015). With a change of government in December 2014, Manasseh Sogavare returned as Prime Minister and has indicated a willingness to table the TRC's final report in parliament (Atkin 2015; Radio NZ International 2015); however; it is yet to be seen when this will happen.

## 8.3   Veneer of adaptation

The Solomon Islands TRC was inspired by an external and global discourse of transitional justice, yet it began with potential to be 'hybridised'; it was initiated locally and implemented

through an Act of Parliament; it was partly funded by the Solomon Islands Government, and the overwhelming majority of the staff were Solomon Islanders. However, from its conception, the TRC was inserted into the Solomon Islands context, the normative underlying premises and structural format replicated and relatively unchallenged. Rather than genuine contextualisation, there was a veneer of adaptation: ceremony and theatre which presented an image of congruence with local culture but with little more than a token commitment to *kastom* and indigenous reconciliation practices.

From the outset, the TRC was driven by two mutually reinforcing influences, both navigating the TRC away from the civil society and church network initiatives which saw it introduced, and leading it away from the people whom it was intended to benefit.

The first influence was that of globalised and standardised discourses on post-conflict peacebuilding and transitional justice, and the ensuing army of international actors and trainers that provide technical assistance in post-conflict contexts. Early potential for the Solomon Islands TRC to be hybridised with local symbols and understanding were unrealised as the TRC 'replicated' a model commission, adopting its organisation, mission and ideology (Merry 2006, 44). International consultants, UN agencies and international NGOs were sought for technical assistance, and in turn provided welcomed support, guidance and funding throughout the TRC's conception and operation. Simultaneously, however, the external support pulled the TRC closer to a standardised and globalised transitional justice discourse and away from what may have been a more contextualised, localised, hybridised approach.

Introducing institutions into the Solomon Islands follows a long history of what Peter Larmour terms 'institutional transfer' into the Pacific (2005, 1). The transfer is not just from one country to another, but as Larmour notes:

> The Pacific Islands have also suffered from the partial application of idealized and standardized models with no particular national origins. Colonization, decolonization, fiscal crises, and membership in international organizations have made the islands open to prevailing ideas of 'best practice'. (2005, 1)

The notion of 'best practice' further adds to a sense of placelessness, as 'best practice' is advised by international organisations (Larmour 2005, 3). As discussed in Chapter Seven (see Section 7.2.3), this was clearly evident in the Solomon Islands with ICTJ's technical

assistance. Aside from ICTJ's technical assistance and presence, the transnational discourse on transitional justice permeated the Solomon Islands TRC through various avenues, as documented in Chapter Five.

The accumulated international influence resulted in the transference of experiences and lessons from previous commissions manifesting in the Solomon Islands commission. While the Solomon Islands TRC could thus benefit from the cumulative lessons from a range of previous commissions, the much-cited need to interrogate the values underlying the commission and question its relevance to the society in question was neglected. As Harris Rimmer (2010, 8) reflects,

> The experience of Pacific countries raises the appropriateness of some of these international rules of thumb, as seen in attitudes towards the roles and interplay of retributive and restorative justice; externally-driven formal judicial mechanisms and indigenous traditional mechanisms; impact on gender equality, and the impact of truth-telling in very small communities.

In postcolonial Solomon Islands it is well accepted (and warned) that 'foreign' ideas should not be insensitively imported and imposed on the country or its people. The sentiment is often expressed in casual workplace or social conversations. In an interview, a former SICA Peace Office member explained, 'a lot of organisations fail because they bring the Western style of doing things, and try to do something else' (Interview with VG). Yet alongside this sentiment and particularly noticeable in donor-funded projects, exists an evident insecurity or lack of trust and confidence in local leadership, which at times manifests as a dependency on foreign staff or technical assistance. Commissioner Sofia Macher reflected on this dynamic within the TRC, noting that a lack of confidence in local leadership from MNURP and within the commission itself resulted in a disproportionate reliance and perceived expertise of ICTJ by the TRC and its stakeholders. With increased confidence and support by MNURP, ICTJ and donors, the commissioners could have been supported to interpret the mandate in a way in which they saw as realistically and practically relevant to the population, rather than to attempt to replicate a standardised model into the Solomon Islands context.

The second influential factor of the trajectory of the TRC was the shift in responsibility from its conception by civil society and church networks to implementation by the government. Following the passage of the TRC Act, the commission clearly became a responsibility of the

government and largely left, or was left by, civil society and civil society actors. Those who initially advocated for a TRC did not foresee the TRC operating as independently from the churches as it eventually did, as former SICA Peace Office member Bob Pollard explained:

> *In the early days, it was never perceived as the TRC operating really without operating hand in glove with the community level churches. And I don't think that ever happened. I don't think, you know, once the TRC set off on its own path, the churches rightly or wrongly, in a sense, they abandoned the TRC, or the TRC abandoned them.*

Indeed, as it operated, the TRC was often seen by the public as an arm of the government, as noted in earlier chapters of this thesis. An ICTJ staff member described:

> *As far as my observation, TRC wanted as much as possible for people to have ownership over the TRC. But from what I saw that did not happen. If you go to the meetings or the hearings, [the communities] always refer to the TRC as part of the government. No matter how much awareness we do. That I definitely noticed. And sometimes people ask, is it independent?  (Interview with BO)*

As discussed in Chapter Four, churches, local leaders and civil society networks led much of the meaningful peace work prior to RAMSI and subsequent reconciliation processes, illustrating the trust accorded to them as mediators and peacemakers. Meanwhile, many Solomon Islanders affected by the tensions lay blame for the conflict and its consequences at the hands of the government, namely at its inability to address core issues as they were raised. Thus the TRC became the responsibility of an authority with markedly less trust and traction to operate such a sensitive process. One former SICA Peace Office member described the government's lack of conviction to do the work, 'The government they just do this thing like any other government officers. They go, just pack up and go and come back tomorrow' (Interview with LA). In the absence of a dedicated and inspirational champion or advocate for the TRC, this shift in responsibility from civil society to the government had a marked impact on the realisation of the commission. While the government's endorsement provided necessary authority and legitimacy to the commission and demonstrated an overall government commitment to peacebuilding in the country, it did not have the leadership or conviction to meaningfully promote its work and garner community support.

The remainder of this section illustrates the consequences of these placeless and globalised influences on the Solomon Islands TRC.

### 8.3.1 Misplaced emphasis: Truth over reconciliation

The twin broad objectives of pursuing 'truth' and 'reconciliation' were ideal goals and a mostly welcomed premise of the TRC. This thesis has shown, however, that the TRC fell short of its ambitious mandate and expectations. Chapter Six comprehensively illustrated how both 'truth' and 'reconciliation' were understood in the Solomon Islands context, which served to raise expectations of the TRC that the commission did not meet. Reconciliation was shown to carry significant value, and the pursuit of truth was justified in so much as it would facilitate future action, reparation or policy changes at the government level. However, the public's expectation of the TRC in terms of reconciliation was vastly different from the commissioners' intentions or capacity. Importantly, the TRC's use of the term 'reconciliation' required clarification. Who were the intended beneficiaries of the proposed reconciliation, and who was to be reconciled?

As described in Chapter Six, the Solomon Islands TRC did not initiate or host processes of interpersonal reconciliation between those involved in disputes, although in the minds of many Solomon Islanders who worked for the TRC, this was how reconciliation should have occurred. While a definition or plan for reconciliation was not delineated, interviewees widely agreed on what forms of reconciliation were *not* valid or valued: the high-level, symbolic ceremonial displays between political leaders, which were mostly regarded as superficial. A victim from Ravu village in the Weathercoast was quoted in the TRC report (Ata et al. 2012, 714) explaining:

> Nobody talks of reconciliation because nobody wants to think about it. It's not that anybody is actively opposed to it, but it's that the victims are not recognized. It is only for bigmen and ex-militants. We small people are forgotten therefore reconciliation has no meaning for me.

Early advocates of the TRC saw truth-seeking as an important element of genuine reconciliation and an attempt to rectify this trend.

> *You can't have all these reconciliation ceremonies going on all around the country, where no one knew exactly what it was we were reconciling over. We just kind of hand some shell money over and pretend we're friends again, you know, what does that mean? (Interview with Bob Pollard, SICA Peace Officer member)*

Unlike reconciliation, truth was a perceivably easier goal for the TRC to pursue, insomuch as the final report would represent its outcome. However, as explored in Chapter Six, pursuing truth in the Solomon Islands was not without its inherent challenges. Talking about sensitive topics from the past can be *tabu*. Truth-telling, for its own sake, is not necessarily cathartic or an expected or accepted public practice. Rather, truth-telling was seen by the public, and the TRC workers, as a means to right the wrongs – to acknowledge the victims of the conflict and their circumstances, and to produce a final report and recommendations to be submitted to government. For many who participated in the TRC process, it was hoped this would lead to reparation or compensation for their losses, thus the pursuit of truth was tentatively validated. Interviewees, however, overwhelmingly agreed that the truth-seeking aspect of the TRC should have been conducted in conjunction with reconciliation processes.

> *Reconciliation to me, I find it funny because reconciliation is supposed to be done straight after people tell their stories and admit their stories and I think that reconciliation should happen straight at that point [...] So I think that reconciliation should go hand in hand with truth-seeking. After we find the truth, we shall reconcile straight away. (Interview with Benjamin Afuga, statement taking coordinator)*

Some interviewees suggested if reconciliation was facilitated alongside truth-telling, then more perpetrators would have come forward to admit their crimes.

> *One perpetrator from Guadalcanal came to the office when we were down near the ocean, he come actually and told me and another staff member that he killed somebody in a nearby village in the height of tension. And he said: 'My problem is to reconcile with that family. Everybody knows what I did, and I've been living with this guilty conscience for more than ten years. But my problem is that I don't have anything to use to go and give to that family as a symbol of true sorry.' So actually he came and asked, he said "truth" and "reconciliation", he was confused actually that TRC will help victims and perpetrators to reconcile by a form of giving something.*
>
> *I hope you understand that as far as our culture is concerned, reconciliation involves giving something. So he thought that part of TRC's work is to actually give something to someone who wants to reconcile with his victims. So that was what he did, he came and asked and I said, sorry we can't do that. After we had to tell it straight that we don't award compensation.*
>
> *I think his message was one among many, I believe that many victims and perpetrators had the same thought. A lot of perpetrators actually did something, like what they did was through maybe other people's orders or something like that. They did not mean to do it. Then afterwards they just realise that they need to reconcile with the victims. But*

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*then their problem is you need to give something. And you might know that for Guadalcanal, to make one* chupu *which is acceptable it will roughly cost about five thousand dollars or more. That's a lot of money for an individual. (Interview with TRC manager)*

The strength of a TRC in Solomon Islands as a tool for peacebuilding on a national level does not lie in cathartic storytelling, furnishing a historical narrative of the conflict or documenting human rights abuses alone, but rather in the potential for sanctioning discussions under the banner of reconciliation on an interpersonal level, and the linkages with action and justice that the final report potentially offers at a national level.

## 8.3.2  Local ownership, participation and buy-in

The misplaced emphasis on truth to the neglect of the much more relevant and resonating issue of reconciliation was symptomatic of the persistent disconnect between the TRC and the very people whom it was designed to reach and assist. The Solomon Islands TRC was variously described by interviewees as isolated. Many interviewees remarked that the general population would not have heard of the TRC, or if they had, would not have understood its mandate and assumed it was another organisation working on issues of peace, conflict and development without really knowing what it did. It took a long time for the TRC to gain the trust of the public, if it all. Chapters Six and Seven described the various examples of suspicion towards, and resistance to, the TRC, and the practical impediments limiting its access and outreach.

Underlying these challenges were fundamental issues characteristic of the context that went relatively unacknowledged and unaddressed. First, related to the above discussion about the TRC shifting from civil society to government responsibility, was the struggle of the TRC to contend with a general attitude of antipathy towards government bodies, especially in the aftermath of the conflict and the subsequent corruption that took place under the name of 'compensation'. Such antipathy was similarly shown towards foreign organisations and perceived unmet promises.

Although the Solomon Islands TRC functioned as an independent body, it was largely viewed by the public as a government institution. In addition to complaints regarding corruption, the

Solomon Islands Government has a disappointing track record regarding the completion and public release of previous commissions and reports.[56] In an interview, Bob Pollard said:

> *There's a sense of [...] I don't think there's ever been a Commission of Inquiry that the government ever released, so there's a sense of, one more that we're not going to see.*

By appealing to 'truth' and 'reconciliation', the Solomon Islands TRC garnered enough public support to be implemented, yet on one hand it was regarded with wariness, and on the other, bestowed with ambiguously high expectations.

Another dynamic that challenged broader local ownership and buy-in of the TRC was the state of civil society and its relationship with the commission. Chapter Seven discussed this in relation to the relative isolation of the TRC from other stakeholders and interested parties (see Section 7.2.3); however, here I note the dynamics of the civil society in Solomon Islands and the inability of TRC processes to understand the relevance of the necessity to keep civil society actors engaged.

First, the generally accepted and expected approach to engaging with 'the grassroots' through 'civil society consultations' can be ineffective at genuinely accessing the broader population. While local leaders and representatives may have attended TRC consultation meetings, there was no guarantee or assurance that they subsequently relayed the information back to the community.

A second dynamic is the generally limited advocacy role played by civil society in Solomon Islands, especially in terms of human rights. Hayner refers to civil society as 'the essential ingredient' in relation to truth commission processes because of their ability to generate public pressure to advocate for a strong commission, and because of their contacts, information and expertise in human rights monitoring (2011, 223–4). Civil society actors such as NGOs and human rights organisations can also contribute to improved TRC processes by

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[56] For example, a report on the 2006 riots was never publicly released (Franekel et al. 2014, 78) and a report prepared by the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs for submission to the UN to fulfil obligations as a signatory to CEDAW was refused approval by the Solomon Islands cabinet just prior to the submission deadline (Hawkins 2012).

lobbying potential donors, government and the commission to improve standards and cooperation, applying pressure to government to implement recommendations, or producing accessible versions of the final report (Hayner 2011, 22).

Civil society in Solomon Islands has had a notable presence since the country's independence, encouraging civic participation and advocating for government transparency (Roughan 2005, 427). While civil society organisations variously advocate on human rights topics, there is no strong united human rights movement. The TRC research manager noted the difference between the civil society in Solomon Islands compared to his home in Peru:

> *In Peru at least we have a quite strong human rights movement, we have a role for that.*
> *Here we don't have this. Here we're quite alone. Some church groups, that's it.*
> *(Interview with Ludwig Huber)*

Finally, the inability or unwillingness of the TRC to foster meaningful relationships with the functioning civil society presence in Solomon Islands significantly contributed to the overall limited public participation and buy-in of the TRC process. In particular, interviewees repeatedly noted the missed opportunities of working closer with the churches across the provinces. A former SICA Peace Office member noted that:

> *They use the church as a, what should I say, the government always uses us as prayer*
> *for openings and closing prayers, but nothing really [...] But if you actually employed*
> *the church and allowed them to run it, they would do it as we do Ministry now, we go to*
> *the villages. (Interview with LA)*

As discussed in Chapter Seven, the TRC's stakeholders were limited to those who were directly involved with the TRC project – namely UNDP who managed the funds, and ICTJ who set up an office in the country solely to support the TRCs work. While the commission made a concerted effort to function and appear independent from outside influences, it was subsequently perceived by some as 'isolated'. Considering the vital and valuable role civil society organisations played as mediators and peacemakers during the conflict, it would have been prudent to draw on their knowledge, reach and access to bolster the TRCs efforts.

### 8.3.3 Falling short

Whether or not the Solomon Islands should have had a TRC is a debate beyond this thesis. Considering the scale of the conflict, the scope of the violence, and the nature of the causes of violence – it is often asked whether a truth commission was an ideal or necessary peacebuilding mechanism? Perhaps not. Nevertheless, this thesis has shown that the Solomon Islands TRC was not intended to fulfil a role solely of truth-seeking and fact finding, nor to rekindle relationships between a divided society. Rather it was an initiative introduced in the midst of conflict to address the conflict dynamics at the time. As demonstrated in Chapter Five, when initiated the TRC was an attempt to establish a formal institution designed to sanction public space and time for healing, by drawing on localised *kastom* and Christian practices of reconciliation. This, as shown throughout this thesis, was not what occurred. The discussion so far in this chapter has showed that the TRC fell short on two very important components – recognising the value of reconciliation over truth, and garnering adequate community ownership, support or participation.

While the Solomon Islands TRC was not the peacebuilding initiative it was originally envisioned to be, it certainly had potential. By considering the early visions of the TRC, it is understandable how initial advocates envisioned the mechanism to work at that time. However, reflecting honestly on the nature of project development in Solomon Islands, the funding cycles and political manoeuvring, it is also unfortunately understandable how the TRC was diverted from these original visions as it became a government responsibility and was increasingly externally driven and influenced. Chapters Six and Seven demonstrated how its eventual implementation suffered a number of challenges – both conceptual and practical. The TRC was constantly occupied managing its day-to-day operations in a difficult working environment typical of the context. Submitting the final report was indeed a tremendous achievement, even despite the unwillingness, to date, of the government to publicly release it.

This research and thesis has thus concluded that the TRC was not appropriately contextualised; the meaning and value of truth and reconciliation in the Solomon Islands context were not adequately localised. The following discussion highlights the potential the TRC offered as a peacebuilding mechanism in post-conflict Solomon Islands and the

subsequent discussion provides an overview of necessary considerations for future truth commissions in a Melanesian or similar context.

## 8.4 Moving forward: Potential of TRCs for peacebuilding in Melanesia

*I'm not just working for the TRC. I'm working for the Solomon Islands. To better the nation, I have a heart for that. (Interview with HM, female, statement taker)*

Despite the tribulations illustrated and analysed in this thesis, interviewees overwhelmingly agreed that the TRC was a worthwhile initiative. While acknowledging its shortfalls, they universally described the commission as a valuable process for reasons that fall into two general categories: (i) the potential the TRC offered as a national project to promote national unity, break down stereotypes and generate a conversation about the unresolved causes of the conflict and future direction of the nation; and (ii) the value of the Solomon Islands being the first country in the region to implement a TRC, and the lessons this could provide to other neighbouring countries that may look to doing the same.

Coming under the banner of 'restorative justice', the values underlying TRCs are potentially congruent with conflict resolution processes in Solomon Islands, with an emphasis on restoring relationships, promoting reconciliation, and storytelling. If more appropriately and sensitively contextualised, the TRC could potentially have served three distinct and separate functions. Each have been illustrated in this thesis, and are thus briefly noted here before recommendations are made as to future TRCs in similar settings.

### *Truth-seeking and documentation of conflict*

While wary of the cultural taboos and practical challenges of truth-telling, the majority of interviewees overwhelmingly regarded truth-seeking as a worthwhile endeavour and the notion of documenting truth as relatively uncontroversial. In hierarchal societies that privilege the male voice, sanctioned truth-seeking that allowed for wider participation across usual gender and age barriers from across the provinces appeared to be a valued pursuit. The diverse voices who contributed to the 'truth' presented in the final report were widely believed to represent a more accurate and trustworthy narrative than one designed by politicians and 'big-men'. Interviewees described a range of positive outcomes from hearing the various testimony and stories, such as a more informed understanding of what had

occurred, humanising the victims and understanding their needs, and breaking down stereotypes.

Insomuch as the truth was a valued pursuit, it was generally seen to be enshrined in the final report, as a TRC staff member described:

> *And it doesn't mean that the TRC finishes and then we forget the people. No. When the TRC finishes, at least the report of the people and the voice of the people will be there. (Interview with Eunice Hughes, female, transcriber)*

This documentation was important because it had not been comprehensively done before. A number of interviewees reiterated the importance of the final report for compiling the stories of, and acknowledging, the victims, noting that there was a lack of completed research or data on those affected by the conflict, and that ex-militants had received more attention.

> *Have you come across any base line study done by the ministries on these victims? In our research, there's none! That's why the letters are just sitting in the files, there's no research done about this. Twelve years now that's why we it's the first time we open the files look at the stories. (Interview with Commissioner Caroline Laore)*

In order to ensure the work of the TRC benefits the young and future generations, a number of interviewees – including the younger staff members – recommended the TRC report be used to develop educational materials for the school curriculum, reiterating one of the recommendations in the final report (Ata et al. 2012, 793).

### *Sanction space to prompt and initiate reconciliation*

Reconciliation requires inclusive interpersonal and inter-group work, led by Solomon Islanders. In light of this, a TRC offered potential in prompting and legitimising this process on the broader scale in which the conflict has occurred by sanctioning and legitimising a space to initiate dialogue and reconciliation.

This is not to suggest an attempt to replicate customary practices on a larger scale nor to institutionalise customary traditions, but to recognise the potential of creating a space within which Solomon Islanders can come together to discuss, debate and decide about plans for the future.  For example, one staff member likened the role of a TRC on a national scale to that of a chief mediating a conflict on a local scale. She described the TRC as a government

sanctioned mediator – an authority bringing together parties and creating a space and opportunity for reconciliation to occur:

> *Like, [if we were involved in a dispute] and I want you to forget the story, truth and reconciliation commission is here now, it stands between us, so it comes to bind us again. So you don't see me as a perpetrator anymore, and I don't see you as a victim anymore, but we are normal persons like before. (Interview with Eunice Hughes, female, transcriber)*

Creating an inclusive and participatory space to engage with individuals and groups involved in a dispute would also encourage a shift away from the prohibitive culture of government compensation, as hoped by Braithwaite et al. (2010, 148):

> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission needs to reconnect citizens to thinking about reconciliation as something people do between one another, and communities do with each other. Competition for state compensation crushes reconciliation as something that can build peace by touching people's hearts. Solomon Islanders already understand this. They just need to see new institutions of reconciliation working well in a new spirit of national healing, forgiveness, and rebuilding for the next generation.

The suggestion of purposefully designing a space to encourage reconciliation through a TRC may be criticised as creating a 'theatre of reconciliation'. Indeed, as it was, the Solomon Islands TRC involved elements of performativity – carefully scripted speeches, rehearsals of public hearings, and curated events. The necessity to design such a process when local practices exist may also receive critique.

Hopefully it has been shown through this thesis, however, that while local practices are valued and resonate with the population, they require support, strengthening, and adaption to be relevant and effective in modern Solomon Islander communities. This does not mean an abandonment of all things local in favour of 'foreign' or 'Western' models, but to develop a 'hybrid' or 'local' approach that genuinely reflects the values, needs and hopes of the heterogeneous population. Customary practices can similarly be regarded as performance and theatre; the value they lend is instigating the necessary processes for societal equilibrium to be restored and justice dealt.

### Orientation towards future action

> *But people from Solomons, mostly they aren't really interested in reports. They are interested in what you do. (Interview with ED, male, TRC researcher)*

A common thread woven between customary reconciliation practices and the impetus used by TRC staff to encourage Solomon Islanders to participate in truth-seeking was the potential for change: for repairing relationships, addressing causes of conflict, acknowledging harm, and providing symbolic or actual compensation or reparation.

Just as TRCs have potential for peacebuilding by carving out a specific time and place to allow focus on reconciliation, the process can also prompt an interrogation of what went wrong, why, and what needs to be done to prevent the recurrence of violence. Prosecutions and judicial processes play a valuable role in delivering formal justice; however, their focus is limited to punishing perpetrators, to the neglect of providing more directed redress to victims and addressing underlying conflict causes. The potential to lobby for reparations and policy change through the TRC's recommendations was clearly an influential and effective factor prompting public participation in TRC activities, as well as a potential means to address the root causes and consequences of the conflict.

As well as reconciliation, the Solomon Islands TRC was mandated to promote 'national unity'. The TRC was unique compared to other commissions worldwide in that when it was established the majority of the official post-conflict justice work was done, thus the commission could emphasise nation-building without trading in the importance of justice (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 87). Assessing the contribution of the Solomon Islands TRC towards nation-building, however, is beyond the scope of this thesis. As long as the final report remains unreleased and unaddressed by the government, it will likely be minimal. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that a number of interviewees who worked for the commission explicitly expressed pride in their work as contributing towards nation-building and national peace processes. For some, this was the motivating factor to apply for work at the commission in the first place.

> *I liked my job, because first of all, I came to understand more about Solomons, my country. And then the other thing I enjoyed, was being involved in the country's peace*

*process [...] I think one thing I really liked and that I'm proud of, is that I was somehow involved in nation-building. (Interview with ED, male, TRC researcher)*

### 8.4.1 Recommendations for future TRCs in Melanesia

*It's an excuse for us — to say it's a foreign idea, and it's a bad idea. The only thing we [should] do, I think it's a good idea to adapt the TRC. (Interview with ED, male, TRC researcher)*

The greatest impediment to the Solomon Islands TRC's ambitious peacebuilding mandate was the lack of appropriate contextualisation. Being a popular transnational and globalised post-conflict mechanism, however, did not necessarily exclude the TRC from potentially meaningful work in Solomon Islands, or of truth commissions in Melanesia in the future. Importantly, *no interviewee said that the Solomon Islands should not have had a TRC*. Many identified specific characteristics of the truth commission process that resonated with local values and conflict management practices and resulted in positive outcomes. Whilst the expectations and interpretations of how the commission would proceed greatly varied, the majority of interviewees regarded the commission as a worthwhile endeavour.

To reiterate a point made at the outset and throughout this thesis, a call for greater contextualisation is not a call to 'go back' to times before or romanticise traditional processes, nor rhetoric to satisfy donor requirements for community consultations. Rather, it is a call for genuine interest and commitment to listening to what Solomon Islanders want and need – as diverse and heterogeneous as their opinions are across and within demographic and provincial groups – and supporting them to take initiative and leadership as they see appropriate. Quite simply, if peacebuilding is going to be effective, then its processes need to be inclusive and relevant to the intended beneficiaries. The general concluding sentiment that the TRC needed to be better suited to the local context is at once both obvious, and painfully neglected, despite repeated calls in policy and academic literature for this to happen.

In light of the discussion of this concluding chapter, and with the unabashed privilege of hindsight, here I offer recommendations for how a future truth commission in a similar setting may be conceived and implemented in order to better reflect local conditions. Throughout the thesis I have suggested a number of ways in which the TRC process could have been

enhanced. Here I give a summary of necessary issues for those considering implementing future TRCs in a Melanesian or similar context.

### *Identify and scrutinise the objectives of the proposed TRC and arrange activities to address intended outcomes.*

This is essential to ensure the intended activities are relevant to the contemporary context, and have not significantly changed as time has lapsed. It also demands that serious consideration is given to how truth-seeking and reconciliation activities can be conducted. This involves considering how the key terms such as 'truth' and 'reconciliation' are locally understood, what expectations they are imbued with, and whether they are individual goals in their own right. This study has shown that in Solomon Islands, truth was valued in order to document the conflict; however, it was not necessarily cathartic and was at times culturally inappropriate to seek out. Thus truth-seeking needed to be conducted in conjunction with localised cultural practices, and ideally would have contributed towards processes of reconciliation. In turn, reconciliation needed to be better defined as a multidimensional process entailing justice, acknowledgement, repair, exchange and strengthening of relationships.

Once objectives are identified, then appropriate stakeholders and implementing partners should be engaged. For example, if the Solomon Islands TRC were trying to promote reconciliation, they would have benefitted from a working relationship with the various churches present in the communities. Not only do the churches have greater access to the people at the community level, but they are also considered to be an appropriate authority to facilitate dialogue on reconciliation. This point was repeatedly made by interviewees, who lamented the limited involvement of the churches in the TRC's work.

### *Decentralise TRC activities, and support and promote community designed events.*

In order to create better awareness of the TRC's activities, include relevant local leaders, encourage participation and buy-in, and create spaces for genuine reconciliation, TRC activities should be organised around community designed and led events, with one or more commissioners in attendance. For example, commissioners (and other TRC staff) could travel around communities and bear witness to these events, and if and as appropriate, TRC staff could also attend to conduct their work (i.e. statement taking, research, exhumations)

incorporated within or alongside the community event. Interestingly, this was how initial advocates of the TRC envisioned the TRC would go ahead. As former SICA Peace Office member Bob Pollard explained:

> *Well I think what we would have done, is the situation where we would have had a program where the TRC would have called the church leaders and community leaders together and would have said, this is our program, this is not going to work without you guys, we need you involved, and we want to work in partnership [...] Because clearly, it was in our minds, that they were going to be the ones that facilitate reconciliation. Because once you've had the chance to talk through the issues, the TRC would have given the chance for people to hear these stories, and you know we could talk about what's happened, and now the way forward is for reconciliation, and you guys need to take some sort of leadership in that, otherwise we just come in and go away with stories, and you guys are left possibly more devastated.*

Decentralising activities would place the onus on local leaders, groups and community members to take ownership of the process, and allow flexibility for activities and events to vary within and between provinces depending on localised practices, preferences and issues. Community groups could decide on locally resonant goals, and how to meaningfully achieve these. Community organisers could be financially and practically assisted by the national or provincial TRC offices with seed funding, as well as technical support.

Community events may involve a public element akin to public hearings, as well as variations of statement taking, research and exhumations. This would shift the focus of the commission from the final report to the various *processes* of reconciliation and peacebuilding. TRC funds could contribute to transporting individuals or representatives who would like to reconcile with the community in question; for example, people who were harassed and fled the community and have now settled elsewhere, or ex-combatants who caused harm in that community.

### *Strengthen outreach and increase accessibility of national and provincial headquarters.*

In addition to supporting communities with their own events, the national and provincial offices could be designed to be publicly accessible. They could offer a place for members of the public to engage with the commission, such as contributing their own submissions, engaging with statement taking or research, or asking general enquiries. For the TRC to be accessible and transparent to the public it would need to plan ongoing awareness and

communication activities to engage the public. This may involve specialised liaison staff to engage with victims, their families, and ex-combatants. It may also involve more proactive outreach activities, as one communications officer explained they wished to do, such as open days at the office, targeted outreach, such as to unemployed youths and adults, and regular communications materials, such as a newsletter. Mainstream and social media could also be utilised.

### *Explore culturally sensitive methodologies for truth-seeking and truth-telling.*

Various risks of, and challenges to, truth-seeking and truth-telling, such as issues relating to personal security, privacy, cultural practices and conflict management practices, threaten a successful truth program. Hayner (2011, 220) notes the many risks involved and suggests that when victim hearings are not possible, 'other kinds of public sessions might be considered, such as community leaders and rights advocates describing the nature of the violence and how communities were affected'. In Solomon Islands, ICTJ supported and facilitated a group of women to write a submission to the TRC documenting their personal experiences of the conflict and sharing their visions for the future. Participants reported the process to be therapeutic, one telling me:

> *It was therapeutic in itself too, for the women who came together. Because in lots of the meetings where the women came together and told stories, the women cried and cried so much. So in a way it gave women a space to come together and they found it personally healing.*

The process of group work created a safe and therapeutic environment for women, and could perhaps be replicated on a smaller scale with various groups within communities, with assistance provided by the national and provincial offices of the TRC.

Alternative methods of presenting the final report, or disseminating the information contained within, must also be considered. Many interviewees noted that a government report is not accessible to the majority of the population. Rather, other options could include distributing a summary, a pictorial account, or producing recordings or films that could be distributed across the provinces. A national space or museum could be created to provide public access to view the report or summaries of its findings, and engage with the material through other mediums, such as audio and film, as has been done in Timor-Leste.

***Prioritise actions and ensure recommendations are considered.***

From the outset, those advocating for a TRC in the Solomon Islands were aware of the importance of the recommendations in the final report for it to effectively contribute towards a peace process:

> From the experiences of other transitional societies, it is critical to the long term success of the peace process that the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission be mandatory on the government for implementation. (SICA 2002, 4)

This was encapsulated in the TRC Act, which stipulated that upon receiving the report from the commission: the prime minister shall cause it to be laid before parliament and the report be made available to the public; the government shall as far as practicable implement the recommendations of the report; and a person or body shall be appointed to monitor the implementation of the recommendations (TRC Act 17[1-4]).

The official acknowledgement of the final report and a government commitment to implementing the TRC's recommendations were integral to the public's participation and its effectiveness as a peacebuilding tool. Justice and memory practices involve 'reconstructing the world of the living' (Kent 2011, 444) and a commission's programs are an opportunity for those affected by the conflict to exhibit the presence of the past in the present, and lobby for reparation and recognition of the effects of ongoing injustices.

A TRC in a Melanesian context is a means through which the government can fulfil its obligations as party to an exchange, acknowledge experiences and stories shared with the commission, and offer compensatory changes to restore pre-conflict balance in communities and/or address underlying causes of conflict. Compensation, in this regard, could take the form of recommended reparations, exhumations, memorials, rehabilitation or institutional reforms. Conversely, not releasing the report or enacting its recommendations risks dishonouring those who have participated in the process.

## 8.5   Conclusion: One part of the process

> The TRC was to be considered as one part of the process by which Solomon Islands
> dealt with the events and the legacy of the tension. It could not do its work in isolation,
> nor could it single-handedly achieve reconciliation. (Ata et al. 2011, Volume 5, 1197)

As TRCs proliferate in post-conflict situations, earlier commissions serve as templates for later iterations, resulting in a set of international, globalised norms. While alterations made to the structure and function of TRCs over time have allowed different iterations to adjust to some extent to local demands (Millar 2011, 178), the normative discourse underlying transitional justice – that truth-telling is cathartic and leads to reconciliation, justice and peace – continues relatively unchanged. The meaning and value of both 'truth' and 'reconciliation' are translated, or vernacularised, into the local contexts in which they are implemented, resulting in a variety of expectations and experiences in each circumstance. In practice, the Solomon Islands TRC suffered from a lack of definition or clarity of how both 'truth' and 'reconciliation' are translated, defined and valued locally. Conflating both terms into the one process and title, without a clear definition relevant to the Solomon Islands context, served to set unrealistic and ambitious expectations of what the TRC would do or achieve.

This thesis has examined the Solomon Islands TRC and questioned its actual and potential contribution to peacebuilding in a post-conflict Melanesian setting. It has shown that as it was, the Solomon Islands TRC was not a successful peacebuilding initiative. On a 'crowded stage' of peacebuilding actors, it played a small cameo alongside the star actors of RAMSI, churches and local actors and *kastom*. Nevertheless, it was a valuable and relevant proposition. Despite its flaws and challenges, the overwhelming majority of interviewees said that the TRC was a worthwhile enterprise, if not for peacebuilding in the country, then for leading the way in the Pacific and demonstrating the potential it can offer.

This thesis has shown a TRC has potential for facilitating reconciliation both at the national and the local level. At the national level, the provision of testimony in exchange for the implementation of government recommendations potentially accords with a Melanesian style of conflict management whereby symbolic restitution is made in recognition of harm suffered. Depending on if, and how, the government responds to the final report, this may still happen. At the local level, the most important sphere for reconciliation in Solomon Islands is between

individuals, families and communities. Ceremonies between political leaders or chiefs will not restore the interpersonal relationships that were damaged. Yet providing spaces for victims, ex-militants, and others involved in conflict to talk about or document their experiences, and bringing people together under the banner of reconciliation, has enormous potential benefits in the Solomon Islands context.

Memory and justice practices in Solomon Islands do not allow for a sharp line to be drawn between the past and the future in the name of transitional justice or nation-building. Local memory and justice practices are instead a process of ongoing, culturally embedded memes, which may include the state, the churches or *kastom*. Once each rift has been healed, it earns silence; although not forgotten, the wrongdoing is not to be used to justify further retribution or payback.

With a broad and ambitious mandate to 'promote national unity and reconciliation', and a title that gestured towards both truth and reconciliation without defining either, the Solomon Islands TRC began with expectations that could never be met. Yet if truth commissions and transitional justice are operated as local, open-ended, indigenous processes, rather than geared towards a specific outcome, they may be congruent with Melanesian beliefs. As a process-oriented mechanism, the TRC would be judged not on whether it achieves truth or reconciliation, but whether it can create the space for this to occur in a way that is organic to the context – a dynamic, modern Pacific society with cultural traditions that involve Christianity and *kastom* as well as institutions of the state. Otherwise, the search for truth and justice will be far less satisfying than people hope and the seductive discourse of transitional justice will serve only to raise impossible expectations rather than create paths towards sustainable peace.