AusAID

Analysis of the "Community Sector" in Solomon Islands

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Contents

ACRONYMS

ACFID	Australian Council for International Development
ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Services
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
BDBG	Building Demand for Better Governance
CA	Cooperation Agreement
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CD	Community Development
CSO	Community Sector Organisation
CSP	Community Sector Program
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (of OECD)
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DSE	Development Services Exchange
EC	European Community
FBO	Faith Based Organisation
MHMS	Ministry of Health and Medical Services
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MWYC	Ministry of Women, Youth and Children
NACC	National Advisory Committee on Children
NCW	National Council of Women
NGO	Non Government Organisation
NZAID	New Zealand Agency for International Development
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
RCDF	Rural Constituency Development Fund
SICA	Solomon Islands Christian Association
SICAFOW	Solomon Islands Christian Association Federation of Women
SIDT	Solomon Islands Development Trust
SIG	Solomon Island Government
SINAC	Solomon Islands National AIDS Council
SINCA	Solomon Islands NGO Cooperation Agreements (Program)
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

1. Introduction

Perceptions about the role of the state, development and the nature of relationships are critical to an understanding of "engagement" with government and community. Australia has long-standing relationships with Solomon Islands at community, church and private sector levels, plus multiple interactions at government level. These complex, diverse and dynamic relationships are informed by multiple views of community, development and the state.

The development and implementation of alternative views are part of the work of "civil society." Australian aid operates within a development paradigm that promotes economic growth and "functioning and effective" Government as the *sina qua non* of effective development[1]. Alternative paths to achieving "development" within Pacific-based paradigms, which address issues such as "identity, tradition and modernity, sustainable practices, the formation of alliances and the right of and need for Pacific Islanders to shape and determine their own direction without interference[2]" do not generally feature in official Australian aid thinking or practice. It is erroneous to believe that civil society shares similar and consistent views of development, statehood and the future as governments in the same or different contexts, especially in developing countries where values differ so significantly.

Prior to the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) intervention in 2003, which brought to an end the breakdown of the rule of law called the 'Tensions', Australia's development cooperation program in Solomon Islands was relatively small. Australia's official development assistance (ODA) has increased very significantly since then and has largely focused on law and order and reforming national government structures. However, there has also been significant support for activities in the "community sector", valued at more than AUD6-7 million per year. AusAID's Community Sector Strategy for the period 2003-06 informed the development of two major programs – the Community Sector Program (CSP), managed by an Australian managing contractor (MC) and Solomon Islands NGO Cooperation Agreements (SINCA) for Australian NGOs working with Solomon Islands partner organisations.

The first Community Sector Strategy was developed during a time of crisis in Solomon Islands' history and significant interruption to normal bilateral relations. The 2003-06 Strategy included the following statement:

> *A strategic approach to provide increased assistance directly to the community sector is a response to identified need for community development and capacity building. It is also a response to the difficulties of the breakdown of basic service delivery by central and provincial governments (page 1)*

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[1] see Australian Aid: Promoting Growth and Stability: A White Paper on the Australian Government's Overseas Aid Program 2006
[2] Wallace, H. 2007 Taking Action Boldly and Muddling On: Government and NGO relationships in development in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands (1997-2005), Unpublished thesis

AusAID is interested in organising and managing development cooperation programs in a coherent manner. This requires a better understanding of the community sector and organisations which largely work outside or alongside Solomon Islands' national and provincial Government structures and systems. After four years of stabilization, many contextual issues and changes to the purpose of Australia's assistance to the "community sector" need to be reconsidered in order to inform Australia's ongoing programs and to develop new programs. AusAID has therefore commissioned the development of a new Community Sector Strategy to cover the period 2007-11. The new Strategy comprises an analysis of the sector and a set of frameworks to inform aid programming, management and monitoring. The new Strategy is based on extensive consultation with Solomon Islanders and Australian people and organisations with interests in this sector.

1.1   The Solomon Islands context

Solomon Islands has a rich and complex history and a great diversity of cultures. With a population of more than 500,000, the country is the third largest country in the South Pacific after PNG and Fiji. Solomon Islanders live in more than 5,000 villages across 350 inhabited islands and speak more than 80 distinct languages. Many layers of long-established informal and formal relationships have developed between communities, groups and organisations within the country, as well as between Solomon Islands, the Pacific region and other countries. Historically, Solomon Islands has been subject to significant outside influences from Great Britain, Australia, United States and Japan, and most recently and increasingly from China, Taiwan (Republic of China or ROC), Japan, Korea and Malaysia.

Generalizations are difficult because of the great diversity of cultural groups and languages as well as rapidly changing differences between urban and rural/village life. Solomon Islands' diverse cultural values strongly influence the way people live their lives, organise themselves, interact with each other and change over time. These values, as well as many external influences, have also affected the way organisations operate, relate and change. At the broadest level, using Hofstede's categorizations of cultures[3], Solomon Island cultures are more hierarchical than egalitarian, more collectivist than individualist, more masculine than feminine and strong in terms of uncertainty avoidance. On all these dimensions of culture, Solomon Island values differ significantly from dominant Australian values, which are more egalitarian, individualist and weak in terms of uncertainty avoidance (i.e. a degree of comfort with uncertainty).

Solomon Islanders have arrived, survived and thrived over many thousands of years. They have adapted to various types of natural resources and organized themselves effectively at community level. In little more than a century since colonization, they have adapted Christian values and structures into their lives while protecting many traditional values relating to land, community organisation, leadership, exchanges and interactions with other groups, dispute settlement and social harmony. Traditional institutions have evolved to meet emerging challenges, but inevitably lose influence and control over

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[3] Hofstede, G. 1984 "Culture's Consequences" Sage Publications London and Hofstede, G. and Hofstede, G.J 2005 "Cultures and Organisations: Software of the Mind" McGraw Hill

members when new ways of thinking and working are privileged. Indigenous means of organization are often invisible to and poorly understood by outsiders, many of whom are culturally illiterate.

Challenges include a widely dispersed population, poor physical and transport infrastructure, low levels of formal and private investment. In comparative international and regional development terms, Solomon Islanders have poor economic, health and education status. For example infant mortality rates are high (24/1000 under 1 year olds[4]) and literacy rates are low (approximately 50%, and between 17% for women and 23% for men in a disputed study in the 1990s)[5]). There is significant vulnerability associated with poor health and for people with disabilities. The epidemiologic pattern is transiting from high infant mortality and low life expectancy due to infectious diseases, to modern lifestyle related diseases such cardiovascular diseases, obesity and diabetes due to imported foods, lack of exercise and smoking. There are increasing concerns associated with a rapidly increasing population (almost doubling between 1987 and 2007) and poor management of natural resources such as land and forests. A large proportion of young men and women are unemployed, disenfranchised and disillusioned, liable to substance abuse, violence and political manipulation. The Tensions stripped away the illusion of Solomon Islands as 'The Happy Isles' and revealed these underlying problems.   Many of the development achievements prior to that were set back and many changes have occurred at all levels.

As a relatively ignored British colonial territory and an independent country only since 1978, the state has not played a significant role in people's lives – a role that has instead been filled by the church and community groups[6]. Despite rhetorical expectations that Provincial Government structures and systems would be able to meet community needs, there has been a poor track record to date in regard to most government functions, due in large part to lack of resources, geography and a developing economy. As is the case in many Pacific countries, economic and political challenges in Solomon Islands limit the capacity of government to focus on many aspects of social development. This lack of focus often results in increased expectations of and reliance upon NGOs and Churches to deliver social development projects and programs. Assumptions that NGOs and Churches can strengthen and work with Provincial Government structures, have usually been problematic.

> "The government /NGO relationship is subsequently charged with difficulties and dilemmas, comprising opposing and incompatible philosophies. Understanding the dynamics and the potential of this relationship has major implications for development thinking and practice[7]".

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[4] UNICEF figures for 2005 (estimate)

[5] verbal comment from staff member of DSE

[6] John Roughan quoted in NZ Herald article by Ainsley Thomson "Is peace in the Solomons Mission: Impossible?"April 29, 2006

[7] Wallace, H. 2007 Taking Action Boldly and Muddling On: Government and NGO relationships in development in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands (1997-2005), Unpublished thesis, University of Melbourne

1.1.1 Donors in Solomon Islands

The World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, European Community and various United Nations bodies are the principle multilateral donors in Solomon Islands. Australia, Japan, Taiwan and New Zealand are the principal bilateral donors involved in development activities in Solomon Islands. There appear to be multiple agendas and increasing diversity of views among donors, which increase challenges, particularly for Solomon Islands, but also for Australia. Challenges relate not only in terms of different views of development but also approaches to understanding and supporting the respective roles of Government, the private sector and community organisations.

Most donors expect and promote the idea that Governments and NGOs should work together. While Australia and other bilateral donors support this basic premise, a majority of aid activities focus on Government policies, programs and responsibilities. It is not clear how realistic this expectation is, given that SIG has little in common with, and very little financial or administrative capacity to work with community organisations in practice.

Most donors take a deficits approach to Solomon Islands capacity and prospects, rather than a more positive strengths-based approach[8]. Donor expectations of Solomon Islands' ability to operate effectively in a highly complex global environment and its persistent negative and subordinating labeling (e.g. "failed" or "failing" state) create a poor basis for cooperation and frequently privilege western values and concerns. Such language clearly has a negative impact upon people's self-perception and can lead to resentment and other negative feelings towards those applying the labels. Increasing numbers of community organisations internationally are using and applying a strengths-based approach. In a developing community context, it is particularly crucial for joint recognition of existing strengths (such as prior knowledge and skills, resources, networks etc.) and cooperatively identifying means to build on these strengths as a means to achieve change. This approach would result in a significantly different analysis of Solomon Islands.

2. Concepts related to the "Community"

Concepts related to "community," "community sector" and "engagement in the community sector" are not easily defined. For this analysis, the following topics have been considered:

- definition of terms and analysis of community sector concepts/paradigms (this section)
- understanding of community sector concepts in Solomon Islands (Section 3)
- understanding community sector vis-à-vis other sectors and their respective roles
- perspectives on the role of donors vis-à-vis civil society (Section 4)
- the nature and dimensions of the sector in Solomon Islands (Section 5)
- whether there is a separate sector for aid management purposes (Section 6)

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[8] An approach which identifies existing strengths within a context as the basis for moving forward, including planning, designing, working with and monitoring change in development activities.

2.1 What is the "Community Sector"?

The concept of "community" implies a group of people with some shared interests within a shared environment. The word usually, but not necessarily, applies to a geographical space, such as the village or school community. It is often loosely applied by governments and organisations to include the civilian population of a country, i.e. its citizens and their respective organisations. Globally, the term increasingly refers to more diverse groups, such as a community of University alumni or of practitioners linked by an internet connection.

There is no single definition of the "community sector". The term is culturally constructed and is often used as a substitute for "civil society", which implies that it sits outside the formal Government structures and/or outside the private sector. This trilateral distinction (government, private and community) creates some blurred edges. For example, do traditional governance structures fit in the Government sector or community sector? Do small enterprises (e.g. one-person or one-family businesses) fit in the community sect or private sector? Are trade unions part of the community sector?

Within this spectrum, there are a range of possible definitions and associated implications. If the community sector includes the whole population of a country, it is difficult to use for planning and management purposes. If the definition is narrowed to only those organisations which provide welfare services to people, then this excludes the wide range of organisations involved in issue-based, faith-based or other important not-for-profit activities[9].

The term "community sector" is thus not particularly helpful for the purposes of analysis in the aid and development context unless specifically defined. An alternative used in international literature on this third sector (the other two being Government and the private sector) refers to "civil society." Therefore the concept of "civil society" is examined next to inform this analysis.

2.2 Civil society

The concept of civil society has existed for centuries since Greek civilization. More recently, debate has shifted to whether civil society is a goal, or a means to achieve a goal. In the last decade, emphasis has been placed on the role that civil society can play to improve whole societies and support ideals, such as political equality and peaceful coexistence.

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[9] In Australia for example, the definition of community sector used by ACOSS only covers the non-profit community services sector, which is "a major provider of the community services that most of us rely on at some point in our lives but which are particularly important to people on low incomes" at http://www.acoss.org.au/

Extensive work on the role of civil society and development, including the role of aid donors, has been undertaken in the last decade[10] in the field of development policy and practice. Multilateral and bilateral aid organisations, theorists and practitioners from all types of aid agencies use the language of civil society within a wide range of analyses and actions. Howell and Pearce[11] for example note that on one hand, civil society can be regarded as a useful, albeit diffuse, opportunity to create "intellectual and political space…within a context where long-standing dualistic debates about state or market paths to economic development … have reached an impasse" (2001:11). This implies that people who are marginalized, poor or vulnerable are able to articulate and defend their interests, discuss how the world can meet everyone's needs and generally be able to undertake critical thought and action. This is relevant to donor interests in promoting poverty reduction. On the other hand, civil society can be appropriated to describe a "natural and historically inevitable component of a developed capitalist economy." This interpretation involves civil society being perceived and used as a means to counterbalance the power of the state and the market, for the purposes of achieving a "better" capitalist economy than could be delivered otherwise. When such effort is driven or even supported from the outside, issues such as differences in cultural values, sovereignty and sustainability are clearly brought into play.

What is civil society?
Some claim that civil society is a specific product of the nation state and capitalism; others see it as a universal expression of the collective life of individuals, at work in all countries and stages of development but expressed in different ways according to history and context. Some see it as one of three separate sectors, others as intimately interconnected or even inter-penetrated by states and markets. Is civil society the preserve of groups predefined as democratic, modern, and 'civil', or is it home to all sorts of associations, including 'uncivil' society – like militant Islam and American militias - and traditional associations based on inherited characteristics like religion and ethnicity that are so common in Africa and Asia?

Are families in or out, and what about the business sector? Is civil society a bulwark against the state, an indispensable support, or dependent on government intervention for its very existence? Is it the key to individual freedom through the guaranteed experience of pluralism or a threat to democracy through special interest politics? Is it a noun – a part of society, an adjective - a kind of society, an arena for societal deliberation, or a mixture of all three? Can you build a civil society through foreign aid and intervention, or is this just another imperial fantasy? What is to be done with a concept that seems so unsure of itself that definitions are akin to nailing jelly to the wall?
from Civil Society by Michael Edwards at www.infed.org/association/civil_society.htm

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Civil society can be described as the "public sphere," or "places where citizens argue with one another about the questions of the day and negotiate a constantly-evolving sense

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[10] for example, see Howell, Jude and Pearce, Jenny 2001 "Civil Society and Development" Lynne Rienner Publishers
[11] see Howell and Pearce 2001 Introduction p 1-11

of the 'common' or 'public' interest.[12]" Many development practitioners see a more active role for civil society, and many societies reflect extraordinary diversity of purposes and activities among civil society organisations.

The discipline of Development Studies provides useful perspectives on the respective roles of and relationships between three "parts" of nation states – government, the private sector and the community sector or civil society – in the context of understanding change in social, political and economic terms. These three parts represent the most obvious and increasingly universal forms of human organisation and interaction. However, there are multiple definitions and different perspectives on the elements themselves, and relationships between them. Political perspectives, cultural values, globalization and myriad other influences are relevant to discussion of these elements. The term is open to confusion in development terms for the purposes of program design, implementation and the achievement of outcomes. Context-specific approaches are likely to be more appropriate than any single universal approach to development.

A key issue for development organisations is the application of "the normative ideal of civil society"[13] from one context to another culturally different context. Li Puma noted "the nation-state fundamentally entails Western understandings of the state, of individuals and of civil society and that these cannot be separated from Western culture and Western economic, or more particularly capitalist, realities[14]." Value differences between societies influence the ways in which elements of civil society might exist and behave in certain settings. Howell and Pearce[15] argue that "all individuals through their diverse associations and organisations have the right to contribute to discussions about how to organise their society, deal with its problems, and ultimately define what kind of development is required and desired". This is a helpful and relevant distinction.

3.   Understanding of terms in Solomon Islands

Terminology related to the community sector was discussed in Solomon Islands as part of the process associated with developing this Strategy. Understanding of relevant terms and concepts among people in Solomon Islands working on development issues is discussed here, to inform analysis and AusAID's Community Sector Strategy.

In Solomon Islands many people perceive "community" to refer to "the ordinary people," as distinct from those in positions of authority or power. While the terms "community sector" and "civil society" are used in Solomon Islands, there appears to be little *shared* understanding of their meaning. Some of the labels used internationally are interpreted differently or take on context-specific meanings. This clearly has implications for Australia's participation in activities intended to "engage" with communities, and for the way in which this Strategy is communicated to and understood by stakeholders.

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[12] Edwards, Michael 2001 "Civil Society" at www.infed.org/association/civil_society.htm
[13] Howell and Pearce 2001 p10
[14] LiPuma, E. 1997 "The Formation of Nation–States and National Cultures in Oceania"
[15] Howell and Pearce 2001

3.1   Community sector

The term "community sector" is conceptualised in different ways in Solomon Islands. Most Honiara-based stakeholders suggest that "community sector" includes all people or citizens, in effect, the whole population of Solomon Islands, excluding Government institutions. However, Government officials and Parliamentarians are also members of communities, villages, church groups and other community based organisations and may then also be considered part of the community sector. Outsiders' engagement with the community sector has been largely undertaken through **informal or formal organizations**. It is recognized that there are limitations to the ability of these organisations to reach communities or represent their true perspectives and priorities.

Organisations within the "community sector" may include traditional village governance structures (such as chiefs, committees and churches), other community-based organisations (CBOs), national or provincial NGOs as well as Churches and faith-based organisations (FBOs). In Solomon Islands, it appears that:

- many national NGOs do not have particularly extensive, strong or effective formal relationships with villages or CBOs
- many community based organisations (CBOs) appear to be isolated and distant from national organisations of most kinds
- CBOs are perceived as being "internally grown" i.e. they grow from within a village or tribe; they are mostly faith-based (in contrast with NGOs, which come from "outside" and therefore with outside agendas and often secular perspectives)
- most FBOs are linked through clearly defined church structures networks at several levels (national, provincial, diocesan, parish, village).

The diversity of CBOs, FBOs and NGOs makes it difficult and inappropriate to make generalizations about the perceived *role* of the whole group of such organisations. Each organisation perceives its role differently, depending on its status, history, mix of individual members and leaders, relationships with community, relationships with external or other Solomon Islands partners and other factors. There appears to be little shared understanding of a common role across these organizations. A dominant perception is that they are involved in "service provision," often in the absence or lack of service provision in rural areas by the Government of Solomon Islands.

This diverse range of organisations also creates difficulties for aid programs which adopt a deficits approach because service providers appear weak, fragmented and disorganized. A strengths-based approach would identify strengths in all these types of organisations on which further development could be based. For example, all organisations have developed because of a reason perceived to be legitimate by their founders, have been sustained to varying levels by a commitment by some individuals or some external support, and are likely to have contributed something useful to some group within Solomon Islands. However, perceptions of these strengths will vary widely, depending on the perspective of the judge. Even those organizations that appear sophisticated and robust in terms of office resources and skilled personnel may be vulnerable in some ways, for example, lacking in a broad constituency. However, in a country where the logistics

of reaching communities are particularly costly, the achievement of a strong and sustained village-to-national level network or an ability to develop a broad constituency is very difficult. The chances of national NGOs being "representative" of broad community perspectives are slim in these circumstances. It is probably necessary to accept and work with a broader range of organizations with narrower constituencies.

3.2 Civil Society

The term "civil society" in Solomon Islands appears to have arrived during the Tensions. It seems to have been first introduced when external mediators arrived to identify ways to bring about peace at the height of or soon after the Tensions erupted, in their efforts to include representatives from various groups. Some of these groups and individuals formed a loose coalition called the "Civil Society Network" which voiced concerns about particular issues, including Government practices and policies. These groups have met and raised a common voice on a small number of particular governance issues[16] since, resulting in a perception by some people in Government and other organisations that "civil society" represents, in effect, issue-based advocacy critical of Government by a small number of individuals and groups. Their advocacy efforts are perceived in a negative light by some others who dismiss them as being non-elected urban elites and individuals. Some civil society groups distance themselves from this group so as not to be seen as openly critical of the Government or because of their sense that their role is not to criticize.

In Solomon Islands villages, where 80% of the population lives, most people identify three key structures in their lives – traditional leadership, churches and provincial government services (to a very limited extent). Community leadership (traditional and modern) and churches are easily accommodated into a definition of civil society. NGOs hardly feature for most villagers, except as occasional visitors or sources of funds, training or other resources. As more communities are visited by NGO representatives, international agencies and donors, for a wide variety of reasons (e.g. research, to identify priority needs, or to deliver a particular pre-determined service or message), a "hierarchy" of potential sources of aid has emerged. Smaller NGOs are generally seen to offer less than bigger ones; some engage more effectively with existing village governance structures than others and are therefore given greater respect; and some use participatory approaches in villages to identify priorities rather than deliver their own pre-set services. Some see NGOs as alternative providers of services and funds to Government. Such perceptions and experiences influence understandings about civil society and government, even if the actual words are not used.

3.3 NGOs

Internationally, NGOs are regarded as a key element of civil society, with various sub-groupings covering national and international issues and coverage. NGOs can be viewed

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[16] these issues include advocacy in relation to: an attempt in 2000 to lengthen the term of government from four to five years; enactment of forestry legislation in 2004; and opposition to moves to re-arm sections of the Solomon Islands Police Force.

through different lenses by donors, practitioners, academics, governments, partner organisations, the private sector and communities depending on their own views of the world, ways of knowing, cultural values and many other factors.

NGOs in Solomon Islands are perceived in specific ways that are not particularly consistent with international models of categorizing NGOs[17]. They are perceived as:

- organisations which come to villages or urban communities from the "outside" – either from Honiara or provincial capitals, or from other countries
- organisatons involved in delivering services and funding to people, not necessarily those who undertake advocacy work
- carrying out their own agendas rather than representing community views or priorities
- largely driven by external donor agendas/funding, rather than local priorities/issues
- clearly separated into indigenous NGOs and international NGOs; perceptions about the latter range from being competitive and undermining of local capacity to collaborative and strengthening of local capacity.
- completely separate from Church groups; churches, including those providing services, do not see themselves as NGOs and are not perceived by others to be NGOs, but as another element in society altogether
- expected to be and prefer to be seen as apolitical, even if their role is as service providers and these services operate within Government policy frameworks (e.g. health and education activities), in place of insufficient Government service delivery (e.g. in HIV/AIDS or community planning), or contesting Government practice (e.g. on forest protection).

3.4   Non state actors

In 2006-7, the European Community introduced a new term to Solomon Islands as part of its development cooperation approach – non state actors. It invited a wide range of organisations, including the private sector, to form a network for the purpose of engaging with it on a variety of development processes and activities. The term is understood by those who attended several meetings of this broad grouping, and is used not only for communications at national level, but also in the context of the large European Union (EU) Micro-Finance Project which provides funds for community projects across the country. The term is seen as an externally designed. It creates a binary distinction between the state and others, including the private sector and trade unions, which are not normally the subject of development assistance.

4.   Role of donors vis-à-vis civil society

Good neighbours cannot replace good government and nonprofits should not be asked to substitute for well-functioning markets[18]"

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[17] for example Smillie, I and Helmich H 1993 "Non-Governmental Organisations and Governments: Stakeholders for Development" and Fowler, A. 1997 "Striking a Balance"
[18] Edwards, Michael 2004

The role of aid donors in the area of civil society is not neutral. Clarity about the *perceived role of civil society* and *purpose* of donor support for civil society is important to understanding what approach is appropriate and what programming decisions may be taken. As noted above, the approach of some donors reflects a dichotomy between civil society and the state, while others recognize more complex relationships. Many donors look to civil society as a means to promote good governance, based on their perception that governments and the private sector do not perform in appropriate ways or achieve "good" development outcomes. For example the World Bank[19] notes:

> *Civil society organizations … play a key role in amplifying the voices of the poorest people in the decisions that affect their lives, improving development effectiveness and sustainability, and holding governments and policymakers publicly accountable. (website accessed August 2007)*

The 2004 NZAID study on Civil Society[20] for example noted:

> *A vibrant civil society is capable of promoting good governance through its advocacy, development and peace-building roles.*

The OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) [21] has identified that a strong civil society serves as: *a)"watchdog" – holding authorities accountable for their actions; (b) "corrective" – campaigning against abuses of power and for the protection and promotion of Human Rights; (c) source of policy advice; and (d) facilitator of dialogue and negotiation.* This analysis of civil society's role is relative to government's role, rather than as an alternative voice or source of self-determined action altogether. DAC extends this analysis to conflict management and peace building as follows, and it appears that AusAID has applied this approach in Solomon Islands since 2003:

- *Civil society groups can also provide a channel for service delivery where governments are unable or unwilling to provide basic social services.*
- *Engagement with civil society can range from supporting their provision of basic health and education services to facilitating advocacy roles and their promotion of dialogue (for peaceful dispute resolution, reconciliation etc.)*

The DAC also noted that:

> *"external actors [e.g. donors] can positively or negatively affect tensions and conflict dynamics, so at a minimum, they must "Do No Harm". Technical and financial support to civil society organisations must, therefore, be informed by a solid understanding of the local context and the different types of organisations (e.g.*

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[19] see
http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/EXTLACREGTOPSOCDEV/E XTLACREGTOPCIVSOC/0,,menuPK:847749~pagePK:34004175~piPK:34004435~theSitePK:847735,00. html

[20] NZAID, RRRT/UNDP 2004 "Solomon Islands Civil Society Study"
[21] DAC 2005 "Engaging with civil society" at http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/26/55/35785435.pdf (accessed August 2007)

> *beyond those "approved" by the state. ... "Coordination with other local and international actors is essential to avoid duplication and to concentrate efforts".*

Such advice is helpful but the perspectives of local organizations of their roles are absent from the analysis. In effect, this perspective sees that civil society groups are instruments of the donor to achieve particular ends, rather than as independent, highly diverse and "free-thinking" entities with their own agendas, priorities, perspectives and capacities.

All players in civil society do not share the ideals promoted by donors. CSOs may promote single issues or single group interests rather than nation-wide democratic agendas. The assumption that all players want to work with local and foreign governments in order to promote the achievement of such ideals is also doubtful – many CSOs see their role as outside government altogether. CSOs provide an alternative voice, not necessarily a voice which is critical of another sector. Some CSOs have been established primarily to "watch" another sector or to deliver what another sector is not capable of delivering, but many others define their roles differently.

Commentators question the assumption that the role of civil society is to "correct" the errors of government and the market system. For example Howell and Pearce noted that many donors have developed programs to "strengthen and even manufacture civil society[22]" within a perspective that a robust civil society should counterbalance poor governance and the unfairness of the market. They pose the question:
> *"... if donors operate with a blueprint agenda for strengthening civil society, are they in danger of misreading, underestimating, or conversely, overestimating its potential in different cultural settings?[23]"*

Several commentators warn of the risks of donor engagement in civil society[24], particularly when the cultural context is so different from that of the donor. For example, donors can replicate power relations between elites and others by their selection of partners: funding selection strengthens those who agree to comply with donor agendas and weakens those who may express an alternative view. Donors can misunderstand the relationships between civil society and the state and the market in a particular context, and unwittingly change relationships in favour of particular externally-driven agendas. Another key risk for civil society is donor dependency, which can lead to civil society organisations becoming more accountable to the donors' agendas than their members.

While donors can operationalise their agendas through institutional and capacity building, forming partnerships, and strengthening the material base of civil society, all such activities have inherent political and other ramifications. This is a key point that needs to be carefully understood at all stages of the activity cycle.

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[22] see Howell and Pearce 2001 p4
[23] see Howell and Pearce 2001 p9
[24] e.g. Van Rooy 1998, Biekart 1999, Howell and Pearce 2001 and Edwards 2001

4.1 Community engagement

The term "community engagement" is used by AusAID and many other donors to describe interaction with people and their respective organisations. Community engagement can be undertaken for a very wide range of purposes, from promoting a particular issue or approach to changing people's attitudes and behaviour. In Solomon Islands, it appears that people understand this to mean that donors are simply "talking with people." This term is used to describe a very wide range of activities, from telling people what another organisation want them to hear, to providing an opportunity to hear what people want to say. Activities can also include the process of "taking information away" from people in research and data collection exercises to suit donor or planning agendas, although various approaches can be used which contribute to community interests, not just those of the donor or researcher.

Care is needed when using the term "engagement" as is can be interpreted and applied widely, and not always in the interests of communities themselves. It is preferable for activities to be specific and honest about the nature and intent of interaction with people and organisations, rather than using this term generically. For example, if a project wishes to inform the community of a new funding arrangement, then the interaction could be described as "informing communities" rather than "community engagement". If a project includes processes which are dependent on active participation by or joint decision-making with people to be affected, then this could be described as "participation by communities in decision-making" rather than "community engagement." Such clarity will help activity stakeholders when it comes to design and monitoring.

The term "poorest of the poor" is regarded by some in Solomon Islands as neither a useful nor culturally appropriate way to refer to people. The term is hard to measure meaningfully in a subsistence economy and Solomon Islanders do not identify particular groups or individuals in this manner. Alternative language, such as "marginalized people" and "most marginalized people" places more emphasis on the process by which certain people are left out of social and economic life, or development processes and benefits, rather than the people themselves. This seems to be more comfortable among Solomon Islands organisations.

5.   CSOs in Solomon Islands

This paper now refers to **community sector organisations** (CSOs) for the purpose of describing the wide range of organisations that work outside the government and private sectors in Solomon Islands. This includes:

- International, Australian and Solomon Islands NGOs
- Faith-based organisations, including community-based religious groups, as well as the national structures of churches
- Community based organisations

This analysis has reviewed written material on CSOs specific to Solomon Islands, including:

- various documents submitted to AusAID by the Community Sector Program
- Solomon Islands Civil Society Study by NZAID (which uses Civil Society Organisations)
- Development Services Exchange's (DSE) Data Base on member NGOs
- various donor reports on related issues, such as UNDP's Peace and Conflict Development Analysis and AusAID's Gender Situational Analysis
- an unpublished thesis by Heather Wallace on NGOs and Government relations in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu
- articles written by Pacific Islanders, such as Alice Pollard, Afu Billy, Claire Slatter and Tarcisius Kabutaulaka
- ACFID NGO matrix of Australian NGOs working in Solomon Islands

Community organisations in Solomon Islands do not readily conform with the typologies proposed by major authors in the field (Korten 1990[25], Smillie 1995)[26]. It is possible to locate CSOs in Solomon Islands on a spectrum or continuum ranging from:
- charitable and welfare organizations (e.g. some Church based NGOs; Red Cross)
- advocacy and rights-based organizations (e.g. environmental NGOs; Oxfam and Save the Children)
- 'alternative voice' organizations that actively contest and question government (e.g. SIDT, Transparency Solomon Islands and Civil Society Network) [27]

Solomon Islands CSOs can be broadly characterized as follows:
- diverse in almost all respects (see Section 5.1 below)
- do not form a single coherent group
- can change significantly over time (Section 5.2)
- subject to considerable external (donor) influence
- resilient in the face of constant internal and external challenges and pressures
- operate outside but generally not in opposition to the Government (Section 5.3).

The total number of CSOs in Solomon Islands is not known (see section 5.2 below), although DSE included 61 NGOs in its data base of those operating at national level. NZAID's 2004 study referred to over 100 non-state actors counted by EU officials, but this includes private sector groups. The number of organisations operating at village and provincial levels is not known.

5.1   Diversity

The *diversity* of CSOs is a most significant feature in Solomon Islands. Analysis of the organisations highlights very wide variations in the following areas:
- *size*, from a few volunteers up to 90 staff; no members to thousands of members
- *coverage*, from Honiara, or one village, through to those with national coverage
- *history*, from some 100+ year old FBOs to some created in the last few years

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[25] Korten, David 1990 *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*

[26] This is a key finding by Heather Wallace in her thesis (see footnote 2 and bibliography)

[27] NB these almost always have to be locally incorporated NGOs

- *level of formality*
- *level of development capacity*
- *organisational strengths*
- *level of representation* of community interests, voices or priorities
- *type of work*, from service delivery to pure advocacy and by sector
- *sources and extent of funding*
- *extent of engagement with Government*, from strict coherence with Government policies or strategies to countering/contradicting Government policy or practice (see Section 5.3 below)

5.1.1 Size

Development Services Exchange (DSE) serves as the peak organisational and representative body for CSOs. Its capabilities and perceptions of its capabilities have varied significantly in recent years. DSE membership has varied significantly over the years from one hundred to just a few NGOs when it nearly collapsed during the Tensions. DSE currently has a healthy membership with approximately 50 members.

NGOs are often comprised of a small number of paid staff who are actively involved in maintaining and developing contacts with individuals, communities and other organisations within Solomon Islands and often also within the Pacific Island region. They may also maintain connections with international organisations including donors.

Networking organizations, such as Kastom Gaden Association (KGA), vary in their memberships: some have less than a hundred and others, usually churches, with thousands of members and layers of structures reaching to village communities. These types of organisations tend to use innovative approaches and strategies to support their networks and communities.

Church groups are often much larger than NGOs and CBOs, with extensive memberships or networks, especially women's organisations, and are also associated with other larger organisations such as National Council of Women (NCW) and Solomon Islands Christian Association Federation of Women – SICAFOW) which act as co-ordinating bodies.

CSOs range from those with one or two voluntary staff (e.g. Disabled Peoples Association of Solomon Islands and West Are Are Rokotanikeni Association) to those with 90 staff (e.g. World Vision Solomon Islands).   The coverage of their programs is clearly linked to the number of staff available to work on activities and this is directly linked to access to funding. Most head offices of CSOs are based in Honiara, with the larger ones maintaining some provincial offices or activity-specific offices (such as those with temporary offices in Gizo following the 2006 earthquake and tsunami).

There is a wide range of village or community based organisations, often quite small in size. Such organisations may comprise just a few individuals, family, clan or tribe and have been typically formed to develop and implement livelihoods projects. While such organizations may appear to be small, they may be part of church networking activities or supported by networking organizations, for example KGA.

5.1.2 Coverage

The majority of NGOs have an organisational base in Honiara. Such NGOs are faced with major costs and organisational challenges in both travelling to and working in the provinces, especially considerable logistical and communication challenges. Few NGOs have adequate staffing levels to maintain a range of positions throughout the provinces or the available staff to conduct regular liaison visits.

Many CBOs are supported by churches or are closely connected to them. CBOs, FBOs and NGOs with an environmental focus are generally the ones which are most widely located throughout the provinces. Although most of the environment-focused NGOs tend to work on specific projects and programs, there are examples of these types of NGOs co-ordinating activities with other NGOs, for example World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) and Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT). There is scope also for much greater co-ordination of activities in regional areas.

CSP has identified that many rural communities have little awareness of and involvement with NGOs. Given that approximately 80% of the population reside in communities outside of Honiara, this is highly relevant for understanding limitations in the role and impact of the NGO sector.

5.1.3 History

Some Church groups are said to have existed in Solomon Islands for over 100 years while others have been formed only recently. Mainstream church women's organizations such as Dorcas, have very long histories. These organisations have also exhibited a level of resilience and an ability to maintain activities and supportive networks during very difficult periods. Most national NGOs, such as DSE and SIDT, commenced in the 1980s. A number of new local NGOs have been established in recent years. Some NGOs, such as SIDT, enhance their coverage through the media, depending on their specific focus and familiarity with the processes.

5.1.4 Organisational formality and structure

Organisations range from having a clear organisation structure in terms of leadership and representation, to those with a very low profile and informal structure. While some degree of formality is needed in order to meet funding body requirements, many organisations can continue to operate informally and using volunteers. Generally, provincial based NGOs and CBOs are less well resourced, less formal in their processes, more likely to participate in collaborative decision making processes and consult more widely with community members. CBOs may have clear formal structures and may be well-organised but lack management experience, financial skills and wider networks that would enable them to apply for funding or operate more effectively.

The majority of national NGOs have boards of management and established processes for the organisation of finances. NGOs themselves have consistently highlighted that these areas require further assistance and strengthening. Many difficulties are experienced by NGOs in maintaining expertise and providing access to ongoing training for staff in NGOs. When staff attend training and other professional development activities, this can

temporarily reduce effective operations. The absence of NGO staff from daily activities and their attendance at activities organised by donors can create perceptions that they are not focusing on meeting the "real" needs of the communities. There is tendency for well-trained personnel to be poached to higher paid positions, sometimes referred to as "capacity sucking-out". Finding and retaining senior staff capable of running larger organizations effectively and dynamically is a persistent constraint.

5.1.5 Level of development capacity

Capacity for coordination and cooperation, both within and between organisations, also varies widely, including from Honiara to local levels. The poor definition and understanding of the concept of capacity is a worldwide phenomenon, as well as understanding of appropriate methods for contributing to capacity development. Often, definitions of capacity are determined by outside organisations, rather then by themselves, although in Solomon Islands there have been clear expressions for support in the area of locally-appropriate NGO leadership and management and financial management, which DSE and CSP have been able to respond to recently. Capacities are often critically dependent on the capacities and experiences of specific, often key senior, individuals in community organizations.

Development capacity includes: the capability to act, the capability to generate development results, the capability to relate, the capability to adapt and finally, the capability to integrate.[28] [29] Using this or other definitions of capacity, there are wide variations among Solomon Islands CSOs. For example, some organisations are strong in planning and acting but do not relate or network well with others, while others relate with others but are weak in taking action and reacting to changes in their environment.

5.1.6 Organisational strengths

CSOs reflect the challenges present in a country undergoing significant change and dissipated by geographical distance and transportation limitations and costs. The strength of locally based CSOs is their direct and detailed knowledge of the particular settings in which they work and the relevant environmental, political and social issues. Some can identify and work with key liaison people and leaders within or outside a community, while others operate independently. They vary in terms of their contribution to strengthening the capacity of communities to build self-reliance, as well as their understanding of networks.

While most CSOs have proven themselves to be adaptable and resilient in the face of conflict, political turmoil, and financially difficult periods, they do not always draw on expertise available in the sector, and there is a tendency to rely on familiar and known individuals. Competition between organisations for attention, status and funding affects the sharing of information and the use of collaborative processes. However many continue to function despite minimal infrastructure staffing and equipment being in place. For CBOs there is the added frustration of dealing with a lack of awareness of the

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[28] See Morgan, P. 2006 (draft) "The Concept Capacity?" ECDPM
[29] Mike Crooke's model in Appendix 4 of Strategy includes capacities to plan &act, manage, and relate.

requirements and skills required by donor agencies to apply for and to receive funds, adding to a sense of favouritism towards some NGOs that can 'talk the talk'.

5.1.7 Level of representation

Issues of representation include the ability of CSOs to understand and represent community perspectives; numbers of women and young people within organizations; how to balance and respond to cultural expectations of gender and age; and how to give an effective 'voice' to all in a changing society.

A popular critique of CSOs is that they are not elected or representative. This seems to be no barrier to the legitimacy of businesses beholden to private shareholders and government representatives elected by a minority of their electorate. Freedom of speech and association can be assessed by the degree to which CSOs and political opposition are tolerated and welcomed in a society. This does not require proof of "representativeness", which is very difficult in a developing country with such geographic and cultural diversity. CSOs should be better assessed on the validity of their arguments and quality of their practical activities rather than their member representation.

Many communities are "consulted" by CSO representatives or donors. Expectations are inevitably raised and far too frequently there is minimal or no follow up or benefit. This inevitably affects perceptions and understandings of the role and credibility of NGOs. There can also be a lack of knowledge and misconceptions about an organisation's activities and capabilities. Public perceptions of NGOs being engaged in political activity can be negative along with allegations of nepotism in some organisations.

5.1.8 Type of work

CSOs can address single issues (e.g. micro-credit for women) or broader multi-sectoral activities (e.g. rural development). Some deliver complex health and education services for large populations (e.g. churches) while others undertake single village livelihood activities (e.g. some women's and youth groups). CSOs may be involved in community development work, gender and youth issues and activities and environmental policies and practices. Many of these areas intersect, again indicating both the opportunity and need for capacities of CSOs to work across different fields. Many CSOs are increasingly committed to participatory/inclusive approaches and practices in their work and actively engage in raising awareness of these strategies. Some CSOs respond to particular issues, such as environmental protection, with a lobbying and 'awareness-raising' approach.

Some organisations have recently begun to focus on the latest development paradigm, "good governance", which appears in various guises, such as efforts to support the role and the right for ordinary people to be involved in community and national decision-making processes. The more organisations are responsible to external donors, the more they can be expected to follow principles of good governance, strengthening and supporting people at community based level and addressing inequalities, for example the status of women.

5.1.9 Sources and extent of funding

The majority of the well established NGOs are heavily dependent on outside donor funding. This particularly affects the types and subject of projects that can be funded. NGOs often adapt to conform with available funding, determined by the donors' funding cycle and the degree to which they commit to capacity development and longer term partnerships. Longer term planning is often out of the question given that donors rarely commit to funding beyond one to three years. CSOs generally generate funds from a variety of sources in Solomon Islands but considerable challenges are involved. Smaller CBOs' ability to raise funds is limited by their size and little access to external opportunities, but some organisations access sizeable funds on occasion. There are varying levels of competence and compliance required of community organizations by different donors depending on their development philosophy and source of funds. Funds provided by government tend to come with greater compliance/reporting requirements.

5.2   Changes over time

Church groups have existed since missionaries arrived. Some national NGOs started in colonial times, such as Red Cross, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. These are characterized as "relief and welfare" organisations, delivering social services, often during periods of crisis and need. Most other national NGOs, such as Foundation for Peoples of the South Pacific (FSPI), developed in the 1980s following independence. In 1986, SIDT, FSPI's local off-shoot, undertook an assessment of community needs following Cyclone Namu, which may have been the first time that the Government recognized an NGO might play a "useful role." In the 1990s, NGOs became increasingly active in public and community life in Solomon Islands, then the "Tensions" in 1999-2003 changed the context significantly[30] resulting in some becoming more overtly political and providing a voice against corruption and breakdown of law and order.

As noted above, the overall number of NGOs and community organizations in Solomon Islands is not known. Data across the country has not been systematically collected or researched over time. Recent research by DSE on organisations based in Honiara provides some understanding of the extent and nature of CSOs in 2004-05. DSE's data-base has identified 61 international and national NGOs working from Honiara[31]. Anecdotally, there has been a small increase of the national-based organisations in recent years, but overall the picture is one of relative stability and resilience.

While the overall number of organisations at national level appears to have remained remarkably steady in the circumstances, they have responded to a variety of factors, e.g.:
- level of access to external funding
- discontinued funding support when donors' agendas change or 'move on'
- extent of influence of external partners
- competition from other organisations for limited funding
- internal management issues
- individual leadership or staffing changes

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[30] Wallace, H. 2007
[31] DSE Development Data Base 2006

Efforts to collect information on organisations operating at provincial levels are being made in mid 2007. However, the benefits of collecting a national listing of organisations operating at village level may not be worth the costs involved. CSOs are particularly vulnerable to individual influences and external funding issues.

5.3   Linkages and relationships with government

While it is clear there is much diversity among CSOs in Solomon Islands, the majority have very little formal relationships with Solomon Islands Government (SIG) structures and systems. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has formal responsibility for liaison with CSOs, but no meetings or regular arrangements appear to exist beyond the nominal registration process. Some very limited recurrent funding is provided by SIG for quasi-statutory organisations, e.g.National Council of Women and National Youth Congress.

Some organisations, such as Save the Children, work on issues explicitly aligned with or which address government priorities and international commitments, such as child protection. Others involved in service delivery may work indirectly to address national and provincial government priorities in health and education services. In these cases, it is understandable that CSOs are perceived as service delivery agents. With the Sector Wide Approach (SWAp) in health, there is potential for increased cooperation between the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS) and those CSOs involved in health service delivery and related areas (e.g. HIV/AIDS).

There are three examples on formal interaction between CSOs and SIG:
- National Advisory Committee on Children (NACC), an internationally required joint committee which reports on implementation of Convention of the Rights of the Child
- Solomon Islands National AIDS Council (SINAC), which involves joint meetings
- Global Fund on Malaria, Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS, which responds to a Global Fund requirement for private sector and NGO participation in decision-making in relation to funded activities

A number of international NGOs have initiated Memoranda of Understanding with Government which cover operating requirements or means of confirming cooperation in specific areas, although at the time of writing, only one, Save the Children Australia has a signed MOU to date. DSE in also developing an MOU with Ministry of Home Affairs.

Other organisations focused on community development processes and particular issues or communities, work entirely independently of Government. The nature and extent of interaction between SIG and CSOs differs according to the specific issue or sector and individual perceptions within the respective Ministry, and in particular the Permanent Secretary. For example, the newly re-created Ministry of Women, Youth and Children (MWYC) explicitly values the role of CSOs in its own strategic planning as well as in the delivery of programs . It invites community organisation representatives to participate in a range of discussions and collaborative events.

Other Ministries have little to do with any CSOs and view some community organizations, especially those with external donor support, in a confrontational context (e.g. in relation to natural resource management). Anecdotal and media evidence suggests SIG regards those who raise their voices against Government policies and practices in a negative and conspiratorial light. However, since the arrival of RAMSI, there do not appear to have been cases of intimidation, personal attacks, or demands for compensation as there were during the Tensions.

There appears to be very little in the way of linkages between SIG Ministries at national level and CBOs at village level. Villagers have contact through their own Member of Parliament's (MP) annual Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF), currently funded by ROC/Taiwan. RCDF is regarded by many as distorting the community development efforts of CSOs that promote the idea of self-reliance rather than dependence on external sources. However, in the right hands, RCDF projects can lead to worthwhile and tangible developments in villages, such as water supplies and clinics. A process of closer liaison and coordination between SIG and CSOs has been facilitated largely by external agents such as CSP. However relationships lack co-ordination, are subject to variability and often depend on individual personalities.

5.4 Churches

Church organisations are highly significant in all aspects of life in Solomon Islands with extensive coverage across Solomon Islands from national to local levels. Only a tiny proportion of villages are not covered or organized by one or more churches. Their various roles, systems and networks provide the structure (exoskeleton) of governance in rural areas and are particularly pertinent to development process and outcomes in communities. It is therefore logical that donors interested in working on governance issues should work with churches in Solomon Islands. An AusAID-commissioned report "Blowing the Conch Shell: a baseline survey of churches engagement in service provision and governance in the Solomon Islands"[32] estimated that churches provide about 27% of educational services and 13% of health services in Solomon Islands.

Churches vary considerably in their approaches, with some being much more proactive than others in their work with rural communities. For example, the Catholic Church and Church of Melanesia, with AusAID Cooperative Agreement funding and external partnerships, have been particularly active in the post conflict period, developing programs and working with rural villagers on a number of projects with an emphasis on involving young people and women[33]. Other churches without funding support play a wide variety of other roles from "preaching" to specific activity-based groups (e.g. literacy, youth sports, women's sewing groups etc.)

At the national level, Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) represents the major churches: Catholic, Anglican, Seventh Day Adventist, South Seas Evangelical, and United Church. Collaboration between these major churches is evident in Solomon

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[32] Bird C. Blowing the Conch Shell: a baseline survey of churches' engagement in service provision and governance in the Solomon Islands, March 2007
[33] Wallace, H 2007

Islands and provides an excellent example to others of the role of cooperation, particularly in times of crisis. For example the Churches made an important contribution to maintaining stability at village levels during the "Tension". SICA provides the most authoritative "moral" voice in the Solomon Islands, and has occasionally publicly criticised and challenged the Government. While some have suggested that SICA has not been sufficiently critical in the past, their confidence to express alternative views appears to have increased recently, supported by churches involved in social justice, peace and development activities. For example, SICA also joined others in the Civil Society Network. SICA is committed to supporting women's development, for example through its SICA Federation of Women and to supporting women' participation in broader issues, for example through the Women for Peace group, strongly associated with SICA.

Other Pentecostal and evangelical churches exist outside this network and have formed the Solomon Islands Full Gospel Association. With an expanding number of churches, there is some division, competition, and sometimes enmity between them. This can affect the efficiency of service delivery from a national perspective, for example when members of a splinter church deny access or are refused access to a clinic

6. Australia's involvement with CSOs

Since 2003, Australia's involvement with CSOs in Solomon Islands has largely been through two major programs:

- Community Sector Program (CSP) – managed by a Managing Contractor
- Seven Cooperation Agreements (SINCAs) for Australian NGOs and their partner organisations in Solomon Islands

AusAID also supports accredited Australian NGOs in jointly funded projects through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). Some bilateral AusAID programs and components of RAMSI also include elements of "community engagement" and it appears the approach and practice varies widely between activities.

6.1 Community Sector Program

AusAID's Community Sector Program (CSP) is the major vehicle for assisting the sector. It is regarded in various ways in Solomon Islands with some CSOs viewing it as a donor while others see it as another NGO, competing with existing NGOs for attention, staff and profile. From the village perspective, some see it as providing valuable external support for the work of community organizations while others see it as distracting from the more important relationships that need to be built within Solomon Islands, for example between CSOs and their partners.

A review of the CSP in 2007 identified a number of critical issues associated with the conceptualization, the design, the management and implementation of this large and potentially very influential project. This analysis suggests in particular that the following issues raised in the Review Report should be considered:

- clarification of the specific *purpose* of Australian aid in the community sector within a broader understanding of the relationships between Government, civil society and the private sector
- the changes in context since the project was designed (i.e. from a crisis context where the Government was unable to deliver services to a more settled context where the Government is or *should be* able to deliver services)
- the likely *impact* of CSP on Solomon Islands in terms of relationships between Government and civil society, the independence of CSOs, the capacity of CSOs to raise an alternative voice, and the risks to CSOs associated with a large scale external donor-driven intervention
- the sustainability of benefits from CSP given the relative size of the project vis-à-vis the size and number of organisations within Solomon Islands and the lack of alternative national sources of support at the end of the project's life
- the type of project aid with specific expected changes, a focus on pre-determined deliverables within a tight time-frame and a set of pre-determined indicators of effectiveness. This may not be the most appropriate *form of aid* in such a complex context where a particular change cannot be clearly envisaged or assessed, where the stakeholders are extremely diverse and needs are dynamic, and where a progressive engagement approach may be more appropriate.

6.2 NGO Cooperative Agreements

The Solomon Islands NGO Cooperation Agreements (SINCAs) are also regarded in various ways. For Australian organisations receiving funding, SINCA has provided a significant opportunity to consolidate and extend existing partnerships in Solomon Islands, although the short-time frame is seen as limiting in terms of the likelihood of sustainable benefits. For those Australian organisations that did not receive funding, SINCA created a significant gap with the funded organisations in terms of access to Solomon Islands CSOs and information. The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) has helped to bridge this gap through its coordination and information sharing efforts. For Solomon Islands partner organisations, some funded partnerships have significantly helped in terms of the delivery of important community development activities and strengthening capacity, although the donor requirements for reporting have been sometimes perceived as too onerous and distracting.

There is clearly interest in further funding for CSOs in Solomon Islands. Some expressed the view that it may be appropriate now for funds to be directly provided to Solomon Islands organisations, perhaps at a lower level (since funds are not required for Australians to travel to Solomon Islands using these arrangements). Partnership with Australian NGOs is helpful, if the partnership is genuine and requested rather than based on donor requirements, and if there is shared understanding, sensitivity and appropriate skills relevant to the Solomon Islands context.

The inclusion of church-based organisations in SINCA has been well-received, because it recognizes the role of churches in a number of community development activities. Some church organizations have found the design, reporting and evaluation requirements to accountably manage donor funding challenging.

The following points are raised in relation to the current proposal to develop a Churches Partnership Program (CPP) for Solomon Islands:

- Churches clearly have the most extensive coverage of all CSOs in Solomon Islands and also strong roles in governance issues
- the PNG model is not likely to be relevant to the Solomon Islands because of the significantly different context
- SINCA's complexity has made it difficult for Solomon Islands FBOs to be included, so if it were made more organisation-friendly and simpler, FBOs could easily be included in future
- if a CPP was established, FBOs should not be excluded from applying for SINCA funding as FBOs cover a wide spectrum of activities and development topics
- Churches operations are different from many CSOs because their work at community level is largely voluntary, rather than dependent upon paid staff, and this has implications for a wide range of implementation and monitoring issues

Overall, there did not appear to be significant demand for the establishment of a large new activity such as the Australia Papua New Guinea CPP. The history, nature of relationships and activities of Churches in Solomon Islands are substantially different from those in PNG and any support in this area should be based on a detailed understanding of the Solomon Islands context.

7. Principles for working with CSOs

Most CSOs and also CSP, struggle to varying degrees with a range of challenging issues associated with working with communities and other CSOs in Solomon Islands. The following contemporary community development principles are suggested to inform Australian aid:

- start where organisations are at and build on existing strengths (see 7.1)
- recognize and respect local people and organisations' ability to understand their own context, challenges and opportunities
- avoid introducing "technical solutions" to issues which are not technically based (they may relate to leadership, relationships, history, culture or other factors)
- work at a pace which is relevant to the context, not one set by external organisations or agendas
- be flexible and responsive at all levels
- capacity development efforts should be indirect rather than direct[34] (see 7.2)

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[34] see Morgan, P. 2006 "RAMSI And Capacity Development: Report on a Field Trip To The Solomon Islands" (report to AusAID)

7.1 Strengths based approach

A strengths-based approach is particularly relevant to all activities involving CSOs, contributing to improved and sustainable development processes and outcomes. This approach recognizes what is already in place as a starting point and provides a constructive basis for cooperation with others. It also validates the efforts of those people and organisations who have already made substantial efforts in this area over many decades. The contrasting deficits approach (also "gap analysis" or "problem analysis") is now seen to be inappropriate as a basis for cooperative action. It commonly results in setting unrealistic expectations and increases the chances of outsiders imposing change to suit a particular external agenda rather than to meet locally feasible objectives.

Some of the strengths of Solomon Islands CSOs which are noted in various documents and during consultations with a selection of stakeholders include:
- various layers of networks which promote various development issues or practices – from local (village, provincial, national) to Pacific, regional and global
- churches have strong structures from village to national levels
- the value of collective collaboration which exists within groups related by language, tribe, clan or family and through shared faith
- many organisations are well-versed in their community's priorities and aspirations
- some organisations have strong experience in representing the views of their communities and have relationships with people and organisations at village level
- most organisations have a strong commitment to respond to and support communities facing various development challenges
- many organisations know what is culturally appropriate in terms of approach, language, respect for existing structures, consultation processes and overall, what is possible to achieve in terms of likely results and outcomes
- the work and approach of many CBOs reflects the particular strengths of traditional committees, based on respect and cultural values in each context
- organisations comprise leaders, members and other human resources (staff, volunteers, supporters, etc.) with skills developed from long-standing experience or training provided in many different contexts
- the personal commitment of individuals who envision a different future for Solomon Islands
- there are many young people with interests in supporting communities
- a number of leaders have long-standing knowledge of particular social and economic issues, and of the most appropriate means of working with community issues and groups as well as with external partners and donors

By respecting and building upon these strengths rather than starting with a list of "weaknesses", it is more likely that relevant and sustainable change can be achieved, in the interests of the people and organisations of the Solomon Islands.

7.2 Capacity development in CSOs

An indirect approach to capacity development is more likely to be effective than a direct approach[35]. This is even more likely to be the case in CSOs than in Government. Morgan described indirect capacity development work as:

> *"looking for opportunities (as opposed to problems and gaps connected to targeted functions), seeding ideas, finding pockets of Solomon [Islands] energy and potential commitment (usually in groups) and then providing support and resources to these groups to make the experiment work. Agendas are formed within the Solomon Islands system and then encouraged to grow and develop in an 'organic' way. Emergence rather than planning and design is the way forward."*

Given diversity among CSOs noted in Section 5 above, a single list of areas for potential support for strengthening across all organisations is not appropriate – some have very specific or short-term priorities for example and others express broader, longer-term interests. International NGOs are clearly likely to have different areas for professional development from small CBOs, and FBOs are likely to desire different types of activities.

Organisations can be understood in many different ways and there are multiple methods for assessing organisations and assisting them through change processes. One model, McKinsey's 7S model is a simple and easily understood model which suggests that every organisation comprises the following seven elements, all of which need to be in synergy with each other for the organisation to be effective and sustainable: shared values, systems, structure, strategy, staff, skills and leadership style. An assessment of all organisations working on community development issues in Solomon Islands using this or any other method, is likely to identify a number of areas for strengthening.

"Capacity" is another development paradigm term used loosely to describe any number of aspects of an organisation, sector or country (or an individual). Using a relatively new framework for understanding capacity based on extensive international research,[36] Morgan suggests that capacity may comprise the capabilities: to envision (a different future); to plan; to act (on the plan); to react (to lessons learned and changes in the context);and to relate (to others with complementary or different agendas). Again, an assessment of any CSO in Solomon Islands would raise some areas of strength and some areas for "increased capacity". However, some common areas of interest are likely to be found, such as leadership, organisational management and financial management. There is already recognition of some common issues and effort by umbrella organisations, such as DSE to respond to these common priorities.

A key lesson learned about capacity development approaches is that the *method* of communication is as important as the content. Capacity development activities delivered in local language using culturally-appropriate learning strategies are more likely to be effective. Strengthening local *systems* for ongoing context-specific capacity development

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[35] see Morgan 2007 "RAMSI and Capacity Development" page 18
[36] see Morgan 2006 "Definition of Capacity"

is more effective than delivering multiple one-off externally-determined training sessions. Many Solomon Islanders from both Government and NGOs have participated in multiple training activities over many years, but there is little evidence of sustained impact, suggesting such training has been limited because of its lack of relevance or coherence with the context, training individuals rather than groups, and lack of follow up by participants and training organisations.

Particular technical capacities may be sought by certain agencies. For example, a small number of organisations may be interested in strengthening skills in the application of the rights-based approaches for say, children's services, people with HIV and AIDS, or disabilities. Similarly, those with interests and activities in the area of natural resource management or small business development may seek specific technical skills. Specific training in such areas across a number of organizations is likely to lead to a critical mass for change in organisations and the development of local support networks.

8.   Implications for Australian aid

There are significant opportunities, challenges and risks associated with an external donor such as AusAID making a significant intervention in a context as complex and diverse as Solomon Islands. Some options for consideration are proposed below.

8.1   Use of terms

Terminology is important. Lack of shared understanding of key terms creates confusion and risks the alienation of certain groups. Several options have been considered here:
- Use concept of civil society but include the central idea that there is not expected to be a coherent group with a shared agenda.
  - It may not be an appropriate role for Australia to broaden the use of civil society – this could be portrayed by the Government as interference and result in distorted relationships, disempowerment of local voices/perspectives and outcomes.
- Use the umbrella term "Community Sector Organisations - CSOs" instead of community sector or civil society and define it to include all international, Australian and Solomon Islands NGOs, FBOs and CBOs
- Focus on the concept of *participation* by people and CSOs, relevant to the particular issue or context, in all development activities.

It is recommended that Australian aid programs use the term "Community Sector Organisations" in its programming, for the purpose of describing those organisations outside Government and the private sector. The use of "CSOs" is not a complete solution to the problems inherent in the use of any particular labels. However, this term reflects the reality that Australian aid activities are not likely or able to reach the whole population of Solomon Islands, as implied or understood by the terms Civil Society or Community Sector. Aid activities can attempt to benefit communities, both rural and urban, through engagement with formal or informal organisations which work with, relate to or represent villages and other communities, or which specialize in particular sectors, policy areas and/or development philosophies and practices.

Focusing on participation by people, relevant in all development activities should be prioritized by all development activities. Whichever way this is described in each activity, will need suit the particular context, recognizing great diversity in Solomon Islands and the fact that Australia is not able or likely to want to maintain working relationships with **all** organisations across the whole spectrum of society in a sustained and consistent manner.

Questions remain about the concept of *planning* at a sectoral level for such a diverse concept, however, AusAID has requested a Strategy to guide its work in this area.

8.2   Other issues

The above analysis raises a number of implications for AusAID's work in Solomon Islands. The following points are suggested for consideration by AusAID:

1.   Given the diversity of Solomon Islands CSOs, a "case by case" approach is preferable to a single approach for all CSOs.
2.   Aid activities or programming responses to CSOs should be flexible and able to respond to changes over time.
3.   Longer term commitment is essential – regular donor funding cycles of 1-3 years are only sufficient to commence building trust and relationships, not sufficient to contribute to real cooperative action which will lead to sustainable change. Five years should be considered a minimum for programming responses.
4.   Aid activities or programming responses to CSOs should start from an understanding of the existing strengths of each organisation (e.g. its structure, skills, staff, strategy, shared values, systems and leadership style) and its existing capacity (e.g. to envision, to plan, to act, to react and to relate).
5.   Any activities or programming responses should not label or portray people and organisations as weak, failed, failing or incompetent.
6.   Aid activities or programming responses should avoid setting unrealistic objectives which exceed the capacity of each organisation, its operating environment, and what is appropriate culturally.
7.   Gender equality is fundamental to all interactions, including the work of all CSOs. Women's organisations are a particularly important aspect of life and operate extensively in various forms in Solomon Islands. Support for their own work and to raise issues of gender equality is a priority for external assistance programs.
8.   Donor harmonization or more consistency in the area of CSOs is particularly important. Diverse philosophies and practices result in perceptions of competition between donors and promote contradictory messages (e.g. one donor's interest in disbursing large or small scale funds or resources clearly contradicts another's interests in promoting self-reliance).
9.   Donor requirements that CSOs should cooperate on common interests, share common approaches or agree to a "lead agency" approach on particular issues or for particular locations reflects a lack of understanding of the nature of CSOs. Partnerships between AusAID and CSOs need to be based on analysis of each

partner's situation, shared values, recognition of each partner's strengths and constraints etc. not on externally set agendas.

10. AusAID can promote healthy and respectful relationships between SIG and CSOs, through specific activities, e.g.
    a. encourage the inclusion of CSOs with skills and interests in education, in Government task-forces, planning sessions and M&E processes in relation to education activities
    b. include selected CSOs in discussions of governance issues and governance activities supported by Australian Government

11. Faith Based Organisations play an important role in service delivery, community governance and organization, as well as advocacy. If Australia wants to support these areas, it must base its work with these organisations on a more detailed understanding of their strengths, values and interests, in the context of their respective doctrines.

12. There is currently insufficient information available about the extent and nature of CSOs operating at provincial and village level in Solomon Islands. Work on a data-base is being undertaken at the time of writing and this should identify further scope for cooperation at these levels.

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