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FROM PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES**



# SYCAMORE TREE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROGRAMME

SOLOMON ISLANDS

UNDP Pacific Centre

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Title: Sycamore Tree Restorative Justice Programme: Solomon Islands

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# SYCAMORE TREE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROGRAMME SOLOMON ISLANDS

## **SUMMARY**

The Sycamore Tree Restorative Justice Programme was borne out of recognition that an emphasis on rule of law and punitive justice was not addressing the need for Solomon Islands communities fragmented by conflict to restore broken ties and relationships. This case study traces the evolution of Sycamore Tree from its origins as a prisoner-victim counselling programme to a broader reconciliation project bringing together former warring factions and militant leaders, assessing its ability to blend an introduced model of psychosocial counselling with traditional reconciliation ceremonies based on Solomon Islands kastom.

# 1. CONTEXT

At the height of the conflict known as the ‘Tensions’ that played out from 1998-2003 in Solomon Islands, small arms battles between warring factions (primarily the Isatabu Freedom Movement [IFM] and the Malaitan Eagle Force [MEFI]) were frequently taking place, while raids led by the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) were carried out on communities said to be harbouring militants. By the end of the conflict, lives had been lost, countless acts of violence had been committed, property destroyed and populations displaced or disenfranchised from their homes and land. Communal bonds – so important in Solomon Islands society – had also been ripped apart, leaving society fragmented, and with a great deal of inter-personal and inter-communal animosity remaining. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) restored order to Solomon Islands in 2003, with a key plank of the intervention - the law and justice response – leading to former adversaries being imprisoned together.

In response and building on shared principles of Christian faith, collaboration between the international NGO Prison Fellowships International (PFI) and Solomon Islands church peak bodies led to the establishment of a group called Prison Fellowship Solomon Islands (PFSI). PFSI approached the Corrections Service of the Solomon Islands (CSSI) about introducing the Sycamore Tree programme to Solomon Islands prisons. The CSSI Programmes Team agreed in 2008, recognizing that building on shared principles of Christian faith, with its emphasis on reconciliation and forgiveness, could be a useful component of prisoner rehabilitation programming. The Sycamore Tree programme was based on a model for offender-victim reconciliation developed by PFI in the 1990s, which built on the premise that faith-based prisoner outreach could help prisoners reject crime, restore broken relationships, and facilitate their return to their communities as full, contributing members of society. The program was noted for success in post-conflict Rwanda, and closer to home, was used effectively within indigenous Maori prisoner populations in New Zealand. When the directors of PFI approached the CSSI executive board with a proposal outlining these strengths and the Sycamore Tree programme’s potential for success in the Solomon Islands context, it received immediate support from CSSI leadership and efforts began to integrate this programme within the Rove Corrections Centre in Honiara<sup>1</sup>.

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1 CSSI 2010, 11.

This case study will further explore the origins of the Sycamore Tree programme in Solomon Islands and trace its evolution from a prison-based restorative justice fellowship to a broader outreach programme conducting reconciliation between ex-combatants, between individuals, and between communities and members of the RSIPF. It will consider how the Sycamore Tree model was adapted from an introduced model of prisoner-victim counselling to incorporate traditional elements of ceremonial reconciliation outlined by kastom to better fit the Solomon Islands context and its emphasis on restoring relationships. Finally, it will review the programme's achievements and potential for future success, while also considering some of the lessons learned and outstanding challenges that remain.



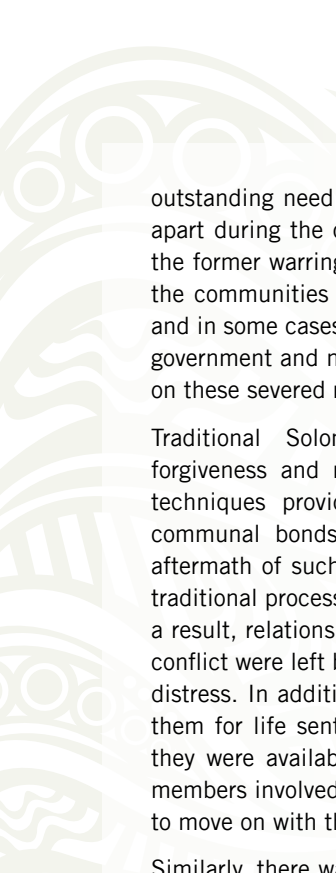
## 2. PROBLEM

As the Solomon Islands justice system began to turn towards addressing some of the alleged atrocities and crimes committed during the Tensions, prison populations grew. While the public trials and subsequent imprisonment of the offenders were an essential part of bringing the conflict to an end, and providing justice to the victims, as some analysts have argued<sup>2</sup>, this emphasis on restoring rule of law through punitive justice did nothing to address the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.





outstanding need for reconciliation between the many groups that were split apart during the conflict. These groups included ex-combatants representing the former warring factions, members of the RSIPF and the villagers living in the communities they had raided, prisoners and the victims of their crimes, and in some cases, even families split apart by the conflict. Other efforts, both government and non-government had not had a meaningful restorative impact on these severed relationships.

Traditional Solomon Islands conflict resolution processes emphasise forgiveness and reconciliation through symbolic exchange. The associated techniques provide a pathway for rebuilding relationships and repairing communal bonds, so essential to social life in Solomon Islands. In the aftermath of such widespread conflict, however, many requirements of these traditional processes – such as the authority of chiefs – had been damaged. As a result, relationships that had been severed by crimes committed during the conflict were left broken, contributing to lingering animosity and psychological distress. In addition, those offenders who were sentenced to prison (many of them for life sentences) were unable to participate in such processes when they were available outside the prison, depriving them and the community members involved in their crimes from a healing process that could help them to move on with their lives.

Similarly, there was a recognised need for rehabilitation processes that would assist offenders in reintegrating into communities upon their release. The Corrections Service of the Solomon Islands (CSSI) stated in a 2010 report that prisoner rehabilitation was to be the number one priority for the CSSI moving forward<sup>3</sup>. This is defined as “helping those individuals under [CSSI] care make the changes to their character and behaviours that will make the transition from prison back to the community easier.” Ensuring that communities were willing to accept the prisoners upon their release, and that underlying conflict had been addressed, was also noted as an important part of supporting prisoner reintegration into society, and preventing reoffending. CSSI has relied on church organisations and other NGOs to assist with addressing this need, for example through the provision of ‘half way’ houses to support transitional programs for post-release prisoners.

The offences for which prisoners were sentenced are often very serious. According to CSSI statistics from 2010, over 70% of prisoners in the Solomon Islands prison system are serving sentences for crimes of ‘serious violence’,

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3 CSSI. 2010. “Prisoner Programs Operations within Correction Service of Solomon Islands – CSSI”. Guide on Programs and Industry within CSSI. Honiara: CSSI Headquarters, p. 2.

including murder, with an additional 15% sentenced for rape and sexual assault, and the remaining 15% for more non-violent crime. Because levels of recidivism are reportedly low (14%) and generally involve petty crime, the focus of CSSI programming has been to change prisoner behaviour in order to better integrate into life outside the prison system upon release.

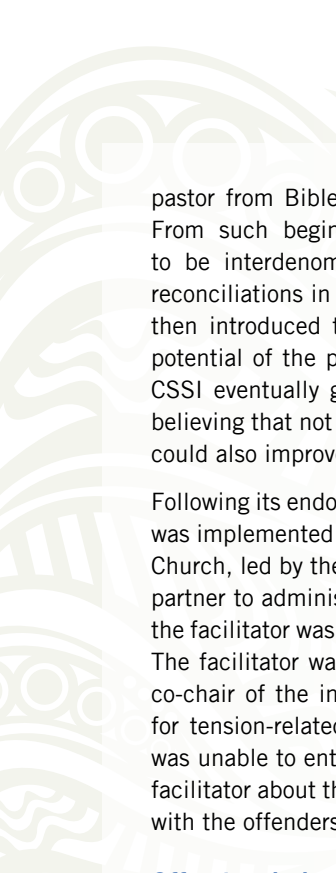
The Solomon Island prisoner population is made up of a mix ethnicities, including Guales and Malaitans, and lines are often drawn within this population according to allegiance to a particular wantok, or traditional clanship grouping of people from generally the same region and dialect group, with shared cultural practices and beliefs. However, beyond the wantok distinctions, almost all of the prisoner population are said to self-identify as Christian, reflecting the largely Christian (97%) population of the Solomon Islands. As such, faith is seen as a uniting force within the prison population, and prison programming works to preserve the importance of faith in the lives of the prisoners, including through the offering of daily devotional services, Bible study and prayer meetings.

### 3. PROCESS

#### Origins of the programme in Solomon Islands

The Sycamore Tree Restorative Justice Programme was originally designed to help prisoners to take responsibility for their crimes and to seek forgiveness from victims through victim-offender reconciliation. In March 2007, PFI, through its local affiliate Prison Fellowship Solomon Islands (PFSI), introduced the program to the community of churches in Honiara. Recognising the programme's potential, an interfaith committee was formed with the intention of supporting the program's implementation in Solomon Islands. A Fijian





pastor from Bible Way Church was nominated as the programme facilitator. From such beginnings, Sycamore Tree in Solomon Islands was designed to be interdenominational – an important factor in its ability to conduct reconciliations in all areas of the country regardless of church affiliations. PFI then introduced to the programme to CSSI administrators, highlighting the potential of the program in Solomon Islands context. While initially hesitant CSSI eventually gave permission for the program to be run in Rove Prison, believing that not only could it make the return of prisoners to society easier, it could also improve offenders' wellbeing within the prison.

Following its endorsement by the CSSI leadership, Sycamore Tree programming was implemented in July 2008 in Rove Corrections Centre, Honiara. Bible Way Church, led by their programme facilitator, was identified as the implementing partner to administer the program. According to one Sycamore Tree co-leader, the facilitator was widely accepted by all parties as he was perceived as neutral. The facilitator was assisted by a notable rehabilitated former combatant and co-chair of the interfaith committee. Having previously spent time in prison for tension-related offenses, and with further charges pending, the co-chair was unable to enter the prison, but was able to provide valuable advice to the facilitator about the dynamics of the prison community and how best to engage with the offenders.

### **Offender-victim counselling**

The process began with the programme facilitator individually counselling prisoners on the importance of reconciliation to enabling prisoners to return to their communities if they were to be released, or to moving on and coming to terms with their actions if they were facing life sentences, improving their quality of life within the prison system. This was followed by the introduction of a structured eight-week programme of victim-offender reconciliation, in which an initial cohort of 30 prisoners participated. As the programme expanded, volunteers were trained by the programme facilitator in administering the Sycamore Tree counselling model, with some of these volunteers going on to become facilitators themselves.

The Sycamore Tree model is based on the original PFI format in which the facilitator(s) bring unrelated victims and offenders together for eight two-hour sessions, usually spread over a period of eight weeks. The sessions were organised along the following themes:

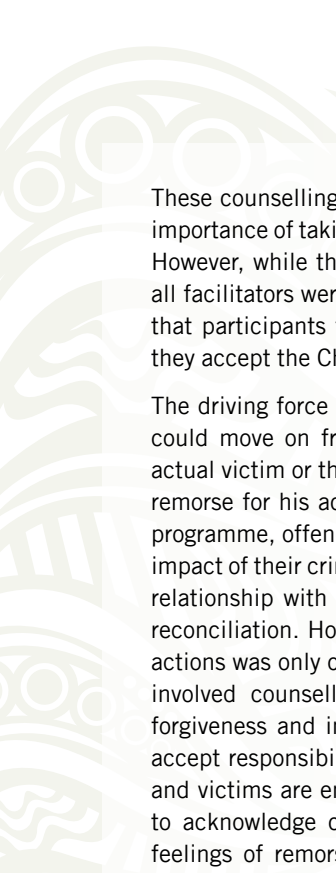


1. Introduction to Sycamore Tree
2. What is crime?
3. Responsibilities
4. Confession and repentance
5. Forgiveness
6. Restitution
7. Towards reconciliation
8. Celebration

It was important that both offenders and victims entered such reconciliation on a completely voluntary basis. All participants also had to agree to a set of pre-conditions, including a commitment to attend all the sessions and to fully participate, to be respectful and not interrupt the other party during discussions, to tell the truth at all times, to maintain strict confidentiality outside the discussions, and to be prepared to participate in the final ceremony. Because victims and an outside facilitator would have to be able to enter the prison in order to meet with the offender(s), facilitators sought buy-in from the leadership of the prison so that proper access and a safe space could be arranged.

It is also important to note that at this counselling stage, the ‘victims’ participating were not the actual victims of the specific crimes committed by the offenders. Instead, they were ‘unrelated’ victims of similar crimes who volunteered to meet with ‘unrelated’ offenders to share their experiences, feelings and needs, and help them to reconcile. In some cases (as will be discussed later in this case study), if the offender wished to meet personally with the actual victims of the crime they committed or their families, this could be arranged, but was not always possible.

Using a tested discussion guide prepared by PFI, the trained Sycamore Tree facilitator – often a volunteer, though in higher-profile or more complex cases, the programme facilitator – would lead the parties through a series of discussions gradually preparing them for reconciliation. These discussions were said to lead naturally to a time in which both victims and offenders could either come together, if they wished and were available, or could exchange letters expressing how they felt and how they wished to move forward. Offenders were invited to explore ways of making restitution for the harm caused by their transgressions, while victims were asked to consider what it would take for them to regain control of their lives and begin their journey toward healing and restoration. Finally, the group came together in a public celebration and worship to signify the formal restoration of broken ties.



These counselling sessions drew heavily from Biblical stories emphasising the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions in order to seek forgiveness. However, while the programme's foundation was grounded in Christianity and all facilitators were required to be Christian, there was no specific requirement that participants themselves be Christian, however it was a prerequisite that they accept the Christian premise behind the programme in order to take part<sup>4</sup>.

The driving force behind the counselling sessions was that before an offender could move on from the counselling sessions to reconcile formally with his actual victim or their family to seek forgiveness, he had to first express genuine remorse for his actions. Through the counselling sessions and the eight-week programme, offenders were counselled to accept responsibility, understand the impact of their crime, and be prepared to make amends and restore their broken relationship with the victim, their family and the community through a joint reconciliation. However, counselling the offenders to express remorse for their actions was only one half of the reconciliation process. The second component involved counselling the families of actual victims on the importance of forgiveness and indeed their duty as Christians to forgive offenders ready to accept responsibility and express remorse. In this counselling, both offenders and victims are encouraged, through appealing to their relationship with God, to acknowledge changes that have occurred in their lives that bring about feelings of remorse and forgiveness, allowing them to make restitution and repair the damage caused by their involvement.

### **Reconciliation ceremony**

The first Solomon Islands Sycamore Tree reconciliation process between an offender and his related victim began in 2008, when a prisoner serving a life sentence for murder, completed the series of counselling sessions and wrote a letter to the family of the man whom he had killed during the Tensions and asked that it be delivered. The programme facilitator and co-chair took the letter to the family's village and presented it to the father of the victim in his home. He accepted the letter and read it, responding that this had been the answer to his prayers for the past five years since losing his son. He thanked the facilitator and co-chair for bringing it, and expressed a willingness to be involved in counselling directly with the offender.

A Sycamore Tree facilitation team subsequently returned to the village to lead the father and his family through victim counselling, beginning in the family home. However, the father decided that he did not want to confine the counselling

<sup>4</sup> However, given the overwhelming prevalence of Christianity in the Solomon Islands population (97%), it is almost guaranteed that all participants would have been Christian.

and reconciliation to his own family, stating that the issues affected the entire community. Instead, he said he wanted to conduct the reconciliation in the local church, inviting the extended family and members of the community as well. The Sycamore Tree team then led a four-day reconciliation workshop for the larger community. Meanwhile, they also approached the family of the offender and began a series of counselling sessions with them concurrently, helping to prepare them for eventual inclusion in the reconciliation ceremony.

Finally, after both families and the community had been counselled and prepared spiritually and emotionally for reconciliation, they held a reconciliation ceremony bringing together the victim's family and community, and the offender's family. This ceremony, and the others that would be repeated in similar reconciliations carried out later, drew largely from Solomon Island *kastom*, involving a symbolic offering of customary gifts by the offender or their family on their behalf, and formal acceptance by the victim's family in the presence of the community. However, an important distinction in the Sycamore Tree reconciliation process was its emphasis on reconciliation with a focus on restitution rather than on 'compensation'. A traditional exchange of food and goods was an important component of the traditional reconciliation process with the value of the exchange carefully negotiated according to *kastom* and based on the offense(s) committed. In the Sycamore Tree reconciliation, the value of goods and the exchange itself, is meant to be symbolic of restoring the damaged relationships. The exchange is intended to formally bridge the two parties in *kastom*, while ensuring that the exchanges did not become focused on actual monetary or material value. The process began and ended with a joint prayer, once again drawing on Christianity as a way of restoring broken



ties. While unable to participate in the community ceremony, Sycamore Tree facilitators arranged a prison ceremony, giving the offender the opportunity to personally reconcile with the family of the victim. Once these ceremonies were complete, both sides were considered reconciled, and healing process could begin.

Once word spread of this successful reconciliation, a Sycamore Tree programme leader noted that requests from other victims and offenders began to pour in from across the country. Working with volunteers, the Sycamore Tree programme was able to conduct additional reconciliations on an individual level in the months that followed.

### **Expansion into ex-combatant reconciliation**

Later in 2008, the programme facilitator selected and trained former prisoner to accompany him on reconciliations as co-facilitator, and ultimately, to groom him to take over as lead facilitator for the programme and to carry it on upon his return to Fiji the following year. The wider Sycamore Tree team continued to extend the programme to include awareness workshops about restorative justice and the need for forgiveness in communities in the Honiara area as well as other conflict-affected areas of Guadalcanal and Malaita. They also saw the need for reconciliation to take place not just at the individual level but also between previously warring factions, starting with those currently within the prison population. The co-chair wrote to the Commissioner of Prisons to request permission for various dignitaries to come to the prison to witness a formal reconciliation ceremony, which was ultimately granted. The Commissioner also suggested that the team expand their scope to also include reconciliation work with warring factions outside the prison, with the larger goal of seeing them apologise to the nation for what happened during the Tensions.



The Sycamore Tree team agreed, and began – usually at the request of ex-combatants who had heard of Sycamore Tree’s successful reconciliation work – to conduct its first reconciliation work outside the prison. This work began in Malu’u and Auki in Malaita province in May 2011, and, with assistance of grants from UNDP’s Strengthening Capacities for Peace and Development Project (CPAD) and some additional financial support from the Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace (MNURP), continued in parts of East and West Guadalcanal, and in other parts of Malaita. The reconciliations often involved ex-combatants serving life sentences for the crimes they committed and despite being unlikely to be released, reconciliation was still viewed as an important part of helping the victims and their families move on and to aid in the prisoner’s ability to cope with life in prison. Meanwhile, for the communities and families affected, reconciliation was seen as crucial to coming to a point of forgiveness, allowing them to heal and eventually mend broken relationships – ultimately, more valuable than any monetary settlement.

While particular local circumstances may require some flexibility and adjustment to the model, Sycamore Tree team generally followed the process outlined below, when working with offenders in prison, and with ex-combatants in the community.

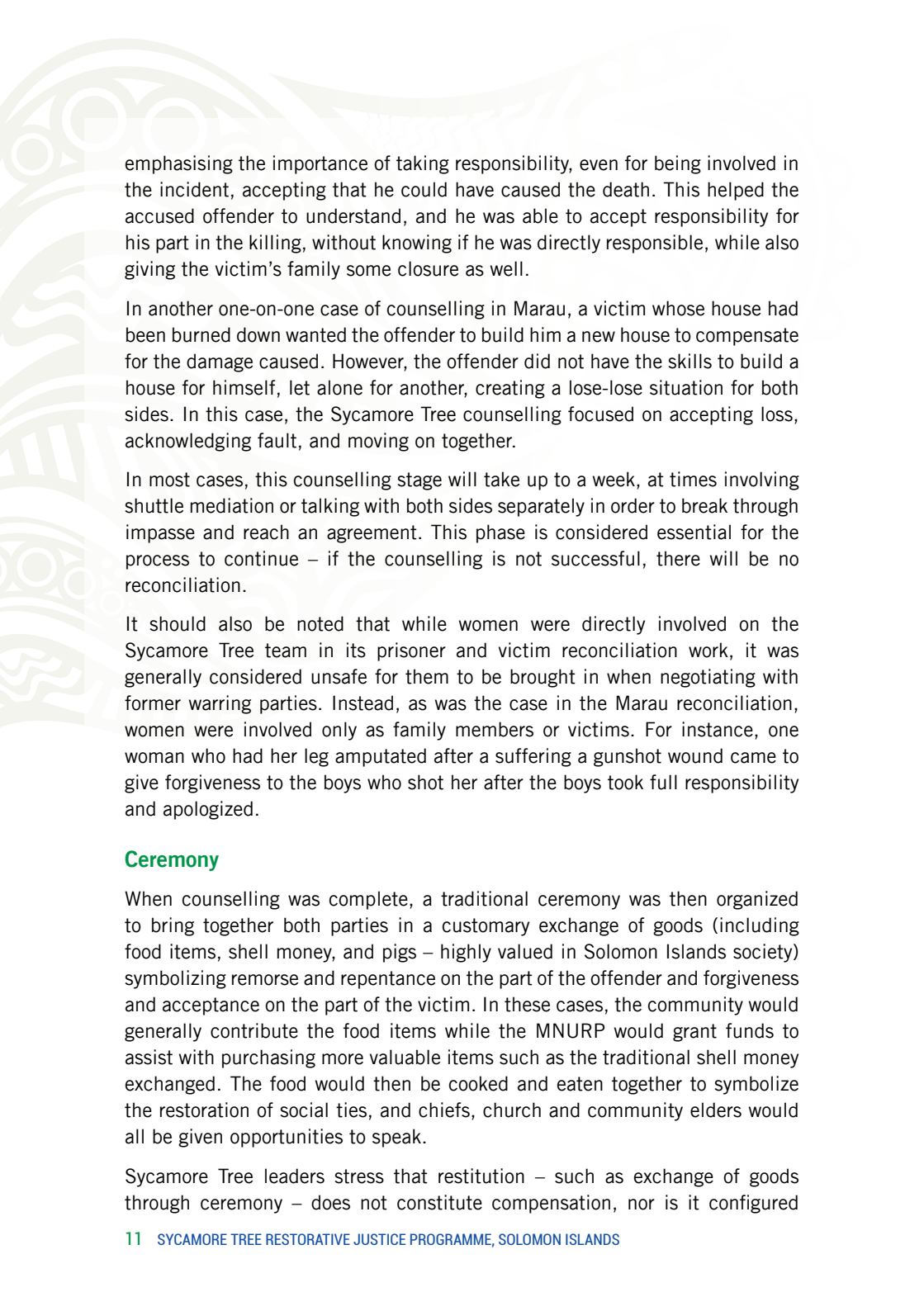
### **Preparatory stage**

The preparatory stage involves entering the community and raising awareness about Sycamore Tree values and processes, and seeking the voluntary participation and buy-in from both sides in the community. This generally involves visiting sides involved and talking to the elders, community leaders, and former militants from each community to secure their willingness to participate in the Sycamore Tree reconciliation process.

### **Counselling**

Once both sides agree to participate, group counselling sessions are held. However, in some cases, individual counselling is needed to break through an impasse. Two such cases arose in Marau. In one, a victim wanted to reconcile directly with the person who killed his father. However because the death occurred in a battle involving a number of armed people and many shots the accused offender denied that he was responsible and refused to acknowledge his role in the death. The Sycamore Tree team thus visited the home of the accused, giving him the chance to explain his side of the story. With the team, the parties discussed cases where it can be difficult to know for sure whose shot actually hit the victim when a number of people are firing, and





emphasising the importance of taking responsibility, even for being involved in the incident, accepting that he could have caused the death. This helped the accused offender to understand, and he was able to accept responsibility for his part in the killing, without knowing if he was directly responsible, while also giving the victim's family some closure as well.

In another one-on-one case of counselling in Marau, a victim whose house had been burned down wanted the offender to build him a new house to compensate for the damage caused. However, the offender did not have the skills to build a house for himself, let alone for another, creating a lose-lose situation for both sides. In this case, the Sycamore Tree counselling focused on accepting loss, acknowledging fault, and moving on together.

In most cases, this counselling stage will take up to a week, at times involving shuttle mediation or talking with both sides separately in order to break through impasse and reach an agreement. This phase is considered essential for the process to continue – if the counselling is not successful, there will be no reconciliation.

It should also be noted that while women were directly involved on the Sycamore Tree team in its prisoner and victim reconciliation work, it was generally considered unsafe for them to be brought in when negotiating with former warring parties. Instead, as was the case in the Marau reconciliation, women were involved only as family members or victims. For instance, one woman who had her leg amputated after suffering a gunshot wound came to give forgiveness to the boys who shot her after the boys took full responsibility and apologized.

## Ceremony

When counselling was complete, a traditional ceremony was then organized to bring together both parties in a customary exchange of goods (including food items, shell money, and pigs – highly valued in Solomon Islands society) symbolizing remorse and repentance on the part of the offender and forgiveness and acceptance on the part of the victim. In these cases, the community would generally contribute the food items while the MNURP would grant funds to assist with purchasing more valuable items such as the traditional shell money exchanged. The food would then be cooked and eaten together to symbolize the restoration of social ties, and chiefs, church and community elders would all be given opportunities to speak.

Sycamore Tree leaders stress that restitution – such as exchange of goods through ceremony – does not constitute compensation, nor is it configured

in response to a demand from a victim. As one leader noted, “This is not compensation, this is restoration.” He explained that from a perspective of forgiveness, when one person demands compensation from another, the person demanding then becomes the offender; if said compensation is made, then the person making the original demand ‘loses’, and the person giving compensation gains. Sycamore Tree therefore focuses on forgiveness, and believes that restitution must “come from the heart” as physical acknowledgement of accepting responsibility and an expression of genuine remorse. For instance, in the case of the injured woman from Marau mentioned above, restitution included having the victims renovate her house so that she could improve her quality of life since her injury.

A second notable example of a Sycamore Tree reconciliation was held on the Guadalcanal Weathercoast between former combatants from the Guadalcanal Liberation Front (GLF), the IFM and Moro Cultural Movement, as well as chiefs and other members of the Sughu community, which had been virtually destroyed during the Tensions by militants from the Moro Cultural Movement who ransacked the village in search of GLF leader Harold Keke. Not surprisingly, high levels of animosity remained between these different parties, with the members of the community calling for compensation. In response, the Sycamore Tree programme facilitator and a number of other highly respected co-facilitators conducted a three-day workshop on reconciliation and forgiveness that drew 140 participants from all sides. By the end of the second day, the militants from the different warring factions were able to reconcile among themselves and seek forgiveness from the Sughu community chiefs. By the third day, which closed with a public reconciliation ceremony held in the presence of witnesses from the community, the most senior chief declared that the community no longer sought compensation or any other settlement; instead, he explained, they were content with “settlement through their belief in Jesus that had healed them”<sup>5</sup>. These results were repeated when a separate workshop was facilitated by the same team in Lambi village later in the year.

Sycamore Tree was also active in Malaita, with workshops held with former members of the MEF and chiefs and members of Malaitan communities affected by the conflict. As a result, MEF combatants were to make a formal public apology to the community as part of the 2009 Malaita Day celebrations in August; however, disagreements on the official wording of the apology by several key members of the MEF led them to abstain from participation in the formal apology, which diminished its impact and acceptance by the community.

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5 CSSI 2010, 13.

## 4. PARTICIPANTS

### The CSSI

The CSSI, heavily supported by AusAID in the post-conflict period, has been a major component of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) “Strengthening Law and Justice” project. In addition to administering the prison system, its mandate is to provide programming for prisoner rehabilitation to ensure that prisoners will be able to reintegrate into their communities to the fullest extent upon release. The Sycamore Tree programme was incorporated into the CSSI’s faith-based stream of programming, recognizing a need to offer prisoners a path towards achieving reconciliation with their victims and their families, as well as with God, emphasising shared Christian values that are central to Solomon Islands identity.

### Prison Fellowship International

Sycamore Tree programming is delivered under the umbrella of Prison Fellowship International (PFI), a global faith-based association of over 140 national prison fellowship organizations with a mission to “pursue justice and healing in response to crime to the end that offenders are transformed, relationships are reconciled, and communities are restored”<sup>6</sup>. In Solomon



6 PFI. 2012. “About Us”. PFI International Website, available at <http://www.pfi.org/about-us>. Accessed on 8 August 2012.

Islands, PFI's national affiliate is Prison Fellowship Solomon Islands (PFSI), which works through a network of volunteers, often drawn from the church community.

## **Bible Way Church**

As with PFI's other global programs, a local implementing partner was identified to administer the Sycamore Tree programming in Solomon Islands. For this, PFI identified the local faith-based organization Bible Way Church, led by an extremely committed pastor. A small team developed around the facilitator, and together they counselled prisoners, conducted reconciliations, as well as trained facilitators.

## **5. CHALLENGES**

### **Funding and human resource constraints**

CSSI expressed concern in 2010 that PFI support for the Sycamore Tree programme was limited only to training materials and technical support. Because of this, the programme relies heavily on charitable donations given to local implementing partner Bible Way Church, as well as whatever funding it can obtain from the MNURP, which came on board with limited funding for Sycamore Tree's ex-combatant reconciliation work, as well as two grants from the UNDP's CPAD programme in 2011 and 2012. Because it must operate within the constraints of this available funding, the programme has been limited in its scope and reach, despite its noted successes. In addition, the success of the program depends on a few key individuals who carry out the work voluntarily. As the demand for reconciliations increases, this can put strain on the capacities of the organisation and the individuals involved.

### **Overlap in ownership of projects**

The Solomon Island Government's MNURP soon realized that Sycamore Tree's prisoner and ex-combatant reconciliations aligned well with their own mandate to foster national unity and prevent future outbreaks of conflict. As such, they have occasionally engaged Sycamore Tree to conduct reconciliation work offering financial support in the form of small travel grants and other financial support (such as the purchasing of chupu mentioned above). However, CSSI reports note that this created the potential for tension regarding which organization would receive the credit for the reconciliation and under which organization's name the reconciliation would be conducted. Overcoming this

challenge will likely require an understanding that future work of this nature is entered into as a joint project in which both parties share the credit, further helping to demonstrate the value of government-civil society collaboration.

### **Intra-organizational tensions**

One of the Sycamore Tree leaders interviewed for this case study noted that quarrels among the people running the programme (a number of whom are reformed ex-militants) occasionally arose and that these had to be contained in order to keep the programme running effectively. The leader mentioned that while many people who had been involved in previous government-run programmes were paid, the Sycamore Tree Process instead relied on peoples' goodwill and commitment to the process. As is common in volunteer organisations, managing expectations can be a source of tension.

### **Mitigating a traditional emphasis on compensation**

One of the Sycamore Tree leaders noted that one of the biggest challenges they face in the community is getting people to accept that Sycamore Tree does not advocate nor promote the payment of compensation. This has been difficult, he explained – particularly in the early days of Sycamore Tree's work – because in Solomon Islands kastom, compensation is framed as an essential part of reconciliation. This has also meant that Sycamore Tree facilitators often face the problem of having to mitigate the large number of demands that often arise during the counselling process. However, the leader noted that gradually, people have come to accept that Sycamore Tree's counselling process, with its emphasis on healing rather than compensation, is a prerequisite to any reconciliation. By adding a traditional reconciliation ceremony at the end of the process, Sycamore Tree has created a process that is ultimately inclusive of elements of both introduced and traditional processes.

## **6. RESULTS AND IMPACTS**

### **High degree of perceived success**

While the scale of the Sycamore Tree programming has been relatively limited due to the challenges noted above (although it is apparently continuing to grow at the time of writing), the documented reconciliations undertaken to date between individuals and families have all achieved some degree of success. Of the eight reconciliations conducted from the programme's introduction in 2008 until 2010, all were noted for achieving displays of unconditional



forgiveness on the part of victims' families, and in all but two, unanimous community-wide acceptance of the remorse expressed by the offenders. In these two cases it was recorded that some witnesses from the community felt that the reconciliation "lacked genuine remorse on the offender's part" or that it was "not embraced fully by the victim's entire family"<sup>7</sup>. This relatively high degree of success supports the idea that such faith-based victim-offender reconciliation can indeed be employed effectively to smooth the return of ex-prisoners to their communities, and assist communities repair the damage caused by conflict and violence.

Similarly, the Sycamore Tree programme can point to a number of successful reconciliations between ex-combatants and communities in conflict-affected areas as further examples of its success. Indeed, all the reconciliations conducted of this sort resulted in reconciliations perceived as successful, with the possible exception of the Malaitan/MEF reconciliation that failed to draw the participation of key MEF figures.

### **Shift of focus from compensation to healing**

Sycamore Tree materials describe the need to see justice through a different lens, describing their focus on restorative justice as "justice that heals". This emphasis on healing has helped remove the focus on compensation that had come to dominate reconciliation attempts in the Solomon Islands following kastom, which dictates that certain crimes warrant certain amounts of compensation. Instead, Sycamore Tree believes that demanding compensation does not resolve anything; in fact, as one leader explained, it just builds on the conflict and exacerbates the problems. The Sycamore Tree emphasis is instead placed on healing and restoring relationships, which is one of the focal areas covered in the counselling sessions. Sycamore Tree stresses that this can help avoid the emerging problem of commercialization of kastom in reconciliation processes.

In reconciliations conducted to date, Sycamore Tree teams appear to have been largely successful in supporting participants to make this transition away from a focus on compensation demands towards healing.

### **Expanding space for negotiation between former warring parties/ Generating momentum for national reconciliation**

Sycamore Tree leaders note that reconciliations between communities around Guadalcanal and Malaita have opened up lines of communication between

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7 CSSI 2010, 12.

these previously warring factions, creating possibilities for them to negotiate. While they note that it will take time for the country to completely heal, this represents a first step towards moving towards national reconciliation. Indeed, in April 2012 amid speculation that two warring factions were holding secret meetings, and fears of resurgent ethnic-related violence, members of the two sides issued a joint statement refuting the claims and specifically referring to the work of the Sycamore Tree. In the statement one leader said “I call on people making these false statements and spreading false information around to stop because you’re not helping the good work Sycamore Tree has done in reconciling us.”<sup>8</sup>

Sycamore Tree is also seen as helping to establish conditions for further reconciliation work. As one leader explained, Sycamore Tree’s reconciliation work has “opened the door” for individual cases to begin to be sorted out, for example people from the Marau Islands negotiating with the Guale people over allegations of atrocity. Sycamore Tree leadership believes that given the achievements in reconciling warring factions, issues that remain between individuals can now be addressed.

### **Providing a non-government alternative to reconciliation programs**

The MNURP national reconciliation program has at times faced challenges due to the fact that it is a government body. This has on occasion resulted in reduced goodwill from reconciliation participants, and unrealistic expectations relating to the capacity to provide financial incentives for involvement in reconciliation processes. As a church-auspiced body, Sycamore Tree is able to focus on the spiritual and healing components of reconciliation without these challenges.

Indeed, MNURP has come to recognise these strengths and has provided some financial support (for logistics) to Sycamore Tree programmes, demonstrating the value of government-civil society collaboration and its potential to achieve even greater impact on community reconciliation.

### **Inclusion and support of former militant groups**

The 2010 CSSI report notes that Sycamore Tree’s reconciliation outreach and workshops have reached all former combatant groups, including the highest levels of their leadership. While the report also notes that this does not mean that they had the support of all members of all groups, it does affirm that Sycamore Tree was able to garner the support of most former militant leaders.

8 Solomon Star Ex-militants give warning of false info By Douglas Maraus April 2012 <http://solomonstarnews.com/news/national/14210-ex-militants-warned-of-false-info> Accessed on 28 August 2012.

## 7. TECHNIQUES AND VALUES

Christian values of forgiveness, repentance and atonement are fundamental to the Sycamore Tree model. Indeed, the name Sycamore Tree itself references a Biblical story in which a tax collector, rich from cheating the community, climbs a sycamore tree in order to get a better view of Jesus. To the disappointment of the crowd, Jesus asks to stay at the tax collector's house, prompting the tax collector to announce that he will give money to the poor and repay four-fold anyone he has cheated. This act of voluntary restitution marks the sycamore tree as a symbolic site of reconciliation through acknowledgement of one's own wrongdoing, and willingness to take action to repair the damage – principles that would become the foundation of the Sycamore Tree programme.

Drawing further inspiration from the Old Testament, Sycamore Tree training materials note that the Old Testament book of Leviticus describes much of what is today known as “restorative justice”, with stories demonstrating that God's ultimate goal is to restore relationships with those who have transgressed, rather than simply enforcing punishment. Indeed, faith in God is considered a central requirement that must be shared by both parties undergoing reconciliation, with Christianity used as a uniting factor. As one Sycamore Tree leader explained, in order for reconciliation to come from the heart, both parties need to return to a mutual understanding of their relationship with the Creator, which will enable them to relate to one another as well in recognition of their shared origins. Sycamore Tree training materials also clearly articulate the fundamental importance of religion: “This is a faith programme – with no faith, there can be no reconciliation”, a programme brochure notes. This is demonstrated quite clearly in a written account of a Sycamore Tree



reconciliation between MEF and IFM leaders held in Malaita, in which one of the MEF leaders reportedly announced to his former adversary, “God forgave us so I must give you my forgiveness”.

An important part of this process is counselling the offender so that they can begin to articulate and take responsibility for what they have done wrong. This is fundamental to Sycamore Tree’s model, as training materials note that if the alleged offender maintains innocence, “there can be no restorative process”. Indeed, for Sycamore Tree, restorative justice must begin with a clear understanding that harm has been done and must be addressed. However, rather than focusing solely on the offender, Sycamore Tree reconciliation also brings in the victim, considering the central role that they also must play in a restorative process. In the Sycamore Tree model, while offenders must take responsibility for their actions, victims are required to take responsibility for their feelings.

Sycamore Tree leadership emphasises the importance of winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of the communities in which they conduct their reconciliation work in order to increase its chances for success. They noted that having the facilitators eat, sleep and live with the people in their homes rather than renting guesthouses or commuting helped them to get the people to open up and accept them as neutral and impartial. It was also said to be helpful that Sycamore Tree facilitators were volunteers, without external funding or direct ties to the government, which meant that they were not seen as ‘big men’ by the villagers. The leadership explained that this helped foster an atmosphere of trust and openness, as well as removing any expectations of ‘big money’ that might motivate people to participate seeking only compensation.

Finally, and as noted above, Sycamore Tree reconciliations make use of customary ceremony, albeit while working hard to disconnect kastom ceremony from ideas of compensation, payment, or demand.

## 8. LESSONS LEARNED, OUTSTANDING ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

### The effectiveness of restorative justice

The Sycamore Tree programme has helped to usher in what they consider a “different way of thinking about crime” – one that gives the victim a central role, in contrast with the punitive system that focuses on the offender’s


transgressions against the state. What the Sycamore Tree programme has arguably proven is that in Solomon Islands, restorative justice principles of rebuilding relationships and undertaking a joint process of healing can have more far-reaching effects towards achieving reconciliation – including national reconciliation – than a process that focuses solely on retribution and punishment. Sycamore Tree attributes this to the centrality of Christian faith to Solomon Islands society, as well as the importance of kastom and its traditional focus on maintaining social fabric. Indeed, the popularity of this style of process among Solomon Islanders may stem from the fact that, in contrast to the punitive and adversarial modern legal system, the restorative justice approach more closely aligns with traditional kastom processes in which broader outcomes for all involved are taken into account during the process. Building on Sycamore Tree’s success, one of the programme’s longer-term goals is to convince the SIG of the importance of integrating restorative justice principles into the national justice system, particularly in terms of sentencing. The extent to which this has been successful remains an outstanding question, though evidence of SIG support for the Sycamore Tree programme’s reconciliation work through funding grants from the MNURP is promising.

### **The importance of ‘insider partials’ and identity**

A CSSI report assessing the impact of the Sycamore Tree programme’s reconciliation work noted that engagement with former militant groups – particularly the MEF – was greatly enabled by having former commanders







'on board' and actively involved in the reconciliations. While contemporary conflict resolution practitioners continue to debate over the use of such 'insider partials' as opposed to adhering to the traditional Western values that espouse neutrality and impartiality, it would appear that in the Solomon Islands context, which places a great deal of importance on wantok relationships, the involvement of insider partials, including former combatant leaders, was instrumental in Sycamore Tree's success in reconciling former militant groups. Conversely, clan or ethnic identity could also prove a barrier to acceptance. For instance, a prominent Malaitan in the Sycamore Tree programme noted that he felt uncomfortable about conducting reconciliation work in Guadalcanal communities given his ethnic background. Such observations underscore the importance of ethnic and clan loyalties in the Solomon Islands, and the need to ensure they are leveraged appropriately in conflict resolution processes.

### **The importance of community**

While the international model from which the Sycamore Tree programme is drawn focuses solely on reconciling offenders with victims, in the Solomon Islands context, it was quickly determined that acceptance and participation of the community at large was vital for the reconciliation to be considered complete. As the father involved in the reconciliation for his son's death explained, when a death occurs in Melanesian society, the entire community is affected. In order to ensure that this inclusive aspect of the program can be achieved, the Sycamore Tree process is designed to gain the trust of everyone involved before reconciliation takes place. This has often included the successful use of 'insider-partial' with ex-members of the different factions becoming trained and participating as part of the Sycamore Tree team itself, helping to gain the trust of all participants in the Sycamore Tree process.

### **Incorporating introduced models with traditional processes**

The success of Sycamore Tree's programming in the Solomon Islands context demonstrates the importance that both introduced and traditional processes can play in promoting reconciliation. The first part of the Sycamore Tree programme – the prisoner/victim counselling – is introduced, based directly on the international training guide established by PFI. It represents a proven model built on widely recognized psychosocial counselling principles that has been brought to the Solomon Islands by facilitators trained in its administration in prison populations. However, in Solomon Islands, it was recognized early on that this must also be coupled with a second traditional reconciliation

ceremony that more closely adheres to kastom in order for the reconciliation to be considered complete and accepted by the broader community. What became clear was that neither ceremony alone would have been sufficient; instead, a careful balance and incorporation of the two styles became the hallmark of the Sycamore Tree process.

### **Inclusion of women**

Thus far it appears that there has been relatively limited involvement of women in Sycamore Tree reconciliations or operations despite their high level of victimisation during the Tensions. Female Sycamore Tree volunteers have assisted in counselling in urban setting, but have not participated in work outside of these areas. While this situation is understandable given the early Sycamore Tree focus on ex-combatants, the question of participation of women becomes more pressing as Sycamore Tree work expands. Women are often excluded in post-conflict processes for want of appropriate and adequate mechanisms to support their involvement. If the Sycamore Tree in Solomon Islands seeks to further broaden the reach of its reconciliation work it will have to more thoroughly and adequately address the participation of women.

### **Balancing community vs. individual reconciliation**

While the Sycamore Tree model was developed using group counselling at its core, in some places where communities were particularly fragmented by the conflict, the leadership determined that a different, more individual approach was required. One leader explained that when families within a community are still unable to talk to each other and regroup it was determined that one-on-one counselling was needed to help rebuild relationships on an individual level before the community could be brought together as a group. This was particularly important in some areas of Solomon Islands, where there are not only deeply fragmented intra-communal relationships, but also a high level of mistrust of government, RAMSI, the RSIPF, and even some church organizations. As such, the Sycamore Tree leadership sees a need to modify the process to adapt to this more individual-based model in instances where it is necessary to rebuild personal relationships as a precursor to broader community reconciliation.

### **Gauging long-term success**

While high degrees of perceived success were noted immediately following reconciliations, there has been limited follow-up in the years since reconciled prisoners were released into their communities. This makes assessing the long-

term success of the programme difficult. It would be helpful to follow up with prisoners rehabilitated under the Sycamore Tree programme to see how fully they have been able to reintegrate into their communities and whether any animosities or tensions have arisen between them and victim families or the broader community to determine whether the model needs adjustment to take into consideration longer-term reconciliation needs and issues.





