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The hidden crisis: Armed conflict and education

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Jeni Whalan

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Education for All: Solomon Islands

Jeni Whalan (jeni.whalan@politics.ox.ac.uk)

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Abstract

Between 1998 and 2003, conflict, violent crime and severe economic downturn pushed the Solomon Islands state to the brink of failure, exacerbating the problems of an already struggling education sector. Most schools on Guadalcanal were seriously disrupted; some were burnt down or vandalized, others closed as teachers and students fled violence, and those that remained open struggled to accommodate the large displaced student population. The collapse of state finances stripped any remaining funding from the education sector; teachers were paid irregularly, if at all, while many schools lacked basic teaching materials and proper sanitation. In 2003, the Regional Assistance Mission in Solomon Islands (RAMSI) intervention quickly restored security and stabilized government finances. RAMSI provided significant budget support to the education sector and opened the door for donor reengagement. Schools re-opened, new facilities were built and teachers were paid, allowing the government and donors to focus on longer-term constraints, including abolishing school fees. Government expenditure on education is high, but financed almost entirely by donors. Solomon Islands is now one of the world's most aid dependent countries and remains vulnerable to external shocks and natural disasters. Weak economic forecasts suggest the need for additional external budget support to protect social spending, including on education.

Solomon Islands is an archipelago of nearly 1000 islands in the southwest Pacific with a population of about 500 000, most of whom live on the country's two main islands, Guadalcanal and Malaita. Over 80% of people live in rural areas, and about 40% are under 15 years of age.¹ Since 2003, annual GDP growth has averaged 7.2%, though this relied heavily on unsustainable logging and foreign aid. The 2009 Human Development Report ranks Solomon Islands 135th out of 182 countries.² Like those of other Pacific countries, Solomon Islands' key health indicators are significantly better than the low income country average: infant and under-5 mortality rates are 53.4 and 70.3 per 1000 live births respectively, compared to 77.9 and 119.93 for all low income countries; similarly, the maternal mortality rate is 220 per 100 000 live births, compared to 790 for all low income countries.³ On education, the latest figures show a net primary school enrollment rate of 62%, lower than the low income country average of 75%, and a ratio of female to male enrollment of 96%, higher than the low income country average of 91%.⁴

When Solomon Islands gained its independence from British rule in 1978, less than 5% of the population was educated to primary school level.⁵ Impressive progress was made in the years that followed and by 1991 about 70% of children completed primary school.⁶ Yet progress faltered during the 1990s. With donor support, the construction of new schools during the 1990s had improved access to education, but this rapid growth, particularly of secondary schools, outstripped

¹ World Bank, 2009, *World Development Indicators 2009*, Washington DC: The World Bank.

² Human Development Report, 2009, *Overcoming barriers: Human mobility and development* New York: United Nations Development Program.

³ World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2009*.

⁴ World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2009*.

⁵ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2004, *Solomon Islands: Rebuilding an Island Economy*, Barton: Australian Government, p.32 fn.1.

⁶ World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2009*.

the government's capacity to fund teacher salaries, teacher training, instructional materials or building maintenance. Economic growth, averaging 6 per cent during the early 1990s, slowed between 1995 and 1999 to an average of just 0.2 per cent.⁷ Primary schools were hardest hit by reduced budget allocations to education and student performance began to decline; a World Bank report found that literacy among Year 4 students dropped by 15% between 1993 and 1999, and numeracy by 73% over the same period.⁸

Conflict, violent crime and economic decline: a failing state, 1998-2003

Between 1998 and 2003 conflict, violent crime and severe economic downturn pushed the Solomon Islands state to the brink of failure, exacerbating the problems of an already struggling education sector. In 1998, tensions between groups belonging to the country's main island, Guadalcanal, and migrants from Malaita escalated into open conflict. Decades of Malaitan migration had followed the relocation of the nation's capital to Honiara, on Guadalcanal, after the Second World War. The acquisition of customary land by Malaitan migrants, either through sale or illegal squatting, generated resentment among some Guadalcanal groups. These grievances were exacerbated by the perception that Malaitians had benefitted disproportionately from the island's development. After compensation demands from Guadalcanal groups failed to draw any response from the Solomon Islands state, Guadalcanal militia known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) began a campaign of violence and intimidation against Malaitan settlers.⁹ By the end of 1999, between 30 000 and 35 000 people had been displaced from their homes on Guadalcanal; many ethnic Malaitans fled to Malaita.¹⁰

Amid escalating violence, a group of displaced Malaitans formed their own militia and began making counter-claims for government compensation. Known as the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF), they had close links with the police force, which was dominated by ethnic Malaitan officers.¹¹ The country's only security force, the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP), was severely compromised during the conflict, either implicated in militia violence and criminal thuggery or paralysed by it. The MEF raided a police armoury on Malaita in January 2000, seizing high-powered weapons and declaring

⁷ World Bank, 2003, *Implementation Completion Report (IDA – 25000) on a Credit in the amount of US\$17.1 million to the Solomon Islands for a Third Education and Training Project*, Report Number 25073, 10 June.

⁸ World Bank, 2006, *Opportunities to Improve social services: human development in the Pacific Islands 2006*, Report Number 39778, p.22.

⁹ Later known as the Guadalcanal Liberation Army, the Guadalcanal Liberation Front and Isatabu Freedom Fighters.

¹⁰ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 2004, *Profile of Internal Displacement: Solomon Islands* available <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3d32e1a54.html>, accessed 19 March 2010, p.5.

¹¹ For more detailed analysis of this period, see: Judith Bennett, 2002, 'Roots of Conflict in Solomon Islands', *RSPAS Discussion Paper 2002/5*, Canberra: The Australian National University; Sinclair Dinnen, 2002, 'Winners and Losers: Politics and Disorder in the Solomon Islands 2000-2002', *The Journal of Pacific History*, 37(3):285-298; Jon Fraenkel, 2004, *The manipulation of custom: from uprising to intervention in the Solomon Islands*, Wellington, NZ: Victoria University Press; Shahar Hameiri, 2007, 'The trouble with RAMSI: reexamining the roots of conflict in Solomon Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 19 (2):409-441; Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, 2002, 'A Weak State and the Solomon Islands Peace Process', *East-West Center Working Paper No. 14*. Honolulu: East-West Center; Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, 2004, "'Failed State" And the War on Terror: Intervention in Solomon Islands', *AsiaPacific Issues Series 72*, Honolulu: East-West Center.

their readiness to secure compensation by force if necessary.¹² On 5 June 2000 the MEF and members of the police force staged a political coup, taking the incumbent prime minister hostage and forcing his government from power.

Requests for assistance by the Solomon Islands Prime Minister before the coup had been declined by neighbouring Australia and New Zealand. Following the coup, however, the two countries intervened diplomatically to broker a ceasefire which built momentum towards a peace agreement negotiated in Australia several months later. The Townsville Peace Agreement outlined a framework for the cessation of hostilities between the IFM and MEF, and established an indigenous Peace Monitoring Council and an International Peace Monitoring Team.¹³ However, these efforts restored neither security nor economic stability; after 2000 the conflict degenerated into violent criminality perpetrated by splintering militia groups and criminal opportunists. Although conflict was largely contained to the island of Guadalcanal,¹⁴ an estimated 85 per cent of Solomon Islanders were directly affected by the insecurity.¹⁵

While data from this period is incomplete and inconsistent, it is clear that conflict had a severe impact on an already under-resourced education sector in Solomon Islands. Most schools on Guadalcanal were seriously disrupted and many closed as teachers and students fled violence. Up to 29 per cent of the displaced population was of primary school age.¹⁶ A number of schools were burnt down and many others vandalized, while schools that remained open struggled to accommodate the large displaced student population. In 2000, one study estimates that primary school enrolment dropped by around 50 per cent and secondary school enrolment by nearly 80 per cent, with similar reductions in teaching staff.¹⁷ Meanwhile, many people fled to Malaita where already under-resourced schools were unable to absorb the rapid influx of displaced students. In September 1999, an estimated 41 per cent of children in Malaita were not in school; of those, 60 per cent had attended school before displacement.¹⁸

But the conflict also constrained education indirectly via its impact on the Solomon Islands state. The economy, already strained by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, was in sharp decline by 2000 as the lack of security closed productive industries and scared off international investment. Violent extortion of government funds and the 'compensation' paid to armed groups contributed to the

¹² Amnesty International, 2000, *Solomon Islands: a forgotten conflict*, 7 September ASA 43/005/2000, available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA43/005/2000/en>, accessed 19 March 2010, p5-6.

¹³ For more detail on the PMC and IMPT see David Hegarty, 2001, 'Monitoring Peace in Solomon Islands', *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project Working Paper 2001/4*.

¹⁴ In 2002, localised conflict broke out in Western Province; see Dinnen, 'Winners and Losers: Politics and Disorder in the Solomon Islands 2000-2002'.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, 2004, *Solomon Islands: Women Confronting Violence*, available <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA43/001/2004/en>, accessed 19 March 2010; see also IDMC, 2004, *Profile of Internal Displacement: Solomon Islands*.

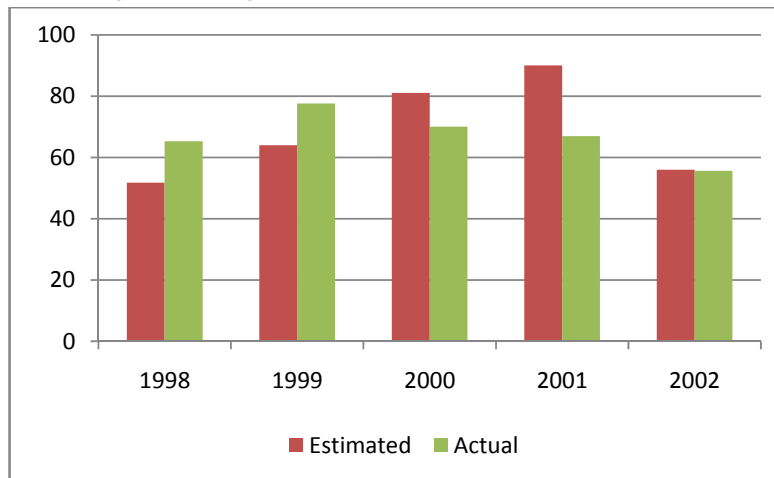
¹⁶ Donald Kudu, 2000, 'Impact of the Ethnic Unrest on Social Development and Disadvantaged Groups in Solomon Islands' in Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 2002, *Profile of Internal Displacement: Solomon Islands*, Annex E-3, p.10.

¹⁷ Kudu, 'Impact of the Ethnic Unrest on Social Development and Disadvantaged Groups in Solomon Islands', p.11.

¹⁸ Kudu, 'Impact of the Ethnic Unrest on Social Development and Disadvantaged Groups in Solomon Islands' p.4.

collapse of state finances: by May 2001, SI\$40 million had reportedly been paid to ex-militants as compensation for deaths, damage and destruction of property, displacement and other grievances.¹⁹ The economy contracted by a quarter between 1998 and 2002; falling revenue and the diversion of funds through official corruption halted service delivery, with education and health services particularly affected.²⁰ Although the budget allocation for education increased significantly between 1998 and 2002, the sector was underfunded by 14 per cent and 25 per cent in 2000 and 2001 respectively, while a balanced budget in 2002 was achieved only by matching actual expenditure to a drastically reduced allocation (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Budget allocations for education, 1998-2002



Source: 2002 Annual Report, Solomon Islands Ministry of Education.

While education expenditure was budgeted to steadily increase until 2001 in line with the large, rapidly growing youth population and Solomon Islands' commitment to increase access to education, actual expenditure began declining in 2000. The lack of financial reporting during this period makes analysis difficult, but it is likely that the closure of schools and displacement of students ameliorated the impact of reduced spending in 2000. As students returned, the collapse in state finances left the Solomon Islands government with no capacity to fund the operating costs of schools: in 2002, teacher salaries accounted for about 91 per cent of actual education expenditure, with civil service salaries taking another 6 per cent.²¹ Yet the payment of teacher salaries still fell into arrears by the end of 2002, causing teachers to strike in March 2003.²² Minimal education services were sustained only through donor support: by the end of 2002, New Zealand had provided at least SI\$3 million to fund the operation of secondary schools affected by conflict; the EU provided an operating grant of SI\$5.8 million for secondary schools in 2002; while primary schools received emergency assistance with school supplies from DfiD (SI\$5.4 million) and Taiwan (SI\$4.5 million), but

¹⁹ For a detailed account of the use of compensation payments by Solomon Islands government as a form of peacemaking, see Dinnen 'Winners and Losers: Politics and Disorder in the Solomon Islands 2000-2002'.

²⁰ For more detail, see DFAT *Solomon Islands: Rebuilding an Island Economy*; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2004, *Social Impact Assessment of Peace Restoration Initiatives in Solomon Islands*, Suva: Pacific Islands Forum.

²¹ Solomon Islands Ministry of Education, 2003, *Annual Report 2002*.

²² Solomon Islands Central Bank, 2003, *Annual Report 2002*; Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, 2004, 'Solomon Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 16(2): 393-401.

no cash grants.²³ In addition, Australian aid financed some school facilities in particularly conflict-affected communities through a Community Peace Restoration Fund (CPRF) designed to support the implementation of the 2000 peace agreement. Funding for the CPRF was progressively increased, to reach AU\$21 million by the end of 2004, though education was just one of many sectors that received small-scale support; others included health, community facilities, training, roads, women, youth, and agriculture.²⁴

While important, this donor assistance provided only minimal education services in an already over-stretched system. Neither free nor compulsory, education was also constrained by over-crowded classrooms and the lack of basic teaching materials, clean drinking water and sanitation facilities. Data on national enrolment figures varies widely, but a 2003 Oxfam report found that less than 40 per cent of children had completed primary school, down from about 70 per cent in 1991.²⁵

First postconflict phase, 2003-2005: RAMSI, security and budget stabilisation

In 2003, Australia reversed its position on direct intervention in Solomon Islands and led a force of over 2000 personnel to restore security.²⁶ Mandated by the Pacific Islands Forum, a 16-member regional organisation, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was deployed at the request of the Solomon Islands government. The largest military operation in the region since the Second World War, in practice RAMSI relied on its police and civilian components to achieve its immediate objectives: the restoration of law and order and the emergency stabilisation of government finances in order to return basic public service delivery, particularly in the health and education sectors. Supported by an influential think tank report that diagnosed Solomon Islands as a 'failing state',²⁷ RAMSI also had a longer-term statebuilding mandate to strengthen public institutions. Just twelve months later, the operation had overseen a dramatic turnaround in Solomon Islands' security: an effective disarmament campaign had collected 3,700 guns and over 300,000 ammunition rounds, representing an estimated 90-95 per cent of the total;²⁸ militia gangs

²³ Solomon Islands Ministry of Education, *Annual Report, 2002*.

²⁴ AusAID, 2002, *Annual Report 2001-2002* Canberra: Australian Agency for International Development; 'Australia Increases Support to Community Peace and Restoration Fund', Media Release, Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer, 1 August 2003.

²⁵ Oxfam, 2003, *Australian Intervention in the Solomons: Beyond Operation Helpem Fren*, available <http://www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2003/caa-slb-25aug.pdf>, accessed 19 March; *World Development Indicators 2009*. An Australian government report puts these figures at 85 per cent (1991) and 79 per cent (2005); see AusAID 2008, *Tracking development and governance in the Pacific* Canberra: Australian Agency for International Development.

²⁶ For more detailed analysis of the decision to intervene, see Elsin Wainwright, 2003, 'Responding to State Failure: The Case of Australia and Solomon Islands', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 57(3): 485-498; Michael Wesley, 2007, 'Reality Beyond the Whiteboard', *Griffith Review*, 16: 173-186; Kabutaulaka, "'Failed State" And the War on Terror: Intervention in Solomon Islands'; Clive Moore, 2005, 'Australia's motivation and timing for the 2003 intervention in the Solomon Islands crisis', *Royal Historical Society of Queensland Journal*, 19(4):732-748.

²⁷ Elsin Wainwright, 2003, *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands* Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

²⁸ Robert Muggah, 2004, 'Diagnosing Demand: Assessing the Motivations and Means for Firearms Acquisition in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea', *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper* 2004/7.

were demobilised and their leaders arrested, along with many former police officers; basic physical safety was restored to the streets of Honiara and throughout the country, assisted by the establishment of seventeen regional police posts; and government finances were stabilised, the endemic extortion of public offices ended, and vital public services had returned. After 2004, RAMSI aimed to consolidate this early success through ongoing capacity building programs targeting the police force, the judiciary and prisons, public accountability institutions, and key government departments, particularly the Ministry of Finance.²⁹ A defining feature of RAMSI is its 'whole of government' approach, in which security, economic and development issues are addressed through a comprehensive, integrated package.³⁰ This has produced a greater degree of coordination between RAMSI's security and development pillars than is often seen elsewhere. In addition, the fact that key Solomon Islands bilateral donors Australia and New Zealand are also the lead sponsors of RAMSI has produced better coordination between the operation and other donors than is usually observed in comparable interventions.

The RAMSI intervention had three important effects on education. First, the provision of public security allowed schools to reopen and the remaining displaced populations to return to their homes. Second, an estimated SI\$118 million in RAMSI budget support in 2003-2004 stabilised government finances and provided vital funds for education, including the payment of overdue teacher salaries which had caused teachers to strike in March 2003.³¹ At the same time, the placement of RAMSI personnel in line positions in the Ministry of Finance, including the Accountant General, helped to plug unbudgeted expenditure such as compensation payments to ex-militants. Third, these security and economic measures opened the door for donor reengagement. Substantial budget support from Australia and New Zealand, part of the RAMSI assistance package, facilitated the return of public services and paid Solomon Islands' overdue debt obligations to the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.³² By 2004-05, annual aid disbursements were more than 40 per cent of GDP (see figure 2).³³ Most of that aid has been directed towards health and education: in 2004, 53 per cent of all aid, including RAMSI budget support, was allocated to social services and community development.³⁴ Significantly, New Zealand has provided ongoing budget support for education: the 2006 budget included SI\$61.3 million for education, dropping to SI\$23.8 million in 2007 but rising again in 2008 to \$45.3 million.³⁵ It is likely that the highly intrusive role of RAMSI in Solomon Islands government departments, particularly in the Ministry of Finance, was crucial to overcome the usual donor concerns regarding the high risks of providing budget support at such an early stage in the intervention.

²⁹ For more on this period, see Jeni Whalan, 2010, 'The Power of Friends: The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands' *Journal of Peace Research* 47(5).

³⁰ See OECD, 2006, *Whole of Government Approaches to Fragile States* OECD-DAC; Stewart Patrick and Kaysie Brown, 2007, *Greater than the Sum of its Parts? Assessing 'Whole of Government' Approaches to Fragile States* New York: International Peace Academy.

³¹ Solomon Islands Central Bank, 2004, *Annual Report 2003*.

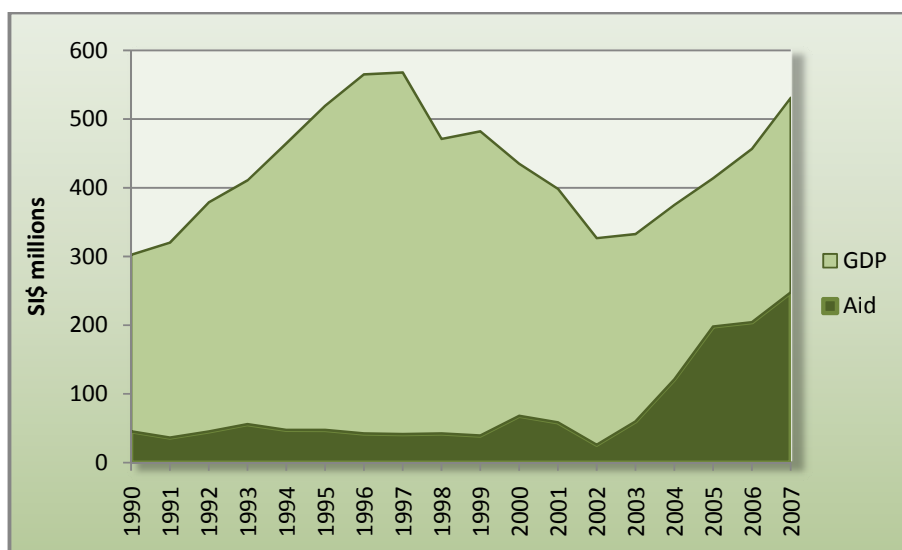
³² International Monetary Fund, 2004, 'IMF Concludes 2004 Article IV Consultation with the Solomon Islands', *Public Information Notice (PIN)* No. 04/89, August 12, Washington: IMF, p.1.

³³ *World Development Indicators 2009*.

³⁴ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *Social Impact Assessment*, p.viii.

³⁵ Solomon Islands Central Bank, 2006, *Annual Report 2005* p.9; Solomon Islands Central Bank, 2008, *Annual Report 2007* p.39; Solomon Islands Central Bank, 2009, *Annual Report 2008* p.35.

Figure 2: Aid as a proportion of GDP



Source: 2009 World Development Indicators, World Bank.

Second postconflict phase, 2005-present: capacity building and long-term development

After 2004, RAMSI progressively shifted to focus on capacity building rather than security provision, and is expected to maintain a significant civilian and police presence for at least the next two to three years. With RAMSI focusing on technical programs of institutional strengthening, anti-corruption and economic governance, other donors have taken the lead on development. NZAID and the EU re-established their previous status as key education donors in the primary and secondary sectors respectively and in 2004 signed a partnership agreement with the Solomon Islands government as part of the shift to a sector-wide approach to education aid.³⁶ The government has consistently prioritised education during the post-conflict period. The 2003-2006 National Economic Recovery, Reform and Development Plan, completed in 2003 with donor support, identified basic and secondary health and education services as one of five priority areas for Solomon Islands' development strategy. Government spending on education has remained high, though largely financed by donors. In 2007, for example, the education sector accounted for 20.4 per cent of expenditure, the largest portion of total spending;³⁷ in 2008, education and health together received around 40 per cent of the recurrent budget.³⁸ The budget allocated to education is high by low income country and regional standards, though it is skewed towards the tertiary level: in 2006, about 40 per cent of the education budget was for tertiary education (only 2 per cent of students), while primary education received just 30 per cent (80 per cent of students).³⁹ Although spending on education remains heavily dependent on donor support, domestic financing for

³⁶ Michael Ward and Derek Sikua, 2004, 'Donor harmonization for improved aid effectiveness' *Development Bulletin* 65, p.35.

³⁷ Solomon Islands Central Bank, *Annual Report 2007* p.40.

³⁸ Solomon Islands Central Bank, *Annual Report 2008* p.8.

³⁹ International Monetary Fund, 2006, 'IMF Executive Board Concludes 2006 Article IV Consultation with the Solomon Islands' *Public Information Notice (PIN)* No. 06/122, October 23, Washington DC: IMF, p.11.

education gradually increased after 2005 to reach 6 per cent of total education expenditure in 2007.⁴⁰

In 2009, the Solomon Islands government fulfilled its promise to deliver fee-free education up to form three. Under the program, over 600 primary schools and 200 secondary schools receive grants in lieu of fees previously charged to students, although there have been reports of disruptions to the allocation of these funds. The scheme is funded primarily by NZAID, with additional contributions from Taiwan and the Solomon Islands government. While it is still too early to evaluate its impact, there are reports that some schools are continuing to charge fees. Ensuring its sustainability will also be a significant challenge. The program is heavily dependent on donor support; given Solomon Islands' weak economic prospects, high annual population growth rate of 2.3 per cent,⁴¹ and large youth population, the government is unlikely to be in a position to meet growing demand for education in the medium term. Strong donor commitment to fund teacher training, school construction and curriculum materials will need to accompany the fee-free grants simply to maintain the standards of education at their current, inadequate levels.

Aid dependence is a significant challenge for Solomon Islands. The latest figures show that Solomon Islands ranked in the top three aid dependent countries between 2005 and 2007.⁴² In 2007, aid to Solomon Islands was 47.1 per cent of GNI, more than six times higher than the low income country average of 7.7 per cent.⁴³ Dependence on unsustainable logging exacerbates the vulnerability of the Solomon Islands economy: while a record timber harvest delivered 6.9 per cent growth in GDP in 2008, in 2009 growth is projected to slow to just 0.4 per cent, due to predicted lower logging production and global recession.⁴⁴ Weak economic forecasts suggest the need for additional external budget support to protect social spending, including on education; donor commitment remains strong, but the vulnerability of aid dependence looks set to continue in the medium term.⁴⁵ On the positive side, donor programs in Solomon Islands are relatively well harmonised, in part because they are relatively few. In the education sector, donors appear to be well-coordinated and aligned with the priorities of the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education, in large part because so much aid is channelled through government. In this, RAMSI plays an important guarantor role: in addition to underwriting public security, the continued advisory role of RAMSI, including through line officials, provides a degree of surveillance and stability that addresses the accountability concerns of donors elsewhere.

Finally, Solomon Islands remains vulnerable to natural disasters. A devastating earthquake and tsunami in April 2007 killed more than 50 people and displaced between 5000 and 10 000 people in Western and Choiseul Provinces,⁴⁶ half of whom were children.⁴⁷ Over 20 000 students in the area

⁴⁰ International Monetary Fund, 2009, *The Solomon Islands: 2009 Article IV Consultation—Staff Report* Washington DC: IMF.

⁴¹ *World Development Indicators 2009*.

⁴² *World Development Indicators 2009*.

⁴³ *World Development Indicators 2009*.

⁴⁴ IMF *The Solomon Islands: 2009 Article IV Consultation—Staff Report*.

⁴⁵ IMF *The Solomon Islands: 2009 Article IV Consultation—Staff Report*.

⁴⁶ Asian Development Bank, 2008, *Solomon Islands: Strengthening Disaster Recovery Planning and Coordination* Asian Development Bank Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Program, Project number 41105,

were directly affected, with around 90 per cent of schools experiencing at least some disruption.⁴⁸ Eighty-four schools, nearly 50 per cent of the total, were either destroyed or suffered major damage, while a further 58 school suffered minor damage.⁴⁹ A number of donors provided emergency and rehabilitation assistance; on education, these include UNICEF, NZAID and the EU. Reconstruction of damaged schools, health facilities and infrastructure was predicted to cost SI\$591.7 million, about 90 per cent of the 2006 recurrent government budget, indicating the extent of Solomon Islands' vulnerability to such external shocks.⁵⁰

Conclusion: lessons of RAMSI

As a security intervention, RAMSI was undeniably effective: its early restoration of public security, near-comprehensive disarmament and arrest of key militia leaders are achievements rarely observed in peace operations, and less often sustained some seven years later. As a statebuilding operation, RAMSI has encountered more resistance, including criticism of its overly intrusive structure, the cultural insensitivity of its personnel, the overwhelming control of its lead sponsor Australia, and its failure to deliver more substantive economic benefits to the majority of Solomon Islanders.⁵¹ Nevertheless, when compared with the record of international statebuilding interventions, RAMSI appears more successful. In particular, the operation's continued monitoring of government expenditures, ensured in part by RAMSI personnel holding key line positions in government ministries, has provided a basis on which donors have re-engaged and pledged long-term support for development, of which New Zealand budget support for education is a prime example.

While caution must be exercised in lifting lessons out of Solomon Islands for application in different contexts, there are relevant conclusions that can be drawn from its post-conflict experiences for education donors elsewhere. The most significant concerns the critical role of RAMSI in underwriting security and stability, assuming a leadership role among international actors, monitoring and at times directing government expenditures, and integrating short-term security goals with long-term development. Notwithstanding the risks of aid dependence outlined above, progress on education was facilitated by three distinctive features of the Solomon Islands intervention.

Donor engagement: significant aid flows from few donors

RAMSI's early security effectiveness and stabilisation of government finances catalysed new donor engagement, first through substantial direct RAMSI budget support in 2003-2004, and later through

November 2007; UNICEF, 2008, 'Solomon Islands Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster: An Evaluation of UNICEF's Response in the Emergency and Initial Recovery Phases' Fiji: UNICEF.

⁴⁷ Donna Hoerder, 2007, 'After the tsunami, education and recreation for Solomon Islands children' UNICEF 10 July, available http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/solomonislands_40295.html, accessed 19 March 2010.

⁴⁸ Asian Development Bank *Solomon Islands: Strengthening Disaster Recovery Planning and Coordination* p.12.

⁴⁹ UNICEF, 'Solomon Islands Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster'.

⁵⁰ Asian Development Bank *Solomon Islands: Strengthening Disaster Recovery Planning and Coordination* p.4.

⁵¹ See Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (eds), 2008, *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands* Canberra: ANU E Press and Asia Pacific Press; Michael Morgan and Abby McLeod, 2006, 'Have we Failed Our Neighbour?', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 60(3): 412-428.

expanded bilateral and multilateral programs. However, Solomon Islands has not seen the large-scale influx of donors evident in other postconflict settings. RAMSI has been the lead international agency in Solomon Islands since 2003, followed by the bilateral programs of its key sponsors, Australia and New Zealand, and then the Asian Development Bank, EC, Japan and Taiwan.⁵² In part, this is because Solomon Islands' conflict and instability remained a regional, not global, concern; with the exception of the EC, all major donors are from the Asia-Pacific region. But it is also because of the overwhelming influence of Australia in the postconflict environment; including both RAMSI and its bilateral aid program, the Australian commitment to Solomon Islands was close to US\$1 billion by 2010, dwarfing the budgets of other aid agencies.

Sustained security

RAMSI rapidly restored public security, which enabled schools to reopen, students to return to classrooms, and donors to re-engage. Notably, security has been sustained with very few, minimal relapses to instability. The most serious of these occurred in post-election riots in April 2006, when parts of the capital Honiara were burnt to the ground. Nevertheless, rioting was short-lived, involved no deaths, and had more to do with popular discontent with political corruption and opportunistic looting than with a return to conflict or broader disorder. The maintenance of security is largely due to the continued presence of RAMSI and its ability to rapidly bolster troop numbers if instability emerges, as occurred in April 2006.

Aid modalities: budget support and partnership agreements

Education aid in Solomon Islands has been well-harmonised with the priorities of the local Ministry of Education. Two distinctive features of the Solomon Islands context are important in this regard. First, the New Zealand program of budget support has channelled aid through the national government; alongside the EU, NZAID has worked in a formalised partnership with the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education. Significant budget support was provided right from the intervention's beginning and is projected to continue in the coming years. While donors are usually wary of the risks involved in budget support, RAMSI's highly intrusive statebuilding program, which has involved placing large numbers of international civilian advisors in Solomon Islands' government departments, ameliorated many of the usual donor concerns regarding malfeasance in the allocation of funds. Second, the role of Solomon Islands government counterparts has also been significant, and the education sector appears to have benefitted from the strong leadership in the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development. In particular, the current Prime Minister Dr. Derek Sikua, who holds a PhD in Education Studies, previously served as Permanent Secretary and then Minister of the Department from 2003 until his election as national leader in 2007. Education had been a strong government priority before the conflict, and with donor support, the Ministry of Education has made progress on its identified goals.

⁵² AidData

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