



Triangulating Success: Building Post-Crisis Capacity in the Solomon Islands

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Acknowledgments

'Capacity *is* Development' is a call to systematically review, capture and discuss key capacity development lessons of the past and to look on to the future. Through distilling key policy and investment choices made over time to motivate forward planning on capacity development, this research paper helped define the content framework of the 'Capacity *is* Development' Global Event. This paper is based by a report ~~was~~ written by [John Davidson \(AusAID\)](#), [Laura Bailey \(World Bank\)](#) and [Christian Lotz \(UNDP\)](#).

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During the period of 1999 through 2003, the Solomon Islands experienced a governance crisis heightened by economic pressures that exacerbated tensions between Solomon Islanders of different island origins. Physical security deteriorated as the integrity and independence of security organs (including the Solomon Islands Police Force) failed, and key government institutions from schools to the Central Bank were compromised. On 24 July 2003, with a mandate unanimously approved by the Solomon Islands National Parliament, a regional peacekeeping force (RAMSI, the Regional Assistance Mission for the Solomon Islands) was deployed with the goal of helping the Solomon Islands Government restore law and order, strengthen government institutions, reduce corruption and re-invigorate the economy. In the five years since RAMSI deployed, attention of all international partners has gradually shifted from emergency stabilization measures (which have largely been successful) to a stronger focus on building capacity in institutions that deliver core state functions and support economic growth.

How were the cases chosen?

This note pulls together observations from a review of four projects in the Solomon Islands that have been referred to as “successful capacity building” or “successful approaches to capacity building”.¹ They were not selected as a representative sample of capacity development interventions in SI, and are neither a cross-section of all donor efforts nor a sample of one partner’s portfolio; instead, they were chosen opportunistically to investigate these reports of alleged “success”, with the intention of triangulating the reality of that perception from a range of stakeholders involved.

- The **Parliamentary Strengthening Project** seeks to improve the capacity of SI Parliament to efficiently and effectively performance its oversight, accountability, legislative, and representative functions and roles, by working with the National Parliament Office.
- The support to the **Office of the Auditor General**, part of RAMSI’s overall Accountability Program, seeks to strengthen this key Solomon Islands institution charged with ensuring accountability in the conduct of public accounts and administration.

¹ The present note is edited specifically for the ‘Capacity is Development Global Event’ and is based on a more detailed synthesis paper ‘Triangulating Success: A Synthesis of Observations on Building Post-Crisis Capacity in the Solomon Islands’, which is available at the website of the Solomon Island Parliament at <http://www.parliament.gov.sb/files/project/phase2/Synthesis%20Note%20Solomons%20CB%20Lessons%20Oct2008.pdf>.



- The Phase 2 Solomon Islands **Government Housing Management Project** seeks to assist key SIG agencies to manage government housing through the implementation of accountable and transparent polices and management practices in the Government Housing Division.
- The **Production and Marketing of Quality Vanilla** sub-project works along the entire value chain from farmer to buyer to processor to wholesaler to improve sustainable returns from high-quality vanilla production and sales.

The review was carried out in September 2008 during a joint mission with headquarters staff from AusAID, World Bank, and UNDP². As we visited the projects for only 8 days, our observations are clearly limited; we focused on success stories that have a potential to inspire further efforts in Solomon Islands and in other fragile post-conflict situations. We did not try to corroborate these stories as factual, and we did not try to identify or explain failure.

The genesis of this “investigation of success” came from the discussion during Professor Francis Fukuyama to the Solomons in March-April 2008, and his subsequent paper on statebuilding³. In particular, Fukuyama discusses the role of mentoring as an approach to capacity building in Solomon Islands, and he suggests that the current generation of middle managers seem to have lost the opportunities or abilities to receive and provide effective mentoring, and that this might be part of the explanation of the capacity loss since the early 90s. He also suggests that a shared discussion of where capacity had been, or is being, built, is an essential ingredient to reaching a shared understanding between Solomon Islanders and international donors regarding the trajectory of RAMSI and other external assistance.

Why is capacity important? What do we mean by capacity?

We approached capacity development by seeking to understand it as a complex process. We believe it involves individuals (and their skills and knowledge), organizations (including their constituent systems and processes) and the enabling environment (including norms and values that may define attitudes and behaviors). We chose to explicitly think of capacity **not as** a convenient “catch-all” term for training courses, computers, and office space. Capacity here is “the ability of people, organizations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully”⁴ – not something external to or separate from people, but rather a collective product of system dynamics (influenced by and influencing attitudes and behaviors) that manifests as joint performance (comprised of individual competence and skill, deployed alongside others’ competences).

PATTERNS, GENERALIZABLE OBSERVATIONS, POTENTIAL LESSONS?

² John Davidson, Assistant Director-General, AusAID; Christian Lotz, Peacebuilding Specialist, UNDP; Laura E. Bailey, Senior Operations ~~Specialist~~Officer, World Bank.

³ See “State-Building in the Solomon Islands”, July 9, 2008, Francis Fukuyama, World Bank, mimeo.

⁴ OECD/DAC 2006.



Can opportunism leverage ownership? The post-crisis environment presented opportunities and openings for targeted interventions in areas where capacity was very low as a result of the crisis, but specific demands for support was high. The three public sector projects were all derived from modest, focused initial interventions in response to such opportunities, leading to a second phase with a more ambitious but still focused project scope. For the most mature projects, those early focused interventions have had enough time to produce impact with potential spillover, leading to broader ‘systems’ impact. This stair-step project evolution seems to help build ownership on the part of key Government counterparts, who have had their own role in defining the iterative work approach.

The projects were all designed to be highly focused at limited organizational entities with relatively small numbers of people. However, they also presented opportunities for much wider systems impact. The projects had limited time horizons and were focused on achieving quick wins, but they also contributed to a strengthening of longer term institutional resilience. Building on these opportunities, the projects created virtuous cycles of interaction between direct efforts with quick and visible results, resulting in significantly increased status and influence that in turn led to strengthened ownership at higher levels, and better prospects for institutional sustainability, including replacement of staff, budget allocations and political support.

Critical mass – how to acquire, nurture and maintain a team where capacity can reside. Some interlocutors raises questions about the sustainability of the capacity built thus far. Would the capacity built be resilient enough to sustain high performance levels in the face of “shocks”, and would small but enthusiastic groups that did not yet have critical mass (both in numbers and skills levels) nor a long enough track record of working as a team be vulnerable? Others pointed to clear evidence of teams in more mature projects demonstrating early signs of resilient capacity.

The opportunity afforded to recruit a mixture of highly competent and experienced Solomon Island civil servants and recent graduates in some projects, appears to have created teams characterized by high levels of competence and corresponding high levels of energy and enthusiasm. Young team members were quickly given responsibilities and visibility, which built their confidence and sense of professionalism. This underlines the importance of balancing the pressure on deliverable ‘results’ or products with a more nuanced and context-specific focus on process. While this dynamic is self-reinforcing and contributes to a virtuous cycle, it is important that this balance be understood. The challenge will be to exhibit resilience to change as the team seeks out to fill positions as some members of the current staff choose to leave for better paying positions and new challenges.



Style matters. Across all projects reviewed multiple stakeholders emphasized the critical ‘coaching and partnering’ style of the skilled advisors/trainers. Project staff in most projects was entirely co-located and integrated with “their” counterpart units’ staff, and were characterized by coaching, congenial support, and an inclusive approach. Solomon Island staff commented that they were proud of ‘their’ TA, both in terms of their skills and attitude. Formal training is based on a skills-gap analysis that includes self-assessment, and training modules are specifically adapted to fit the local context.

Balancing tension between product and process – and between direct and indirect TA. Substantial debate in capacity-building discussions centers on the role and value-added of ‘direct’ technical assistance, where advisors perform line functions. We found a more nuanced reality in the projects we reviewed, including evidence of a transition from ‘direct TA’ to an ‘indirect’ model in a process that established credibility by delivering ‘product’ first. Employing training that is adapted to the context, TA increasingly working in partnership with country personnel, jointly determined work programs, and a range of other collaborative decision-making processes have been important. Critically, this transition appears to be built on an understanding that while product is clearly important, it is supporting the emergence and consolidation of the process that leads to product that is likely to hold the key to a resilient and competent system.

The use of corporate processes such as the development of an Corporate Plan has been one process-product example that has seen staff increase in confidence as they ‘design their workplace’, understand and internalize mission and goals. This shift in balance is not linear and will be subject to constant shocks from other parts of the operating environment.

In a socio-cultural context of the Solomon Islands where frequent mention is made of the Melanesian cultural norm of sharing physical resources but guarding or hoarding knowledge, we note that there is a transformative power created by sharing information vertically within Government and horizontally/diagonally from advisor to Government team members. Seen within this context, the type, quality and access to sharing information within a donor-supported capacity-building project may be as instrumental in changing the way in which people work as any skills training or short course.

Balancing tensions between capacity building and political agenda. Significant importance was attached by stakeholders in one project to the use of a cross-government task force. The key elements here appear to be consistency of advice across levels and areas supported by advisors, adding value in navigating complex and politically sensitive issues through the system, and providing a useful method of ‘buffering’ by building coalitions across the system. In situations with a reduction in the public service payroll, this could represent an innovative way to harness additional capacity outside the lead agency, especially when tackling interrelated



issues affecting public service management and service provision, without being held hostage by ministerial ‘turf’.

However, given the political complexities that confront the proposed policy changes in some areas, the question must arise: does new capacity in policy development have sustaining value if the underlying policy does not advance? Is there then a “backlash” against investing in policy debate? While capacity to formulate policies can be separated from capacity to implement them, the projects showcase the importance of the team experiencing a sense of respect and pride from seeing the results of their “built capacity”.

Acknowledging the importance of leadership – the heroic and politically savvy individual supported by a broader coalition. The ‘success stories’ reported in this review are, in no small measure, due to the charismatic professionalism of approach of their leaders supported by a network of Solomon Islanders across society, and ‘staffed’ by direct TA delivered with a very specific style: open, inclusive, approachable, and nurturing. While the ‘heroic leader’ storyline is thus well-known in these cases, attention is also required to the support they received from a coalition of forces – including prominent members of parliament, a small number of senior Solomon Islands public servants, some powerful sections of the community, and the media. These examples demonstrate the potential role for the donor community in providing the resources to enable early and demonstrable success, supporting the legitimacy of both the leaders and this developing system.

An awareness of systems, both within the agency and across Solomon Islands institutions. All three public sector projects showcase the ‘systems’ linkages across different Government entities, and even in the vanilla project, farming and curing of vanilla beans are seen as only one part of the ‘system’ of the value chain, and is structured in ways that recognize (and indeed take advantage of) the dynamics of the private sector market system. Results achieved in one project depended on and had positive repercussions across other entities and sectors, and sometimes interacting directly with other capacity development projects with clear synergies being demonstrated.

Deeper in the plumbing of government, we found evidence of one project embedding capacity results as rewards in the larger Government system to “evolve them from within”; the project team advisors successfully advocated to link documented individual success in skills development into the public service review and promotion process.



FINAL OBSERVATIONS

The three Government projects had a focus on building and supporting functional capacities for leadership, accountability and inclusiveness - all key dimensions of resilient and responsive state-society relations, and they may contribute to an endogenous and domestically driven statebuilding process. All the projects have benefitted from a generally improved enabling environment and the overall stabilization that RAMSI has provided, and they have reached a certain level of sustainability as a result of institutionalization, teambuilding and the strengthening of technical skills at the individual level. This has allowed them to reach a point where their impacts have begun to interact in critical ways; there is evidence of synergy and systems impact that could allow for an increasingly programmatic and strategic support for capacity development with a specific focus on statebuilding in support of peace – building core state functions in ways that explicitly rebuild trust and confidence between citizens and the state.