
Big Men, wantoks and donors: A political sociology of public service reform in Solomon Islands

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Abstract

Recent decades have witnessed the rise in popularity of New Public Management (NPM) as a paradigm of public service reform. Key objectives on the NPM reform menu include a de-bureaucratizing of government services, the stimulation of local market competition for service provision and the introduction of performance measurement techniques. This agenda has been enthusiastically promoted and adopted into a diverse array of developing-country settings, including Solomon Islands (SI). Yet, the reform outcomes in SI display an uneven character at best. Is such a reform agenda compatible with the reality of achieving effective service delivery in SI? By combining a political history of reform in SI with the perceptions and experiences of respondents from selected public service ministries, state owned enterprises and in-country donor organizations, the following article examines the impact of NPM reforms on SI public service. It considers the ways in which a largely externally instigated reform agenda has been accepted, contested and transformed.

Keywords: new public management, public service delivery, Solomon Islands, transferability.

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What we promised Solomon Islanders was a better life, a safer life and a more prosperous life. I think we met those key objectives. We met them because we had the right team, the right timing and the right approach. Part of that right approach was a partnership with the Government of Solomon Islands and just as importantly, with the people of Solomon Islands.

Nick Warner, RAMSI Special Coordinator, 2003–2004.

Introduction

In his inaugural address (1981), former United States (US) President Ronald Reagan claimed that ‘the public service is not the solution, it is the problem’. This claim signalled the neoliberal turn in policy making of the 1980s. In a move away from the post-war Keynesian consensus, conservative leaders such as Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom (UK) deemed public services inefficient concerns that consumed disproportionate public funds for administrative running costs. Along with the championing of free market liberalization and deregulation, the neoliberal policy agenda would seek to ‘roll back the state’ and curb its spending (Ibietan 2013). Policy makers were tasked with finding different ways of managing service provision.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, a New Public Management (NPM) approach to service provision began to gain significant traction in academic and policy circles as a way to address both financial efficiency and effective service delivery (Zifcak 1994; Polidano 1999; Gruening 2001). This was encapsulated by three broad reform objectives. Firstly, the de-bureaucratizing of government agencies by way of privatization, outsourcing and decentralization (McCourt and Minogue 2001). Second, the provision of government services at affordable prices through the stimulation of local market competition (Vigoda-Gadot and Cohen 2015). And finally, the promotion of greater accountability, transparency and public participation by way of systematic performance measurement (Brinkerhoff et al. 2012; Davila and Elvira 2014). In sum, the NPM approach is “managers, markets and measurement” (Ferlie and Steane 2002: 1461).

NPM reforms were initially rolled out in countries such as the UK, US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand and subsequently promoted by scholars, policy makers and international development agencies for public sector reform in developing countries (Polidano and Hulme 1998; Schick 1998). But as early as 1991, Christopher Hood was warning that NPM’s global spread was little more than a ‘cargo cult’. Despite its widespread adoption over the last three decades, many of the outcomes in developing countries have been uneven and ambiguous (Manning 2003; Batley and Larbi 2004; Hood and Lodge 2004; McCourt 2008).

This brings us to our case study. In 2003, following several years of conflict and social unrest, the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) sought to restore Solomon Islands Public Service (SIPS) capacity as part of its Machinery of Government Program objectives (AusAID 2017). Multiple NPM reforms were implemented from 2003 until RAMSI’s exit in June 2017 in order to restore fiscal discipline and improve public service delivery. From 2013 to 2017, the primary vehicle for these reforms was the Australian AID (AusAID)/Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) -funded Solomon Islands Economic and Public Sector Governance Program (SIGOV), which was succeeded by the Solomon Islands Governance Program 2017-2021 (DFAT 2017). AusAID/DFAT played a sizeable role in Solomon Islands public sector reforms alongside other international actors, including the World Bank (WB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), New Zealand AID (NZAID), Taiwan’s Foreign Assistance and International Cooperation (TFAIC), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). Various scholars have examined the intervention in detail (Kabutaulaka 2005; Allen 2006; Dinnen and Allen 2015; Hameiri 2017). Fraenkel et al. (2014) in particular provide a sober review of the 2003-2013 period. Hameiri (2017a: 85-120) also gives an insightful account of coalition contestation and uneven reform outcomes. Nonetheless, in-depth assessment of the impact of NPM reforms on SIPS remains limited. This article sets out to examine their impact in further detail. By outlining a political history of reform in SI combined with a qualitative assessment of the perceptions and experiences of public service, state owned enterprise (SOE) and donor respondents, it aims to evaluate the ways in which an externally instigated reform agenda has been accepted, contested and transformed. Before moving on to the qualitative data analysis, the following sections situate SI and provide a history of public management reforms there.

Situating Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands lies in the Western Pacific Ocean. It comprises six main islands and nearly a thousand smaller islands and atolls (Whalan 2010). The population is spread across nine provinces and was estimated at 667,044 in 2018 (SINSO 2019). Solomon Islands National Statistics Office (2009) census data shows that only 19.8 percent of the population resides in urban centers. The largest of these is Honiara on the island of Guadalcanal, which is within Honiara City Council's jurisdiction. The total population in urban areas is 102,000 of which 64,609 are located in 'Greater Honiara', accounting for 75 percent of the urban population. While the vast majority of the population still lives in rural areas, this is changing rapidly, with an urban population growth rate of 4.7 percent recorded in the last census (SINSO 2009). Ethnically, 95.3 percent of the populace are Melanesian, 3.1 percent Polynesian, and 1.2 percent Micronesian, with 0.4 percent including Asians and Europeans (SINSO 2009). SI is predominantly Christian Protestant, with Anglicans as the largest denomination. There are also smaller communities of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists.

With the islands being scattered over a wide area, there are specific challenges for public administration and service delivery, especially in the outer islands. As Dinnen and Allen (2015) note, geography matters in SI in terms of its distance from global markets and production centers. It has a challenging archipelagic geography and spatially uneven development. This has precipitated high levels of internal migration to urban areas such as Honiara, with people searching for employment and access to better facilities. According to Hassall and Tipu (2008), the increase in population size in urban areas outweighs existing service provision capacity.

Despite economic growth averaging 3.0 percent in the last four years, Central Bank of Solomon Islands (CBSI) annual reports from 1999 to 2018 indicate the SI economy is heavily reliant on commodity exports. Logging is the largest export alongside fish. While log exports are at record levels, this resource has been exploited at unsustainable levels for several decades. There are projections that if left unchecked, the industry will collapse in the next decade or so (SKM 2011). According to Allen (2008) and Kabutaulaka (2005), it is estimated that Solomon Islands Government has forfeited millions of dollars of revenue due to corruption, maladministration and political interference in the logging industry. Other exports include agricultural commodities such as palm oil, copra and cocoa and minerals such as gold, nickel and bauxite (ADB 2020). Environmental degradation in SI poses a major risk to communities and long-term economic sustainability (Allen and Porter 2016).

SI faces a range of social issues associated with deprivation and inequality. The highest poverty incidences are in Honiara, parts of Guadalcanal and Makira (SINSO 2017). The growing population, especially in Honiara, has resulted in increased urban poverty rates and criminal activity (Droogan and Waldek 2015). The most recent CBSI Annual Report (2019) indicates that the total Solomon Islands National Provident Fund (SINPF) membership is only 58,736—which includes those in other urban provincial centers—suggesting very low rates of formal-sector employment. Rural areas do manage to maintain levels of 'subsistence affluence' by way of regular food supplies from home gardens and fishing. They have access to clean water sources and modest earnings from smallholder cash crops like copra, cocoa or sweet potato, but a 'poverty of opportunity' remains high (Georgeou and Hawksley 2017: 67- 86; Yari 2003: 41-53). Access to infrastructure and transport is usually limited. For instance, although Guadalcanal hosts the country's capital, southern parts of the island lack roads and regular shipping services. Similarly, in Makira province, the provincial capital Kirakira has no wharf and limited access to regular shipping services. The basic corollary is that the further a location is from Honiara, the less access to public services such as clinics, roads and schools.

In Honiara, citizens enjoy better access to roads, hospital facilities, internet connectivity and so forth. According to a World Health Organization and Solomon Islands Ministry of Health and Medical Services (2012) report, only 18 percent of the population enjoys ease of access to health centers and mostly only in urban areas. The dispersed geography of SI continues to make service delivery difficult. Social deprivation issues, uneven economic development and limited national cohesion amongst diverse kinship groups exacerbates the issue. In the rural areas, some villagers have to walk or paddle for hours to the nearest health center (WHO and MHMS 2012). Currently only 62 percent of school-aged children have access to kindergarten, primary and

secondary education, a figure much lower than other developing countries, which average at 75 percent (Whalen 2010).

Furthermore, indigenous belonging is felt keenly in SI, especially over customary land ownership and entitlement. Competition over land alongside divisive mining and logging operations can generate tensions and amplify underlying feuds and resentments (Kabutaulaka 2016; Firth 2018: 1-26; Carnegie and King 2020). As Kabutaulaka (2005: 283-308) points out, geographical, economic and social disparities were key factors in triggering ethnic violence in SI (see also Allen 2013; 2018). Between late 1998 and early 2003, land issues and crime on Guadalcanal Island prompted the Isatabu Freedom Movement to take up arms and expel Malaitans from rural and peri-urban areas of Guadalcanal Province. Malaitans retaliated with the formation of the Malaita Eagle Force. Only after the RAMSI intervention did a semblance of social and political stability return to the country. It also brought a renewed impetus to previous public management reform attempts and an expectation of improvement. The following section further details political configurations in SI.

Systemic reform or reformed continuity?

Eight years prior to independence, the British colonial administration advised against SI adopting a Westminster system. They were skeptical of it working. However, the orchestrators of SI independence thought otherwise (Larmour 2002). Since gaining independence in 1978, SI has had 17 governments and Prime Ministers. The People's Alliance Party (PAP) is the only party to have won a majority of parliamentary seats and to form a full majority government. This has occurred twice, first under Solomon Mamaloni's leadership in 1984 and then under Sir Allen Kemakeza's leadership in 2006. The other governments have been coalitions with PAP part of most of them. There are currently 25 ministries, 4 commissions and 9 state owned enterprises (MPS 2016). Interestingly, while there is provisional loyalty to political parties, especially in the lead up to national elections, Members of Parliament change loyalty frequently. Despite the introduction of the Political Party Integrity Act in 2014 (PPI Act 2014), fluid factional allegiances persist. As Fraenkel and Grofman (2005) note, it reinforces and reproduces a 'big man' style of politics. For others, it is a hybrid situation that has resulted in a personalization of state finances and negatively impacted good policy making (Alasia 1997).

To elaborate, political organization in 'traditional' SI society revolved around 'big men' (Bennett 1987). Depending on a faction's strength, a 'big man' could have up to 200 or more followers. A 'big man' usually displayed specific characteristics: the achievement of status through his ability to win followers and not by election or inheritance; and the ability to use his resources and those of his clan to cultivate allegiance through largesse for feasting, dance entertainment and assistance during bride payments or funeral offerings (Bennett 1987: 14). The 'moral economy' of pre-colonial SI largely revolved around the 'big man'. These 'traditional' forms of socio-political organization continue to have both enabling and constraining effects in contemporary SI governance. As Fraenkel and Grofman (2005) note, the influence of tradition (personalized patronage and parochial forms of politics and leadership) necessarily affects government reform implementation.

The way things get done in SI is also influenced by the *wantok* system. This traditional socio-cultural formation is commonly understood as a set of social relations between groups of people who identify with each other. They can collectively share the same language, be part of the same kinship group, come from the same locale or even a particular church congregation (Renzio 1999). In a broad sense, *wantoks* thrive on the principle of mutual reciprocity as a social glue, but this does vary according to circumstance (Nanau 2011; Wood 2014). For example, in a local SI setting, *wantok* can indicate a particular group speaking the same dialect or from the same village or urban area. Alternatively, they could be from the same province, constituency, ward or church group. On a more regional level, the lingua francas of SI Pijin, Tok Pisin (PNG) and Bislama (Vanuatu) can also confer the status of *wantok*. It is sometimes claimed that these patterns of reciprocity in SI form a preponderant political culture characterized by localism and patronage. For others, *wantokism* equates with the art of favoritism or patronage (Larmour 2005). As Wood's (2014) study of voter behavior in SI indicates, voters do not necessarily vote along clan or tribal lines, but rather for the candidate most likely to provide them personalized and localized benefits. Interpretive differences aside, the *wantok* system is largely about allegiances (Sanga 2009). And it is fairly self-evident that as a deeply embedded structure of meaning and expression of socio-cultural identity, *wantok* sensibilities exert influence over political decision making in SI. How could it be otherwise? This can have drawbacks, especially when unemployed relatives rely too heavily on family members who are in employment. Pressure on wage earners can lead to a manipulation of government resources not only for personal use, but to meet the demands of *wantok* reciprocity. Having said this, some scholars have

noted that the strong ties that bind *wantokism* can provide a resource to facilitate localized notions of accountability and transparency (Brigg 2009).

Walker and Sanga (2005) encapsulate the above situation in their ‘three domains’ model. They argue that each leader is influenced by three domains when making decisions. The first domain is modern management principles, the second is religion and the final domain is the *wantok* system. These competing dialectics produce certain levels of compromise and trade-off. The situation is also further complicated by forms of clientelism and patronage politics that have emerged in SI’s political economy vis-à-vis resource extraction. The exploitative character of this political economy sits uneasily with and, in certain instances, manipulates for its own ends the reciprocity and mutuality of traditional modes of leadership and social life (Cox 2009; Fraenkel 2004; Hameiri 2012; Wood 2016). As Allen and Dinnen (2016) highlight, an imported system of government has enmeshed with big-man style politics and the accumulative logics of resource extraction. The de jure political structure may be Westminster, but the day-to-day practice is firmly embedded in forms of socio-political organization focused on social and economic power relations (Dinnen and Allen 2018). In a hyper-factionalized country with power-sharing issues, this hybridity produces a localization of reform implementation where levels of acceptance, resistance and ultimately transformation are discernable. Whether that benefits political agendas rather than improved public service delivery is considered in the following sections. They map the reform developments in SI governance structures and public service in the 1990s through to RAMSI and its aftermath.

Solomon Mamaloni’s governments (1992-1997)

Debates about decentralization and devolution started in the late 1970s and early 1980s in SI (Cox and Morrison 2004). The Provincial Government Act passed in 1981 established a provincial assembly for each province, with elected politicians empowered to pass ordinances. The intention was for the provincial governments to work with Area Councils in identifying and providing services to rural communities. However, the outcome was mixed, with issues of underfunding and poorly defined roles and functions to the fore. The isolation of provincial authorities meant that communication and coordination with central government was difficult (Coventry 2009). This resulted in cases of priority duplication and resource misapplication that hampered effective service delivery.

The first reforms to adopt NPM approaches began in 1992 under Solomon Mamaloni’s People’s Alliance Party (PAP) government and continued in 1994 under the Group for National Unity and Reconciliation (GNUR) government. The reforms implemented by the Mamaloni government were meant to reduce the size and cost of the government and decentralize services from the national capital to all provinces (Moore 2019). This included converting selected government departments to state owned enterprises (SOEs) such as Solomon Power, Solomon Water, Solomon Postal, Commodities Export Marketing Authority, Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation, Development Bank of Solomon Islands, National Bank of Solomon Islands and the then newly created Solomon Airlines (Coventry 2009).

A localization of reforms for the benefit of political agendas became increasingly evident with the introduction of Constituency Development Funds (CDFs). As part of the decentralization restructuring, ‘discretionary funds’ of SBD 100,000 per MP were introduced by the Mamaloni government in the last Parliament of 1993 (Fraenkel 2011). The application of discretionary funding was supposed to assist with rural development. However, it has also been used as a campaigning tool for re-election. The Billy Hilly government in 1994 converted the discretionary funds to CDFs, increasing them to SBD 200,000 per MP (Fraenkel 2011). CDFs have continued to grow over the years and have increasingly become a subject of controversy. Constituency Development Officers (CDO) are hand-picked by MPs. They are recommended directly to the Public Service Commission for recruitment. This contradicts the Public Service Recruitment Procedures and ultimately affects public management and the distribution of national resources (Batley 2015). In fact, recent investigations by Solomon Islands Ministry of Rural Development confirmed that most funds are mismanaged (Wiltshire and Batley 2018). It was found that the highest implementation rate is only 70 percent. The lowest implementation rate is around 30 percent. To date, CDFs have increased to more than USD 1 million per MP (NPSI 2019). This seems to contradict the reform objective of cutting the size and cost of the government.

Batholomew Ulufa'alu's government (1997-1999)

In 1997, the Ulufa'alu led Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC) formed following the national election (OPMC 2017). SIAC inherited the economic problems of the previous government and sought assistance from the World Bank (WB). Under WB advice, the SIAC government carried out a large-scale retrenchment exercise in which 500 public servants lost their jobs (Hughes 1998). The SIAC government then embarked on a broader suite of reforms underpinned by WB, Asian Development Bank, EU, AusAID and NZAID support. Reforms targeted stabilization of the economy by reducing spending. Moreover, there was a 20 percent devaluation of the SI dollar to encourage exports and attract investors (Hameiri 2007). Other reforms included improving public service processes and systems, preparing SOEs for sale or liquidation, shifting the public service to a performance orientation and capacity building for provincial governments (Rheins 2017). But the reduction of government spending affected grants to provinces.

Furthermore, the abolishment of Area Councils in 1997 widened the gap between the provincial administration and the village level (Cox and Morrison 2004). At this point, it is fair to say SIAC-backed reforms were largely the product of external influence. The government's economic vulnerability gave it little option but to implement reforms recommended by donors. Reforms halted abruptly when ethnic tensions spilled over in late 1998. It was not until the RAMSI intervention in 2003 that the reform program restarted apace under the auspices of Australian oversight. In 2003, the Australian-funded and -led RAMSI was invited by then Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza to intervene in the conflict between Malaitan and Guadalcanal militias and help rebuild the country. RAMSI aimed to achieve three objectives: (i) restore law and order; (ii) improve the 'Machinery of Government' and (iii) strengthen 'Economic Governance' (DFAT 2004).

While the primary focus was to restore law and order, there were Australian advisers located in core ministries such as Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (OPMC), Ministry of Public Service (MPS), Ministry of Finance and Treasury (MoFT) and Ministry of National Planning and Development Coordination (MNPDC). These advisors were largely responsible for NPM style reforms within the core ministries. The key strategy was to strengthen core ministries' capacity to provide support services to line ministries. But significantly, as Cox and Morrison (2004) noted, services became more centralized after the conflict subsided, largely because RAMSI was based in Honiara. According to Allen and Dinnen (2015), RAMSI was not as transformative as is commonly assumed.

Gordon Darcy Lilo's government (2011-2014)

Gordon Darcy's National Coalition for Rural Advancement (NCRA) government carried forward the reform agenda in exchange for 'budget support and project funding' (Solomon Islands Government 2010). Interestingly, discretionary funds to MPs continued to increase without significant improvement for rural constituents, and the state continued to be largely absent in rural areas. Moreover, from July 2013, when RAMSI became a policing-only mission, to June 2017, when it ended, the reform agenda continued under the auspices of the DFAT-funded Solomon Islands Economic and Public Sector Governance Program (SIGOV). An independent review of SIGOV in late 2014 raised doubts about whether the changes to central government agencies were leading to "downstream improvement in results" (Manning, 2014: 1). The review counselled that SIGOV risked "making a difference at the centre which is based more on mimicry of OECD reforms than on making a difference for final service delivery results" (Manning 2014: 13).

Manasseh Sogavare's and Rick Hou's Democratic Coalition for Change government (2014-2017)

In December 2014, the Democratic Coalition for Change won the numbers game to form a new government (DCCG). Significantly, DCCG's policy objectives closely aligned with SIGOV priorities and those

of major backers such as the ADB and the WB (World Bank 2013; ADB 2015). The DCCG set out a platform of good governance and economic growth. Strategies to achieve the priorities were six-fold (OPMC 2015). First, they aimed to improve good governance by reducing corruption through a comprehensive review of legislation, acts, regulations, policies and procedures. Second, core ministries and institutions were to undertake capacity building and structural adjustment to provide better service delivery. Third, priority was to be given to a diversification of the economy and building a more conducive environment for the private sector, foreign investment and trade. Fourth, there were proposed plans to create economic centers or new townships in the provinces as part of greater decentralization initiatives. Fifth, the proposed introduction of electronic payment systems was viewed as a way to improve financial management. And finally, the DCCG called for greater strategic planning across SIG ministries and agencies culminating in the National Development Strategy 2016-35. Significantly, the funding modality for DCCG's reform drive was tied to the SIG fiscal budget and international donor aid (OPMC 2015). The continuing implementation of NPM reforms was part of the 'deal' to satisfy budgetary support from its donor partners. Table 1 (below) summarizes the main components of SI's 'reform-scape' from 1992 to 2018.

Table 1: SI Government and public administration reforms from 1992 to 2018

| Year | SIG | NPM-influenced reforms |
|--|--|--|
| Early reform period (1992-1999) | | |
| 1992-1997 | <i>Solomon Mamaloni's Governments</i> 1992-1993 (PAP) 1994-1996UR) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - decentralization - devolution - corporatization - privatization |
| 1997-1999 | <i>Batholomew Ulufa'alu's Government – SIAC</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - structural adjustment - fiscal reforms - performance measurement - decentralization - capacity building |
| Main RAMSI era (2003-2010) | | |
| 2001-2006 | <i>Allan Kemakeza's PAP Government</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - corruption and good governance reforms |
| 2006-2007 | <i>Manasseh Sogavare's GCC Government</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - federalism - restoring ethical leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. anti-corruption bill b. a political parties integrity bill c. code of conduct for MPs - land reforms - public service capacity building by RAMSI - decentralization of power and development - rural development (bottom-up approach) |
| 2007-2010 | <i>Dr. Derek Sikua's Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement (CNURA) Government</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - updating institutional instruments (e.g constitution) - federalism - public financial management - rural development (rural economic empowerment) - education (free primary education, USP campus in Honiara, converting SICHE to SINU) - good governance - governance reforms - better management of RCDF - addressing urban poverty |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pursue public sector reform - privatization - economic diversification (major agricultural projects) |
| RAMSI-transition to exit period (2011-2017) | | |
| 2011-2014 | <i>Danny Phillip's and Gordon Darcy Lilo's</i> NCRA Government | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - structural adjustment - fiscal reforms - marketization - outsourcing some functions of government to private sector - contracting-out of government services - formulation and implementation of performance management and measurement systems - implementing electronic payment systems - financial management - public sector reform program (PSRP) |
| 2014-2017 | <i>Manasseh Sogavare's and Rick Hou's</i> DCC Government (bridged RAMSI's exit) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - good governance - review, legislations, Acts, regulations, policies and procedures - structural adjustment - fiscal reforms - diversify economy by providing conducive environment for private sector, SOE and PPP - capacity building - increase foreign investment and trade - decentralization—creation of economic centers and new townships in the provinces - Improve financial management - privatization |

As Fraenkel and Grofman (2005) note, 'state in society' implies that an imported governance system is not fully accepted within the society. Our brief political history of public management reforms in SI suggests an underlying transfer and legitimacy issue. Traditional governance would seem to have the upper hand in the sense that there is a relatively weak state with a strong society (Allen and Dinnen 2016). Informal systems of governance enjoy a higher level of legitimacy relative to national and provincial governments (Cox and Morrison 2004). In sum, it is the political, socio-economic and ethno-cultural context that plays a significant role in influencing the success or otherwise of initiated reforms rather than their assumed benefit or pressure to implement them.

Perceptions and experiences

Evidently, the issue of reform transfer and legitimacy is a significant story in SI. The second half of this article brings together perceptions and experiences of donor, public service and SOE respondents to articulate an interior view on the character of reform in SIPS. Their personal accounts and the ways in which they have constructed meaning from their experience helps render a fuller portrait of the ways in which a largely externally instigated reform agenda has been accepted, contested and transformed. Their voices speak to a tension between 'paper-based' reforms and achieving 'people-based' outcomes.

The data collection for this part of the article was carried out by the first author and involved a series of semi-structured interviews to canvas the ways in which reforms have translated into practice in SI. Respondents were selected through non-probability purposive sampling, mainly due to sample size, accessibility

of interviewees and the discretion of the first author whose networks in SI facilitated interview access. 62 respondents were interviewed: 51 from the public service ministries, 7 from state owned enterprises (SOEs) and 4 from donor organizations. For the public service, 1 minister, 1 political appointee and public servants ranging from Permanent Secretary to more junior levels were interviewed. For the SOEs, senior level respondents from the Solomon Islands Ports Authority (SIPA) and Solomon Water Authority (SW) were interviewed. And the target donor respondents from ADB, DFAT, SIRD and UNICEF were predominantly high-ranking officials. The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, but participants remained anonymous. They were then transcribed and, where necessary, translated into English. The first author is fully bilingual, but special attention was given to ensure an accurate rendering from Solomon Islands Pijin to English in order to preserve the meaning of the responses. Respondents from SI Public Service were coded numerically from PS1 to PS51. State Owned Enterprise respondents were coded SOE1 to SOE7 and donor respondents coded from AD1 to AD4. From the collected data, a variety of thematic factors emerge that tell a story about reforms in SI, namely transference and acceptance of reforms, resistance to reforms and transformation of reforms.

Transference and acceptance

As mentioned, the rationale behind NPM reform is to improve efficiency in public services through cost-cutting and performance evaluation measures (Hood 2006; Chan 2006; Pidd 2005; Radnor et al. 2007). Interviewed respondents did confirm that NPM reforms had shaped the reform agenda in SI. They identified key reforms over the last 14 years ranging from performance management to poverty alleviation. As PS42 indicated: “most are now going into performance plans, this is a new area PMP has opened up” (ministerial undersecretary). AD1 further confirmed that: “ADB’s main focus is to reduce poverty so it gives grant, loans and technical assistance” (donor executive officer). Generally, most respondents stressed the relevance of NPM to SIG reforms. As PS34, PS11 and AD3 noted:

ADB, WB and IMF focus on public financial management ... and these groups provide budget support to SIG ... Inside budget support, they ... have certain conditions like, there must be PMF Act; When it’s under government, money collected can be diverted and used for other means. So we privatize ... so it runs as a business and ... improve the quality of service delivery to Solomon Airline’s clients (sic);

Public sector reforms are to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the Solomon Islands Government public sector, which will result in delivery of improved services.
(ministry director; permanent secretary; donor agency head respectively)

Respondents also indicated that reforms are largely donor funded and instigated. PS46, AD1 and AD3 indicated major reforms in recent years:

I think financially; those programs are driven from outside. Weak point is the capacity for SIG to take over when donor scaled down, e.g. Aurion system, is an Australian company arranged under RAMSI funding. When they pulled out ... now spending on Aurion is quite high;

Company registration online ... Customs Act Bill ... Solomon Islands Maritime Safety Authority improvements;

The rollout of HRMIS has led to a number of ‘ghost’ workers being removed from SIG’s payroll, leading to cost savings (donor agency executive member).

In terms of transferability, the respondent data reveals key factors driving the process. Moreover, given the circumstances, SIG had little or no option but to accept reforms in exchange for development assistance. SIG’s pledge to bring about ‘rural development’ opened a gateway to access poverty alleviation aid from donors on the conditionality of reform. As PS33 noted: “I think one of the thing that we hold dearly is our mission ... to improve the lives of Solomon Islanders. So it motivate us because we’re getting more revenue to help our people in the provinces” (deputy commissioner). AD2 also confirmed: “we apply for funding, managed by ADB, e.g. funds are made available in one basket, then we apply for Solomon Islands to that basket. When we

get the funds, we will check where the source is, for e.g. Commonwealth or UK or JICA or EU. Then we show them our strategy to reduce poverty” (donor agency executive officer). And AD3 stated that: “public sector reforms are to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the Solomon Islands Government public sector, which will result in delivery of improved services”.

This data suggests that the promotion of ‘good governance’ and ‘poverty alleviation’ were strong justifications for reform. But as AD11 notes: “The government received a lot of aid to improve good governance and service delivery, but surprisingly there were no service delivery improvement—the donors failed to hold the government accountable for fund misuse too” (executive officer). And according to PS5: “bulk of incoming funds is in the name of ‘rural development’. For administrative budget for ministries in Honiara, it’s going to be low. But some hijack our funding” (ministry director).

Limitations, contestation and transformation

After the ethnic conflict in SI, outsourcing of services increased, including the contracting of Permanent Secretary Posts (Baser 2007: 1-76). According to the logic of NPM reform, contracting employees, outsourcing services and encouraging private sector involvement in the provision of public services is supposed to reduce the size and scope of government and help alleviate excessive budgetary expenditure. However, respondent data indicates various issues with these assumptions. First, there is a limited private sector in SI. As PS46 noted: “our private sector is very weak ... when outsourcing occurs, service delivery is given to a much weaker entity with less capacity to deliver expected services”. Secondly, outsourcing is associated with rising costs and corruption issues. As PS35 explained: “I think my view on contractors that are doing roads or government houses; when they contract out, yes, they’re doing the work. But they’re overcharging the government, too excessive, inflated” (ministry director). PS1 further noted: “a new form of ‘legitimate corruption’ in Solomon Islands. Printing or stationary orders are placed to Ghost companies, even though SIG preferred suppliers are there” (ministry HR manager). And PS29 revealed: “there are lot of contracts given to friends, family through wantok system”.

Significantly, respondent data indicated that the more SIG contracts out services, the more expensive the services become, with little in the way of overall improvement. According to PS34: “road maintenance is outsourced, state of road become worse and we lose millions of dollars” (ministerial undersecretary). Several respondents indicated a similar situation with corporatization. Despite the enactment and enforcement of the SOE Act 2007 and SOE Regulations 2010, 6 of the SOEs remain liabilities for SIG. And whilst Solomon Water Authority (SWA), Solomon Electricity Authority (SEA) and SIPA do return a profit, their services remain expensive. Interestingly, PS43 noted that: “SIG still funds 17 million for water royalties, Solomon Water Authority is not funding this ... it’s still a liability”. According to SOE3: “costs will be higher, and goods in shops will be expensive (due to high tariffs) and expensive ship fares to provinces” (SOE operation manager).

Based on respondent data, it seems fair to say that if there is little in the way of competition in the local market, then marketization reforms (designed to improve services and reduce costs via competitive tendering) will struggle to gain purchase. A lack of competition leaves SIG to prop up most services on private tender. It is a prognosis echoed by SOE6, PS7 and PS43:

There is not much business out there. Like Auki, Tulagi and SIG have to give us Community Service Obligation so that services continue to operate. Since infrastructure for water is expensive (SOE HR manager);

Privatization will affect farmers, because they’re still not commercial farmers. VET is very expensive and they won’t afford one (ministry director);

SIG still providing franchise to private shipping companies to operate in non-economical routes.

Whether this reform implementation misjudgment was due to a lack of prior knowledge on the part of donors is harder to gauge. Interestingly, a common trope amongst donors as to why reforms falter is often framed around socio-cultural issues. As AD3 noted: “the reform is a technical ‘fix’ to a problem that is not technical in nature, but more cultural, political or behavioural”. Such tropes seem to suggest that stereotypical thinking probably plays a more significant role in donor dealings in SI than they are liable to admit. With

exceptions of course, it speaks to a certain lack of awareness on the part of donor agencies of their own tight knit 'cultures' of work and play that sub-consciously or otherwise maintain invisible ring fences and distance from the recipients of their largesse and expertise. It is a blind spot we are (with some caution) calling 'briefcase aid syndrome'. For instance, AD4, from a bilateral donor agency, admitted that donor countries largely select the type of reforms to be implemented: "countries who provide 'aid' to us dictates what should be implemented. For instance, in Solomon Islands, Australia is the biggest giver, so if they want 'gender', we have to follow them, because it's their money". AD2 also noted that some advisors "write a nice policy or procedures manual, in isolation of everyone else, and then it settles in the bookshelf, and the advisor never looks at it again. We jokingly refer to them as 'brief-case advisors'". What this means in practical terms is that many well-meaning policies end up part of the office furniture and formal theatre of governance, but remain at best partially implemented.

Having said this, as outlined in our political history of reforms, there are not only levels of donor compulsion, but also degrees of complicity between senior figures in SIG and donor agendas. RAMSI initiatives may have precipitated a centralization of services in SI, however, elite Honiara-based public servants also enabled the trend. Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017), in their ground-breaking cross-country analysis of reform achievement deficiencies, identify this tendency of governments to mimic other governments' successes as 'isomorphic mimicry'. Domestic 'reform champions' with the backing of donors try to replicate 'best practice' processes and systems deemed successful elsewhere in the hope that it will bring about what they desire. This often creates a situation where 'the look' of institutional form (regulations, policies and procedures) is targeted and given greater credence than underlying functional issues and lack of capacity. The work of Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock goes on to detail the ways in which premature load bearing on existing capabilities can actually generate levels of stress that weaken rather than strengthen institutional effectiveness. Two of the resource ministries in SI where we conducted research, 70 percent of the staff were either high-school leavers or diploma holders. It is in this sort of context that the issue of premature load bearing on existing capabilities takes on strong resonance. As PS13 noted: "lack of understanding is affecting the implementation" (ministry HR manager).

In more strident and forthright terms, if we were to adopt a Fanonian interpretation from *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), we could say that the 'desire' amongst elite Honiara-based public servants to imitate and replicate 'best practice' processes and systems is symptomatic of a 'captive mentality'; a situation where the views and sensibilities of the dominant grouping become internalized and largely acquiesced to by a more subordinate group.

However, isomorphic mimicry is not the only tendency conditioning reform impetus in SI (and the 'captive' connotations this implies). Our research also revealed a different form of agency at play, and we are tentatively terming this 'paper-based' performative mimicry. This new angle of vision was influenced by the thinking of the late great Epeli Hau'ofa (2008: 61) who once surmised:

One of the more positive aspects of our existence in Oceania is that truth is flexible and negotiable, despite attempts by some of us to impose political, religious, and other forms of absolutism. Versions of the truth may be accepted for particular purposes and moments, only to be reversed when circumstances demand other versions; we often accede to things just to stop being bombarded, and then go ahead and do what we want to do anyway.

This resonates with the work of Christopher Balme (2007), who in a different Pacific setting, detailed a type of mimicry associated with a set of actions and behaviour based on what is expected. Our interpretation of performative mimicry is that it is not just a means to explicitly resist or thwart external compulsion, but a way to knowingly elicit some form of gain; an exchange for advantage. It is donor expectations that set the performative mimicry in motion. It involves an outward appearance being projected without necessarily adhering to the expectations placed upon it. In this sense, playing up to the stereotypes of big men and *wantok* (while having a basis in reality) also serve to mask a terms of exchange where the donor-recipient relation is repurposed. As PS47 and PS17 reflected: "human beings are still the same regardless of reform"; "I think most time they (PS) report fake information" (ministry principal officer).

Conclusion

Reform is rarely, if ever, a straightforward process. The overall tenor of the respondent data from our research indicates that service delivery in SI has not improved significantly despite undergoing major episodes of reform. Outcomes have been decidedly uneven at best, and it is probably fair to say that expectation has fallen some way short. Our overview of these reforms and the analysis of respondent data identified two main driving forces of NPM reform implementation in SI. First, the view that reforms were a remedy for service delivery issues precipitated its adoption. Second, donors alongside domestic reform champions played major roles both in promoting and inducing conformity to NPM reforms. The assumption was that they would then function in a way assigned to them, but the respondent data indicated a variety of ways in which these externally instigated reforms have been accepted, contested and transformed. It also revealed unexpected forms of agency at play.

The mismatch between the generic character of reform and its ability to achieve effective service delivery in SI is not easily resolved. How we bridge the disconnect between ‘ways of doing things’ deeply embedded in traditional socio-cultural structures of meaning, kinship and authority with the forms of institutional legibility demanded by more impersonal market relations is really beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say, if aid donors and associated stakeholders remain preoccupied with what reforms should ‘look like’ rather than what they do, then developing countries such as SI will continue to struggle. AD3 seemed to grasp the gravity of the task: “reforms have a much greater opportunity for success if they are contextually appropriate, and locally-owned and led. Where possible, reforms need to ‘work with the grain’ and not simply impose ideas from elsewhere with no adjustment for the change in context”. Standardized responses to predetermined problems (imported under donor community pressure) may make countries like SI look more ‘legible’ and comprehensible, but they are not necessarily beneficial for the citizens of these ‘recipient’ countries. For societies characterized by high levels of normative pluralism and socio-political hybridity, reform has to be smart, adaptive, problem specific and most importantly accepted if it is to have any chance of success.

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