Investigating the peacebuilding project in the Pacific: The experience of Solomon Islands and Timor Leste

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Recent stocktakes point out that success in post conflict peacebuilding is all too rare. This briefing paper first of all considers the peacebuilding project writ large, before briefly assessing how peacebuilding is faring in two countries in the Pacific, pointing to areas of future promise and concern for New Zealand policy makers.

The tripartite peacebuilding formula

A particular formula has typically been proposed for guiding efforts at post conflict reconstruction (or construction). This set formula involves the rebuilding of a centralised state system that is politically a liberal democracy and economically a neo-liberal market driven entity. Yet developments over the decade or so have highlighted some problems with these three principles.

Statebuilding is currently the default response to the question of 'what to do' in post conflict environments. However many post conflict sites have not ever experienced statehood in any meaningful way. Numerous states were created through processes of colonisation rather than being generated through centuries of community building or concerted efforts to forge a social contract between peoples. Given the lack of experience with meaningful statehood in many areas, it is unclear how well new or renewed states can be 'manufactured' by external manipulation, or whether or not statebuilding lends itself to increased conflict.

Similar concerns have arisen with respect to democracy promotion. Some communities have sought to acquire the veneer of democratic polities without demonstrating the requisite liberal culture of individual rights which would allow democratic principles to be properly carried through into practice. Additional critiques have focused on the mechanics of democratic polities: a focus on oppositional politics within democracy is problematic in a variety of cultures and the push towards elections can exacerbate social tensions in post conflict environments.

Finally, the third pillar of recent peacebuilding efforts – the implementation of neo-liberal market economics – has also come under increasing scrutiny. Economic growth has not tended to simply 'fall out of' liberalisation. Fledgling economies need time to consolidate and at times this requires state-led economic principles to be accepted rather than potentially rapacious privatisation. Research on reforms in Cambodia and El Salvador, for example, has clearly demonstrated the negative impacts of liberalisation programmes.

With all three of these pillars coming in for increasing scrutiny in recent years, it is important to assess how these principles have fared in more specific examples in the Pacific and what might be done differently to help consolidate peace.

These three factors at play in the Pacific: Two cases in point

How is the state faring in Solomon Islands? Most accounts still seem to suggest that Solomon Islands consists of villages rather than a state per se in terms of the feeling of community. In terms of how statebuilding is progressing with respect to the creation or rebuilding of the actual machinery of government, some important developments have occurred. The Partnership Framework of 2006 states that the overall goal of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) is the achievement of a 'peaceful Solomon Islands where key national institutions and functions of law and justice, public administration and economic management are effective, affordable and have the capacity to be sustained without RAMSI's further assistance'. Efforts have therefore been ongoing to strengthen public finances, develop effective cabinet and parliamentary systems, and to undertake fundamental public service reform.

For the present time government offices appear to be functioning adequately, though this functionality may be reliant on continuing external involvement for some time. In terms of planning to improve state capacity, bureaucrats are being subjected to a 10 year Public Service Improvement Programme (PSIP) which is trying to assess what government can afford to deliver and how best this can be done. For example, the Ombudsman exists to consider complaints about the public sector but is often overwhelmed with complaints from teachers and police about promotion. Informal organisations such as the Integrity Group Forum (with members from Police, Corrections, Customs) are trying to identify ways to diminish chances for corruption. However, most assessments still place Solomon Islands in a category of high governance risk for the present time.

In terms of democratic practices, elections have been held successfully. Yet in 2007 54% in the RAMSI People's Survey believed misbehaviour was likely amongst senior officials or politicians. This increased to 81% in 2008. Efforts are being undertaken to rein in politicians who are more loyal to constituencies than national interest, who are still too unaccountable, who appoint political appointees into public sector posts and who fiddle in bureaucratic affairs.

Positive signs therefore exist in terms of the creation of the Leadership Code Commission, which assesses abuse of senior office in order to help to embed increased political integrity. The existence of a free press and active NGOs such as Transparency International are also significant. However, the internalisation of democracy as a whole is still shallow.

Economically things are more tenuous. Government revenue is not overly resilient, and logging revenue is set to be exhausted in 2014. This leaves the government in a rather difficult position – more open to external influence, and potentially unable to deliver on public expectations. Trade liberalisation is thought to have contributed to problems in 2000, and it is difficult to attract solid foreign and direct investment. Some relevant areas of concern include the fact that almost a quarter of the population is below the poverty line; there is an overreliance on copra, palm oil, and cocoa; an almost exhausted forestry sector is the mainstay of export revenues but is set to soon disappear; and corruption in the logging and fishing sectors is leading to a loss of revenue. Tourism is a potential source of economic growth but remains underdeveloped. International organisations are still promoting private sector development, seeking to: improve infrastructure; reform State Owned Enterprises (which provide expensive and inefficient water, phone, electricity); change the tax system that 'discourages' formality; address the issue of weak land property rights; and to recognise that the legal framework is lacking. However, it is difficult to see how these reforms will necessarily be able to prompt the growth that is needed, and critics are concerned that such liberalisation simply leads to encouragement of international exploitation and local corruption.

In terms of another example of the tripartite formula at play, Timor Leste remains somewhat dependent on external involvement for successful functioning of certain roles essential to states. In particular the question of both internal and external security is still reliant on international support. Here the fraught relationship between the police (PNTL – Policia Nacional de Timor Leste) and the military (F-FDTL – Falantil-Forças de Defesa de Timor Leste) required the return of an International Security Force in 2006, and though much more stable the situation remains troublesome. In order to try to dissipate the tensions of 2006 the police and military have been encouraged to cooperate closely, but the international community has suggested that for Timor to exist as a modern state, it must clearly demarcate internal and external security forces. There are concerns that this situation could flare up if roles in internal security remain open to interpretation. The systems of government are perhaps more solid than those in Solomon Islands, and there is a strong nationalism forged through the resistance to Indonesian occupation – though ironically this feeds into the issue of still seeing the military as the primary source of security rather than the police.

In terms of democracy, elections have so far seemed technically to function well enough though there have been cases of abuse of power. Concerns over human rights issues and the role of elites are ongoing, but there is a strong civil society element at work in Timor Leste with groups such as La'o Hamutuk providing strong analysis and critique of government policy. One area that such groups have focused on lately has been voicing concerns about the possible growth of corruption as the economy looks set to grow.

Economically, things are looking better. In 2005 Timor Leste was ranked 150 out of 162 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). In 2010 this climbed to 120. The country is expected to experience double digit figures in GDP growth in the next few years, which could further improve the wellbeing and development of Timor Leste's people. This change is partly due to the increase in Government expenditure, which has almost quadrupled over the last five years. Private spending is also up, with vehicle registration, mobile phone lending, electricity and construction all on the increase. This growth is primarily driven by the petroleum industry, and Timor is expected to continue to experience solid economic growth as long as sound economic management and favourable external conditions hold. However, such growth has also fuelled inflation, and, given the reliance on a non-renewable resource, such growth is temporary, and international institutions are therefore calling for more transition to private sector-led growth in a more diversified economy.

In both cases in the Pacific, therefore, there have been some more and some less successful experimentations with aspects of statebuilding, democratic practices and neo-liberal economic policies. Given the concerns about these variable effects, scholars in the Pacific and elsewhere have begun to consider what alternative approaches might help improve these chances, with interesting results.

Hybridity in peacebuilding

The concept of 'hybridity' has recently been suggested as a mechanism for managing complex problems (see Boege et al in *International Peacekeeping* 16 (5) 2009). In the case of statebuilding, for example, hybridity could mean a sharing of roles between the state and other entities in governance or justice issues – such as in recognising the role played by the village court system (*suco*) in Timor Leste. It could also mean considering the creation of a political system that works with rather than against local bigman politics (as argued in Morgan Brigg's response to Francis Fukuyama in the *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 24 (3) 2009). Alternatively, hybridity within post conflict environments might mean creating an economic system that: relies on a combination of state owned enterprises and private industry; or that might be more cautious about the demands of the global marketplace in being a driver of conflict; or that emphasises welfare in order to help a traumatised population to rebuild.

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One way in which New Zealand has already been involved in efforts that are in some sense hybrid has been through recent policing efforts in peace operations. New Zealand Police in Solomon Islands, for example, are engaging with Community Officers in addition to supporting Royal Solomon Islands Police Force Officers – a move which helps reinforce centralised state police institutions with local, less formal community officers who are often more responsive to local populations and who have the option to pursue different justice systems that can better reflect local needs. Informal and formal policing and justice sectors are therefore both drawn upon as solutions to problems.

Another possible avenue to consider for future efforts was mentioned in a recent discussion with an experienced New Zealand practitioner with the UN Mission in Timor (UNMIT). New Zealand currently has officers deployed within the UN context to help mentor and train Timorese police. However, the concept of community policing in particular is difficult to embed in isolation. That is, both the population being policed, and those doing the policing, need some understanding of what is trying to be achieved. The unofficial suggestion was to send Timorese police officers to reside and work in New Zealand as such officers' work is better internalised by working with a population that is familiar with the concept of community policing. New Zealand does not yet appear to have developed any official policy along these lines, but this suggestion opens the possibility that the whole concept of capacity building and the mechanisms for policy transfer could also be 'hybridised' and applied in broader contexts outside of policing too.

New Zealand policy makers may already have certain characteristics that lend themselves to applying hybrid approaches. Coming from a democratic system that tries to reconcile the various demands of biculturalism through commitments to the Treaty of Waitangi and mechanisms such as the provision of Maori seats in Parliament, for example, New Zealanders should already have a clear understanding that there may be many different ways for realising political and social goals. Our recent election has also demonstrated that policy makers are actively grappling with the best ways to achieve economic growth through harnessing both private and public possibilities. New Zealand and New Zealanders could therefore be well suited to helping mediate between international demands and local contexts in helping to support a range of more reflexive state, political, or economic reform efforts. ■

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