

A long, narrow wooden bridge with a decorative railing extends from the foreground into the distance, crossing a body of clear, turquoise water. The bridge is flanked by dense, lush green tropical vegetation, including several tall palm trees that stand out against a bright blue sky with a few wispy white clouds. The perspective is from the start of the bridge, looking down its length towards the horizon.

INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT IN SOLOMON ISLANDS: UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF DEVELOPMENTAL LEADERSHIP

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DLP investigates the crucial role that leaders, networks and coalitions play in achieving development outcomes.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The 'Citizen state engagement in Solomon Islands: Learning from pockets of developmental leadership' project looks at how and where leadership in Solomon Islands is working to produce positive development outcomes, and how this is influencing reciprocal relationships between citizens and the state. It asks:

What explains cases of developmental leadership in Solomon Islands?

When do cases of developmental leadership improve citizen-state relationships?

How can developmental leadership be effectively supported?

A key challenge in Solomon Islands is building productive, accountable relationships between citizens and the state. This includes building demand for responsive government, accountable service delivery, and strengthening the authority and legitimacy of the state.

This research aims to identify and learn from cases where leadership has enabled positive development outcomes in Solomon Islands. It looks at how leaders – within and across institutions of the state, church or *kastom* – have collaborated effectively to enable positive progress in the inclusive provision of vital welfare services, with a focus on health, education and literacy. The research follows the positive outlier approach, focusing on cases where there have been successful outcomes and problem-solving.



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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Key Findings and Implications	4
The Challenge of Uneven Development	4
Co-Producing Vital Goods and Services	5
Research Puzzle	6
Understanding Inequality in Access to Services	6
The Challenge of Remoteness	6
Geographies of Access	7
Gender Inequality	7
The Political Economy of Uneven Development	7
Fragmentation	7
Colonial Legacies	8
Effects of Aid	9
Distrust in the State	10
Pockets of Developmental Leadership	11
Investigating Developmental Leadership	12
References	13
Image Credits	15

INTRODUCTION

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Progress has been made in reducing poverty in Solomon Islands, but stark variation in development outcomes persists between centre and periphery, rural and urban areas, and across provinces.
- There are multiple underlying political and economic barriers to inclusive development, including the challenge of remoteness, social fragmentation, and legacies of colonial rule.
- There has been less emphasis on understanding cases where these barriers are overcome.
- Examples identified in this brief suggest there is untapped potential in better understanding when and how local leaders work together to co-produce goods and services that benefit whole communities.
- A DLP research project is exploring such cases of 'developmental leadership', with a focus on understanding what motivates individual leaders, what drives community co-operation, and how these processes have the potential to address the challenge of uneven development.

With a small population spread across an archipelago of some 900 islands, Solomon Islands faces significant challenges in providing inclusive access to vital services such as healthcare, water and education. A complex and variegated mix of social, political and economic conditions underlie a spatial pattern of uneven development both across and within provinces.

A new research project in partnership between the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) and the University of the South Pacific is investigating the role of local developmental leadership in access to vital goods and services across the islands. Its focus is on understanding what incentivises local leaders to work collectively to co-produce inclusive public goods in ways that can address the challenge of uneven development.

THE CHALLENGE OF UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

Although progress in reducing poverty at the aggregate level has been made in Solomon Islands, stark variation persists between centre and periphery, rural and urban areas, and across provinces. Income and food poverty are higher in rural areas, where some 80% of the population reside (World Bank, 2017). In 2020, the country ranked 151st on the human development index, with a life expectancy of 73 years, and an average 10 years of expected schooling (UNDP, 2020). At the sub-national level, though, clear disparities exist. In 2013, for example, 42% of the working population in urban areas had attended high school, compared with 69% in rural areas (World Bank 2017, p. 16).

Substantial research has documented multiple underlying causes of this uneven pattern of development. In 2017, the World Bank's country diagnostic concluded that neither the economic geography nor political economy was conducive to the development of strong state institutions capable of delivering services or managing conflict, disasters or health emergencies (World Bank 2017). A 'clientelism trap', whereby politicians focus on delivering personalised benefits to voters at the local level at the expense of investing in strong state institutions, both results from and in turn perpetuates underdevelopment (Wood 2018).

Within this political environment, the effect of devolving considerable discretionary funding to individual Members of Parliament (MPs) via Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) has been contentious. While on the one hand, CDFs can facilitate direct support to communities for vital goods necessary to improve their daily living conditions, on the other hand they can perpetuate inequality where these benefits are restricted to an MP's support base (Wood 2020). CDFs may perform well in terms of dispersing funds quickly, but less so in terms of transparency and accountability (Batley 2015).

While previous research has extensively documented these and other underlying political and economic barriers to inclusive development, there has been less emphasis on understanding cases where these barriers are overcome.

CO-PRODUCING VITAL GOODS AND SERVICES

Although significant political and economic barriers to inclusive development exist, communities demonstrate varying levels of resilience and adaptive capacity. How societies organise and respond to development challenges may depend on how local social orders were affected by legacies of colonial rule and are exposed to contemporary processes of globalisation (Allen et al. 2013). More broadly, Solomon Islands has been characterised as a weak state-strong society (McDougall 2015). Centralised authority structures are often perceived by remote communities as disconnected from local realities and people's everyday survival strategies (Hobbis 2016).

In spaces and settings where state authority is distant and weakly institutionalised, local governance is typically co-produced. Customary institutions and kinship networks often provide a social safety net during periods of hardship, while in many communities church and customary leadership play vital roles in maintaining order and social welfare. In practice, hybrid forms of local authority evolve whereby church, *kastom* and state actors fulfil core social functions (Dinnen and Allen 2015).

The dynamics of the local relationships that evolve between leaders with different formal and informal sources of authority, and between leaders and communities, can be catalytic to development. A simple example from two remote villages in East Kwaio illustrates this. Here, a new raised walkway was built to resolve a perilous situation where women struggled to carry water across eroding logs in the mangrove forest. In a context where there was no residing MP, and no non-governmental organisations, workers from the local hospital provided cash, and village leaders provided timber and labour for construction (Asugeni et al. 2019).

These and other cases of co-production documented in this brief suggest there is untapped potential in better understanding the conditions under which communities and leaders tackle existing barriers to providing inclusive public goods, with potential to address the challenge of uneven development.



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RESEARCH PUZZLE

When and why do local leaders and communities work together effectively to co-produce public goods? How are different actors - within government, donors, church, *kastom* and civil society - overcoming barriers to collective action in these cases? What incentivises individuals to act? And how do they gain legitimacy and support from the local community to make change happen?

This collaborative project is exploring these questions through the lens of developmental leadership - defined as 'the strategic, collective and political process of building political will to make change happen' (Hudson et al. 2018). Through a combination of interviews at national, provincial and village level, *tok stori* with local communities who are both the co-creators and recipients of community projects, and media and documentary analysis, it is investigating how pockets of developmental leadership emerge and address inclusive development.

UNDERSTANDING INEQUALITY IN ACCESS TO SERVICES

THE CHALLENGE OF REMOTENESS

Solomon Islands is an archipelago covering an area of 28,900 square kilometres (FAO, 2016, p. 1). As a relatively large Pacific island country (PIC), second only in size to Papua New Guinea, it is challenging to administer and govern. The more than 900 islands

include both bigger and higher volcanic islands as well as low lying atolls and artificial islands. The distance between islands also varies, from close proximity to significant isolation. Even the larger, mountainous islands have regions that are accessible by service providers and other parts that are remote and extremely difficult to reach. This distinction is important as while the islands may be remote from each other, within them there are also areas far removed from the urban centres and therefore essential services such as clinics, schools, wharves and even trade stores. Some children in rural areas have to travel by canoe or trek through mountainous landscapes to get to school, limiting inclusive access, especially for those with disabilities (Sharma et al. 2017).

The lack of transportation infrastructure to enable people to access services, or transport their produce to markets exacerbates the common challenge of remoteness. Because of unreliable transportation, distance to and from markets and the costs of transporting goods to market outlets mostly in urban areas, the ability of many individuals, families and communities to provide for basic needs in the modern cash economy is severely limited. Indeed, most remote parts of the country have abundant stock of natural resources and comparative advantage that cannot be transformed into cash. As such, offers by MPs using Rural Constituency Development Funds (RCDF) and other forms of gifts by candidates in the lead up to elections can be tempting.

GEOGRAPHIES OF ACCESS

Inequality in access to health, water and education is evident between provinces. For example, while many rural and urban households in the Makira and Central provinces have access to piped water, many rural and urban households in the north-western provinces of Choiseul and Western often rely on rain water (Anthonj et al. 2020). Anthonj et al. (2020) argue a possible explanation for this inter-provincial inequality is the provinces' location to the capital city, Honiara. Since Honiara is the hub of policymaking and service-co-ordination, a trend where access to vital services decreases with distance to the capital has been observed.

This centre-periphery inequality is acute in healthcare access, with many rural communities or outer provinces unable to receive specialist care because they are unable to travel to Honiara (Botfield et al. 2021). Furthermore, it is important to note the key role topography plays in access to piped water supplies: communities with good water sources in hills are able to pipe water to their communities via gravity fed systems. This is not possible for communities surrounded by flat land or located in atolls.

Disparities are also found between islet and mainland dwellers, as those on islets often have to use time, money and resources to travel to the mainland for basic resources such as water, gardening land, and fuel wood (Barclay et al. 2018). This puts islet families at a disadvantage, as they have less time to generate income and have to put money into frequent travel. Consequently, some families are unable to afford expenses such as clothes and school fees on top of food, unlike mainland families.

Variation in development outcomes runs deeper than the mere location of communities, it also depends on the availability of natural resources. Some have access to natural resources, such as rainwater tanks, garden beds, and fuel to cook food and travel to markets.

GENDER INEQUALITY

Women are acutely under-represented in Solomon Islands politics, with very low levels of participation in traditionally male-dominated spaces, including formal political office (Baker 2018). Informal institutions such as kinship and clientelism are

gendered in the sense that they can privilege men's access to resources (ibid).

Gender norms and practices not only restrict women's formal participation but also perpetuate inequalities in accessing vital services. This is especially acute where women's mobility is controlled by their husbands or male members of the community (Hobbis 2018). For example, women can face significant sociocultural barriers when trying to access healthcare services when they have limited financial resources or are confined to traditional gender roles as caregivers or subsistence farmers (ibid).

Women's access to health resources may hinge on whether their male counterparts permit it. This is starkly illustrated by the findings of a 2015 national cervical screening programme pilot, in which participants highlighted the vital role played by husbands and village chiefs in creating a supportive environment for women to attend and follow the after-care recommendations (Botfield et al. 2021). Moreover, since men are often given greater opportunity to attend schools, particularly in rural and remote communities, gender inequality permeates development efforts in the country, disadvantaging not only remote communities but also almost half of the country's population.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

FRAGMENTATION

Identity, linked to cultural and linguistic diversity, reveals the nature of fragmentation across the country. Melanesian societies in general have close affinity with their own kind. Informal institutions often facilitate cooperation and increased social capital within extra-familial groups such as clans, and - at times - within larger groups, such as language groups, or people from the same island. This is commonly referred to as the *wantok* system. Affinity with *wantoks* can also serve as the foundations of identity groups at national or regional levels (Nanau 2011). During the colonial era, dissatisfaction with accessing government services resulted in the formation of groups such as the Ma'asina Ruru Movement (Akin 2013) and the Moro Movement (Davenport and Çoker 1967) that exploit certain *wantok* identities to protest colonial rule while re-exerting indigenous leadership. The social

safety net provided by the *wantok* groups at the local level means that seeing beyond the group identity and interest is often a challenge. Considering the 900 plus islands, 78 different languages spoken in addition to English and Solomon Islands pidgin, fragmentation is a reality (Bugotu 1973). A vision for the modern state of Solomon Islands is often blurred partly because of this reality.

In addition to geographic and demographic issues, uneven development can also be understood in the differences in levels of socialisation, especially in pushing for a united and evenly developed Solomon Islands. Access to basic education and the distribution of higher levels of educational attainment by people from various parts of the country and within islands is uneven. Those closer to urban centres or places where Christian missionaries established the first formal schools are generally more educated than those in remote and maritime areas.

Access to formal jobs in both public and private sectors favour educated individuals and their families. The close knit nature of societies means that those with better education have the ability to access government support to develop their communities. More importantly, the priorities of these people if they become government officers or MPs is to their kin and *wantoks* who are usually their voters, in the case of MPs (Hiriasia 2016). The use of discretionary funds is often through such networks, which in turn perpetuates unequal development.

COLONIAL LEGACIES

Apart from political volatility, instability and maladministration that continuously distract Solomon Islands government from addressing unequal development, external interventions have also contributed greatly. These include development and administrative hangovers from the colonial era and present day relationships with donors.

During the colonial period, the government developed certain areas of the country, particularly those with potential for agriculture production. Parts of the western Solomon Islands like Kolombangara Island, for instance, were alienated from indigenous customary landowning groups partially under the *Queen's Regulation No. 3 of 1900*, which allowed occupation of wasteland (i.e. land not owned, cultivated or occupied) with a government issued

Certificate of Occupation (Foukona 2007). This gave way to plantation and forestry development. The same was true for the northern parts of Guadalcanal and the Russell Islands in the Central Islands Province (Bennett 1987). People moved to these places as a direct consequence, because plantation development attracted wage labour. They usually moved in groups from the same part of an island or from the same island, maintaining their safety net in their new places of residence and employment. As they resettled, these groups ultimately occupied both physical and social spaces. These in the long term developed into 'triggers of conflict' when not properly managed or where assimilation did not happen.

Successive governments since independence have continued that legacy. They have concentrated on developing parts of the country that were previously centres initiated during the colonial period. The movement from populated, and maritime islands and parts of islands to places with employment opportunities and government centres continued and was even exacerbated after independence. This resulted in overcrowding and increased poverty in urban centres, giving rise to social issues and the neglect of other parts of the country. An attempt to maintain and improve the decentralised system of government that started during the colonial period era is maintained under section 114 of the *Independence Order* (Solomon Islands Constitution) that turned local councils into provincial governments. The only major difference between the colonial and postcolonial structure of decentralisation was the devolution of political power to provincial governments rather than simple administrative decentralisation or 'deconcentration' under the previous local councils (Premdas and Steeves 1985).

The intention was to ensure that provincial governments look after development efforts and service delivery in their respective provinces, with the hope that there will ultimately be equal development across the country. Although some development has resulted from this decentralisation and a second tier of government exists at the provincial level with technical staff to support its work, provinces are starved of funds and resources. While limited political powers were devolved to provinces, financial power remained centralised. As such, their impact on development efforts in local

communities has been limited. Further political and economic decentralisation through the insistence on more autonomy has been an ongoing call by provincial governments. For example, the Western Solomons movement called for more autonomy in the form of state government in 1978 and 2000 (Scales 2007). In a similar fashion, Guadalcanal called for the establishment of state governments in 1988 and again in 1998, triggering the Tensions (Kabutaulaka 2001). Likewise, Malaita province has been calling for autonomy from Solomon Islands since the government's switch of diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China (Foukona and Smith 2019).

For serious observers of development in the country, these calls indicate the need for reforms to existing government structures and systems. Unfortunately, only multilateral donors like UNDP recognise efforts to address calls for local autonomy by supporting various land summits, leadership summits, the traditional governance bill awareness, and more than ten years of consultations that resulted in a draft federal constitution.

EFFECTS OF AID

The Tensions from 1998 to 2003 that brought the country to its knees did not help development efforts and cumulative achievements since independence. Indeed, it stopped the major development projects such as the palm oil plantation, the gold mine and other important development activities that were providing employment and national revenue. Even the tuna industry was badly affected. The Tensions were a culmination of development frustrations and failed dreams over the years, as demonstrated in the development provisions of the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) that brought an end to overt fighting between warring factions. For example, under the TPA, parties agreed that Malaita would have as part of its infrastructure development an international airport, Wairokai industrial port and the construction of the South road while Guadalcanal would have the Aola-Marau road, Lambi-Tangarare road and the cross-island road (SIG 2000). After almost twenty years, none of these infrastructure projects have materialised.

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) that intervened and brought the country back to normalcy had different terms of reference, focusing on three pillars: machinery of government, law and justice and economic governance (Moore

2013). Despite calls for more economic and financial power by provinces and people, RAMSI's focus was more on processes of good governance and proper transparent procedures, rather than people's empowerment or development. The cries for roads, infrastructure development and so forth under the TPA were not part of RAMSI's terms of reference.

In the meantime, Solomon Islands government negotiated with Taiwan, through the Exim Bank, and compensated properties lost as a consequence of the Tensions (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2012). Moreover, Parliament strengthened the electoral constituency to become a development entity with excessive resources at the discretion of MPs.

The Taiwanese Government contributed some resources to this newly created development entity that at the most only had two officers and an MP with no technical officers to deliver services. What happened was the creation of another level of government with the intention of giving the same resources to each electoral constituency, ignoring the role of provinces in development and service delivery. The Solomon Islands Government funded a bulk of the RCDF budget. The RCDF has an Act of Parliament to control its administration passed in 2013. Unfortunately, it remained unenforceable (NPSI 2013a). MPs are said to follow the provisions of the Public Finance Act (NPSI 2013b) to an extent but with minimal success, as RCDF is effectively spent at the discretion of individual MPs.

In 2019, Solomon Islands switched diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to China (Foukona 2020). The justification for this switch was the need for development or more resources to develop the entire Solomon Islands. The Chinese Government agreed to maintain the RCDF as it is currently functioning for a certain period while in transition before they look at alternative ways of funding development in the country (RNZ, 2019).



DISTRUST IN THE STATE

One of the effects of inequality in access to vital services is low trust in the state. Ethnographic studies have documented a lack of entitlement to services in places where the state has failed to consistently provide them (Hobbis 2016). In remote villages, citizens are sometimes turned away from services, dismissed by claims such as ‘we are looking into your request, please come back tomorrow’ (Hobbis 2018, p. 68). In turn, even where state services exist, distrust can dissuade citizens from using them. For example, some women are unwilling to report domestic violence because, even if the police act appropriately and arrest the perpetrator, help may be temporary: abusers may be released from prison and they often return to their home villages where their victim still lives (Hobbis 2018).

It is typical for citizens to rely on traditional community support mechanisms for their daily survival strategies. For example, in a measles outbreak in the Malaita province, families prioritised visits to traditional healers over the main hospital, and the village with the highest infection rate did not support vaccinations due to traditional beliefs (Diau et al. 2015). Ha’apio et al. (2019) found that when government did not fulfil their commitments in supporting communities after natural disasters, communities primarily relied on each other. In rural coastal communities, the majority of citizens first seek assistance from family to fulfil their food or other basic needs (Malherbe et al. 2020). In a context of community reliance, limited service delivery and low trust, the potential for service delivery to facilitate reciprocal state-society relations is limited.

POCKETS OF DEVELOPMENTAL LEADERSHIP

In a context where the challenge of inclusive development is real, the significance of local leadership in driving change is amplified. An illustrative example of this is the Simbo for Change project, a single-island community development and livelihoods project that began in 2012. This case demonstrates the potential of local leadership in generating new livelihood opportunities and community cohesion. A single leader - Esther Suti - a Simbo woman based in the provincial centre of Gizo was, according to Cox (2020), 'an essential catalyst for change'. Suti navigated informal tribal structures, consulted local leaders, and encouraged others to take ownership of a programme that helped families to reappraise their cash incomes and long-term food sustainability. It linked farmers with markets so women didn't have to travel away from Simbo for a long period of time. Overall, the project demonstrated that working through informal local governance structures is essential to making services work for communities.

How the Simbo community responded to the tsunami of 2007 further shows the significance of leadership that aligns with local social capital and cultural norms. The rapid organization of a local disaster relief committee ensured successful dissemination of goods and medical aid to households (Lauer et al. 2013). This effective response relied on systems of exchange and labour sharing between groups and high levels of social capital. Village life on Simbo is underpinned by *varivagana* - a term that connotes the norm of generosity and reciprocal obligations, love, concern for others, and the prioritisation of community over individual resource accumulation (Lauer et al. 2013).

At the same time, this example also illustrates the significance of national and regional influences on local leadership. The Simbo Disaster Management Central Committee (SDMCC), formed just hours after the tsunami, was made up of three educated men, with either college degrees or experience in the national government. In this sense, they were not traditional leaders, but nevertheless worked closely with the support of village chiefs and church leaders (Lauer et al. 2013). This illustrates Simbo's progress is not only linked to local cultural values, and the social

capital that drives collaboration between leaders, but also connectedness with opportunities off the island (Lauer et al. 2013).

As seen in the above cases, developmental leadership has the potential to drive community projects that can improve citizen-state relations in Solomon Islands. When reforms in Solomon Islands are aid-linked, they can 'often fall short of expected outcomes' despite consensus on the importance of effective governance (Sahin and Shahin 2019). Importantly, the Australian-funded Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) sensitively supported the Simbo initiative. The fact that it continues as a local movement in Solomon Islands even after donor involvement concluded in 2017, points to its sustainability. The support of the Samoan Women in Business group illustrates the importance of intra-Pacific collaboration (Roche et al. 2020).

Developmental leadership has the potential to drive community projects that can improve citizen-state relations in Solomon Islands.

While such cases illustrate the potential of developmental leadership, documentary evidence of their inner dynamics remains scant. What they tell us is that understanding how leadership operates in Solomon Islands requires an appreciation of the complex institutional landscape. As noted earlier, these are a legacy of the hybridisation of traditional and British colonial forms of governance. Governance is co-produced by state institutions, customary systems, non-state actors and churches (Allen et al. 2013). As Allen et al. (2013) note, there is significant capacity for 'local innovation, adaptation, and reconfiguration—an ongoing process that signifies a willingness to absorb outside influences and experiment with increasingly hybridised models of community governance.'

There are examples of state agencies actively engaging with hybrid structures to improve their capacity to operate more effectively, such as in the case of the "Community Officer" project of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force. This project sought to extend the reach of the police in villages by appointing a local lay person into a quasi-policing role. In evaluating the programme, Dinnen and Haley (2012) found a 'generally positive reception in those communities where COs have been appointed, as well as among members of the RSIPF with whom they have interacted.'

Understanding these configurations of formal and informal leadership is significant in light of prominent Western critiques of the constraints to development in Solomon Islands. For example, the *wantok* system has been considered a factor in slow development progress by ADB (2010), Duncan

Local relationships that evolve between leaders with different formal and informal sources of authority, and between leaders and local communities, can be catalytic to development.

(2010), Gay (2009), Fukuyama (2008), and Hughes (2004), against a normative standard of what political and administrative delivery mechanisms ought to resemble in a modern state. Such technocratic literature, according to Haque (2012), loosely assigns this as a 'catch-all term for various real or perceived collectivist elements of Solomon Islands' culture', which are argued to impede the nation's societal capacity to deal with collective action problems. However, such interpretations can deny the importance of relationships that link individuals and groups, from the interpersonal to national and international levels (Brigg 2009). Overall, cases of co-production of public goods challenge narrow and negative conceptualisations of 'weak institutions' and suggest they can be 'functionally strong' (Ang 2016).

INVESTIGATING THE POTENTIAL OF DEVELOPMENTAL LEADERSHIP

By closely exploring cases where leaders and communities work together effectively to co-produce public goods, we aim to better understand the incentives, values and actors driving pockets of inclusive developmental progress in Solomon Islands. In a country with a dispersed population, where citizens often rely on community support structures, understanding configurations of local leadership is an important aspect in understanding overall political and economic prospects for inclusive development. In so doing, the research aims to generate practical insights on how local and international stakeholders can work in ways that support developmental leadership to emerge and thrive.

READ MORE

The Simbo for Change Project: [Livelihoods, Leadership, Linkages and Locality: The Simbo for Change Project, Solomon Islands](#)



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