



Executive Summary

Australian Intervention in the Solomons Beyond Operation Helpem Fren

An Agenda for Development in the Solomon Islands

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In July 2003, an international police and military force, led by Australia and supported by New Zealand and other Pacific Island nations, was deployed to the Solomon Islands in *Operation Helpem Fren*. The deployment is the first stage of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), a longer-term “cooperative intervention” to address the crisis of development and governance in the Solomon Islands.

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad welcomes the increased Australian commitment to helping the Solomon Islands. The intervention was invited by the Solomon Islands Prime Minister, and there is no doubt it is widely supported by its people. We welcome the police and military intervention, believing it has already acted as a circuit breaker, led to significant disarmament and an increased respect for the rule of law. But if RAMSI is to make a sustainable difference in the lives of Solomon Islanders, then it must be accompanied by an investment in longer-term development.

In looking beyond the immediate military intervention, Oxfam Community Aid Abroad believes that the imperative will be a broader program of development support that focuses on both the causes and the results of the current situation. The proposed priority areas of RAMSI – support for the rule of law, budget stabilisation and economic reform – will only address some of these issues. They are necessary but not sufficient. In the long term, RAMSI must focus on a much broader development agenda if it is to achieve sustainable improvements in the lives of Solomon Islanders.

This report draws on Oxfam Community Aid Abroad's experience in the Solomon Islands and elsewhere to outline such an agenda for RAMSI to maximise opportunities for renewed and sustainable development in the Solomon Islands.

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad has worked with local organisations in the Solomon Islands to implement programs focusing on literacy, rural livelihoods, basic service delivery, and community peace building for the past two decades. Oxfam Community Aid Abroad has a permanent country office in the Solomon Islands which focuses on addressing the causes of conflict in communities. This paper is informed by our long experience in the Solomons Islands and elsewhere, and by the views of our partner organisations and the civil society sector in the Solomon Islands.

Within the RAMSI framework there is a commitment to an expanded development program with a proposed focus on support to the rule of law, stabilising the budget, and economic reform. It is imperative that the long-term RAMSI program is developed based on an informed understanding of the root causes of the current crisis in the Solomon Islands.

The interaction of local struggles for power and resources - particularly land, paid employment and services – and global economic trends in trade and aid which disadvantage small island developing states have brought about what is essentially a political and social conflict. RAMSI's stated focus on law and justice problems, the shortcomings of public institutions, and economic imperatives, needs to be balanced by a deeper analysis that considers the root causes of the current situation in the Solomon Islands. These include:

- Lack of employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas.
- Youth disenfranchisement and vulnerability to militarisation.
- Conflicting perceptions of land and development, particularly in relation to resource extraction.
- Internal displacement and migration – both as a cause and effect of conflict.
- The social and economic pressures of rapid population growth and a young population.

- Constructs of “statehood” and governance and the legacy of the colonial period.
- An increasing culture of violence characterised by petty crime, property damage, theft, public drunkenness, and sexual and family violence.
- The implications of cultural and ethnic diversity for nation building.

There have been early successes towards RAMSI's aim to restore law and order to the Solomon Islands. The people of the Solomon Islands hope that the intervention will create a space in which the root causes of the violence and conflict can be addressed. A key strategy for achieving sustainable peace is to facilitate a process whereby Solomon Islanders themselves can shape the long-term RAMSI development program. In order to achieve this outcome, as well as focusing on the publicly documented agenda of support to the rule of law, stabilising the budget and economic reform, RAMSI should:

- Actively seek to work with civil society in all aspects of its programming, both in relation to the law and justice component and the long-term assistance package. This is because an active civil society can help promote good governance, and because civil society organisations (including church, community, and non-government organisations) have established links to the communities and are an important source of local knowledge.
- Recognise the important role that Solomon Islands' women have played in peace building, providing for their families, and responding to the needs arising from the conflict, and mainstream a gender perspective in all development initiatives, programs and projects.
- Emphasise the importance of consultation with communities. Community consultation should reflect the make-up of the community: men, women, youth, and different ethnic and social groups. Otherwise development initiatives will reinforce, rather than break down, inequalities within society and within communities.
- Ensure that the police and military deployment is conscious of its potential impacts on Solomon Islands' society. The operation must insist on cultural and gender sensitivity, allow time and resources for adequate information flows to the people of the Solomon Islands, and model appropriate conduct at all times.

Operation Helpem Fren is responding to problems with Solomon Islands' governance which results in massive insecurity, widespread economic hardship and civil disorder. In order to achieve sustainable change, the RAMSI long-term development program should address the causes of unrest in the Solomon Islands by focusing on interventions in the following seven areas:

- **Rural opportunities** Identify and support programs which address the identified needs of rural youth, including lack of rural employment, limited education opportunities, drug and alcohol use/abuse, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, unplanned pregnancies, family violence, polygamy, and loss of identity. Existing programs such as Save the Children Australia's Youth Outreach Project and Kastom Garden's Youth Livelihoods Project can provide useful lessons.
- **Land and culture:** Explore options for formalising customary land ownership and registration which are mindful of Pacific perceptions of land, land ownership systems, and gender implications of land registration programs.
- **Family and community violence:** Recognise that the culture of violence commences within communities and support organisations which undertake community-based work to eliminate family and community violence.
- **An appropriate bureaucracy:** Draw on Solomon Islanders, Pacific islands technical experts, consultants, and volunteer development workers as part of the program of

institutional support. Support Solomon Islands involvement in establishing governance systems with specific skill-building programs and exposure and study visits.

- **Health and education:** Prioritise support for basic services, particularly for rural areas, recognising the important contribution of civil society organisations. Build HIV awareness, prevention, advocacy and support mechanisms into all RAMSI initiatives beginning with the law and justice program.
- **Community peace building:** Integrate community peace building initiatives into all efforts to build lasting peace in the Solomon Islands, and consult widely with and actively involve civil society, including women's groups and female community leaders, customary and church leaders, and youth in the peace process. Specifically draw on the experience and expertise of Solomon Islands' women and women focused organisations in conflict resolution, for example SICA, Women's Federation, Family Support Centre, Vois Blong Mere, National Council of Women.
- **Restorative justice:** Extend work with Solomon Islands Government in the field of restorative justice, including alternative sentencing, and explore opportunities for integrating customary systems and institutions of justice with Western judicial structures. Experiences from Bougainville, East Timor, and other Pacific countries may be useful. Provide financial and technical support for training in reconciliation, protection from violence, trauma counselling and appropriate indigenous counselling methods.

As a large-scale police and military intervention it is important that RAMSI does not contribute to or cause additional disruption to Solomon Islanders. RAMSI should be conducted in a culturally and gender sensitive manner, allow time and resources for adequate information flows to the people of the Solomon Islands, and model appropriate conduct at all times. Accordingly RAMSI should:

- **Provide access to information:** Publicity and outreach to inform the wider public about the timing and format of the international deployment and subsequent development policies and programs will be an important communications strategy, also involving face to face community meetings facilitated by local civil society organisations.
- **Ensure training of RAMSI personnel:** Organisations such as the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre can provide training to police and military personnel both in terms of their conduct, and in terms of programming opportunities that bring in women's important role in peace keeping. Pidgin training should be available for all overseas forces deployed in Solomon Islands.
- **Monitor appropriate conduct:** Senior *Operation Helpem Fren* officers should monitor and prohibit acts of sexual violence, prostitution and harassment of women by international peacekeeping forces. A reporting mechanism for inappropriate behaviour, or general community concerns, should be established. In Bougainville, regular meetings with NGOs and community groups facilitated a two-way reporting process.
- **Maximise civil-military cooperation:** A dedicated Civil-Military Cooperation office with a gender-balanced staff should operate in the Solomon Islands to enhance the relationship between the civilian, NGO and military sectors.
- **Provide clear military-humanitarian delineation:** Military should appear in uniform at all times to avoid problematic issues of civilian perception which may lead to security issues for NGOs. Any delivery of humanitarian relief should be through those organisations mandated to do so.