Bridging the gap between state and society

New directions for the Solomon Islands
Published July 2006

This report is available online at www.oxfam.org.au and www.oxfam.org.nz

The central purpose of this report is to present the voices of Solomon Islanders, which are at risk of not being heard in this period of rapid change. The report builds on earlier work undertaken by a reference group of Solomon Islands’ scholars, civil society leaders, and public intellectuals, presented at the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies’ Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in the Asia-Pacific Region conference, at the University of Queensland in 2005. Research was undertaken through extensive interviews by Anna Powles, Paul Roughan, Nancy Kwalea and Anne Lockley, during 2005, with communities and civil society groups in Malaita, Guadalcanal and Western Province; members of the Solomon Islands Government; RAMSI officials and Australian diplomatic personnel in Honiara; and Australian Government officials in Canberra. The names of individuals and organisations who did not wish to be identified have been omitted.

About Oxfam International Solomon Islands Office

The Oxfam International Solomon Islands Office is a joint country office of Oxfam Australia and Oxfam New Zealand, and is managed by Oxfam Australia. Oxfam’s Solomon Islands program aims to contribute to sustainable peace and security in the Solomon Islands via five inter-related thematic programs: conflict, livelihoods, HIV and AIDS, natural resources, and the Solomon Islands Citizens’ Voice program. The Oxfam International Solomon Islands Office also implements part of Oxfam’s regional disaster management program, which includes disaster response, mitigation, and rehabilitation activities.

Credits

Author: Nic Maclellan, with contributions by Anna Powles, Anne Lockley, Nancy Kwalea, Paul Roughan and Forrest Metz.

Editor and designer: Elizabeth Wheeler

Photograph credits

Front cover:
Kim Berry/OxfamAUS
Li Fung/OxfamAUS

Section headings:
Li Fung/OxfamAUS

Back cover:
Oxfam Australia supports projects in the Solomon Islands to develop sustainable farming methods and organic community gardens.

Photo: Kim Berry/OxfamAUS
Bridging the gap between state and society

New directions for the Solomon Islands

Oxfam Australia and Oxfam New Zealand
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFP</td>
<td>Australian Federal Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARDS</td>
<td>Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AusAID</td>
<td>Australian Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECP</td>
<td>Enhanced Co-operation Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EITI</td>
<td>Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPG</td>
<td>Eminent Persons Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCW</td>
<td>National Council of Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NERRDP</td>
<td>National Economic Recovery, Reform and Development Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>National Peace Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZAID</td>
<td>New Zealand Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD DAC</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Development Assistance Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIF</td>
<td>Pacific Islands Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPF</td>
<td>Participating Police Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAMSI</td>
<td>Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSIP</td>
<td>Royal Solomon Islands Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIG</td>
<td>Solomon Islands Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOPAC</td>
<td>South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNIFEM</td>
<td>United Nations Development Fund for Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION 6

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 7

PART ONE: VOICES FROM THE VILLAGES 9
1.1 Concepts of peace and security 10
1.2 Livelihoods, jobs and essential services 12
1.3 Outreach to the community 13
1.4 A mandate for change 14

PART TWO: BUILDING THE STATE AND SOCIETY 15
2.1 International context for intervention 15
2.2 State building in the Pacific 17
2.3 Economic reform and conflict over resources 19
2.4 A regional mission 20
2.5 Benchmarks for success and public debate 22

PART THREE: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN STATE AND SOCIETY 23
3.1 Linking to the community 23
3.2 Redefining security 24
3.3 Capacity building 26

PART FOUR: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS 28
4.1 Improve community engagement 28
4.2 Develop programs that address broader concepts of security 28
4.3 Focus on livelihoods, food security and rural development 28
4.4 Develop public debate on benchmarks for success 29
4.5 Greater representation from the region 29

REFERENCES 30
In April 2006, Solomon Islanders went to the polls to elect a new government. But the riots that rocked the capital Honiara after the selection of a new Prime Minister are a sharp reminder of the challenges still facing the country.

Overseas donors have made a significant commitment to rebuilding Solomon Islands after years of conflict between 1998 and 2003. The first phase of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), a deployment of police and military forces in July 2003, saw a welcome and rapid improvement in law and order on the streets of Honiara, and the removal of many guns from the community.

As the third anniversary of the RAMSI intervention approaches, Solomon Islanders within and outside the public service and political establishment need greater engagement with, and ownership of, the process of redeveloping the Solomon Islands.

As Mission Helpem Fren, the 2005 report of the Pacific Islands Forum's Eminent Persons Group, states, “Out of necessity, RAMSI has, since its arrival, adopted an interventionist approach. Without compromising the substantial security gains that have been made, it seems timely to adopt a more development approach with Solomon Islands being an equal partner, if not the driver.”

This report includes four sections:

**Part 1** presents a range of voices from the streets and settlements, from the capital and the provinces — community perspectives on the many ways that state building is failing to address the immediate concerns of people at the local level.

**Part 2** looks at the central focus of RAMSI's activity as a state building exercise. It discusses the issue of state and society relations in Melanesian countries, the international context for intervention in developing countries, and the link to economic development.

**Part 3** outlines opportunities, arising from the recent national elections, for a review of relationships between outside donors, the Solomon Islands Government, and church, community and customary authorities engaged in development activities.

**Part 4** outlines recommendations for debate and action.
Voices from the villages

This report documents a widespread feeling that ordinary Solomon Islanders are excluded from government processes and decision-making, pointing to a lack of linkages and engagement between government and citizens.

Whilst many Solomon Islanders have welcomed RAMSI’s role in ending the conflict of the late 1990s, it appears that the general population has little understanding of RAMSI’s role beyond policing. Furthermore, despite improved security over the last three years, there remains a widespread lack of confidence that current proposals for economic development in Solomon Islands will benefit all.

Solomon Islanders hold far more complex attitudes towards RAMSI than those presented in the Australian and New Zealand media. Ordinary people say that government and donor rhetoric about broad-based economic development and growth needs to be translated into real action on livelihoods and human security.

Many ordinary people feel these processes are not moving quickly enough to address their daily concerns: more jobs, improved livelihoods, better basic services and equitable distribution of the benefits of the nation’s resources, especially for the bulk of the population who live in rural areas and outer islands. There are also new pressures on government, as citizens express their concern over elite corruption.

This report highlights the needs and views of ordinary Solomon Islanders, including their desire for:

1) Stronger concepts of peace and security, tied to broader notions of economic, social or environmental vulnerability.
2) Jobs, essential services, and improved livelihoods.
3) Better outreach to the community by government and donors.
4) Support for efforts to decrease disputes, crime, violence and anti-social behaviour and a renewed focus on ending violence against women in the home and community.
5) A transparent mandate for change.

Further, the report also notes the importance of empowering women and young people in peace building processes within communities and the need for greater engagement with community-based organisations by government officials and RAMSI personnel than has been the case to date.

Bridging the gap

To achieve the goal of “a peaceful, well-governed and prosperous Solomon Islands”, RAMSI has focused on rebuilding the state and the machinery of government. But these are not enough. The central challenge is to build a bridge between state and society and to increase governance at community level so that an engaged and informed citizenry can hold governments, corporations and donors to account for the health, education and development services that are their right.

RAMSI can and should play a role in strengthening these linkages between the Solomon Islands Government and the people or establishing them where they are absent. If the intervention mission does not engage the people in the processes of state building and peace building, its legitimacy will be inherently weakened.

Oxfam believes that any ongoing intervention to address peace and security in the Solomon Islands must draw more on the human and cultural resources of the country so that it will:

• rebuild capacity of Solomon Islands institutions based on an understanding of traditional structures, acknowledgment of existing capacity, respect for ways of working and with a clear Solomon Islands presence in institutions and decision making;
• be better placed to tackle underlying components of conflict and insecurity in the Solomon Islands including unsustainable and contested resource use; the low status of women and their exclusion from decision-making processes; a culture of
violence that begins at the family and community level; and mobilising communities to prevent corruption and develop practices of good leadership;

- Work more effectively in partnership with the Solomon Islands Government, traditional law and justice structures and civil society to understand the context and develop appropriate solutions led by Solomon Islanders; and

- Support citizens in their demands for systemic accountability at all levels and empower them to build and maintain their own peace and unity.

Economic reform

The election of a new government in Solomon Islands has created an opportunity to re-open debate on the costs and consequences of past economic reforms, at a time when donor governments are seeking to promote new investments in the resources sector.

The simmering dissatisfaction evident among both rural and urban communities in Solomon Islands, as described in this report, indicates that there is a pressing need to develop alternatives to current economic reform policies and to create initiatives that are more targeted towards reducing poverty, inequality and potential conflict and improving the quality of life for all citizens of Solomon Islands. The foundation of these alternatives is adopting a rights-based and sustainable development approach to economic reform and development.

Current proposals for large-scale natural resource development projects (including oil palm plantations and mining projects) produce some employment opportunities but can also contribute to conflict, as people debate the environmental and social costs. The ways that natural resources are extracted can devastate ecosystems and destroy indigenous cultures and livelihoods. As recommended in Oxfam’s report, Conflict Prevention or Promotion? (2006a) there is scope to apply new initiatives like the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) to promote sustainable exploitation of natural resources.

Beyond extractive industries like logging and mining, there is a need to place more emphasis on rural livelihoods, food security and the non-formal economy. Eighty five per cent of Solomon Islanders live in rural areas, so attention to the rural economy is paramount. Yet in many studies of the Solomon Islands crisis, there is a lack of analysis and understanding around rural development, resource exploitation and their connection to conflict.

The future of the country’s economy is also tied to regional debates about aid, trade and regional economic integration. Reform of the Solomon Islands economy should be tied to policy changes by Australian and New Zealand in the areas of labour mobility and access to employment through seasonal work schemes.

Benchmarks and representation

RAMSI has developed a performance framework and states that it is measuring its achievements against this framework. However, the framework notes that “the information to date has largely been provided by the various RAMSI programs themselves”. There is no process for public input into the development of benchmarks or indicators for RAMSI’s work, and no opportunities for the Solomon Islands community to measure RAMSI’s performance against these indicators. The absence of debate on these indicators opens the way for community uncertainty about the longevity of RAMSI’s tenure, the motives of those governments supporting the regional intervention, and the apparent contradiction between the mission’s calls for accountability from the Solomon Islands Government and its own lack of openness to scrutiny.

There is a clear need for RAMSI to provide greater clarity about its objectives, to provide a public timeframe for activities, and to acknowledge the limits to its capacity. Above all, the discussion on the future of Solomon Islands state and society must be based on a process that supports greater public debate over the intervention’s goals and achievements.

Greater representation from RAMSI’s Pacific member states is an area for significant reform. Although RAMSI is supposed to be a regional mission, 94% of civilian advisors in the Solomon Islands came from Australia and New Zealand (as of May 2006), with very few civilian staff from other Pacific Island countries. The latter phases of the RAMSI deployment have focused on economic and public sector reform through the placement of in-line personnel and advisors in key government departments.

The absence of meaningful numbers of Pacific Islanders in the civilian state building elements of the operation could be remedied. There is significant experience from within the region — particularly from Samoa and Fiji — in high demand areas like finance and public sector reform, which are key features of RAMSI’s work in the Solomon Islands. Experienced staff from Pacific Island Forum (PIF) member countries regularly take up overseas positions in the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) or the Forum Fisheries Agency, partly as a contribution to regional development. RAMSI should be considered more often as a similar posting for island staff, with Australian or New Zealand personnel temporarily backfilling positions in Suva, Port Vila or Nuku’alofa while island staff bring their unique understanding of Melanesia and the ‘Pacific way’ to their work in Honiara.
Many Solomon Islanders have welcomed RAMSI’s role in ending the conflict of the late 1990s, and supporters of the co-operative intervention highlight the “extensive popular support” (Fullilove 2006) in the Solomon Islands for the operation. Until the April 2006 riots in Honiara, RAMSI had received almost exclusively positive mainstream media coverage in Australia and New Zealand, with much of this coverage suggesting that RAMSI had largely resolved security issues in the Solomon Islands.

However, the assertion that the public is fully informed about and supportive of all aspects of the intervention (Batley 2005) needs to be qualified. Solomon Islanders hold far more complex and ambivalent attitudes towards RAMSI than those presented in the media in Australia and New Zealand.

A range of surveys have documented the ongoing development and political challenges facing the country, some of which contributed to the conflict in Honiara following the 2006 national elections. For example, a December 2005 report by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM 2005) notes “many positive elements and opportunities” but correctly predicted the risk of conflict arising from unresolved issues, as cited below:

- There is a pervasive sense of exclusion from government processes and decision-making, pointing to a lack of linkages and engagement between government and its citizens.
- There is also a general tendency towards low economic development and considerable gender inequality within Solomon Islands.
- Dissatisfaction with the provision of government services is high. Specific issues that are commonly mentioned include lack of water and sanitation, poor quality of roads, inadequate transportation and communications linkages, inadequately trained teachers, distance of clinics and the expense of both medicines and schooling.
- There is a pervasive sense of inequality among different regions throughout the country, especially between Honiara and the provinces. Development and economic activities are frequently centred in Honiara while rural and provincial areas are overlooked. There is also a strong sense of economic inequality within Honiara itself. This includes dissatisfaction by locals at the opportunities (and land) being given to those from other provinces, which is again linked to the need for decentralised development.

There are also new pressures on the Solomon Islands Government as citizens more consistently express their concern over elite corruption and the failure to deliver essential services and improved livelihoods.

Oxfam conducted extensive interviews with community leaders and villagers to inform this report. Throughout these discussions, there was a gap between the perceived achievement of law and order and more tangible and lasting development outcomes. Although RAMSI has helped return normality to the country and increase community safety, most people, especially those in outlying and rural areas have received few other benefits. This was also reflected in the actions of urban poor people and opportunistic looting during the April 2006 riots in Honiara.¹

There are four areas in particular where ongoing demands from the community were evident:

1) Redefining concepts of peace and security.
2) Providing jobs, essential services and improved livelihoods.
3) Improving outreach to the community.
4) Defining a transparent mandate for change.

¹ Footnote 1.
For discussion, see papers from Solomon Islands: Where to Now?, a seminar organised by the State Society and Governance in Melanesia project, Australian National University, 5 May 2006 (http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/conferences.php)
1.1 Concepts of peace and security

To assess the intervention’s impact on peace, security and development for Solomon Islanders, it is first necessary to understand how Solomon Islander men and women define these concepts. Oxfam staff and researchers, in 2005, asked people in many communities about this in their field research.2

Local community perspectives of peace and security focused largely on the local context and daily needs, and illustrated the difference between ‘law and order’ and ‘peace and security’ — a difference that RAMSI officials privately acknowledge but publicly treat as one and the same.

Community definitions of peace, security and development present a challenge for RAMSI. Whilst it requires the support of grass roots communities for its long-term success, it is essentially focused at an institutional level and on the bigger picture of macro-economic stability and growth, a strong state, and a police-focused view of law and order (Fullilove 2006).

Security think tanks in Australia have lauded RAMSI’s successful intervention to end the fighting of 1998 to 2003, disarm the militias and collect weapons (Wainwright 2005). Participating Police Force (PPF) have arrested 4,182 people and laid 6,124 charges, most often as joint operations with the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP). Throughout Solomon Islands, 3,730 firearms have been removed from circulation and a total of 306,851 ammunition rounds have been seized (AusAID 2006a). But disarmament does not mean real security for all members of the community, as Margaret Maelaua, Secretary of the Malaita Council of Women, explains:

“Peace is more than just returning of arms — we need peace in the home, peace in the heart, peace in the community — you need to be able to settle into your own life — need a secure livelihood. Also looking at security it means financial security, you can do your gardens, sell your goods, sit down with your family — this is peace and security within the home. Within the community it means everyone inside the community can live together in harmony, there are no conflicts, the village is organised — there is a structure that we follow. Village level government has authority; they deal with the things in the village — health, law and order. I see this is not effective now. With government, their contribution to peace and security (is that) services can reach people and provide for health and education and people know what is happening. (And there is a national government that works together with provincial governments to deliver services to the people. In Malaita this has broken down and it is still broken down.” (Oxfam 2005a)

Almost universally, women interviewed for this report gave multi-faceted definitions of security that emphasised improved livelihoods, even more than law and order:

“[Peace is when] children can go to school without any problems, the classes are on, the husband has a job and we can pay school fees. In the community when there is peace, people listen to the Chief ...” (Oxfam 2005b)

“Peace and security for women in the Solomon Islands means that children go to school and the family can afford to pay the school fees ... basic needs are met, women are treated fairly, [and] there are services — health, education, available ... [We] live in a peaceful co-existent community ... [and] don’t see guns around ...”(Oxfam 2005c)

“[Peace and security for women means that] ... women and their children are free to move around at any time, day or night [but] even if we have peace if we can’t feed our family, it is still not balanced, if we can’t pay our school fees we still struggle.” (Oxfam 2005d)

In contrast to the livelihoods-focused definitions raised by women, broader community definitions focused more on “… working together inside the community — working with different tribes, cooperating, helping each other, and not fighting.” (Elima 2005)

The need to address underlying causes of tension and conflict in the Solomon Islands is emphasised by Solomon Islanders in a wide range of situations, as is the need for specific reconciliation work. Betty Luvusia from Guadalcanal was an active campaigner and motivator for peace during the conflict. She states:

“From my experience of working through the conflict until now the big thing is that the grievances still remain. It is not really peace. Fights still take place — people see someone they had a problem with, someone from the other side and they beat them up. The police and RAMSI have not addressed this. There needs to be trauma counselling, reconciliation work.” (Oxfam 2005d)

Footnote 2.

Interviews were conducted by Anna Powles, Paul Roughan, Nancy Kwalea and Anne Lockley during 2005 with communities and civil society groups in Malaita, Guadalcanal and Western Province. The names of those individuals who did not wish to be identified have been omitted.
Women strongly acknowledged that RAMSI had an impact on freedom of movement and freedom from fear of sexual violence and intimidation:

“During the tension ... we couldn’t sleep at night. People harassed us, stole things from us ... When RAMSI came the burden was lifted.” (Oxfam 2005f)

However, many women are concerned that RAMSI’s activities are too focused on the capital. Women’s activist Hilda Kari, a former Member of Parliament, told a radio debate in May 2006:

“There is a different picture in the villages in Solomon Islands where the impact or presence of RAMSI is not there or they do not really know what RAMSI is, except that they are in Honiara helping to curb law and order in the city. In terms of women, we see the high risk indicator in that women fear reprisals. Especially as we continue to hear that whenever people go into prisons, when they come out, there might be further problems in the country.” (Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation 2006)

Although on the surface, RAMSI’s presence and the reduction in guns has led to a feeling of improved order, new manifestations of conflict continue. At a village level, experiences were quite mixed, but many women in Malaita reported that their feeling of safety within and around their communities has not greatly improved since the arrival of RAMSI (Oxfam 2005g, Amnesty International 2004):

“Before we had a Chief and Headman in the village; we didn’t have men who steal, who kill or rape because everyone was frightened of the Chief and the Headman... The problem is now the structure has gone — we don’t have law and order, we don’t have Kastom ...” (Oxfam 2005h)

“During the tension there was no respect. Before the tension there was a lot of respect — now, no — and children don’t respect their mothers. Children have learnt bad things during the tension.” (Oxfam 2005b)

There remains a strong desire for increased police involvement in community policing projects. A member of a community regarded as having a high crime rate called for the adoption of a different kind of engagement, under the banner of the highly popular community policing of the pre-RAMSI period:

“This was a wonderful idea, stopped by RAMSI because they thought they will take over and improve everything. Instead things have gone from bad to worse. We want to introduce the community policing once more. We don’t need RAMSI to help us do this because we did it well for ourselves before.” (Oxfam 2005j)

An elder from another community on the outskirts of Honiara also stated his support for a resumption of community policing:

“They (RAMSI) patrol this community every six to eight hours. They come in especially to arrest because crime rate in this community is very high. I’d say 90 to 95% of the criminal activities in Honiara are in this community. That is why we have police patrols. We want RAMSI to do more awareness in our communities. Not just coming to arrest. We also want increased RAMSI presence. I suggest that they put up a police post in this community and have RAMSI and local police working in it. I like the idea of community policing, the way they say it. I don’t really know how it works but I like the idea. I think that will really help because the crime rate in this community is increasing fast.” (Oxfam 2005k).

Many people in communities interviewed for this report expressed concerns over the manner in which RAMSI and, specifically, the Participating Police Force (PPF) conducted themselves during operations to arrest suspected criminals or investigate crimes. One community spokesman in Malaita told us:
“The respect for and integrity of RAMSI has gone down by the day. Until the last four months, people were happy to wave to RAMSI when they drove past. Today, people are not interested. When RAMSI officers wave to people from their vehicles, people don’t wave back. Why? We have stopped trusting RAMSI. It’s not doing any good to our nation.” (Oxfam 2005l)

Clearly the notion that peace and security has been restored in the Solomon Islands is questioned by a wide range of Solomon Islanders. Moreover, many people doubt that achieving law and order through a perceived climate of fear and intimidation ensures sustainable peace and security. As one member of a Honiara-based civil society group stated:

“The fear of RAMSI isn’t good enough ... people should abide by the law because they consent, not because they are afraid.” (Oxfam 2005m, Oxfam 2005n)

RAMSI remains best known for its work in the area of law and order. Among Solomon Islands communities, this is mostly because the PPF and the military were initially, and in many ways continue to be, the ‘face’ of RAMSI. Initially, significant sections of the Solomon Islands community were suspicious of the police (largely because of distrust of the RSIP), but, over time, RAMSI was received more positively. More recently however, this goodwill appears to be ebbing. RAMSI needs to be sensitive to these changes and must act to stem the declining support for its policing function before its effectiveness and recent gains in law and order are compromised.

1.2 Livelihoods, jobs and essential services

While definitions of security varied among community members, the lack of economic and development opportunities dominated discussion:

“The problem in the Solomon Islands is that people don’t have jobs. RAMSI may come and restore law and remove guns, but we need development.” (Oxfam 2005o)

When asked if the arrival of RAMSI had brought positive outcomes, an elderly member of a community on the outskirts of Honiara stated:

“Now that we have peace, what can we do? We don’t have money. We have no finances or sources of income to start up small projects to support family needs. Financing our communities is a good way. At the moment, we just grow cabbage, potato, etc. enough to feed our children. But we have no money to provide protein ... just dry food to feed our children. That is why old men like me, our bodies look unhealthy.” (Oxfam 2005p)

A villager stressed that the ongoing level of poverty was tied to issues of governance and leadership:

“The problem they solved is law and order. We enjoy the presence of RAMSI in our community. However, we are still poor. Why we are still poor, even though RAMSI is here, is that we still have the same corrupt people in government.” (Oxfam 2005p)

In preparing this report, the Oxfam research team visited communities less than half an hour from Honiara’s centre. They observed a lack of running water, health care, and electricity and an overwhelming poverty of opportunity. These conditions contrast markedly with those in the capital, where the economy is experiencing an unsustainable artificial boom — high market prices, more cars on the road, inflated rental prices for housing and increased power shortages (one Solomon Islander suggested these are due to expatriate dependence on air conditioning, which short-circuits the national electricity grid).

The significant contribution of aid and personnel by Pacific Islands Forum member countries since 2003 has not always translated into direct tangible benefits for people. For example, many women are unable to afford the licence to sell betel nut or other goods at the market, and many children cannot attend school (although the cost of primary-level education is subsidised, the price of transport to and from school has increased). As one Honiara-based woman said:

“Why are we expected to pay licences to sell cassava? All we want to do is to sell our cassava so that we have protein in the night and school fees and bus fares for our children to go to school. When fees are charged on everything we do, it limits our chances of sending our children to school. And if we do not pay fees at the town council, they always threaten us with RAMSI. They tell us that RAMSI will arrest us if we do not pay.” (Oxfam 2005q)

Footnote 3:
Concerns about kwaso, marijuana, and prostitution were recurring themes throughout all community meetings in Honiara, August & September 2005.
For the young men and women who are unable to attend high school or find work, some choose a life of kwaso (homebrew) and marijuana abuse.\(^3\) (Callinan 2006; Box 2006) One woman spoke of the abuse-related violence that exists parallel to the restoring of law and order:

“RAMSI has come and law and order is there but marijuana and kwaso are still there, the fear of rape, of being beaten up is still there.” (Oxfam 2005r)

The illegal production of kwaso and marijuana is widespread with detrimental effects on the users and society as a whole.

Some young men and women are also selling their bodies at the wharf to visiting fishermen. (Callinan 2006) The increase in prostitution, including that of children, appears to be in reaction to the deepening economic divide rather than purely a reaction to the influx of potential customers to the Solomon Islands.

In spite of raised hopes with the election of a new government in 2006, there is still a level of marginalisation stemming from the breakdown of social structure during ‘the tensions’. This has been further compounded in the post-conflict reconstruction phase by RAMSI and other donors allocating resources to reconstructing government institutions rather than reaching out those most in need. Unless this issue is addressed effectively, there will remain a risk of repeated incidents of violence and dissent such as the rioting and arson that occurred in Honiara in April 2006.

1.3 Outreach to the community

RAMSI claims to have overwhelming community support for its operations. However, Oxfam’s research has found that there remains a considerable level of ambivalence about RAMSI’s role among communities in Honiara’s peri-urban settlements and in the provinces.

One of the greatest challenges for an intervention mission is the dual task of disseminating information regarding its mandate and protecting the mission’s reputation. As one community member remarked when asked about RAMSI’s media strategy, with particular reference to the Tokback Show:

“Street interviews done in the central market is ridiculous. They ask the simple vendors and people on the street what it is like in the administration [Government and RAMSI]. Why don’t they go to the administration offices and ask the people who are working there? Or why ask about police when there are police officers to interview in their places of work, what it is like now? Too much ‘self promotion’ by RAMSI when ordinary people are not satisfied about what is happening right now. Next time they do this show, tell them to go to the right people for information, instead of doing street interviews in the market place. People laugh at them doing this.” (Oxfam 2005s)

People are well aware of RAMSI and the PPF’s role in policing Solomon Islands, but there is less knowledge about other aspects of RAMSI’s operations. This community member’s comment during an group interview was endorsed by others attending the same meeting:

“Even though RAMSI is here there is still no improvement with our lives. To be honest the only thing we know about RAMSI is that they are police and they help to keep law and order. If there is anything else they are doing in the country, can you please clarify that for us, because we live like this and we don’t know what else they are doing?” (Oxfam 2005t)

At the village level, the lack of connection between government institutions, RAMSI and the grassroots was a concern:

“We hope that if RAMSI comes for settling law and order, they need to work at the grassroots. But as far as we can see they don’t reach the grass roots. We can say they stay at ‘Class A’. They don’t reach B or C or D.” (Oxfam 2005u)

If work is not done to enhance the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of RAMSI’s outreach work to the wider Solomon Islands population, then recognition of the full range of the mission’s activities in the country will remain limited at best. Without this understanding, claims by the mission that it operates with the informed consent of Solomon Islanders will ring increasingly hollow. More significantly, real understanding and ownership of the wider state building elements of RAMSI will remain contained only within the Office of the RAMSI Special Coordinator (and perhaps the higher echelons of the Solomon Islands bureaucracy), and will not extend to the majority of the country’s people whose support for these processes is crucial to their long term effectiveness and sustainability.
1.4 A mandate for change

RAMSI’s continued tenure and operations in the Solomon Islands rely on the annual renewal, through a debate and vote by Members of Parliament, of the Facilitating Act that governs the mission’s status in the country. Therefore, notwithstanding recent statements by Australia’s Foreign Minister Alexander Downer suggesting that the make-up and nature of RAMSI and its various component programs are non-negotiable, (Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation 2006) the mission’s continued presence in the country, is in large part, dependent upon it maintaining a mandate from the government and the people of the Solomon Islands for the programs of change that it wishes to pursue. Although considerable work has been done by RAMSI to maintain its partnership with the government (a process that now has to be re-established with the election of a new government in April 2006) there is little evidence of similar efforts being made to identify and understand what ordinary Solomon Islands citizens want from RAMSI.

RAMSI’s ‘People’s Survey’ is designed to gauge community attitudes and perceptions of issues like corruption and security (RAMSI 2005, page 6). It is a useful initiative, but there is a need for significantly more outreach to rural communities and sustained and regular interaction by government and donors with key non-government and church organisations. Preliminary information about the first ‘People’s Survey’ conducted by RAMSI in mid 2006 is that it assessed performance in RAMSI’s identified mandate areas, rather than exploring the wider requirements of the population.

Investigating such aspirations would provide RAMSI with useful insights into the issues that are of concern to grassroots Solomon Islanders. A community on the outskirts of Honiara expressed a wish to receive the kind of support that would enable reconciliation in accordance with RAMSI’s mandate of ‘creating space’. A member of this community highlighted the lack of assistance trickling down from the government:

“RAMSI presence in Honiara is good. Their mission is very clear to me — to provide the environment in which people can make peace between themselves. But the problem is when aid money is given through the government to assist with the peace process, it gets filtered somewhere else. Under any peace regime, assistance should come direct to communities. In this community, we have many broken relationships. Many children are not in school. We in this community have a peace plan. We have submitted copies to NPC (National Peace Council), Police Commissioner, Government, etc, but nobody is talking to us about it. The officers within some of these offices like NPC and government have preconceived ideas about what they want out of our land. We do not have the money to enable implementation of the peace plan. Even money for the peace process is filtered elsewhere.” (Oxfam 2005p)

It was recognised that the need for the Solomon Islands Government to assist disadvantaged communities was as relevant as the responsibility of RAMSI to assist in creating the space for the dialogue to occur. As one community leader said:

“The [name omitted] community is a community born out of the ethnic tension as people found difficulty as to where to settle after they were chased out from Guadalcanal by the rebels. Some of us are displaced people. We are called squatters and we have no opportunities to earn a living. We are living on government land. We are never certain what the government will say to us. So it is difficult for us to do anything permanent here. But at the same time, if we go home where services are far away, what will happen to us? RAMSI is here to help people to help themselves to achieve peace, but there is no real peace for this community as people live with uncertainties because of the land issue. The government, RAMSI, police and the community should work together to find a solution for these problems so that the people in this community can achieve true peace.” (Oxfam 2005p)

Oxfam Australia supports a food and livelihood security project that increases food diversity and income opportunities

Photo: Li Fung/OxfamAUS
RAMSI’s recently proclaimed mandate is to contribute to “a peaceful, well-governed and prosperous Solomon Islands”. (AusAID 2006b) In order to understand how (and whether) RAMSI can contribute to achieving this goal whilst also addressing the issues identified in Part 1 of this report, it is first necessary to recognise the forces driving the current intervention in Solomon Islands. These forces exist at international, regional and national (Solomon Islands) levels.

2.1 The international context for intervention

With the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the international context for intervention in developing nations changed, with increased debate about the right to impinge on state sovereignty and the need for United Nations (UN) endorsement of ‘coalitions of the willing’. The timing of the regional commitment to Solomon Islands was influenced by these international debates on the roles of humanitarian intervention and post-conflict state building.

In presenting a rationale for RAMSI, the Australian Prime Minister John Howard emphasised Australia’s shift in policy:

“We know that a failed state in our region, on our doorstep, will jeopardise our own security. The best thing we can do is to take remedial action and take it now ... We are forging new arrangements to meet the challenges posed by the potential failure of nation states in the Pacific ... We recognise that such an action represents a very significant change in the way we address our regional responsibilities and relationships. But our friends and neighbours in the Pacific are looking to us for leadership and we will not fail them.” (Howard 2003a)

Prior to these developments, Australia’s National Security Council had been closely monitoring the growing conflict in Solomon Islands, but even as late as January 2003, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer had argued that:

“Sending in Australian troops to occupy the Solomon Islands would be folly in the extreme. It would be difficult to justify to Australian taxpayers. And for how many years would such an occupation have to continue? And what would be the exit strategy? And the real show-stopper, however, is that it would not work ... Foreigners do not have the answers for the deep-seated problems affecting the Solomon Islands.” (Downer 2003)

Ultimately, the combination of a changed international climate and growing conflict, insecurity and lack of political stability in Solomon Islands led to the creation of RAMSI in July 2003. This intervention is driven by a renewed Australian engagement in the Pacific region and is the most ambitious Australian commitment in the Pacific region since Papua New Guinea became independent. It is viewed by many as a test case for future Australian policy towards the Pacific islands region.

State building and intervention

State building is the face of contemporary intervention. It differs significantly from classical, or traditional, peacekeeping and peace-enforcement operations in terms of mandate, scope and authority. Otherwise known as international territorial administration, international administration or transitional authority, there are four categories under which state building operations fall, reflecting the differing levels of authority of the intervening party: (1) assistance; (2) partnership; (3) governorship; (4) control. (Chopra 1999) There are several international examples of humanitarian intervention evolving into a state building
In interviews for this report, many RAMSI personnel perceived themselves to be taking part in a unique and broadly-mandated mission that departed from earlier examples of interventions in its comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to rebuilding the Solomon Islands state. It was apparent throughout all levels of RAMSI that there existed a very strong sense that RAMSI is exceptional in mandate and that, as was remarked upon more than once, “the world is watching with great interest”. Others have suggested that RAMSI is seen as a model that might be studied for other arenas, and the Lowy Institute’s Dr. Michael Fullilove has argued:

“The Solomons matter to the international community because after the deeply troubled exercises in Afghanistan and Iraq, the world is looking for successful examples of state building, even if the successes are early or incomplete.”

(Fullilove 2006)

Since RAMSI was deployed in 2003, there have been important investigations into the best examples of outside engagement with countries in crisis. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) has drafted Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States (2005). The Solomon Islands deployment is an important test for these draft principles, piloted as a model for intervention in ‘fragile’ states (a significant change of terminology from the earlier use of ‘failed’ states).

The ongoing efforts to rebuild Solomon Islands take place at a time when there is international debate over the proportion of resources to be allocated to conflict prevention, rather than peacekeeping or post-conflict reconstruction. OECD members and UN agencies have placed a renewed emphasis on the need to prevent conflict occurring, as well as to intervene in conflicts and assist in rebuilding after conflicts.

The International Commission on State Sovereignty and Intervention, in its report The Responsibility to Protect (2001), explicitly states that “the decision to intervene is made from the point of view of those needing support and not those providing it”. But there is a danger that intervention in Solomon Islands is very much an action by outsiders, driven by external imperatives, with little engagement of the people in whose name they act. Some Solomon Islands critics have argued that, in many areas, the reform process is being driven not by local need, but by the needs of Australia as the key regional power.

(Kabutaulaka 2005)

OECD DAC criteria to evaluate intervention in fragile states

AusAID’s new Fragile States Initiative will be responsible for developing the OECD DAC piloting scheme in the Solomon Islands working with the Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States. The Fragile States Initiative will also develop its own framework building on lessons from the Solomon Islands on how to engage in accordance with the DAC criteria:

- Take context as the starting point.
- Move from reaction to prevention.
- Focus on state building as the central objective.
- Align with local priorities and/or systems.
- Recognise the political–security–development nexus.
- Promote coherence between donor government agencies.
- Agree on practical coordination mechanisms between international actors.
- Do no harm.
- Mix and sequence aid instruments to fit the context.
- Act fast …
- … but stay engaged long enough to give success a chance.
- Avoid pockets of exclusion.

Source: OECD DAC Fragile States Group: Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States
2.2 State building in the Pacific

The Eminent Persons Group (EPG) of the Pacific Islands Forum sees RAMSI as a test case for its future policy towards conflict and crises of governance in the Pacific region and notes that Pacific island states view it as a test case for their future engagement within the region (Eminent Persons Group 2005). The Australian Government has viewed the mission as an example of regional collaboration and acceptance of the new leadership role Australia envisaged for itself, as indicated by Prime Minister John Howard at the time of RAMSI’s initial deployment in July 2003:

“I believe the mission will not only be successful for the Solomon Islands but very importantly it will send a signal to other countries in the region that help is available if it is sought, that we do have a desire to help all of the peoples of the Pacific to have conditions of law and order and hope and peace and stability for their future generations.” (Howard 2003b)

Particular elements of the mission are regarded as transferable to other Pacific contexts and are already being applied elsewhere — for example, the emergence of ‘police-keeping’ as an integral element of the regional security agenda, with the widespread deployment of Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers to assist the reform of Pacific police forces (including the appointment of AFP officer Andrew Hughes as Fiji’s Police Commissioner, the creation of a regional police college and Transnational Crime Co-ordination Centre in Fiji, and troubled proposals to deploy police to Papua New Guinea under the Enhanced Co-operation Program).

However, models of state building often fail to take into account the kind of state — and the kind of nation — that is found in Melanesia. Analyses of state building as a contribution to international security often avoid or downplay issues of history, culture and identity, in favour of a technocratic approach that “either ignores the wider historical context or assumes that the right set of state building strategies can succeed without reference to the specificity of the local, regional and global context”. (Berger 2006)

In much of the rhetoric about failed states and state building, there is inadequate critical reflection about the way that post-colonial models of government were developed in island societies, and the way that some centralised government bureaucracies have unravelled since independence. Sinclair Dinnen of the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia project at the Australian National University has argued that notions of a ‘failed’ state are of little value in explaining state-related issues in Melanesia:

“They are based on an assumption that at some point there was a well functioning centralised state … It is probably more accurate to say that the main problem with the state in Melanesia, including Papua New Guinea, is not so much that it is falling apart but that it has yet to be properly built.” (Dinnen 2004)

Many Pacific Island states are still trying to deal with the legacies of colonial rule. These include national boundaries that arbitrarily divide linguistic and cultural groups, education systems that do not ensure employment in the waged sector, and systems of law, administration and economic development that have created unequal access to power and resources (particularly between kinship groups on different islands).

The creation of the state across traditional forms of authority, custom and law, and across culturally and linguistically diverse societies, worked well in some cases while people received benefits from central government — roads, schools, health centres and other services. But the decline, or non-existence, of services means the state often has little relevance to many people in rural areas and outer islands. Some Solomon Islanders also suggest that a strong centralised state can be a source of conflict, rather than a solution to it.

Is the state part of the problem?

“In many instances, what is regarded as nation building involves, largely, the re-establishment and strengthening of structures and processes that existed prior to the conflict and in some cases contributed to the initial causes of the conflict. Because of this, post-conflict nation building is often state-centric. The state is viewed as the central pillar of the nation and must be re-established (where it has collapsed) and strengthened. This is despite the fact that in some cases it was the state that was part of the problem … there is no questioning of whether or not citizens regard the state as legitimate or whether it is possible and desirable to expect the state to function well in other societies. There is, in other words, no attempt to understand how the state functions in different societies and its role in the nation building process.”

Source: Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka 2004, Crowded Stage — Actors, actions and issues in post-conflict Solomon Islands”, presentation to a forum on re-inventing government in the Pacific Islands, October, Honiara.

Oxfam Australia and Oxfam New Zealand 17
The recent intervention in Solomon Islands has allocated significant funding and human resources in the capital, rather than in the rural areas where the bulk of the population lives. But around the region, Pacific Islanders are debating how best to decentralise power to the provinces, to ensure opportunities and services for villagers. As seen in post-Suharto Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and other Pacific island countries, there are many challenges in decentralising powers to provincial and local level. These include the cost and duplication of governance and administrative structures, difficulties in monitoring corruption and decision-making, and sharing the benefits and costs of natural resource development across all provinces. The record of decentralisation in Melanesia is mixed. (May 2001)

Despite these challenges, strengthening community-level governance remains a central issue facing many Pacific Island states, including Solomon Islands. Whilst few would dispute the necessity of central authority, this cannot be allowed to obscure other forms of customary authority that are on the periphery of the state but at the core of communities and village life. For instance, Solomon Islands women’s activist Rose Wale, in a point that applies across much of Melanesia, argues that aid donors should reflect on the fact that Solomon Islands is not a ‘nation’ but rather a ‘country of villages’, so state-based solutions and centralised government political systems might not be a sustainable solution. (Wale 2003)

Developing the capacity of the state is obviously critical for the development of stable, peaceful and equitably developing democratic Pacific island states. But developing a cohesive sense of nation and a viable civil society are also centrally important. In diverse, far-flung nations, as found across Melanesia, there are long-standing debates about decentralisation of power and the role of provincial and local government. In village communities, there is also an important role for customary authority at local level in fulfilling functions that come from state institutions in other societies (for example, the role of village courts and customary law; and the use of church leaders, chiefs and village elders for policing roles at the community level).

In Solomon Islands, this authority was sharply challenged and weakened during the conflict between 1998 and 2003. However, the resources allocated by overseas donors to (re)strengthen diverse forms of community-based authority are nowhere near those allocated to the central machinery of government or to the recruitment and salaries of overseas police and civilian advisors.

For this reason, in Solomon Islands and elsewhere, rebuilding the state is not, and cannot be, a conflict-neutral process — the model of a stronger centralised state in itself has implications for the dynamics of conflict and the allocation of power and authority within society. Historian Hank Nelson has noted that there have always been winners and losers in the process of strengthening the machinery of government in Melanesia:

“Because different peoples responded in different ways to ‘government’, people have had varied relationships with the state, ranging from a rapid accommodation to a long guerrilla war. For some people the church has always been more important than the government in providing services, linking them to the wider community and explaining the rest of the world too them. For nearly all peoples, ‘government’ in the colonial or post-colonial state has been imposed, enticed or captured: it has almost never been the result of policy debate, decision by democratically elected representatives and its imposts and benefits imposed universally. Governments, like mines and logging companies and plantations, result in advantage and handicap.” (Nelson 2006)

As we discuss below, if Solomon Islanders at all levels of society are not genuinely engaged in the process of reconstruction and reconciliation, the causes of conflict will not dissipate but instead retreat to the shadows and margins of the state building enterprise. Can RAMSI, PIF member countries and other donors succeed in engaging with the range of communities who can address questions of development, peace and security?

A state building focus

RAMSI was always a more ambitious intervention than Pacific peacekeeping operations like Bougainville. From the beginning, RAMSI was planned to extend into key areas of governance and economic policy. As Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced in August 2003:

“The assistance mission is at this stage essentially a police-led operation designed to reintroduce law and order, and get guns and other weapons out of communities. Once the situation has stabilised, we can begin to implement the necessary governance and economic reforms and ensure that the Solomons has a firm foundation on which to build its future security and prosperity.” (Howard 2003c)

Today, RAMSI’s role is largely presented as a state building operation, with earlier suggestions of nation-building much reduced. RAMSI argues that it is creating the space for other players to engage in
nation-building. In 2005, RAMSI’s Special Coordinator James Batley stated:

“At its core, RAMSI is a state building exercise ... RAMSI’s work springs from a view that, whatever the size of a country, there is an irreducible minimum of functions that a state should provide, and some irreducible minimum standards that government should observe.” (Batley 2005)

The initial law and order intervention has now clearly evolved into a large scale operation that involves stabilising government finances, securing revenue collection and control of expenditure, strengthening financial administrative safeguards, and obtaining the support of donors and international financial institutions.

An exercise in state building, as noted above, is usually instinctively focused on centralised — and centralising — state power, rather than broader questions of national identity and citizenship. Solomon Islands academic Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka asks:

“Can a strong state apparatus alone create a stable nation committed to a shared identity and mission among its peoples? To achieve sustainable peace and rebuild Solomon Islands, both state and non-state entities must be strengthened. This is especially important in a plural society where the state will always share and compete for power with other organisations ... In actual conflict resolution in Solomon Islands, the state often plays a secondary role. For these reasons, it is vital that other entities - churches, landowners, community leaders, women’s organisations, youth groups, and civil society - feature prominently in the complex processes of peace building and national rebuilding. There is a need to look beyond the state for ways in which Solomon Islanders themselves could be involved.” (Kabutaulaka 2005, pages 283-4)

In an echo of this, and following the April 2006 national elections, the incoming Solomon Islands Government announced that it would further investigate a federal structure for the country by reviewing the Draft Federal Constitution:

“The Government will pursue the Constitutional reform so as to move governance and decision making authority closer to the people, while promoting Diversity in Unity through the transfer of powers and functions to the periphery. The people’s desire to adopt a Federal system of government in Solomon Islands has been a long standing one but in recent years it has gathered fresh momentum towards its fulfilment. The leadership, both in Government and Opposition, is not divided on this issue ... The present top-heavy status quo will, nevertheless, be changed as powers and functions are transferred to the proposed states.” (Solomon Islands Government 2006)

Notions like this challenge the current phase of the RAMSI deployment with its focus on centralised economic and public sector reform through the placement of in-line personnel and advisors in key government departments. RAMSI needs to identify how it will respond to developments of this kind, and both encourage and facilitate the engagement of a wider range of Solomon Islanders in decision-making around the nature of their future state.

2.3 Economic reform

Another major area for review is the role of RAMSI and outside donors in shaping economic policy for Solomon Islands. The extension of RAMSI’s mandate into areas that should be the focus of the Solomon Islands Government (including economic policies) is causing increasing debate — the economic reform process is not a neutral one and there are sharp divergences within Solomon Islands over who should bear the costs of rebuilding the economy.

In response to the economic crisis arising from conflict between 1999 and early 2003, the Solomon Islands Government developed the National Economic Recovery, Reform and Development Plan (NERRDP) as a blueprint to address the country’s deep economic and social development challenges. The Australian Government has also proposed major changes in Solomon Islands economic policy, involving privatisation of public utilities, reform of the public sector, more efficient infrastructure provision, and fiscal and budgetary reform. (Economic Analytical Unit 2004) Other regional donors also favour similar prescriptions for neo-liberal economic reform in Solomon Islands.

The new Sogavare-led government in Solomon Islands, elected in April 2006, is currently working with aid partners to develop new policies that extend beyond the NERRDP period. As part of this process, it is vital to review the impact of the last three years
of economic reforms on the lives of ordinary Solomon Islanders and also to consider the effect that these have had on the potential for conflict in the country. This is all the more important at a time when donor governments are seeking to develop new initiatives in the resources sector — like the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) — to promote sustainable exploitation of natural resources.

Oxfam’s report Conflict Prevention or Promotion? (2006a), argues that some of the current economic approaches of the Solomon Islands Government (as supported and promoted by international donors) are unsustainable, do not positively affect the lives of the majority of the country’s citizens, and may actively undermine gains in law and order achieved since 2003. The report presents alternatives to current economic reform initiatives, suggesting options more oriented towards reducing poverty, inequality and potential conflict, and improving the quality of life for all citizens of Solomon Islands. These sentiments were reiterated by participants in a seminar on economic reform (Perspectives on natural resources development as the foundation for economic growth in Solomon Islands) hosted by Oxfam and the Environmental Concerns Action Network of Solomon Islands in May 2006. For example, the seminar highlighted the need of small and medium enterprises for immediate, tangible assistance to export their products, whilst they await the longer term benefits of economic reform. Participants noted that small and medium enterprises do not face the impediments associated with large-scale projects, such as the need to deal with multi-landholder groups and dependence on foreign investment.

In addition, and given the often stated statistic that 85% of Solomon Islanders live in rural areas, it is necessary to place more emphasis within Solomon Islands economic development planning on rural livelihoods, food security and the non-formal economy. Three years after the RAMSI intervention began, plans are only now emerging for serious investment in rural development programs — AusAID, the European Union and the World Bank are currently working to develop an Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy (ARDSD) to strengthen rural livelihoods, which will be implemented in 2007.

At the same time, economic reform should not only involve Solomon Islands, since the future of the country’s economy is tied to regional debates about aid, trade and regional economic integration. In Solomon Islands and around the region, young people are seeking jobs in order to pay for school fees, housing, basic necessities and improved rural livelihoods, but are finding that there are limited opportunities in the formal sector of the economy. Reform of the Solomon Islands economy should be tied to policy changes by Australia and New Zealand in the area of labour mobility and access to employment through seasonal work schemes, an issue already receiving serious consideration by the Pacific Islands Forum, other regional donors and the Australian Government.

Oxfam believes that seasonal work programs alone cannot address the many development challenges facing Solomon Islands, but the creation of new opportunities for unskilled workers to access the Australian and New Zealand labour markets could make an important contribution to the country’s social and economic development, to complement the official development assistance program.

2.4 A regional mission

RAMSI’s supporters stress that the mission is truly a regional initiative and 11 countries have contributed personnel to the mission. Paradoxically, RAMSI is also widely recognised as an Australian initiative. (Fullilove 2006) The distinction between RAMSI and the Australian Government’s diplomatic representation in Honiara is a careful and cautious one — it aims to signal that RAMSI is not a tool of Australian foreign policy but rather a separate manifestation of regional action and concern. However, the recent adoption of exactly the same goals and objectives by both RAMSI and Australia’s bilateral program to Solomon Islands makes maintaining this distinction more tenuous. (AusAID 2006a)

Additionally, and despite its purportedly regional basis, recent data indicate that Australian influence over the mission is all-pervasive. With key exceptions such as the Assistant Special Coordinator (Fiji’s Mataiasi Lomaloma), Pacific Islands representation in RAMSI is largely confined to the role of ‘foot soldiers’, through the deployment of island defence and police force contingents in the PPF. The vast majority of RAMSI’s civilian advisors continue to come from Australia — as of May 2006, 152 of 173 civilian advisors (88%) were Australian, working alongside 10 people from New Zealand (6%) and 5 from the UK (3%). There were very few staff from island nations: five out of 173 people (two Papua New Guineans, one Tongan, one Fijian and one ni-Vanuatu).5

Greater representation within RAMSI of bureaucrats and advisors from amongst the Pacific member states is clearly an area for significant reform of the mission. As the report Mission Helpem Fren – A Review of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (2005), hereafter referred to as the EPG Report, recommended:

Footnote 4: Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Nauru, Tuvalu and Cook Islands
Footnote 5: As of June 2006, there remained only four Pacific islander civilian advisors.
“Given the desirability of it being a regional exercise, the Pacific representation in both the policing and civilian component should be strengthened where possible.” (page 6)

In addition, although the treaty establishing RAMSI specifies that the special coordinator and the head of the PPF are Australian, the EPG Report also states:

“The leadership of the Participating Police Force should also be shared with Pacific Islanders and the special skills of Pacific Islanders derived from their cultural background should be utilised more.” (page 6)

Support for this position comes from both Solomon Islands civil society – a representative from a Honiara based non-government organisation (NGO) notes, “RAMSI should represent all countries it purports to represent and doesn’t” (Oxfam 2005m) — and from other RAMSI participating states. Reflecting on Tonga’s experience of deploying police officers in Honiara, Tongan Police Commissioner Sinilau Kolokihakaufisi has stressed that cultural affinity between islanders is a crucial element in conflict settings:

“The relationship between the islanders and the Solomon Islanders is very, very strong, and in the context of violent confrontation the presence of our officers there really helps the Australian and the New Zealand police officers. There is a bond, a relationship that has been there for centuries, and with their presence there it counts and it counts a lot.” (Pacific Beat 2006)

Earlier experience further validates the importance of drawing on wider Pacific input in any regional intervention. One of the key lessons from the Truce Monitoring Group and Peace Monitoring Group in Bougainville (1997–2003) was the cultural distinction made between the New Zealand/Pacific Islands and Australian personnel, and the importance of linguistic and cultural training and awareness. For example, the deputy leader of the Truce Monitoring Group, an Australian, has noted:

“The New Zealand military was heavily weighted with Maori who had an instant and close empathy with the Bougainvilleans. The predominance of Maori officers and soldiers was a deliberate and very effective choice. The TMG under New Zealand leadership went out of the way to associate itself with Bougainvilleans and make them feel welcome in and around headquarters.” (cited in Wehner 2001)

Further, and in addition to issues over the provenance of RAMSI’s personnel, the suitability of the mission’s civilian contingent has recently been questioned. While acknowledging the commitment of the “many genuine men and women who make up Australia’s commitment to RAMSI, be they police, troops or civilian advisors” RAMSI’s former public affairs advisor has sharply criticised the PPF as “a largely ill-prepared, inexperienced and, in many cases, fairly ordinary crew.” (O’Callaghan 2006)

This reflects the concern expressed by some in Honiara that RAMSI is seen as an opportunity for young Australian bureaucrats to gain experience working in Pacific Island states — one Solomon Islands senior academic told a 2005 seminar in Brisbane that “Honiara is becoming the new post-graduate training classroom for Australia.” (Nanau 2005) The discontent that this statement implies is amplified by the inevitable differentials between Solomon Islands public servants earning local salaries, and expatriate staff who have higher wages and better conditions, such as access to vehicles and housing allowances.

The large number of overseas personnel taking up positions in Solomon Islands public service indicates that there is potential to recruit more civilian personnel from Pacific island countries to support the rebuilding process. In response to these issues, a common refrain in Canberra and RAMSI’s offices in Honiara highlights the obvious disparities in size and population between Australia and other PIF member countries, with suggestions that “there aren’t any suitably qualified people”, “we don’t know who to ask” and finally, “we can’t take them away from where they are needed”.

But given Australia’s weight in Melanesia as a major aid, trade and defence partner, the issue cannot be ignored. PNG Government Minister Bart Philemon alluded to the risks of doing so when he stressed the problem with Australian heavy-handedness in relation to the proposed deployment of police to Papua New Guinea through the Enhanced Co-operation Program (ECP):

“Given some of the aspects of our relationship and our history, if not handled sensitively — for example, [if] Australia is overly intrusive — Australia’s intervention could well be counter-productive. Let me be frank — there are some people in Papua New Guinea who take the view that if Australia is insisting that we do something, even if it’s in our interests, then in order to demonstrate our independence, Papua New Guinea should do the opposite.” (Lewis 2006)

Footnote 6:
Direct quotes drawn from a series of interviews with Australian Government officials in Canberra and Honiara in 2004 and 2005
Should the concerns around the limited regionalism of RAMSI not be adequately addressed, there is a risk that similar sentiments will surface in Solomon Islands. This would act to undermine RAMSI's long term success and call into question the sustainability of the changes that the mission has achieved to date.

2.5 Benchmarks for success and public debate

On several occasions since July 2003, RAMSI's overall goals have been presented to the Solomon Islands public by senior RAMSI figures. Initially the mission was described as:

“... a comprehensive package that includes reforming the RSIP over a five year period or longer, fixing up the prisons and restoring the courts ... stabilizing finances, balancing the budget, cleaning up and improving revenue collection, plus putting in place the conditions for economic growth, for attracting foreign investors, for rebuilding the local economy.

Most importantly it also includes some very tough and long term tasks such as restoring the machinery of government, strengthening the means for dealing with corruption and reforming the public service.” (Warner 2004)

These descriptions were generally consistent with RAMSI’s mandate as understood by the Solomon Islands Government of the time — in July 2004, the Intervention Taskforce Committee’s review of RAMSI (page 5) noted that the mission’s mandate was fourfold:

- restore civil order in Honiara and throughout the rest of the country;
- stabilise government finances;
- promote longer-term economic recovery and revive business confidence; and
- rebuild the machinery of government.

Beyond these generalised objectives, however, few details have been available to provide additional insight into exactly what RAMSI is seeking to achieve under each of its broader goals. The Intervention Taskforce Report of July 2004 noted under the ‘Rebuild the machinery of government’ component of the mission’s mandate, that the specific requirements are to “reform the way the government functions, including the parliament, the cabinet, the public service and the electoral process”.

More recently, RAMSI’s goal has been reformulated to be “A peaceful, well-governed and prosperous Solomon Islands”. This is to be achieved through work that contributes to a safer and more secure Solomon Islands, encourages broad-based growth, helps government better serve Solomon Islands people, and helps build strong and peaceful communities. (Solomon Islands Government 2004)

In its review of RAMSI, the Pacific Islands Forum’s Eminent Persons Group recommended that, “The tenure of RAMSI should be measured by the achievement of tasks rather than be time bound” (page 6).

In response, RAMSI very recently (in May 2006) developed a performance framework that establishes benchmarks and indicators for its range of activities and programs. Whilst it is laudable that such a means to measure the mission’s work now exists, this framework has not been widely circulated, nor has there been significant public input into the development of either the indicators or the benchmarks contained therein. Furthermore, there appears to be few – if any – opportunities for participation by the wider Solomon Islands public. Certainly, the first report against the Framework, due in July 2006, will be based almost entirely on information obtained through RAMSI’s own internal processes.

The development, review and monitoring of RAMSI’s performance against a series of benchmarks and indicators offers great possibility for more meaningful involvement by more Solomon Islanders in defining the nature of the support the mission provides to their country and, by extension, the nature of the state that it is seeking to rebuild. Although the initial development of the framework has, to a large extent, been a process internal to RAMSI, extending involvement has the potential to generate real and widespread local ownership of the mission’s mandate. It could also demonstrate how citizens’ demand-led accountability can function in practice, and ensure that future indicators, benchmarks and also mission performance are inclusive of a wide range of perspectives from Solomon Islands society.
The 2005 report of the Pacific Islands Forum’s Eminent Persons Group, Mission Helpem Fren, notes:

“Out of necessity, RAMSI has, since its arrival, adopted an interventionist approach. Without compromising the substantial security gains that have been made, it seems timely to adopt a more development approach with Solomon Islands being an equal partner, if not the driver.” (page 6)

One leading Solomon Islands NGO activist stresses the need for more local engagement:

“RAMSI have only ‘cleared the garden’ ... the hard part, replanting, nurturing and tending must be done by Solomon Islanders.” (Roughan 2005)

The recent national elections open the way for a review of relationships between outside donors, the Solomon Islands Government, and the range of church, community and customary authorities engaged in development activities. This section outlines key areas for consideration by all of these different groups.

3.1 Linking to the community

Governance programs that target parliamentary reform, political parties and state institutions are an important part of building social stability and economic development. But on their own, they are not enough to achieve these aims. Throughout the Pacific, people are demanding that governments provide jobs and basic services in health, education and transport; they are calling on corporations to address the social and environmental impacts of logging, mining and fisheries projects; and they want overseas aid donors to ensure that development assistance focuses on poverty reduction, human rights, and rural livelihoods.

Community-led accountability can greatly improve the effectiveness of aid, as community groups monitor donor funding to ensure it translates into financial support for improved education and health services. Recent policy statements by the governments of Australia and New Zealand (AusAID 2006c, NZAID 2006) highlight the importance of community-led governance and strengthening people-to-people links within the region. It is vital that these policies are translated into programs on the ground in the Solomon Islands, with resources that can extend throughout the country.

The current focus on the machinery of government is just one part of the equation — a central element of rebuilding Solomon Islands is creating the context for its citizens to debate larger questions on the appropriate structure of government (for example, the role of local government, federalism, presidential models and reform of political parties).

Donors talk of consulting more widely with civil society and working to “strengthen the interface” (AusAID 2006c) and collaboration between governments and NGOs. Donor programs on good governance emphasise the role of non-state actors (churches, NGOs, private sector organisations, trade unions), but these programs have often failed to define the place of customary authorities and indigenous structures that are so important in the region.

Many interviewees for this report stressed that they would like to see RAMSI, and its PPF officers in particular, interact more with Solomon Islanders — both so that they might understand the cultural context better, and so that Solomon Islanders can understand RAMSI and the cultures of its staff better. One community member in Malaita argued that RAMSI is not engaging at the grassroots level with the local population and is therefore missing an opportunity to gain a better understanding of Solomon Islands culture and authority structures:

“They need to work at the grassroots. But as far as we can see they don’t reach the grassroots ... The problem is that they [RAMSI] don’t understand our culture and we don’t understand theirs. They want us to go to their level but they should come to ours.” (Oxfam 2005u)
RAMSI claims that it is driving engagement with civil society and that any lack of involvement by community groups is due to their reticence at coming forward. Yet, some in the Solomon Islands community believe that RAMSI’s actions reveal a reluctance to engage with local non-governmental stakeholders, or at least a lack of understanding about how to achieve this. (Oxfam 2005v)

At the same time, NGOs and community groups in the Pacific are engaged in a debate about how best to engage with their government or multilateral agencies. There is concern that consultation often comes too late to have any real effect on policy and that government and donors regard NGOs simply as a mechanism to deliver services that government cannot or will not provide (for example, after privatisation, private companies will sell water and electricity in urban centres, and leave the rural areas for NGOs). Contrary to this view, Oxfam has encountered many NGOs that wish to be actively involved in policy formulation, planning and advocacy.

During interviews with community members in Honiara and Auki, community activists reported that the high turnover of RAMSI personnel was making it difficult to build links. One women’s leader from the National Council of Women reported, “People change every few months — we don’t know who to talk to”. (Oxfam 2005w) She did speak favourably about some of the more informal interactions they have had with RAMSI and PPF officers, “The first time two RAMSI men came it was good — we felt relaxed with them. They were very open”. Similarly, in Auki, one of the earlier expatriate women police officers made the effort to seek out the Provincial Council of Women’s representative and this was appreciated. However, when focus groups and interviewees were asked how RAMSI had drawn on the knowledge and experience of women and women’s issues in Solomon Islands, or how RAMSI had used their networks to reach women, the answer was, “They haven’t”.

Nevertheless it was apparent that there is considerable goodwill towards RAMSI and people would like to be involved and help where they can, if the right kind of approach is made. At a seminar on RAMSI at the University of Queensland, one NGO representative stressed that “dissent does not mean disloyalty”, and that NGO criticisms of RAMSI’s mode of operations are made to improve its work, not to get it to leave. (Roughan 2005)

At the time of writing (July 2006), as the third anniversary of RAMSI’s arrival in Solomon Islands approaches, this issue of community engagement is critical for the mission. One leading NGO activist has argued even after the April 2006 riots that necessitated the renewed deployment of police and military forces, RAMSI still neglected to mobilise community leadership:

“Military convoys visiting Honiara’s outlying settlements, throwing lollies to the kids and the showing of gun power, doesn’t come to grips with the problem. Canberra should be informed of its failure in trying to micro-manage the Solomons scene. Place an embargo on all ‘experts’ jetting in from all over Australia but set up a local reference group — pastors, elders, women’s groups, youth reps — to help re-direct RAMSI in its work. This is not an opening wedge to get rid of RAMSI but a plea for it to re-order itself to nation building with the majority of Solomon Islanders.” (Roughan 2006)

3.2 Redefining security

One of the key achievements of RAMSI between 2003 and 2004 was to create a climate that de-legitimised armed violence by the militias and ‘special constables’, who had been active for the five years before the deployment of police and military forces from PIF member countries. But the collection of weapons from the militias and the strengthening of the RSIP took significant resources in the initial phase of the RAMSI deployment and key donors were slow to allocate resources to support rural development programs and community initiatives that could help to address some of the root causes of social conflict.

A key task for the government and people of Solomon Islands is to now discuss concepts of security that move beyond disarmament and increased policing on the streets. For RAMSI, the challenge is to find ways to amend its approach in order to recognise and accommodate these concepts, not only in its law and justice programs, but across the mission’s interventions.

As this report has demonstrated, for most people in Solomon Islands, concepts of security extend beyond policing and are tied to broader notions of economic, social or environmental vulnerability. The notion of peace and security for a woman, a man, a child, a community, or a culture, can differ in meaning and expression — it has political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions that are manifested in everyday life. Security is not purely the achievement of law and order, but rather a process that deals with issues at the root of conflict and engages all sectors of society. Focusing on the creation of ‘law and order’, or on achieving superficial calm after periods of armed conflict, risks ignoring (or missing) the quiet anger of young people; violence against women in the home, family and community; and other forms of insecurity.

The concept of human security places people (rather than the ‘state’) at the centre. In this framework, loss of livelihood, the threat of violence, and the
lack of access to food, health care, sanitation, clean water, education, and political expression can all be understood as threats to human security.

RAMSI’s policing has focused on physical security in the community. However, if the essence of peace and security is to be found in kastom and tradition, and in upholding the social contract between the state and its people through the delivery of services and legitimate political representation, the responsibility to safeguard peace and security lies at many levels — with the village, the province and the state.

In 2003, Oxfam Australia published a report on Operation Helpem Fren, outlining issues underlying the conflict in Solomon Islands. Many of the issues raised at that early stage in the RAMSI intervention are still valid:

- Lack of employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas.
- Youth disenfranchisement and vulnerability to militarisation.
- Conflicting perceptions of land and development, particularly in relation to resource extraction.
- Internal displacement and migration — both as a cause and effect of conflict.
- The social and economic pressures of rapid population growth and a young population.
- An increasing culture of violence characterised by petty crime, property damage, theft, public drunkenness, and sexual and family violence.
- The implications of cultural and ethnic diversity for nation building.
- Participation and ‘bottom up’ accountability.
- Addressing the ‘growth’ development model.

Similarly, in the comprehensive report Emerging Priorities in Preventing Future Violent Conflict published in 2004, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) identified and explored five root causes of conflict in the Solomon Islands:

- land and its contested utilisation;
- the weakening or breakdown of traditional authority systems;
- limited access to government services, resources and information;
- the inequitable distribution of economic opportunities; and
- a breakdown in traditional and non-traditional law enforcement mechanisms.

Both of these reports suggest that one-dimensional explanations of conflict — such as ethnicity, identity, religion, ‘greed and grievance’, or resources — are inappropriate. Rather conflicts are borne of a range of factors, some related, others not. The reports use the term “complex political emergency”, which is particularly useful in the Solomon Islands context, where the conflict reflects a series of interlocking — and clashing — societal, cultural, political and economic dynamics.

The assumption that state building is a means to building peace dramatically affects the ways that resources towards community security are allocated.

RAMSI broadly identifies peace building as comprising “activities to promote peace and security”. (Oxfam 2005x) These activities exist in the four spheres of politics, security, economics, and society. RAMSI perceives its role as strengthening the political, security and economic spheres, thereby providing the space for the Solomon Islands Government and Solomon Islanders to engage in the ‘social’ area.

One example is RAMSI’s support for the National Peace Council-sponsored Tok Stori Workshop on the Weathercoast, an initiative supported by Dr Sitiveni Halapua, the driving force behind the Talanoa process in Fiji. In his opening remarks, RAMSI Special Coordinator James Batley stated that “RAMSI would not be in the country forever therefore chiefs and community leaders must take the role in maintaining law and order”. (‘Tok Stori workshop for chiefs underway’, Solomon Star, 21 September 2005, page 8)

RAMSI’s officials argue that it is the responsibility of the Solomon Islands Government and communities to build peace. As one commentator on the intervention explains:

“[RAMSI] ... seeks to ... give the community a secure environment in which to debate important national issues, and to provide Solomon Islands with effective state machinery as these issues are discussed.” (Wainwright 2005, p 10)

There is also a degree of pragmatism to this approach. RAMSI does not have the knowledge — cultural, traditional, or customary — necessary to delve into the myriad root causes of the conflict and might, in trying to do so, create additional problems that, in turn, fuel further tension.

In 2005, community leaders stressed the importance of Solomon Islands leadership in addressing the root causes of conflict. As one villager in Malaita remarked:

“You can’t make peace from outside. Groups have to come together and make it themselves.” (Oxfam 2005u)
The strengthening of customary dispute resolution systems would allow traditional leaders and communities to resolve community disputes. It could also facilitate development of a common understanding of customary land law in villages, which is the basis for allocation of resources among those with traditional resource rights.

Public criticism of police activities during the Honiara riots has re-emphasised the need for Solomon Islanders to take the lead in addressing the causes of conflict. (Roughan 2006) The process of strengthening state institutions such as the police and judiciary raises new challenges in Melanesian countries, where some policing and judicial functions are carried out by non-state actors, such as village courts and community elders. As one Malaitan community member living in a settlement on the outskirts of Honiara noted:

“Before, we were governed by our own laws. We had our cultures to guide us. RAMSI came in with written law which does not work for our country. They don’t recognise that they are dealing with characters of human beings. Their characters and the laws they brought in do not match.” (Oxfam 2005s)

Notably, the police deployment under RAMSI has criminalised certain activities that would previously have been dealt with through traditional means.

The 2004 UNDP report (page 19) states that RAMSI recognises that “Order” is not the same as ‘peace’. Or that the absence of overt violence is not the same as the presence of active peace”.

Yet Oxfam’s research highlights a gap between RAMSI’s approach to achieving law and order, and what is perceived by many Solomon Islanders as necessary for creating peace and security. This has implications for the sustainability of RAMSI intervention. As a Malaitan villager said:

“I supported RAMSI when they came in and took the guns. That has made us freer. But my complaint is they can’t come in and make laws for us. I listen to ‘Talking Truth’ on the radio – to me they are turning down custom and turning up law. That may trigger future conflict.” (Oxfam 2005u)

3.3 Capacity building

Capacity building within government is integral to current notions of state building, including RAMSI’s work in the Solomon Islands. Failure to appropriately and adequately build capacity risks creating a culture of dependency. Capacity building within civil society is equally vital to the integrity of the state given the role civil society can play as watch dog. However, the speed at which state building operations are conducted can mean that the expatriate personnel often employed in state building interventions such as RAMSI perceive it to be “easier and quicker to do the job themselves”. (Oxfam 2005y) Rather than building capacity, this only serves to compound pre-existing weaknesses.

Capacity building necessitates a balance between sometimes competing priorities — on the one hand, the efforts to re-establish a public administration, maintain control, and monitor quality and progress; and on the other, the responsibility to facilitate local ownership and effect eventual handover. There is also a central challenge for the government to be more accountable — both to its donors and to its citizens.

International authorities often rely on international agencies and personnel for the execution of their mandate, especially in the early days of an operation when emergency conditions prevail. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) report on development effectiveness in fragile states argues that a better balance needs to be struck between the requirements for effective and efficient administration in the short term and the strengthening of local capacity in the longer term if international administrations are not to establish unsustainable states or territories as a part of their legacy.

Reflecting this, in May 2006, Solomon Islands’ new Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare stated that RAMSI was welcome in the country as long as it had a clear plan for transferring responsibility to Solomon Islanders:

“We feel that there now has to be some serious exit strategy. People should be actively trained to take over the jobs and that is not really apparent.” (Australian Broadcasting Commission 2006)

A 2002 report by the International Peace Academy on best practices of conflict prevention emphasised the centrality of local participation or, at the very least, ensuring that international and national efforts recognised local needs and capacity and promoted ownership of the process of peace building.

RAMSI has undertaken an assessment of its capacity building work in light of the variety of approaches employed and the different time-frames capacity building programs have enacted. Its desired outcome, according to senior RAMSI officials, is a mainstreaming of approaches and the establishment of key principles for capacity building, agreed upon in consultation with the Solomon Islands Government. (Oxfam 2005z)
One stumbling block to this has been the contradictory ways that personnel within the Solomon Islands Government have been treated. Initially, these personnel were ignored or actively sidelined in RAMSI’s early days, as RAMSI officials prioritised immediate results. Now they are being drawn back into the process, and profiled and approached as counterparts to be supported in the process of capacity building.

A second hindrance has been a lack of understanding on the part of many capacity-builders. They generally adhere to a model that assumes Solomon Islands public servants operate in a cultural vacuum. However many Solomon Islands civil servants have unofficial or semi-official obligations, including involvement in deaths, sickness, and conflict resolution. Solomon Island researcher Paul Roughan has argued:

“The realities of a crushing urban wantok burden and abysmally low real wages combine to make the model of a highly effective, efficient and even punctual, civil servant a cruel myth. Yet this is what public servants feel is expected of them from the capacity building advisors or line-position holders. Never mind that these individuals themselves are performing their duties in a highly contrived and artificial setting, often living out of hotels, without family and earning more than they would in their own home institutions.” (Roughan 2005)

The EPG report observed that the Solomon Islands Government has:

“... failed to provide a local counterparting arrangement to RAMSI of a kind to enable RAMSI to implement capacity building ... As a result of this failure, in our view, RAMSI has been unjustly criticised for failing to embrace local arrangements for its civilian personnel in line Departments”. (page 6)

The report’s recommendation on capacity-building states:

“... priority should be given to the formulation of a capacity-building strategy, to be agreed with the Solomon Islands Government, outlining the positions which RAMSI should fill, and that there should be identification and recruitment/appointment of local Solomon Islanders to serve as counterparts to RAMSI officers. We further recommend that the Solomon Islands Government develop a Strategic Staff Development Plan that sets out clear career paths for capable and high performing local public servants which RAMSI can be guided by to develop a counterparting arrangement that will be beneficial to Solomon Islands.” (page 25)

The EPG report notes that some people in the Solomon Islands Government and society believe that RAMSI personnel should only serve as advisors, with Solomon Islanders taking up the in-line personnel positions (page 12). This would require significantly more training for RAMSI advisors in mentoring skills than they currently receive. It would also require greater commitment on the part of the Solomon Islands Government to take an active role in ensuring that the capacity being built was in accordance with its aims and policies. Ultimately however, the gain for the Solomon Islands civil service and community would be significant.

In developing its capacity building strategy, RAMSI needs to be cautious of the implications of pursuing an approach that focuses on transferring knowledge rather than developing real capacity. The knowledge transfer approach risks reinforcing the notion that what is ‘good’ comes from outside practice, constraining opportunities for drawing on aspects of Solomon Islands public service culture that are appropriate for the context. It also limits the scope of action to what has been tried elsewhere. This fails to recognise that Solomon Islanders might develop their own, fresh solutions, drawing on local experience, knowledge and cultural values.

Accountability and community engagement

An aid-dependent government becomes accountable to donors for its actions, rather than to its population, while donors are primarily accountable to domestic electorates rather than recipients. There are very real tensions around government’s upwards accountability (to donors), competing demands for accountability to different donors and the government’s downwards accountability (to the population). These tensions are not easily resolved, but in many aid dependent countries there is presently a striking imbalance in favour of an (often confusing) array of upwards accountabilities at the expense of downwards accountability. This competition and imbalance leads to a (further) loss of accountability of the government to its people.

Source: Senior Level Forum on Development Effectiveness in Fragile States 2004, Harmonisation and Alignment in Fragile States (Draft Report), Overseas Development Institute (ODI), United Kingdom p.17.
4.1 Improve community engagement

This report documents a widespread feeling that ordinary people are excluded from government processes and decision-making, pointing to a lack of linkages and engagement between government and citizens.

To achieve the goal of “a peaceful, well-governed and prosperous Solomon Islands”, it is not enough for RAMSI to focus on rebuilding the state and the machinery of government. The central challenge is to build a bridge between state and society and to increase governance at the community level, so that an engaged and informed citizenry can hold governments, corporations and donors to account for the health, education and development services that are their right.

RAMSI can and should play a role in strengthening these linkages between the Solomon Islands Government and the people (or establishing them where they are absent). The engagement of local stakeholders, from grassroots to government, is the cornerstone for successful state building but has been accorded cursory treatment by practitioners and policy-makers alike. In short, if the intervention mission does not engage the people in the processes of state building and peace building, its legitimacy will be inherently weakened.

4.2 Develop programs that address broader concepts of security

Law and order is important, but is not, on its own, enough to bring long-term peace, security and equitable and sustainable development to the Solomon Islands. The voices from the local level expressed in this report need to be recognised and Government and donors must develop a concept of human security that encompasses and addresses the broader perspectives held by ordinary Solomon Islanders. This requires that more resources be allocated at the community level. Programs need to be developed to:

- improve community relationships and cooperation and improved outreach to the community by government and donors;
- meet basic needs by providing jobs, essential services and improved livelihoods;
- decrease levels of disputes, crime, violence and anti-social behaviour and achieve a renewed focus on ending violence against women in the home and community; and
- define a transparent mandate for change.

The empowerment of women and young people is an important aspect of peace building within communities, and requires greater engagement with community based organisations by government officials and RAMSI personnel than has been the case to date.

4.3 Focus on livelihoods, food security and rural development

The election of a new government in Solomon Islands has created an opportunity to re-open debate on the costs and consequences of past economic reforms, at a time when donor governments are seeking to promote new investments in the resources sector.

The simmering dissatisfaction evident among both rural and urban communities in the Solomon Islands, as described in this report, indicates that there is a pressing need to develop alternatives to current economic reform policies, and to create initiatives that are more targeted towards reducing poverty, inequality and potential conflict, and improving the quality of life for all citizens of the Solomon Islands. The foundation of these alternatives is adopting a rights-based and sustainable development approach to economic reform and development.
Exploitation of natural resources can contribute to conflict in the community, as people debate the distribution of costs and benefits of new projects. As recommended in Oxfam’s report, *Conflict Prevention or Promotion?* (2006a), there is scope to develop new programs like the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) to promote sustainable exploitation of natural resources.

Beyond extractive industries like logging and mining, there is a need to place more emphasis on rural livelihoods, food security and the non-formal economy.

Changes in the Solomon Islands economy must also be tied to policy reform by Australian and New Zealand in the area of labour mobility and greater access to employment through seasonal work schemes.

### 4.4 Develop public debate on benchmarks for success

The absence of any public debate about how RAMSI’s impacts could be measured has contributed to questions in the community about the longevity of RAMSI’s tenure and the motives of governments supporting the regional intervention. There appears to be a contradiction between the mission’s calls for accountability from the Solomon Islands Government and its own lack of openness to scrutiny. The EPG report recommends that, “The tenure of RAMSI should be measured by the achievement of tasks rather than ... time bound”. (page 6)

There is a clear need for RAMSI to facilitate greater clarity about its objectives, to provide a public timeframe for activities, and to acknowledge the limits to its capacity. Above all, the discussion on the future of Solomon Islands state and society must be based on a process that supports greater public debate over the intervention’s goals and achievements.

### 4.5 Achieve greater representation from the region

Greater representation from amongst RAMSI’s Pacific member states is an area for significant reform of the mission.

The absence of meaningful numbers of Pacific Islanders in the civilian state building elements of the operation is surprising and inappropriate. There is significant experience from within the region — particularly from Samoa and Fiji — in high demand areas like finance and public sector reform which are key features of RAMSI’s work in Solomon Islands. Experienced staff from PIF member countries regularly take up overseas positions in the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, SOPAC or the Forum Fisheries Agency, partly as a contribution to regional development. RAMSI should be considered more often as a similar posting for island staff, with Australian or New Zealand personnel temporarily backfilling positions in Suva, Port Vila or Nuku’alofa while island staff bring their unique understanding of Melanesia and the ‘Pacific way’ to their work in Honiara.
References


AusAID 2006c, Australian Aid: Promoting Growth and Stability, AusAID, Canberra.


Berger, Mark 2006, ‘From Nation building to state building – the geopolitics of development, the nation state system and the changing global order’, Third World Quarterly, 271, pp. 5-25.

Box, Dan, ‘Solomons mission worsens child sex’, The Australian, 22 March 2006.


Economic Analytical Unit 2004, Solomon Islands – rebuilding an island economy, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government, Canberra.


Howard, The Hon John 2003a, Address to the Sydney Institute, Sydney, 1 July 2003.


Oxfam 2005a, Interview, Margaret Maelaua, Secretary, Malaita Provincial Council of Women, Auki, 3 August 2005.

Oxfam 2005b, Interview, Central Kwara’ae Women’s Association executive, Auki, 2 August 2005.


Oxfam 2005f, Interview, Malaita, 2 August 2005.

Oxfam 2005g, Interview, village women’s focus group, in Malaita, 2 August 2005.

Oxfam 2005h, Interview, female civil society representatives, Auki, 2 August 2005.


Oxfam 2005k, Interview, community member, Honiara, 9 October 2005.

Oxfam 2005l, Interview, community member, Malaita, 2 August 2005.

Oxfam 2005m, Interview, civil society representative, Honiara, 4 August 2005.


Oxfam 2005p, Interview, community member, Honiara, 9 October 2005.

Oxfam 2005q, Interview, community member, Honiara 5 August 2005.


Oxfam 2005s, Interview, community member, Honiara, 7 August 2005.

Oxfam 2005t, Interview, community member, Honiara, 9 October 2005.


Oxfam 2005y, Interview, former RAMSI personnel, Canberra, 20 August 2005.


Oxfam Australia 2003, Beyond Operation Helpem Fren, An Agenda for Development in the Solomon Islands, Oxfam Australia, Melbourne.

Oxfam International Solomon Islands 2006a, Conflict Prevention or promotion? An analysis of economic planning and performance in Solomon Islands, Honiara.

Oxfam International Solomon Islands 2006b, ‘Perspectives on natural resources development as the foundation for economic growth in Solomon Islands’, notes from a discussion seminar hosted by Oxfam International Solomon Islands and the Environmental Concerns Action Network of the Solomon Islands, 4 May 2006, Honiara.

Pacific Beat 2006, ‘Regional police pleased with their contribution to RAMSI’, Radio Australia, 23 May.


Contact

Oxfam International: Solomon Islands Office
Tandai Highway, Honiara
PO Box 1377, Honiara, Solomon Islands
Telephone: +677 22004 Fax: +677 23134
Email: oxfamsi@solomon.com.sb

Oxfam Australia
156 George Street, Fitzroy, VIC, 3065, Australia
Telephone: +61 3 9289 9444 Fax: +61 3 9419 5318
www.oxfam.org.au
Email: enquire@oxfam.org.au

Oxfam New Zealand
PO Box 68357, Newton, Auckland 1145, New Zealand
Telephone: +64 9 355 6500 Fax: +64 9 355 6505
www.oxfam.org.nz
Email: oxfam@oxfam.org.nz