

**SHARING AND EXPLORING PACIFIC APPROACHES  
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FROM PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES**



**SOLOMON ISLAND  
NATIONAL PEACE COUNCIL:  
INTER-COMMUNAL MEDIATION**

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**Title: Solomon Island National Peace Council: Inter-communal Mediation**

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The background of the page is a photograph of a sunset over the ocean. The sky is filled with soft, golden light from the setting sun, with some clouds catching the light. The water is calm, reflecting the colors of the sky. In the bottom right corner, there is a large, intricate, white decorative pattern that resembles traditional Pacific Island art, featuring circular motifs and wavy lines. The text is overlaid on this background in semi-transparent green boxes.

# SOLOMON ISLAND NATIONAL PEACE COUNCIL: INTER-COMMUNAL MEDIATION

## SUMMARY

When the Townsville Peace Agreement formally ended the period of violent conflict in the Solomon Islands known as 'the Tensions' in 2000, it also established a Peace Monitoring Council (PMC) to monitor and enforce the agreement. In 2003, the PMC was transformed into the National Peace Council (NPC) which, in recognition that a high level of animosity remained between and within many communities, was mandated to conduct the work of restoring inter-communal ties that had been broken by the conflict. This case study examines the NPC's inter-communal mediation work carried out from 2003 to 2006, including by reflecting on the challenges and successes of blending introduced models of mediation with traditional reconciliation processes.

# 1. CONTEXT

While the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement in 2000 brought an official end to the violent conflict in Solomon Islands known as ‘the Tensions’, deep divisions remained. Years of fighting had resulted in death, damage to property, loss of livelihood, and – perhaps more fundamentally – broken communal bonds, particularly on the islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita. In many cases, lingering animosity remained within and between communities for transgressions committed during the tensions, ranging from damage to property to raids, abductions, rapes and killings. Many regions and communities found themselves divided by the conflict, which sometimes split villages and families, destroying the ties fundamental to Solomon Islands society<sup>1</sup>.

Reflecting on the need for “reconciliation to be meaningful” at this vital community level, the Townsville Peace Agreement called for “face-to-face dialogue at community, village, family, individual and organizational levels”<sup>2</sup>. To coordinate this process, the Agreement established a Peace Monitoring Council (PMC) with a mandate and funding from the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) to “monitor, report on and enforce the terms of this Agreement”<sup>3</sup>. As part of this task, the PMC was directed to organize and dispatch a team of Peace Monitors to facilitate inter-communal dialogue and to ensure overall compliance with the Agreement in communities across the Solomon Islands<sup>4</sup>. However, despite the wording of the Agreement, PMC monitors did not have actual ‘enforcement’ authority – instead, they were limited to using their stature and relationships to persuade parties to disarm, participate in reconciliation processes, and act in overall compliance with the Agreement<sup>5</sup>.

Initially, PMC monitoring posts were established in various major population centres and former conflict ‘hotspots’ primarily around Malaita and Guadalcanal. PMC monitors were drawn from the communities and included respected individuals selected for their neutrality during the conflict as well as stature in the community, including chiefs, teachers, church figures, youth leaders, and women’s group representatives<sup>6</sup>.

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1 Maebuta, Jack and Rebecca Spence. 2009. ‘Attempts at Building Peace in the Solomon Islands: Disconnected Layers’. Reflecting on Peace Practice Project: Cumulative Impact Case Study. Cambridge: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

2 Townsville Peace Agreement (2000), Part 5, Article 1a.

3 Townsville Peace Agreement (2000), Part 6, Article 1a.

4 Townsville Peace Agreement (2000), Part 6, Article 4.

5 Hegarty, David. 2001. Monitoring Peace in Solomon Islands. State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Working Paper 01/04. Canberra: ANU College of Asia and the Pacific.

6 Maebuta and Spence, 16.

Their main task was to conduct community outreach to raise awareness of and promote compliance with the terms of the peace agreement, particularly regarding disarmament. Monitors were also increasingly called upon to mediate in disputes between individuals, families and communities to help begin to restore the social fabric of conflict-affected communities<sup>7</sup>.

In the years following its establishment, the SIG recognized that for the PMC's inter-communal reconciliation work to be more effective, it needed to transition to become a more independent and politically neutral body, rather than being seen as an arm of the SIG itself. As such, in 2003, the PMC was transformed into the National Peace Council (NPC), a body designed to more closely resemble a non-governmental organization, with funding from primarily external sources to ensure greater neutrality and independence<sup>8</sup>. The NPC's mandate was to support the ongoing reconciliation and national unity process while continuing the peacebuilding, mediation and outreach activities begun by the PMC. Much like their predecessors, NPC monitors were responsible for monitoring conflict in assigned zones throughout the country, reporting incidents to the proper authorities where necessary, but largely working to mediate conflicts as they arose. Through this, they contributed towards building the capacity of communities to resolve their own conflicts through dialogue and restoring communal bonds. Around the same time, the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) also began its work of disarming combatants, providing a police presence in some communities and encouraging the reestablishment of law and order. Over the following years, the NPC would work closely with RAMSI in the communities to carry out its inter-communal mediation work.

Between 2003 and 2006, the NPC carried out a number of inter- and intra-communal reconciliations. In 2006, the NPC was disbanded following a task force review<sup>9</sup>. Since then, communal reconciliations have fallen under the responsibility of the Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace (MNURP). This case study will examine the processes used by the NPC in conducting the work of inter-communal reconciliation in the post-Tensions climate, considering the role the NPC was able to play as an indigenously led reconciliation body, and assessing the impacts it was able to achieve during its tenure.

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7 Hegarty, David. 2003. Peace Interventions in the South Pacific: Lessons from Bougainville and Solomon Islands. Paper for Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies Conference Island State Security 2003: "Oceania at the Crossroads," Honolulu, Hawaii, 15–17 July 2003.

8 MNURP. 2006. Final Report of the NPC Review Taskforce. Honiara: MNURP.

9 Ibid.

## 2. PROBLEM

Reflecting on his work in a report to the NPC head office in Honiara, an NPC peace monitor in Eastern Guadalcanal described a specific situation indicative of a wider scenario facing many Solomon Islands communities in the aftermath of the Tensions. He recounted an incident in which a group of youths requested that he lead a reconciliation with a group of youths from a neighbouring community. These neighbouring youths, the first group of youths argued, were connected with a raid on their village during the Tensions that resulted in the abduction, imprisonment and torture of a number of young people, and obvious animosities still remained. This situation, the monitor noted, was not specific to his post. The lack of reintegration of militarized youth in some communities and the prevalence of gangs of disaffected youth in others continued to threaten community relations already traumatized by the conflict. These broken communal bonds, he wrote, threatened to jeopardize the fragile peace in not just these communities, but across the entire country.

The situation described above is but one of many detailed in the written reports of NPC monitors and in interviews reflecting on the time spent in their posts. They point to the key problem of managing post-conflict after-effects of the Tensions, including dealing with lost family members, lost or damaged property, and in some cases, dealing with the memory of offenses committed, trauma and suffering. These after-effects have eroded the social fabric – in some cases very seriously – that is so important to Solomon Islands culture, constituting a major barrier to any attempts at a wider national or inter-provincial reconciliation.

Compounding these inter-communal tensions was the fact that in some communities, traditional *kastom* processes had been compromised because the conflict had decreased the power and legitimacy of chiefs. In some cases, the chiefs' instructions had been ignored during the Tensions, or the chief himself had been attacked, weakening his authority. In others the chiefs themselves had been involved or implicated in localized violent conflict. As a result, there was a demonstrated need for a neutral, external intervener to come into the communities to help the chiefs and the people repair broken relationships, restore communal bonds, and enable people to return home and rebuild. This was particularly important given that community relations are essential to peace and order in Solomon Islands, and given the often limited presence of formal law enforcement mechanisms.

## 3. PARTICIPANTS

### The National Peace Council (NPC)

The NPC was established in 2003, tasked with supporting government efforts towards reconciliation and peace. It was mandated to continue the peace monitoring and outreach work of its predecessor, the PMC, as well as to resolve the issues of peace, law and order at the community level that would contribute towards national stability and set the stage for national reconciliation.

### NPC Peace Monitors

To fulfil this mandate, the NPC relied on a network of approximately 90 peace monitors stationed in a field posts in strategic population centres or former areas of conflict around the country, supported by an administrative team and advisers based at the NPC's head office in Honiara. As the face of the NPC in the communities in which they were posted, peace monitors were generally chosen based on their stature and potential for acceptance and neutrality.

### Local chiefs

While NPC monitors took on the role of coordinating and facilitating reconciliations, they relied heavily on the traditional power and dispute resolution function bestowed upon local chiefs and religious leaders within their communities. Indeed, NPC monitors noted that special emphasis was placed on preserving and even drawing upon the power given to the chiefs, rather than trying to subvert or override it through their interventions. By including chiefs in their inter-communal reconciliation work, NPC monitors were also able to help restore their traditional authority, which in many cases had been damaged or weakened as a result of the conflict.

### Conflict parties

Conflicts, sometimes violent, between members of the same community, or between members of different communities, continued to surface even years after the formal end to the Tensions. Formal peace processes such as the Townsville Peace Agreement focused solely on combatants, leaving most of the longstanding grievances of local villagers unaddressed. In addition, transgressions and atrocities committed between communities and among villagers during the Tensions created an additional level of animosity that, while unaddressed, remains a constant threat to peace.

## 4. PROCESS

### Selection of a monitoring team

To fulfil its mandate to support the country moving towards reconciliation and peace, the NPC relied on a network of approximately 90 peace monitors stationed in a field posts in strategic population centres or former areas of conflict around the key “post-conflict” provinces of the country, supported by an administrative team and advisers based at the NPC’s head office in Honiara. As the face of the NPC in the communities in which they were posted, peace monitors were generally chosen based on their stature and potential for acceptance and – more importantly – their perceived neutrality during the Tensions. However, there were also instances where rehabilitated ex-militants were chosen to be monitors because of the additional level of influence they were able to bring to such negotiations. In order to ensure acceptance, monitors were posted to communities within their own island; however, in order to manage obligations or loyalties to their own kinship networks, efforts were sometimes made to station monitors or work on particular mediations in posts adjacent to their home communities rather than within them. While monitors were predominantly men, efforts were made to ensure that each post had at least one, preferably two women monitors.

As further described below, when opportunities to undertake large inter-communal reconciliations arose, an NPC team would be tailored for the specific communities involved. The team would usually comprise the local NPC monitors but may also include other senior NPC representation likely to have respect and influence in the particular communities. Women NPC monitors would also form part of the team.

### Roles of the NPC monitoring teams

While the NPC monitors became engaged in facilitating reconciliation within and between communities, they also completed a range of tasks from monitoring local tensions and conducting awareness sessions (providing basic information and exhortation about conflict resolution and peace), sometimes by working closely with RAMSI officers. RAMSI was primarily responsible for policing and restoring law and order, and as such, RAMSI officers were often invited to witness NPC reconciliation work and at times, to even participate in dialogues where necessary. In addition, depending on the scenario in question, local Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) officers were occasionally





requested to participate or witness reconciliation dialogues. This demonstrates the twofold importance of gaining the acceptance and buy-in of the security sector in the inter-communal reconciliation process, as well as fostering a greater acceptance of security and police officers by the villagers themselves, especially in communities where law and order was still fragile.

Furthermore, while NPC monitors took on the role of coordinating and facilitating reconciliations, they relied heavily on the traditional power and dispute resolution function bestowed upon local chiefs and religious leaders within their communities. Indeed, NPC monitors noted that special emphasis was placed on preserving and even drawing upon the power given to the chiefs, rather than trying to subvert or override it through their interventions. This was particularly important in areas where the chief's stature and role had been damaged because of the conflict. In such instances, the chiefs needed the NPC to help restore that role, through providing the means and logistical support for the work of reconciliation, but leaving the chiefs responsible for any ceremonial reconciliations, and where possible, allowing them to lead any dialogues.

The NPC's reconciliation work did not focus on addressing the underlying drivers of the broader Tensions, as this was not in their operational mandate. Instead, they concentrated their efforts on more immediate short-term post-conflict recovery at a local level, while advocating for wider reconciliation and

peace. Their main priority in their local mediation and reconciliation work was to provide and facilitate a process that would enable communities to heal themselves, as a precursor to reaching out across broader social divisions. Such a process would generally begin with an initial 'bridging' reconciliation based on kastom and traditional practices to demonstrate willingness to reconcile, followed by a process incorporating Western concepts of shuttle mediation and negotiation, ending with a kastom ceremony in which agreed upon compensation items and amounts would formally be exchanged and social fabric restored. Each of these steps will be further outlined below.

### **Pre-negotiations and preparation**

In many instances, NPC inter-communal reconciliations were initiated upon request by chiefs or community members of villages in conflict. As previously noted, in many instances the traditional dispute resolution role of village chiefs had been weakened by during the Tensions, so chiefs often felt they needed support to deal with matters that they would have previously handled among themselves. Furthermore, the NPC noted that in some respects the approach of the chiefs also had its own shortcomings, meaning that there was room for building upon traditional ways of operating. For example, chiefs often experience a great deal of pressure to deliver a good outcome for their group, and thus their room to compromise was limited without seeming weak, resulting in negotiations ending in stalemate. Similarly, when resolving disputes within communities, the role of the chief was often to give a final decision. Often, however, the 'losing' side can be left angry and may even threaten the opposing party. It is in these cases that the chiefs would approach the NPC monitors posted in their villages for assistance. In other cases NPC monitors would themselves identify situations that required intervention.

Once a particular case had been identified, NPC monitors would liaise with NPC headquarters and the local chiefs to ensure the necessary resourcing and agreements were in place for the mediation to proceed. Some relatively minor matters were mediated by local NPC monitor teams, while other larger matters were dealt with by including senior NPC representation from the national council and by forming a mediation team (with at least two women, if possible) from surrounding NPC posts. Minor matters were sometimes dealt with quite quickly between the parties involved, while larger matters might take several months of liaison and planning<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this case study we describe the process as used for larger and more complicated matters.

Upon arrival in the relevant community, the NPC team would spend a significant amount of time –often up to several days – explaining and building trust in their role as well as meeting the parties to the conflict and preparing them for mediation. The team would split up for this purpose, talking separately with groups and individuals. Chiefs were crucial to this process, often relaying to the wider community the goals of the process and allaying possible concerns about the NPC’s role.

Equally important was listening carefully and respectfully to the key parties, demonstrating an understanding of their circumstances and concerns, and preparing them for the mediation process. These detailed discussions would also negotiate arrangements for an initial or ‘bridging’ ceremony.

Gaining an understanding of the concern of women, through the work of female peace monitors, was crucial. As a senior former NPC official explained, women were often badly affected during the conflict by warring parties and by their own chiefs. Whereas in the past, conflict had been waged strictly among warriors, with women and children relatively unaffected, the recent conflict saw the use of guns and an extension of the fighting and its effects to women. As such, it was important that women’s specific needs for reconciliation also be incorporated into the process.

### **The ‘bridging’ ceremony**

In matters of serious conflict, Solomon Islands kastom often requires ceremonial exchange of valuables (often shell money) – as a precursor or ‘bridge’ to the main reconciliation process between conflicting parties. NPC monitors noted that such a bridging ceremony was often necessary to extinguish the animosity that would otherwise keep the parties from being able to come to the table for negotiation.

Such ceremonies also serve to ‘cover’ the subsequent interactions, both exhorting and encouraging all participants to behave respectfully and compensating in advance for any offence that might be taken for hurtful things that necessarily, yet regretfully, have to be said as part of the process.

Utilizing this bridging mechanism, an NPC-facilitated reconciliation typically began with a traditional ceremony, led by local chiefs, bringing the parties to together through an exchange of goods of customary value, symbolizing to the community and to each other that the parties were prepared to enter negotiations in good faith<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> It should also be noted that in some cases, it was considered too difficult to bring groups together at this stage. In these cases, an alternative process was used, which involved holding a customary ceremony individually with each group, conducting a form of shuttle mediation, before finally bringing parties together for a reconciliation ceremony.

## Shuttle mediation, negotiation and bargaining

In the days or weeks following this symbolic setting aside of overt conflict, the NPC would bring parties together, with NPC monitors taking the role of conflict mediator. The NPC peace monitors received training in a modified version of Western mediation practice<sup>12</sup>, and they further modified this in their work in inter-communal mediations.

The introduced process was seen as a way of enhancing traditional orally transmitted Melanesian processes of discussion – ‘Tok Stori’ in Solomon Islands Pijin. It was also blended with Christian values and practices that are central to Solomon Islands society; for example, each session of an NPC inter-communal mediation would be opened and closed with a prayer. At the core of this blended process was building trust in the NPC by stressing and demonstrating neutrality. This enabled the NPC monitors to maintain their credibility with the conflicting parties.

After an opening session covering formalities and establishing the role of the NPC, parties would raise, explain, and discuss grievances. In matters of serious conflict in Solomon Islands, a transgression/s has occurred, and in response, people usually moved very quickly to make a request or demand for compensation to redress the grievance and thereby restore relationships and social bonds<sup>13</sup>. NPC peace monitors both mitigated and engaged with compensation as a way of processing conflict. To some extent, they employed listening and questioning skills to deflect compensation demands to instead focus on assisting parties to express their needs and concerns in relation to the grievance.

For instance, parties would be encouraged to discuss how the problem arose and how they had been affected, but it is unclear how extensive such discussion was in NPC inter-communal processes. The NPC team also engaged directly with such compensation demands. They encouraged and cajoled parties to clarify and reduce their compensation demands, stressing the importance of the traditional values of compensation in the process.

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12 Provided in 2003 and 2004 by the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, The University of Queensland. The stages in this model are: Introduction; Stories; Issues; Discussion; Possibilities; Agreement; Review.

13 The issue of compensation is a matter of debate in Solomon Islands. Some churches, for instance, forbid the practice of compensation, while others note that it has become corrupted to the level of extortion during the Tensions, and others still point to the erosion of its true value through recent monetization. A full discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this case study.

Given this traditional – and therefore necessary – focus on compensation, it would seem that the NPC peace monitors were unable, even if they wanted, to fully introduce a new system of ‘mediation’ into play. One former senior NPC official noted that a system for dealing with the full range of human conflicts and grievances had historically been in place throughout the Solomon Islands. It seems, then, that the NPC monitors used an introduced process and skills to mitigate the demanding dimension of parties’ conflict behaviour while simultaneously re-connecting parties with customary (and Christian) communal values.

The process of discussing issues, reducing demands and finding a workable and acceptable level and form of compensation would often take some time. Parties to the mediation often did not respond immediately or exchange offers publicly. Instead, parties were said to often discuss issues with their extended family in the evening, ‘sleep on’ issues, or come to individual members of the NPC mediating team for private discussion and deliberation before the mediation was reconvened on the following day. As part of this process, the NPC mediators would spend significant time working with chiefs to establish the proper terms of compensation. Over a number of days of facilitated discussion, the parties would negotiate a settlement on the amount of compensation to be paid according to the measure of wrongs committed.

In many cases, parties made demands over and above those prescribed by kastom. In these instances, peace monitors noted that it was often necessary to revisit the issue to work towards levels of compensation that were more in line with kastom, offering an opportunity for the NPC monitors to once again bring in the chiefs for guidance, helping to reaffirm their traditional authority. One monitor noted that while these negotiations were often tedious and lengthy, when one party backs off initial demands and ultimately accepts a lower degree of compensation, such an act is one way they can “show their heart”, thus demonstrating how even compensation-focused negotiations have a value in building towards reconciliation.

### **The traditional reconciliation ceremony**

Once a settlement was reached, a traditional reconciliation ceremony – led by local chiefs according to kastom – served as a public acknowledgement that a settlement has been reached and that the restoration of relationships could then proceed in earnest. The process generally closed with prayer, drawing on the importance of Christian faith as a unifying factor. In some cases, the

NPC mediators oversaw the formal swearing of an oath and/or the signing of a document, but it appears that practices varied from area to area and case by case. At times, RAMSI police officers were also called upon to ‘witness’ agreements. In most cases, the process was witnessed by the community, which ensured that the parties were committed to carrying out reconciliation on the terms they had agreed upon. In this way, the NPC process served as a confidence-building measure, a healing mechanism, and a public affirmation that social ties could now be restored.

## 5. CHALLENGES

### Balancing kastom and introduced mediation models

One of the challenges the NPC monitors faced was in trying to balance kastom with the ‘modern’ model of introduced mediation and joint participatory problem solving they were exposed to through external training. In particular, former monitors noted the constant need to look for ways to empower village chiefs and to use the process to reinforce rather than override traditional



mechanisms. Only by doing this would the NPC have credibility and be able to operate in local environments. It is also likely that they were more comfortable with – and had more confidence in – traditional rather than introduced conflict management processes. At the same time, the NPC monitors saw the value in encouraging the chiefs away from quasi-adjudicative conflict management behaviours and making the needs of the parties more central to discussions. This was particularly so given that the role of the chiefs had become compromised during the Tensions, leading to reduced capacity for authoritative decision-making. It seems that some form of compromise was found. The NPC facilitated inter-communal mediations in ways that made traditional ceremony and chiefs central but also drew out the needs and concerns of parties, including women, who would traditionally have had much less of a voice. Moreover, the NPC process seems to have achieved this in a way that restored the communal values of kastom in ways that were workable for local people.

### **Monetization of compensation and corrosion of kastom**

A related challenge was the influx of ‘modern’ thinking and a generational divide that many claim has led to a focus on the monetary value of compensation rather than its traditional function as a means to repair relationships. During the Tensions, community members were harassed by militants, including through demands for compensation often based on questionable pretences. This eroded the traditional value of compensation, and it has been noted that some ex-militants have remained similarly motivated more for self-interest than peace, often seeking to secure greater rehabilitation benefits through negotiations. More broadly, monitors noted that nowadays, many people, particularly young people who are less familiar with kastom, are motivated by a desire for cash and material goods rather than for reconciliation and forgiveness. Once again, the monitors noted the importance of harnessing the moral authority of the chiefs, where possible, to counter the emphasis on material gain.

### **Role confusion**

The NPC was originally established as a peace monitoring body (the PMC) and indeed, the NPC field staff retained the title of ‘peace monitor’. Monitoring is a quite different from mediating; the former more passive than the latter. There appears to have been some confusion among the local population about the role of the NPC monitors, with some expectation that they should do more mediation, while on the other hand, suspicion that they were monitoring – and therefore reporting on – local people and their actions. This was further complicated by the fact that the NPC was sometimes seen either as a

government agency or well-heeled foreign-funded operation, both of which generated unrealistic demands and expectations.

### **Integration with wider peacebuilding**

The 2006 Task Force Review of the NPC, which led to its disbanding, notes that the organization was created at a time of crisis and was never given a particularly clear mandate from the government nor any clear, actionable objectives. As such, the NPC's inter-communal mediation work was described as "reactive" rather than proactive, focused on responding to hotspots with the potential to flare up into conflict rather than a coordinated effort towards national peacebuilding. With no strategic workplan, NPC inter-communal mediations were not able to contribute to an overall peacebuilding programme.

### **Logistical constraints**

Many NPC peace monitors expressed the larger logistical challenges facing their work. One monitor's report notes, "I really need more mediators and NPC monitors to help me out". This is a common refrain mentioned through the reports. Dispersed over a range of difficult-to-access areas of the country and with apparent shortages of personnel, monitors noted that a great deal of their time was spent travelling between villages, and that fuel costs and lack of resources often made such travel cost- or time-prohibitive.

## **6. RESULTS AND IMPACTS**

### **Reconciliations (mainly) achieved and kept**

The NPC did not have as part of its process a formal mechanism for following up on reconciliations or monitoring outcomes. This was noted as a shortfall in the 2006 Task Force Review that led to the disbanding of the NPC. As a result, it is difficult to draw any overall conclusions about the numbers of reconciliations held or success of the reconciliation process. At the same time, NPC monitors were well connected to the communities in which they were involved, and were able to informally monitor ongoing peace, collect anecdotal information about the progress of communities, and intervene where necessary. These anecdotal accounts point to good adherence to agreements in the communities, and a gradual rebuilding of communal ties following reconciliation processes. This does not mean total success. There is at least one account of a reconciliation ceremony not achieving agreement and leading to more conflict, although this is noted as a case of inadequate preparation that led to changes in NPC



monitor practice. There seems little reason to doubt the NPC accounts of overall success with inter-communal mediation given the broader capacity of societal agreements to hold in the Solomon Islands.

### **Kastom and church upheld**

Throughout the Solomon Islands, kastom and the church are the pillars of society that ensure the everyday maintenance of peace and order. The state is often not present and/or not able to exert authority outside these institutions. However, both kastom and the church had been compromised and weakened during the Tensions – although the latter arguably to a lesser degree. By integrating kastom and church in successful conflict resolution activities, and particularly by recalibrating rates of compensation within those set by kastom, the NPC inter-communal mediation work helped to restore faith in these sustainable local conflict management mechanisms.

### **New conflict resolution models and techniques introduced and disseminated**

All the former NPC monitors surveyed were highly appreciative of the training they had received, both in the procedural skills of mediation, and in the psychosocial training they received in areas such as anger management. They felt that this training empowered them with the skills to be effective at their work and to be able to deal with a wider variety of situations. They also felt that the training encouraged a culture of giving and being able to earn respect, of listening, of being able to see things from different perspectives, and of being able to communicate more effectively with people. One monitor noted that despite formidable logistical and institutional challenges – the same identified in the 2006 task force report – the NPC team was still largely able to carry out the work it was tasked to do, even in the face of limited budgets and staffing. He explained that having a clear mediation process to follow helped ensure that some degree of consistency in the work carried out across the different posts, and that on the ground, it seemed that people were able to trust and accept the NPC as a neutral, independent body committed to working towards peace. Some of the former NPC monitors have subsequently been employed by the MNURP and other peace and conflict organizations. The approach promoted by the NPC also exposed chiefs to a more participatory mode of decision-making in conflict management, often convincing them of the value of having all parties – including women and young people – involved in processes.

## Increased participation by women

The incorporation of women's views in the reconciliation process was a crucial part of the NPC mediation. The NPC monitors recognized that the involvement of women was vital not only because of their particular experiences during the conflict, but also because they could be brought into the process as agents for peace. As one female NPC monitor explained, "women usually wanted peace while men wanted to win". As such, the NPC monitors negotiated with the chiefs in the initial stages of the process to enable the women's involvement. Once this was achieved, women peace monitors played a vital role in talking to women in early rounds of shuttle mediation, gathering their views, and helping to ensure that these issues were brought out in the negotiation process. Through this negotiation with chiefs, the NPC peace monitors were able to respect *kastom* while gaining some movement towards greater women's participation.

## 7. TECHNIQUES AND VALUES

While the NPC's inter-communal mediation process used an introduced model of third-party mediation as a broad guide and drew upon some introduced mediation techniques, it operated through a framework of traditional power structures and systems, namely the chiefly system and traditional processes of compensation and exchange. From the introduced mediation model, the NPC process stressed the value of people coming together to discuss their grievances and create their own solutions. However, by blending this model with *kastom*, the NPC process emphasized the importance of doing so in the context of local culture, including through compensation. What emerged is a hybrid process of inter-communal reconciliation that borrowed from introduced techniques, but remained fundamentally grounded in Solomon Islands culture.


The NPC inter-communal mediations were predominantly conducted as local-level community exchanges and dialogues. Specific techniques used included shuttle mediation, respectful listening (including techniques of summarising and reflecting), trust building and facilitated discussion to explore, test and challenge claims and demands before moving to a workable settlement.

The mobilization of a range of shared values was key to the success of NPC inter-communal mediations. Again, *kastom* was key. One former NPC monitor explained that if he and his colleagues came upon a particular stalemate or impasse with elderly chiefs, he would sometimes speak in local language,

invoking the ancestor figures and origin myths for the chief's people to shift the chief's position and commit him to peace. Exchange through compensation is also crucial. As one NPC monitor expressed, "Hurt cannot be forgotten through words." Even prayer – an important component to the Solomon Islands values system – "cannot wash the problem from your heads". Instead, in the Solomon Islands context, reconciliation must involve settlement through some degree of exchange. As one former senior NPC official explained, "It does not have to cost much – but it does have to cost." More generally, the use of bridging ceremonies helps to set expectations about the behaviour of parties to the process.

Alongside kastom, church played a similarly important role in the NPC inter-communal mediations. Christianity was often cast as a unifying force, and it was certainly used as a way of 'joining' people's efforts at the beginning and





end of each day of mediation, and of consummating the overall agreement and reconciliation. Christian values were also used quite directly and purposively by NPC peace monitors. In one report from an NPC monitoring post, the NPC monitor makes the argument that peace is a “divine weapon” that can be used to “conquer evil forces of the region” that “drive us to disunity”. Indeed, some NPC workers noted that they would encourage parties to compromise by convincing them that “The way down is the way up” – that by being more humble and more willing to compromise on demands, God would provide rewards in the end.

Finally, NPC inter-communal mediation drew heavily on the much more prosaic value of – and commitment to – peace itself. In their reports and in other accounts of their work, NPC monitors note explaining to parties the need to come together, not only for the good of the country – an aspiration that may not have resonated deeply with many of the parties – but also for the good of their communities. The monitors would emphasize that while there was conflict in or between their communities, no donors or NGOs or government agencies would come to provide aid, and that health and education of the children would suffer as a result. In other words, they would strenuously emphasize the costs of conflict, often in the face of demands from former militants, as a sufficient reason for coming to resolution. That is, they would say that peace cannot guarantee material or other benefits, but it must be the starting point.

## 8. LESSONS LEARNED AND OUTSTANDING ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

### **The importance of allowing adequate time for processes to unfold**

Former monitors stressed the need for patience in these processes. A female former monitor explained that in this type of process, people needed to come to their own decisions in their own time. Sometimes, this meant giving people the opportunity to sleep on issues rather than seeking an immediate response in a facilitated discussion (a notable difference from mediation in Western contexts). In other cases, this meant having to leave a community and return up to two weeks later, in order to give people sufficient time to think things over and change their minds, if needed. She explained that when people felt rushed into a decision, this could lead them to abandon the process altogether, or create other problems in the future. She noted that this was one of the drawbacks

of some traditional kastom reconciliations, in which chiefs often expect both sides to come together, make an agreement about compensation, and have the reconciliation ceremony straight away. In doing so, she reflected, this could fail to give people adequate time to truly resolve their issues, including some underlying problems that had caused the conflict in the first place. As such, the NPC process, with its emphasis on patience and encouraging people to come to their own decisions, represented a potentially more fruitful way of resolving these types of conflicts.

### **The importance of shared local values and their combination**

NPC inter-communal reconciliation processes made much use of the shared values of kastom, church, and peace (see discussion of each in the previous section). Without these values to unify people in conflict, and to appeal to, it seems that the work of the NPC monitors would have been much more difficult. Indeed, it seems that the NPC monitors judged that the introduced mediation process and skills offered to them were primarily useful as a process guide and a way of improving their ways of interacting with parties. This is not to downplay the value of the training, which monitors report very positively on, and it is the case that the NPC processes adopted to some extent the participatory mode of conflict management advocated in the provided training. It is important to note, however, that the social power that was necessary to re-regulate behaviour and convince people of the need for peace was largely embedded in local community values.

Finally, it is important to note the prevalence of 'syncretism' in Solomon Islands – the combining of apparently contradictory beliefs and values.

In the NPC inter-communal mediation work, NPC monitors were able to successfully and simultaneously appeal to values of kastom, church and development<sup>14</sup>. The monitors recognized the need to incorporate church values such as forgiveness and redemption and prayer into the reconciliation process, while layering upon them the need for kastom and its focus on compensation and exchange.

### **The importance of relationships**

While neutrality is highly prized in Western mediation models, former NPC monitors noted that there were definite instances where it was helpful to have monitors from the conflict communities facilitating the mediation and reconciliation work. With their experience and relationships, they could reflect on past tradition and practice as a strategy for getting through impasses,

<sup>14</sup> It must be noted, though, that some churches forbid the practice of compensation.

particularly when talking with chiefs. Having this shared relationship – to the people, place, and traditions of the community – gave these ‘insider’ mediators an extra degree of leverage that they could use to guide the process in a more fruitful direction. While such a form of mediation is frowned upon in some Western models, it was seen as having a value in breaking deadlocks in the Solomon Islands context.

### **Monitoring and follow-up**

The NPC’s inter-communal mediation work would likely have been much more visible (and perhaps effective) with adequate monitoring and follow-up. Due to the ad hoc nature of the work, there seems to have been little effort made on the part of NPC monitors to return to communities to evaluate the success of their interventions. Compounding this issue, the quality of reporting from the NPC posts was said to be poor, and analysis or integration of the data at the NPC headquarters was lacking. With an added level of follow-up and monitoring from the posts, results could have helped contribute to a more strategic workplan, could have fed into ongoing training programmes for peace monitors, and may have provided valuable information about NPC successes for the 2006 review.

### **Limited operational timeframe and integrated programming**

The NPC was involved in inter-communal mediation work from 2003 until it was disbanded in 2006 following the task force review. Supporters of the NPC argue that the inter-communal mediation programme ended prematurely, before it was able to achieve the kind of broader reconciliation for which it was striving.

Some of the former peace monitors expressed the opinion that, should the NPC have been able to continue, the country would by now be on a more solid trajectory towards peace. While it is hard to make judgements about these claims, it is clear that outstanding Tension-related inter-communal conflicts remained at the end of the NPC’s operations.

It should also be noted that many of the failures noted in the 2006 task force report – including the need for more funding and a stronger mandate and workplan – were mentioned in monitoring post reports from as early as 2004. Without a clear mandate, there were questions as to the extent of the role that the NPC and its peace monitors could play within communities. Meanwhile, with no strategic workplan or coordination between posts, monitors had little choice but to engage in their work on an ad hoc basis as instances arose, rather

than taking a more proactive stance.

### **Participatory problem-solving versus traditional authority**

The hybrid process developed by NPC monitors apparently blends kastom and Western mediation with some success. Yet it also raises questions about the viability of combining a participatory model of problem-solving with the traditional authority represented by the chiefs. Some chiefs took to this quite readily, acknowledging that mediation skills gave them a new tool that maintained their standing while limiting chances for resentment from parties who were disgruntled with previous decision-making outcomes. Others, however, saw it as an attack upon – or at least erosion of – their authority. While the NPC process illustrates the degree to which the monitors attempted to balance the two – to some degree of success – former monitors also noted that chiefs also sometimes fail to understand their roles in these processes. As a result, questions of authority and legitimacy still remain when trying to integrate these different models into a single process.

### **Outsider-neutrals versus insider-partials**

A related question concerns the use of chiefs and other ‘insider partials’, such as peace monitors from conflict-affected communities, or the involvement of ex-combatants in some instances, who may have a stake in the outcome of the process they are meant to facilitate. Given the importance of relationships in the Solomon Islands context, insider partials clearly contribute to an effective process. At the same time, the NPC put much weight on neutrality and impartiality, claiming and using these qualities to gain credibility and legitimacy with local communities. This case study has not had the opportunity to carefully consider the interplay of outsider-insider and neutral-partial, but these issues likely deserve more consideration in the Solomon Islands context.







