

LISTENING PROJECT

Field Visit Report

Solomon Islands

November 2009



This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

These documents do not represent a final product of the project. While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project's findings cannot be made from a single case.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time, experience and insights for these reports, and for their willingness to share their experiences.

Not all the documents written for any project have been made public. When people in the area where a report has been done have asked us to protect their anonymity and security, in deference to them and communities involved, we keep those documents private.

Background on the Listening Project

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA), with a number of colleagues in international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, has established the Listening Project to undertake a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance efforts. The Listening Project seeks the reflections of experienced and thoughtful people who occupy a range of positions within recipient societies to assess the impact of aid efforts by various international actors. Those who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, peace-building efforts, environmental conservation and human rights work can learn a great deal by listening to the analyses and suggestions of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such efforts.

The Listening Teams were made up of staff from international and local aid agencies, with facilitators from CDA. The teams did not use pre-established questionnaires or a rigid interview protocol. Instead, they converse with local people about their issues of concern as they reflect on the broader, cumulative impacts of international assistance in their country. Most conversations are held with one or two people, but sometimes larger groups of people gather and conversations turn into group discussions. Most conversations, except for those with key stakeholders and government officials, are not pre-arranged. Listening Teams travel to a location and begin conversations with whoever is available and willing to talk, and listen both to people who have, and those who have not, received international assistance.

Over a period of four years, the Listening Project will visit up to twenty locations around the world, with Solomon Islands being the 19th Listening Exercise so far. The Listening Project will gather what we hear from people in all of these locations in order to integrate these insights into future aid work and, thereby to improve its effectiveness.

A collaborative learning process such as the Listening Project depends entirely on the people who took time to share their thoughts with the Listening Teams, and on the involvement and significant contributions of all the participating agencies. Those staff and community members who were involved in Solomon Islands deserve great appreciation for their generous support, insights and dedication to the effort.

The Listening Project in Solomon Islands

The participating NGOs in the Solomon Islands Listening Exercise were Oxfam Australia, Save the Children Australia, the Adventist Relief and Development Agency (ADRA), Australian People for Health Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA), and the Solomon Islands Red Cross. Two Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) staff also participated on the Listening Teams. Three CDA facilitators guided the Listening Teams in five days of listening in Western Province, Malaita and Guadalcanal. Due to the geographic constraints and high costs of air travel, the training, listening and analysis sessions in the three provinces were organized simultaneously, with one facilitator responsible for each region. A total of 34 staff and volunteers from the six agencies participated in the Listening Exercise and

except for the Lead Facilitator and one AusAID staff member, all Listening Team members and other facilitators were Solomon Islanders.

All team members were trained in the listening conversation methodology used by CDA's Listening Project. Following this, they were sent out for a morning of practice, after which teams discussed the process of engaging people in open conversations about the broader, cumulative impacts of aid. Then the Listening Teams were sent out to listen in communities in and around Gizo, Noro and Munda (Western Province), north Malaita and Auki (Malaita) and northwest, northeast Guadalcanal and Honiara. In the towns, people also told stories about development assistance elsewhere. For example in Auki, the capital of Malaita, conversations were held with people from remote South Malaita and East Malaita.

The Listening Teams held around 300 conversations with approximately 425 people. These included people in rural and urban communities. Conversations were held with a random selection of community members, church leaders, teachers, business people, and government officials. Most conversations were held with one or two people, while on a few occasions Listening Teams met with a larger group of people in communities. Conversations were held in an open and informal manner, the emphasis being on listening to people's views, experiences, thoughts and feelings about the broader cumulative impacts of aid in Solomon Islands. Listening Team members noted down what they heard as exactly as possible. Most conversations were held in pidgin, but since pidgin is not often used in written form and people learn to write in English, most notes were taken in English.

After listening in communities, the facilitators in each of the provinces guided Listening Team members through a day of analysis, bringing together what was heard and organizing this according to several different themes that emerged. Listening Team members also reflected on what they heard and their experience of participating in the Listening Exercise during the analysis sessions in each of the three provinces, which is captured at the end of the report. Following these analysis sessions, the facilitators presented a preliminary overview in an NGO feedback meeting and at a donor debriefing session in Honiara. A short presentation was also made to a consultation meeting of NGOs in the AusAID Solomon Islands NGO Partnership Agreement (SINPA).

This field report reflects the themes and patterns that came out of the conversations held by the Listening Teams. It does not represent all perspectives of the broader impacts of aid on Solomon Islands, but aims to highlight the issues that were consistently brought up by people across the different locations in Solomon Islands that were visited by Listening Teams.

Background on Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands is an archipelago of islands, divided into nine provinces. The majority of people in Solomon Islands are Melanesian, with Polynesian and Micronesian minorities. Chinese have been settling in Solomon Islands since before independence in 1978, and dominate the retail market. In 2005, the size of the population was estimated at around 530,000 with 84% living in

rural areas.¹ Honiara is the largest city and the capital, with an estimated 80,000 people.² Outside Honiara, the populations of the other townships of Auki (Malaita), and Gizo, Noro and Munda (Western Province) are much smaller.

The population of Solomon Islands is extremely heterogeneous. There are approximately 80 different cultural groups spread across the nine provinces. Social networks are very important and cover extended families, clans and tribes. Referred to as the ‘wantok system’ (one-talk), these ties constitute important social support networks for people, but they are also seen as constraining equal and fair distribution of resources, jobs, etc. With 84% of the population living in rural areas, subsistence agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the vast majority of Solomon Islanders. Nearly a quarter of the population over 15 is illiterate,³ the formal economy remains small, and business activity is heavily centered in Honiara.

The gap between Honiara and the provincial, mostly rural areas is large, in terms of education, lifestyle and means of income. Almost all land in Solomon Islands remains under customary ownership. The central state does not ‘reach’ very far outside Honiara due to geographical constraints (there are few roads outside the main centres in the different provinces), and limited capacity of state institutions to deliver services. There are many logistical challenges, as women from Wairaha village in Malaita explained, “We cross six rivers that do not have bridges on our way to Auki. A small rain can cause river flooding and we just sit for hours with our market goods by the river until the flood gets lower. We have to dispose of some of our produce because it loses its freshness by the time we get to the market.”

The capital Honiara is located on the island of Guadalcanal and since the end of World War II, job opportunities in the capital and surrounding plantations have attracted a large number of migrants from the other provinces, most notably from Malaita. Malaita province has long had the largest population in Solomon Islands (around one quarter of the total population), and Malaitan people have a long tradition of migrating elsewhere for work opportunities. As Honiara grew, people settled outside the town boundaries and on the Guadalcanal plains through informal lease agreements with the Guadalcanalese landholders. Towards the end of the 1990s, tensions between Malaitan settlers and Guadalcanalese landholders began to rise, against a backdrop of demands by the people of Guadalcanal for a more equal distribution of the profits resulting from the capital, plantations and gold mine located in their province.

In 1998, tensions erupted in an uprising of Guadalcanalese people, who began to chase Malaitan and other settlers from Guadalcanalese land. Around 20,000 people were displaced, with many Malaitan people travelling back to Malaita province or moving to Honiara. With the government perceived as incapable of addressing the issue, Malaitans established their own militia, and a violent conflict around Honiara’s boundaries ensued between the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force. After a number of attempts, a peace agreement was signed in the Australian city of Townsville in 2000. Although this peace agreement saw a halt to the major violence and the militias disbanded, weapons remained in circulation, and the police were

¹ Solomon Islands Government Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2005/6.

² Action Aid Abroad/APHEDA, “Stayin’ Alive: Social research on livelihoods in Honiara,” 2009.

³ UNDP Human Development Index for Solomon Islands, 2009.

http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_SLB.html Accessed 18 December 2009

heavily compromised. The general law and order situation continued to deteriorate, along with the workings of state institutions, until the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) intervened in 2003 to restore law and order, and embarked upon a large-scale, long term development assistance program, mostly targeting the strengthening of state institutions. International Assistance to Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands receives a very high amount of international aid per capita. Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Solomon Islands rose from 21 million USD in 2000 to 179 million USD in 2006, and currently amounts to approximately 200 million USD, constituting more than 50 percent of GDP.⁴ Aid has significantly increased following the period of ethnic tensions between 1998 and 2003, after which time Solomon Islands was classified as a post-conflict and fragile state. In 2003, RAMSI intervened in a situation where law and order continued to be precarious, and state institutions were barely functioning. RAMSI consists of police, military and civilian personnel and the Participating Police Force (PPF) is made up of Australian, New Zealand and Pacific Islands police officers. The PPF is supported by military personnel, mostly from Australia but also including New Zealanders and some soldiers from other Pacific Islands. The civilian personnel of the mission work on supporting the Solomon Islands government in three areas; law and justice, the institutions of government, and broad based economic growth.

RAMSI focuses on the strengthening of national state institutions. The PPF has (re)established police posts in 15 locations throughout the provinces, each of which has a small number of PPF officers stationed to work with and build the capacity of the local Solomon Islands Police Force, but the main focus of RAMSI has been on the central state institutions that are located in Honiara. The PPF includes around 300 police officers, most of whom are living at a base just outside Honiara, which is supplied by an international contractor, with the bulk of food and other supplies imported. The civilian contingent consists of 160-200 expatriate personnel, including advisers working in the legal sector, the Ministry of Finance and Treasury and a number of other Solomon Islands government institutions in Honiara.

Bilateral and multilateral donors to Solomon Islands are engaged in a wide variety of programs across different sectors. AusAID and New Zealand Agency for International Development (NzAID) provide direct budget support to the Health and Education Ministries respectively, and have programs in a number of other sectors. Japan is another significant donor with tied grant aid and a long-standing volunteer program. The multilateral donors are the European Union, UN Development Program, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank. Aid from the Republic of China (ROC)—or Taiwan—is linked to the politics of Solomon Islands' recognition of ROC as a sovereign nation. In return, ROC provides aid to Solomon Islands in a number of different sectors, but the largest impact derives from the Rural Constituency Development Funds (RCDF) – grants that are given directly to the Members of Parliament to support their constituencies. Fifty million SBD (USD 6.25 million) is disbursed in this manner every year.

⁴ Duncan, Rod, "Solomon Islands and Vanuatu: An Economic Survey," *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, Vol.23 (3), (Australia National University:2008). http://csusap.csu.edu.au/~rduncan/Academic/PEB23_3_DUNCAN_WEB.pdf

The NGO sector has grown since the influx of aid into post-conflict Solomon Islands. Most of the international NGOs in Solomon Islands are headquartered in Australia, and some of the local NGOs also have Australian or New Zealand partner organizations or other support mechanisms. The main donors to the NGO sector are AusAID and NzAID. Although there are a number of international NGOs in Solomon Islands, most NGO staff are local. In the rural areas, the majority of aid is provided in the form of infrastructure projects (roads, clinics, schools, water and sanitation), livelihood projects, or workshops/trainings around health issues, life skills, community planning, etc. Recent years have also seen an increase in aid to the agricultural sector, through support for agricultural livelihoods projects. Aid reaches the rural areas either indirectly, through the support to the health and education sectors, or through mostly small scale projects implemented either by NGOs, donors (eg. the AusAID Community Sector Program and EU Micro projects), or by MPs and their Constituency Development Officers (e.g. RCDF).

In April 2007, a tsunami struck the northwest of Solomon Islands and an estimated 20,000 people were affected, including 5,000 displaced and 52 deaths.⁵ A number of islands suffered damage to housing, roads, clinics and schools. A large number of people relocated to higher ground, and some have still not returned to their original homes. The aftermath of the tsunami has seen an increase in development assistance to Western Province and Choiseul, initially in humanitarian relief, and later in rehabilitation and reconstruction of schools, clinics and houses. Several NGOs, as well as UNICEF, are involved in tsunami rehabilitation efforts.

The vast majority of expatriate aid workers are based in Honiara, with occasional visits to the provinces. The presence of development assistance efforts outside Honiara is generally limited to the PPF officers in the police posts and some NGO and donor program offices in the main towns. The gap between urban and rural areas is mirrored in the stark difference in the kind of development assistance that reaches and impacts on Honiara, and the rural areas.

What People Said

1. International Aid Has Helped

Many people noted the important role that international assistance has played in helping people in Solomon Islands. People commented that the government needs development assistance to provide services like health and education, and noted how aid had helped their communities through specific projects. People expressed gratefulness for the help that Solomon Islands has received through international development assistance efforts.

“We are happy with aid coming in because it developed the standard of living. Schools and clinics were built because the village is too far away from town.”

Young men in Turarana, Northeast Guadalcanal

⁵ Solomon Islands National Disaster Council, “Western and Choiseul Provinces Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster Emergency Relief Response Report,” 2007.

“We are happy with the clinic, because now when they give birth they have a place to sleep.”

Woman at Takwa clinic, North Malaita

“Donors have played a vital role to supply health services in Solomon Islands, and this has been evident here in Western Province.”

Hospital worker, Gizo hospital, Western Province

“We are a developing country and depend on aid. Much of our budget is funded by aid donors. Aid has been useful – in education, health, law and order. So aid has brought a lot of benefit to the population.”

Church representative, Honiara

“We are very happy with [an NGO]. They provide us with sports equipment and prizes and do awareness programs for our community, which reduces criminal activities among our youth. They also taught us how to handle and repair our sewing machines.”

Woman in Lord Howe settlement, Honiara

“People in my village are very grateful for the road because now with trucks coming into our village, the women can now take their vegetables to the market. Before, the tomatoes just rotted in the gardens. Tomatoes go bad quickly and despite our attempts in the past to take them to the market to sell, we always lost.”

Woman from East Malaita

“There are two angles; it is positive but on the other side, not negative, but there are challenges.”

Government official in Honiara

2. Aid Does Not Reach People: “The Problem of Middle Persons”

Although many conversations started with a positive note on aid in general or a positive story on a particular aid project, when given time to reflect on the broader impacts of aid, people discussed various challenges in the processes involved in bringing aid to Solomon Islands people. “The problem of middle persons”--NGO workers, government MPs, or community leaders--was especially mentioned by many people.

“A lot of times, target group names have been used only to convince donor partners, but the aid money never reaches the real beneficiaries.”

Young woman in Munda, Western Province

“Donors should not channel their aid money through NGOs or other middle persons. They should come direct to any community and assess priority needs of the people.”

Female teacher, Gizo, Western Province

“People in the village draw up ideas, identify areas of need and do planning, for example, to build a youth centre. But whilst the community is still working on how to present their idea, a marketing middleman intercepts, takes the idea and presents a proposal on this idea to the donors and secures funding to use it for himself.”

Man from North Malaita

“I really think that if the aid agencies do away with the system of processing through other people, a lot of rural dwellers will benefit from donor funding. Direct consultation from agencies will be more effective.”

Female market vendor in Noro, Western Province

The main reason why middle persons are seen as problematic is the issue of corruption. There is a perception that somewhere along the way, money gets diverted by people for their own purposes, or for the benefit of a specific group of people or “wantoks.” Many people pointed to the RCDF in particular, saying MPs distribute these funds only to the people who are supporting them, or that many of these funds do not reach the people at all.

“Mifala les lo representative or middleman becos misuse lo seleni [I don’t like representatives or middlemen because they misuse money].”

Farmer/fisherman, Tapou village, West Guadalcanal

“Donor agencies should do away with dealing through CONRABLES [honourables].”

Female community leader, Noro, Western Province

“RCDF is not shared equally. International agencies must bring the aid here themselves. Do not give through our leaders, chiefs, or church leaders because they will not share equally amongst the people.”

Woman in Kwailabesi, North Malaita

“Aid means well for our development but it is our leaders that mismanage the funding. Government people putim seleni lo pocket na wrong – hem olsem nao good farming good harvest! Corruption is like a big tree that grows and has its roots. If plants are being planted in farms oketa bae no grow becos tree disturbim development blo olketa, unless umi pullim out full tree ya, bae aid no garem any impact lo country blo umi. [Government people pocketing money is wrong – it’s like good farming, good harvest! Corruption is like a big tree that grows and has roots. If plants are planted in farms, they will not grow because the tree hampers their growth; unless we pull out the whole tree, aid will not have any impact in our country.]”

Maintenance worker, Kukum Market, Honiara

“Leaders [government and community] often misuse aid money.”

Old man, Borderline, Honiara

“Self interest always stands in the way of equal distribution.”

Chief at Fo’ondo, Malaita

Middle persons are also seen as a problem because they place an additional 'layer' between the giver and the intended recipient of development assistance. This in turn is linked to a lack of understanding amongst the givers of what the real needs of the intended recipients are.

“Donor agencies need to come down to the villages, come to the rural areas and talk to the people. Donors are 'out there' and not knowing what's going on and need to listen further, past the liaison workers, to grasp the real views from the rural communities.”

Female hospital worker, Gizo, Western Province

“Consultation from agencies should go direct to rural villages between community leaders and the agencies themselves. Agencies need to really understand the need of villages in order to know how to distribute projects ... that are suitable for the rural.”

Male community leader, Bibolo, Western Province

“The misuse by middlemen often delays the completion of projects. International agencies must establish a community office. Direct donor-recipient interaction is vital for the completion of projects.”

Chief, Emmaus, Malaita

3. Aid is Not Shared Equally

Many people in rural areas noted how development assistance seems to benefit certain people but not others. People discussed how areas that are more remote, and therefore more difficult to access, do not receive international assistance.

“No assistance comes to the people in the Southern Region because they are too far from Auki.”

Senior education officer from South Malaita, in Auki

“Donors are more selective, only interested in sites that are accessible and not remote areas. Most donor funded NGOs are based in urban areas and there is high need for representatives to be based in outer islands.”

Female town clerk, Noro, Western Province

“We don't see, feel or experience any effect of aid as every donor giving aid is just for those living close to the urban centres. Why not come to our remote villages?”

Man from East Malaita

When aid is not shared equally, it can cause tensions between communities:

“NGOs should cover everybody equally, which will also avoid dividing communities. Families who have not received any support in terms of aid feel discriminated from assistance.”

Pastor, Vori Vori, Western Province

“Donors should have assistance available to each household within a community after crisis strikes instead of sharing at large (community, tribe, etc.) because so often, some families miss out on the benefit.”

House wife, Bibolo, Western Province

4. Problems Understanding and Accessing Aid

Many people, especially outside Honiara, expressed frustration at the lack of transparency around international assistance. It is unclear to them how much assistance there is and where it goes, and accessing aid is difficult. People do not know where to go for information, and the application forms that accompany many of the project funds in rural areas are often difficult to understand.

“Awareness about international aid should be shared equally among the rural populace. For example, we hear about funds for a cattle project only after all the funds have been used.”

Education officer, Auki, Malaita

“Some people only hear of aid assistance benefiting other communities. Non-beneficiaries of aid thought that aid is only for the literate and powerful people who have connections with people at higher levels (church, government, politicians, NGOs etc.) and with their relatives in the village.”

Male community leader, Noro, Western Province

“Aid to the rural people is no issue because only people in town receive these aids. Information about aid does not reach rural people. If information does not reach them, then how much more of the real substance or concrete material does?”

Male aid project manager, Auki, Malaita

“Application forms must be simple enough for community level to understand. Changes should be made to the criteria and the process.”

Farmer, Numbu, East Guadalcanal

“People away from Honiara have no clear perception of what aid is – what aid means nobody knows. They just hear there are lots of Australians driving cars and renting houses. They look all the time for practical things – unless the High Commission comes to open up a clinic in their village they probably feel they haven’t benefitted. Aid may have supported their health services, but people may not know this. Their perceptions are the result of their reaction to a particular manifestation of aid, and if there aren’t any they will feel left out. If there are some visible – then they understand it, but what else, they won’t know.”

Local aid consultant, Honiara

5. Expectations Are Not Met

Aid agencies, NGOs and government workers come to communities to assess, discuss, and ask questions, which raises people's expectations. Sometimes promises of assistance are made and not fulfilled. People expressed frustration with false promises and expectations that are not met, which leads to a loss of trust in the aid agencies and the government.

“We have received visits from different NGOs and local government officials who collected data on lost properties with the promise to deliver support in aid, but until now, nothing has happened.”

Man, Bamboo Camp, upper Gizo, Western Province

“We are filled with false hopes and let down by failed promises.”

House wife, Titiana, Western Province

“An NGO going to this area promised to return with some trainings and awareness since March this year but never returned till now...we are still waiting. When will the promises result in action?”

Market woman, Kukum area, Honiara

“NGOs and government made too many promises which did not eventuate. A lot of interviews were done in communities, but nothing forthcoming. We were given high hopes that assistance will be coming. Days, months, years passed by, still no green light. No moa trust lo olketa nao [We don't trust them anymore now].”

Women leader in Visale, West Guadalcanal

“False promises from NGOs are not good. For instance, one NGO provided training for the Karaina youth on business and promised to follow up but nothing was done after that.”

Youth group in Karaina settlement

“Mi hearem you talk about effect lo aid. Iu minim help or aid sem olsem Auluta Oil Palm Development ia? Mifala taied fo herem aid bae come. After ground breaking long Auluta Oil Palm project ia, only help come nomoa long Palm Oil tree hem grow lo door lo truck and round round long road ia. [I hear you talk about the effect of aid. Do you mean help or aid like to Auluta Oil Palm Development? We are tired of hearing of aid to come. After the announcement of the Auluta Oil Palm project, the only help that we have seen is the palm oil tree on the door of the truck that is driving around.]”

Man from East Malaita

“The people lose trust in community leaders when aid agencies do not keep up promises.”

Male community leader, Bibolo, Western Province

6. Aid Contributes to Dependency

Solomon Islands receives a large amount of international assistance per capita, and many people noted how aid has contributed to dependency and led to a hand-out mentality among Solomon Islands people. From people in the rural communities to government officials in Honiara, many people raised this as a serious issue.

“A certain kind of aid has destroyed Solomon Islands. It has made us beggars. Because people see the opportunity there, they stop trying their best in agriculture. There is a lot of land, but because aid is readily available, people are lazy, and in the time it takes to apply for aid, they do nothing, and when they don’t get anything they have wasted time. And when they get aid, because it is not hard earned, they squander it.”

Businesswoman in Honiara

“Aid is like a curse to us, because it creates a dependent mentality amongst the community. It makes people believe that development should come from outside.”

Government official, Malaita

“I think the motive behind aid is good but aid for me, hem teachim mefala fo dependent [but I think it teaches us to be dependent].”

Man from Aligegeo village, Malaita

“Before aid came in, people were doing so many things themselves. Now even when they do get aid, they don’t know how to organize and everyone wants money for everything. Aid has helped foster that mentality – cumulative effect of aid over the years.”

Aid consultant, Honiara

“Aid funding makes people so lazy and waiting for fast cash. It also widens the inequality between the rich and the poor.”

Government official, Munda, Western Province

A number of observers in Honiara commented on the dependency of the Solomon Islands government on foreign assistance, and the impact this dependency is having on the way government functions.

“It’s very important that we have a say in what our priorities are, to ensure that the aid is sustainable. Aid is now encroaching into operational or recurrent funding, so donor dependency

has become an issue. Aid was initially intended for areas where government could not provide, instead now it is creating dependency.... Reliance is becoming like a norm now, especially in the provision of government services. When there is big influx of donor funds, this creates a wastage mentality; donors are funding it, so while resources are available, just spend, for the sake of spending, before the end of the financial year.”

Government official, Honiara

“Government’s first reaction to identifying a need is to think which aid donor should we go to. And there is an abundance of aid here. All donors are under- spending their total aid allocation. Over time this can change, but instead [a donor country] has been substituting other aid, because of the failed state/emergency dynamic. Prop them up, and we like being propped up – if they do it we don’t have to do it – we can buy more cars.”

Aid consultant, Honiara

Government officials in Honiara, who see people travel from rural areas to Honiara to petition their MPs for funds, pointed to the RCDF and the way many of these funds are being distributed as an example of the hand-out mentality.

“RCDF has negative impacts; people will line up for the Minister to give it out – school fees, sea fares to go home. The way it’s administered – people see this as a cult thing – creates laziness and complacency – people ask for every little thing and they think it’s their entitlement. To have funds that go straight into your pocket, instead of cutting copra in the village, they all come up when they know a round of funds is coming up for 1,000 or 2,000 SBD. It would be better to give it for specific livelihoods or to start a small business. Just to give out cash – cash handouts are really irresponsible.”

Government official, Honiara

“Aid doesn’t make people want to get up and get involved. A good example is the RCDF. People are busy coming over to town to tap in just to pay for a bag of rice, school fees-- it’s not for activities that will make them involve themselves. Instead they flood into Honiara and wait.”

Government official, Honiara

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands has been providing a large amount of assistance, including the maintenance of law and order, since it arrived in 2003. Observers in Honiara in particular reflected on RAMSI’s assistance and the dependency it may be creating.

“How long is RAMSI going to be here? Because I think that it’s time to test Solomon Islands; somewhere along the line they have to be tested. Not only reduction, but they need to leave and see what will happen. There are people worried about what will happen if it leaves, but others are suspicious, what are they still doing here? Trying to get people’s resources? This is not really a

wide spread view, but it won't be long until more people start to question it. The tensions are alive and well – just like a volcano underneath the surface. But is RAMSI the solution?"

Government official, Honiara

“RAMSI intervention took the steam out of domestic efforts to do things. There was a growing local attempt to sort things out, and we'll never know whether it would have worked. Then, through decisions taken elsewhere, RAMSI was designed and launched. The Prime Minister was put on a plane to request the intervention. When that arrived, there was such a sigh of relief in the community – but popular support for civil society weakened because people felt they didn't have to do it now. So RAMSI kind of took over. Now everyone is glad that happened, but there was a downside to it, because it took the stuffing out of homegrown attempts to deal with the insurgency, and we are still trying to get over this.”

Aid consultant, Honiara

“To some extent RAMSI has been a victim of its own success. RAMSI came in with a ‘can do’ attitude; there was none of the slow nature of aid processes as with other donors. They came in and had their ships offshore, and all these materials that people here would like just rolled off these ships. The resources rolling in were mindboggling – they set up all these PPF posts in the provinces in a matter of weeks; ‘poof and there they were’.”

Aid consultant, Honiara

“Dependency? The thing is that I don't know when we are going to be independent. Instead the question is how sector ministries will work with donors to properly utilize aid resources to benefit the people.”

Government official in Honiara

One aid consultant also linked dependency to donor agendas:

“When there is an aid NGO– with all the best intention, they can't help it – people say they need a school, yes of course, so the school gets built, and they will keep coming back to the same NGO. Donors are in a hurry to spend the money otherwise they won't get it next year – so this sets in motion a circle of requests. Some people will say they want more – nothing wrong with this, but it should not induce this lethargy.”

Aid consultant, Honiara

7. “Boomerang Aid”

Not all aid that is provided to Solomon Islands actually reaches or remains in the country. The majority of foreign aid workers are Australian, and AusAID is the largest donor in Solomon Islands. Expatriate aid workers get paid high salaries compared to Solomon Islanders. This is

sometimes seen as “boomerang aid.” One observer noted how he would like to see the funds that are used to implement aid programs and for these international salaries taken out of the money that is given to the country before the funds are announced, so that it is clearer how much money actually comes into Solomon Islands.

“I suspect that a lot of funds given in aid are consumed by consultants’ salaries. For example, if [a bilateral donor] grants 80 million SBD, 50 million SBD is used on overseas consultants and technical advisers, whilst only 30 million SBD is used on the people. As a result, many projects are not being completed. We want the agencies or the government to show how much money is being given and how that money was used so that the people can know what, where and how the money was used.”

Businessman, Takwa, North Malaita

“How much of the money for RAMSI police stays in Solomon Islands? Salaries are paid from Australia and everything is brought in from other countries. Does it really help the economy- that is the question. Especially with RAMSI, there are a lot of advisers coming in: they give us adviser after adviser; the purpose is to build capacity, but they are still there. When will Solomon Islands be given the chance to take on board some of these functions?”

Government official, Honiara

“RAMSI hires an Australian man’s helicopter for 11,000 SBD per hour to deliver supplies to the PPF officers at the outpost in Malu’u. A lot of assistance coming into Solomon Islands is sucked up by very big salaries paid to expat consultants, technical advisers and administrators. I am frustrated because RAMSI even get their water from Australia. If they want to help us they should use our businesses to supply them water, food and do their laundry.”

Businessman, Takwa, North Malaita

“Donors always hire outside consultants to do evaluation and designing work. Is there no one qualified in Solomon Islands to do the work? Aid meant to help the community goes back when hiring outside consultants. So donor, think good before becoming a donor.”

Man from Ambu Village, Malaita

“Aid no osem colonial time, wea aid come straet. Dis time every seleni finis lo admin cost nomoa.[Aid is not the same as in colonial times, when it came straight (to the people). Now all the money ends up in administration cost.]”

Businessman, Lambi, West Guadalcanal

“Only few people benefit from aid – RAMSI is very good but olketa olsem puppets, olketa seleva implementem activities and food blo olketa shipped kam from overseas. Therefore more money go back lo country blo donors nothing for our people iumi poor go more! [RAMSI is very

good but they are like puppets; they implement activities themselves and their food is shipped in from overseas. Therefore more money goes back to the donor countries, nothing for our people, we remain poor!]"

Retired school teacher, Choviro, Honiara

"Some of the aid looks like it goes back to the giver, in salaries and allowances--maybe 1/3 of the aid. Another 1/3 towards the handling of the aid, then 1/3 reaches the recipient."

Businessman, Honiara

8. Donor Agendas

Many people noted that international assistance comes with certain criteria, plans, and agendas. Aid agencies are spending money from people in other countries, and this is where their accountability ultimately lies.

"The bottom line of people coming in from outside is that they have to write a good report, and account for all the money spent. They come with predetermined templates and formats that the local staff then have to follow, even at short term notice."

Businessman, Honiara

"Aid has contributed to the high increase of unemployment. By coming in with their own agendas, they created very competitive job opportunities hence they need their own high skilled personnel – while our educated people/youth are the ones left without jobs."

Male student, University of the South Pacific, Honiara

"They have their own charters, sometimes we might want to go another way but they don't want to touch that. So sometimes there is some conflict there; some projects are not really what we would like to address – because the donors only want to do one component, and not another, because it is sensitive, or because they want quick results and to get out."

Government official, Honiara

People also questioned the real motives behind international assistance.

"What is the real motive behind aid? Because these developed countries coming to help us are going to exploit us or suck us out. Solomon Islands should revisit the formulation of aid assistance."

Aid project worker, Auki, Malaita

"Why? What is their motive? We need to be informed about this."

People in Northwest Guadalcanal

Different government officials in Honiara described how donor agendas can be linked to a distortion of government processes.

“It is post conflict, so donors want to come in and be seen to drive economic recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration and all that, but if you are too quick, you tend to forget line ministries. When they complete projects, they expect us to pick it up, but I cannot do that if it is not my priority, if it is not in my work plan.”

Government official, Honiara

“If the design is not done together, projects can be designed by donors, they collect people together into a Project Management Unit – get someone in from the Ministry, then run it, but these are not understood by the Ministry. ‘You have any comments? No comments, nodding yes, yes, yes.’ When that happens, you get projects from Africa, and the donors can easily get something done, but in the long term they fail.”

Government official, Honiara

“In the education sector, health sector, government is bypassed, perhaps because of the weakness of the government system. [Aid agencies] go directly to the community and build a school which is very good, but then they forget we have to have teachers in there and maintenance costs – so instead of solving a problem they create another one which is more difficult to solve.”

Government official, Honiara

9. Aid Does Not Fit the Local Context

On the other side of the issue of donor agendas lies the gap between international assistance that is provided and the local context. People discussed how some donors do not prepare enough before they start a project, and do not collect enough information about the people and communities they are aiming to assist.

“They have agendas and timelines to meet... But people have to be given time to develop, it cannot happen this quickly. Another aspect of aid system problems is the problem around capacity building. It needs flexibility to meet the local context. If we are not sensitive to the local context, everything falls over at the end. I have seen these projects where technical advisors come in with money, cars etc, but then when they leave, not even a piece of paper is left. Fly by night is not good, they need to stay for two years or so, understand the local context. And our leaders do not step up to the donors either to tell them what we like and don't like – we need to say it to them, we have a culture of silence here.”

Aid consultant, Honiara

“Agencies need to touch base, be in the community, to really understand.”

Male community leader, Bibolo village, Western Province

“Sometimes they talk from Manila or Brussels, and they don’t understand your problem. They don’t understand the logistics of travelling by sea, poor shipping, and the big rains that come. So unless you come to Solomon Islands you don’t understand...here the logistics come into play.”

Government official, Honiara

“There should be collaboration between the donor agency and the local community to design the hospital, to avoid poor and biased design.”

Businessman, Malu’u, North Malaita

“Donors should send their officers to Solomon Islands to implement activities in urban and rural areas. This will help them understand the difficulties we often face with people, environment, culture, geography, etc. ‘no expectem evri ting bae stret’ [Don’t expect everything to go right].”

Man, Honiara

“A lot of donations that come here are junk – not what we want or need. You are using obsolete equipment, so if it breaks down you cannot fix it.”

Government official, Honiara

“The adviser left behind a report with the design of a shopping complex for the Board, but it looked like something you’d find in the middle of Sydney. The design was very complicated, very high class. It was not a simple design. It would be too expensive to build.”

Businessman, Honiara

10. Problems with Monitoring and Evaluation

People pointed to problems surrounding the monitoring and evaluation of international aid funds. This relates to questions at the national level – whether the Solomon Islands government knows how much assistance is provided and where it goes – and at the community level as well, where problems with (or lack of) monitoring and evaluation were linked to the misuse of funds. Government officials in Honiara pointed to the fact that most evaluations are done and funded by the donors, and that they do not seem to capture the sustainability, or lack thereof, of the outputs of international assistance.

“There is no proper evaluation and monitoring of the funds coming into the country. The government cannot do this. Whether these funds actually make a difference is something that I think we do not know – there is no policy or mechanisms to monitor this impact. The only assessment that has happened is done by the ones bringing in the funds.”

Government official, Honiara

“Funds/aid donors must follow up with the projects, so that they see what we really do in the community and the progress of the project.”

People in Komukama, Eastern Guadalcanal

“Most of the time, the consultants are engaged to solve things or fix things – the donors don’t want to know how to do it better, or maybe they are just busy. Consultants run these workshops for them, and write a report, rather than getting themselves to be part of this. We should deal directly with the donors, rather than through a consultant who writes a report for them to read, which most of the time they don’t have time to read. If they want to know how taxpayers’ money is spent, they should have time to listen.”

Government official, Honiara

“Projects need proper submissions and follow-up reports from the community. The donor should keep a good record of who they have helped in the past and what projects were successful so that they can help the next community.”

Man from Maluu, North Malaita

“No any gud monitoring system, that’s why money given to government and then when they misuse the money, that’s why you won’t see any good impacts after each project.”

Young man, Green Valley, Honiara

“Some big bilateral programs have their own assessments – specific formats and indicators. Of course it looks good on paper – but does it improve the life of the village people? For example, are water supplies still working? Why do not all villages in Solomon Islands have proper water and sanitation by now? Why after all these years of funding, why is it not sustainable? Assessments cover a certain period, but there is the issue of sustainability.”

Government official, Honiara

11. The Problem of Sustainability

The problem of sustainability arises at the national government level as well as in communities. At the national government level, officials note the large influx of aid, and question whether the Solomon Islands government is going to be able to maintain what is being built or brought into the country. At the community level, people point to the lack of sustainability of short-term projects and the need for follow up or longer term engagement.

“How long are we going to receive this assistance, and after this timeframe will we be able to continue? A lot of assistance, especially in the security sector, but then RAMSI will not be here forever, and the infrastructure they put in – like manna from heaven, they give us everything – but the maintenance of it – the national budget will not cater for the ongoing cost.”

Government official, Honiara

“Most of the aid donors set up their own criteria about how to use the aid money. There should be a system to back up the aid with a sustainable strategy. For example, there should be capacity building within the community as to how they would take care of the water supply. Motivate the communities to see the project as their own.”

Aid project manager, Auki, Malaita

“There is a lot of money circulating in this area. But I guess it only ends up in the Chinese shops. Money is not reinvested into projects like improving cocoa or coconut farming. Short training does not help people to understand financial statements, which are one of the main criteria to approve loans to local farmers.”

Bank worker, Auki, Malaita

“Aid donors come in and give people things, then they start to catch fish, but can’t sell it to anyone and don’t know how to ship it to Honiara, and then to export is even harder. So the fisherman then thinks ‘why do I bother.’ Not one of these fishing projects is still going. And the people coming into Honiara rather than cut copra, might as well live in town. People don’t need money to live here. In other places you would starve, but not here.”

Businessman, Honiara

“Aid is given through a lot of NGOs and sometimes through ad hoc groups and so many times it is abused or does not benefit the people. It is a short lived help and not sustainable. To go a long way, it is good to concentrate aid in infrastructure like schools, clinics and roads and use established institutions like the churches and the provincial governments.”

Church Secretary, Auki, Malaita

“All these NGOs try their best but the biggest issue I see why projects are not sustainable is because communities are not together and people have no respect for their leaders.”

Elder man, Rarumana, Western Province

A few observers linked the problems around sustainability to the issue of dependency:

“What changes have I noticed since independence? Whatever development you see here is due to individual struggles. No single aid program is sustainable. NGOs are created by donors and are comfortable with who they know. NGOs eat up the bulk of help intended for the communities. NGOs become international employers. They do their own thing in our province. Most projects have no impact. I want to say stop all aid except for education and health. If international assistance concentrates on quality education and health, the educated and healthy people will take care of themselves.”

Government official, Auki, Malaita

“Aid should help people who are already helping themselves.”

Farmer, Aruligo, West Guadalcanal

“Aid should go straight to people who are already in business. Not to enrich them further, but this way others can benefit from growing business. That way people can get money from their work, especially in agri-business, and they can stop waiting around for aid to come.”

Business woman, Honiara

Finally, some linked the issue of sustainability to the indicators that are used and the ways that aid agencies look at the impacts of their efforts.

“The most important impacts of aid people do not think about – they are not listed, not planned, they are remote, but these are the longest lasting. Often they are the opposite of the stated objectives. So remote, unintended, unexpected impacts are very often more important and more lasting and more dramatic than the short term intended, measured ones.”

Aid consultant, Honiara

Listening Team Reflections on What People Said

1. The Processes of Development Assistance

Listening Team members noted how the different themes are interlinked. The issue of donor agendas is linked to the fact that aid does not fit the local context, and this is in turn linked to issues around boomerang aid, and problems of sustainability—aid is too often devised by outsiders, according to outside agendas, and therefore lacks grounding in the local context, which lies behind the problems of longer-term sustainability of aid. The stories about aid not reaching people due to problems surrounding middle persons can be seen as another call for development assistance to come closer to the people it is meant to help, including better monitoring of the funds. Dependency is a serious problem which is in turn linked to how aid is delivered—if it is given as handouts and not monitored properly, dependency results. These linkages between the different themes illustrate how all of the issues are related to the *processes* of development assistance—they are questions around *how* aid is delivered. The Listening Team members reflected on the need for more discussion around the processes of aid delivery and donor agendas in Solomon Islands.

2. The Gap between Honiara and the Provinces

There is a wide gap between the national and grassroots levels—Honiara and elsewhere—in Solomon Islands. As a result, the issues of aid not reaching, the problem of middle persons, aid not being shared equally, the problems understanding/accessing aid and false promises, were brought out mostly in the communities, especially in the rural areas. Much of the aid that focuses

on the strengthening of state institutions or the policing through RAMSI remains largely invisible outside of Honiara. However, many of the issues related to dependency, boomerang aid, donor agendas and inappropriateness for the local context reverberate across this gap and are brought out in different ways at both grassroots and national government levels. For example, for people in the communities, the problem with monitoring and evaluation was often linked to the misuse of aid funding, whereas government officials raised how existing evaluations are linked to donor agendas and do not capture questions around longer-term sustainability.

3. How to Address Issues Raised in Rural Communities

Raising expectations and allegations of false promises was a matter of great concern to Listening Team members. They noted the importance of carefully devising communication strategies, and making sure aid is well planned so that expectations are not left unmet. To help solve the problem of aid not reaching the people it is intended to reach in the rural areas, listening team members noted the importance of strengthening the linkages between donors and communities. In Guadalcanal, team members suggested a stepped approach to engaging with communities:

- Take time to understand communities
- Take time to raise awareness/provide training
- Then assist with aid/‘start off’
- Follow up with good monitoring and evaluation

4. Constructive Criticism

The issues raised under the different themes may, at first glance, look like a list of negatives and of complaints about aid in Solomon Islands. It is important to remember however, that many conversations began with a statement of appreciation for development assistance, as did this government official in Honiara: “There are two angles; it is positive but on the other side, not negative, but there are challenges.”

Aid is seen by many as a good thing—the challenges lie in how it is delivered and in how aid funds are being handled. In many cases where people raise such challenges, they are already thinking ahead about the potential solutions. See for example the many suggestions along the lines of these people from Kolupa, in Northwest Guadalcanal, “Donor should kam lo community fo tisim an fo lanem wie blo local pipol. [Donors should come to the community for teaching and learning the ways of the local people].”

Reflections on Participating in the Listening Project

The NGO staff and volunteers that participated in the Listening Project noted how it had given them new skills in conversations and note taking. But most importantly, they expressed how different and valuable the opportunity was to take time to ‘just listen to people.’ The Listening Project was seen as an ‘eye-opener,’ and with its informal set-up, it really put people at ease to open up and share their opinions.

“The Listening Project has been really helpful and really built my confidence as an NGO officer. The peer-to-peer approach taken in this exercise relaxes people to talk openly and freely about their opinions. Joining LP makes me realize that as NGO workers, we talk a lot and never listen. This teaches us to take another approach: talk AND listen.”

“We have always done monitoring using complicated formats and while this Listening Project compares to be the simplest exercise, it proves itself to be a vital tool that should be used to communicate effectively with rural communities. I have noticed that taking the LP approach, people are not reserved and it could be because of the informal set-up that comes with LP.”

A donor representative noted the value of hearing Solomon Islanders talk about aid in their own words. NGO staff also reflected on the lack of a broader debate on aid in Solomon Islands, and how the outcomes of the Listening Project could play a role in such a debate.

Concluding Reflections

The Listening Project has provided an opportunity for Solomon Islands NGO staff to listen in a different setting to the people they intend to help. It has collected a number of stories from a variety of different people in three provinces in Solomon Islands. It is important to emphasize that these stories and quotes present people’s opinions of aid as they see it around them. They reflect people’s *perceptions* of aid to Solomon Islands, often informed by what they can see.

“People are not analytical – they just see the aid coming, for example the government announced on the radio that a donor will help Tina Hydro. Then the landowners came to the Ministry asking for the money – saying you have it and do not give it to us. So aid gives wrong ideas to people. They think aid is meant for everyone directly. And if it is going to that area then it should be their money. They don’t realize that the aid is for infrastructure, not for them directly, and that they will benefit from the spin-offs instead.”

Business woman, Honiara

Listening Team members also noted the importance of what is visible – even driving to communities in a pickup truck with the Save the Children logo on the side meant they had to make an extra effort explaining that they were there to listen, not as Save the Children staff but as representatives of aid providers. As such, perceptions play an important role in how expectations are raised.

Perceptions also play a role in who gets blamed for problems with international assistance, as a government official in Honiara explained:

“Most of the time the problem with delays is due to donor bureaucracy. It takes them three weeks to one or two months to approve disbursements, evaluation reports, etc. Most of the delays are caused by donors. But then we are seen as the people delaying. We only have consultants and contractors here. So people see the Ministry; the donors are sitting overseas so people don’t see them.”

The challenges related to aid reflected here are not black and white issues and they are not easily resolved through quick fixes. Many of the challenges present dilemmas rather than easily resolved errors or mistakes, as noted by a businessman in Honiara:

“People who are responsible for implementing these projects might divert these funds, for example to help a dying relative, or to go home for a cultural festival. When it’s done through the government, then we have these problems. When aid comes with other people to implement, then they do their work, but then a third of the money goes towards salaries.”

This is true for many of the issues raised here. However, many people we listened to noted how things can be done better, so that solutions to these dilemmas can be negotiated jointly. It is unlikely that international assistance agencies will leave Solomon Islands any time soon, so finding ways to better deliver aid to reduce the problems around the processes of aid delivery is paramount.