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### STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY IN SOLOMON ISLANDS: ORGANISATIONAL AND NETWORK DEVELOPMENT IN DEVELOPMENT SERVICES EXCHANGE

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### About the author

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### Acknowledgements

This article is a personal perspective and does not represent the views of DSE, nor anyone associated with it. The desire to share insights and lessons learnt, in the hope that these may be useful to others, is the motivation for writing this paper. It is not intended as a criticism of any individuals or organisation. I have tried hard to fairly represent events as they occurred. I apologise if I offend anyone with how this story is told. This is a story that involves many people, and there would be nothing to tell without their support and commitment. My thanks go to each and every one of them.

## Introduction

There is increasing attention given to what role civil society should play in the 're'-building of nation states.<sup>1</sup> Many see a strong civil society that can create a 'demand' for better governance as necessary for the strengthening of democratic institutions and their processes.<sup>2</sup> The rationale for what is being called 'demand governance' is twofold. One is the need for greater participation in planning and decision-making by those directly affected by this process. Within Solomon Islands there is a call for greater decentralisation from Honiara so as to help bridge the gap between the state and society<sup>3</sup>. This requires a people's voice that is informed, willing, and able to participate in decision-making that can be heard from the local to the national level. The second is simply to hold the institutions and their office bearers accountable, acknowledging that addressing corruption must be driven from within a society.<sup>4</sup> Of course, civil society plays a far broader role than this, but for such groups to play such a role requires a high level of organisation and capability. For Solomon Islands it is recognised that to achieve such an ambition will take time and efforts must be grounded in local circumstances.

In the context of these broader discussions, this paper outlines some of the current challenges to strengthening civil society in Solomon Islands. This is done by drawing on my experience as a non-Solomon Islander working within a local Non-government Organisation (NGO), Development Services Exchange (DSE). NGOs are only one component of civil society and that are many other elements that make up the whole. It is assumed that the challenges faced by DSE are similar to those of other NGOs and perhaps even other types of civil society organisations and groups.

Most of the challenges identified in this paper are not new or unique to Solomon Islands. Many parallels could be drawn with the experience of community organisations in Australia. While this story may resonate with the experiences of others, it is important to be mindful of the context in which this work has occurred. Solomon Island's is trying to recover from its recent civil conflict. Since 2002 it has received vastly increased interest and presence from external actors, as well as the presence of the Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands (RAMSI). This situation makes it difficult to distinguish the longer-term development issues from the challenges posed by more recent events.

The paper has two parts. Part one gives an overview of DSE, including a background on its history and the situation it had reached in 2004, and a description of the efforts to rebuild the organisation and the role that external support played in this. The second part outlines some challenges faced in undertaking 'capacity building' work within DSE. This is not a comprehensive analysis of a capacity building approach, rather a selection of particular challenges that were prominent at that time. These challenges have been organised into, practice issues at the micro level; difficulties relating to organisational development; and more generally challenges to strengthening civil society in Solomon Islands. Broader development issues faced by Solomon Islands, and the motivation and goals of 'development' are beyond the scope of this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> "with the post-colonial Melanesian states it is not so much that they are prone to falling apart, but that they have never been properly put together in the first place" In Finin Gerard & Wesley-Smith Terence. *Coups, conflicts and Crises: The New Pacific Way?* East-West Centre Pacific Islands Development Series, No13 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government (2006) *Australian Aid: Promoting Growth and Stability*. Australian White Paper AusAID.

<sup>3</sup> The weakness of the state is matched by the strength of society. Most Solomon islanders see the state as a competing political entity. Migdal (1988) *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Government (2006:pg 60) *Australian Aid: Promoting Growth and Stability*. Australian White Paper.

# Development Services Exchange (DSE)

## Background

Development Services Exchange (DSE) was established in 1983 as an umbrella body for NGOs working in Solomon Islands. Its purpose was to support the exchange and sharing of information, skills, and resources, as well as to be a focal point and a voice for civil society. Since its inception, the organisation has played an important role in bringing NGOs together. During the mid 1990's DSE had over 100 financial members, though as is the case for many NGOs, it has gone through periods of weakness as well as strength. By the end of the 1990's DSE experienced a serious decline. This demise coincided with the civil conflict (or ethnic tensions) although there were several factors that increased the organisation's vulnerability to the adverse social conditions. These included:

- Poor management, especially regarding financial accountability.
- Lack of relevance to members; it proved difficult to meet the diverse needs of members who range from international to local NGOs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs).
- Inability to adapt to the changing environment. This included the maturing of the NGO sector, new technology and means of communication, and a rapidly changing social context.
- The organisation had become distracted from its core business of coordination and cooperation.
- Opportunities were not shared with members.
- DSE's agenda and resources had been used for political and personal interests.
- Struggled to establish and maintain links to local communities.

## State of the organisation

By 2003, DSE's situation had become dire. Funding agreements had been withdrawn because the organisation has lost the confidence of its donors. Additionally DSE had accrued debts in excess of \$200,000.00 SBD to more than ten creditors and on balance was close to, if not, insolvent. The loss of funding had resulted in the then Board eventually making all staff redundant. For some, DSE had reached a point where they felt it was "dead and buried". It was difficult to obtain a comprehensive assessment of the state of DSE, because much information had been lost, a desire to present a positive public face, and a cultural reluctance to avoid revealing actions that could bring shame on people.

DSE owned a property with two buildings in Chinatown but these were in poor condition. One building had undergone some repair work and was being rented to two NGOs. The other was not fit for rental and was used as DSE's own office. It was clear that DSE had previously been well organised and equipped. However much of the equipment had broken down or reached the end of its lifespan. The systems of information management and storage had not been maintained, and many of the documents on file went back two decades. Most significantly, the bulk of the organisation's operational knowledge had been lost when the office staff had been made redundant.

Income from the rental of office space, plus an administration fee for supporting the delivery of a training project from Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) was used to cover ongoing office operating costs. However funds were limited and every month it was difficult to pay bills. This resulted in basic services such as phone, power and water being disconnected on a regular basis, creating extra reconnection costs

as well as impeding the functioning of the office. This situation contributed to a sense of despair and feeling that things were beyond control. The lack of funds led to a day-by-day survival mentality and contributed to a lack of long term financial planning and management. In this environment when any additional funds were available, these tended to be spent immediately rather than put into a budgeted plan. This way of thinking reflected the uncertainty for many during the civil conflict.

Two people had been retained as 'volunteers' when the office staff were retrenched. Their roles were not well defined but basically they were to safe guard the assets of DSE and to take care of administrative requirements. Their presence was important in preventing the premises being taken over by militants. The Board of management met sporadically and there was little contact between them and the office. Major decisions were typically made in consultation with the Chairperson. Many people outside DSE were unaware of the problems faced by the organisation and they assumed that it was business as usual.

Needless to say the credibility and legitimacy of the organisation was low. Not only did donors not trust DSE, its financial membership had dropped from more than 100 groups to two. The Office was no longer able to provide services to members or their development partners, and was thus in no position to ask them to pay their dues. Regardless of this situation, DSE continued to be invited to attend meetings and conferences, and asked to provide comment to visiting consultants and donors on behalf of Solomon Islands NGOs.

Another aspect of DSE's situation that only gradually emerged was that several fundamental tasks, related to its proper establishment as an organisation were never fully completed. There are many possible reasons for this situation, some of which may have as much to do with the 'responsible authorities' as with those in the office. These unresolved issues all had the potential to further destabilise the organisation if they were not addressed.

## **The rebuilding process**

There was strong interest domestically and regionally to support the rebuilding of the organisation. Sometime around 2002-2003, New Zealand AID (NZ AID) conducted an assessment of key civil society organisations in Solomon Islands. This assessment concluded that DSE was one of a number of key organisations that would benefit from strengthening. Although NZ AID had previously withdrawn funding, despite this it indicated it was open to re-establishing a relationship if DSE could demonstrate that it had addressed its problems, had a level of capacity to operate, and mandate from the NGO sector.

A small amount of interim funds were initially channelled from NZ AID through the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO). These funds were to cover basic office costs and to conduct a more detailed assessment of DSE's finances. Around the same time ACFID/CDI instigated a 'Leadership and NGO Management' training project, funded by AusAID. This project was designed to build the capacity of individuals working in NGOs and CBOs. The project also included extensive consultation to discern whether efforts should be made to rebuild DSE, this allowed people to voice many of their concerns about the organisation. Despite all of the failings of DSE, people concluded that there was value in keeping the organisation. Their belief was that networking and coordination of NGO/civil society was important and whether it was DSE or another entity supporting this, it would still be the same people who needed to work together.

Once it was agreed to persist with DSE, a process of strategic planning for the organisation was undertaken as part of the leadership training project. This process resulted in a draft strategic plan that set out the role of DSE as being:

1. **Governance, Management & Administration:** To ensure DSE and its Executive Committee is an effective hub for the Solomon Island NGO network & a reliable source of support for NGOs & CBOs in the country
2. **Information & Communication:** To provide timely & relevant information to NGOs & their stakeholders
3. **Capacity Building:** To strengthen the capacity of Solomon Island NGO, church and community leaders to effectively lead and manage their organisations and/or communities
4. **Inter-Agency Cooperation & Networking:** To strengthen relations & improve cooperation between DSE, Solomon Island NGOs & their stakeholders

To assist with the rebuilding work and the implementation of the strategic plan a request was made to Australian Volunteers International (AVI) to place a volunteer to provide technical support. The technical assistance sought was with organisational and network development, and capacity building of NGOs. The primary focus was to be the strengthening governance within the organisation and between network members. It was in this capacity that I arrived to work with DSE in July 2004.

Upon my arrival, there were varying expectations of what I should or could do and offer. In some respects, there was a sense of waiting for the technical support to arrive and to fix things by 'building capacity'. There are numerous possible reasons for such an attitude, but most important was that the concept of capacity building was not well defined or understood despite the frequent use of the term. This situation is not new and many commentators have noted difficulties associated with capacity building approaches.<sup>5</sup> It was apparent that DSE had previously received substantial capacity building and advisory support. This raised the question as to what could be done differently that might make a lasting contribution. Given the state of DSE there needed to be a balance between simply fixing what had been, and reforming to address fundamental problems.

Originally it was envisaged that the role be advisory but as the situation evolved it was gradually expanded to include in-line responsibilities such as the day-to-day management of the Office. The renegotiation of the role occurred over a six to eight month period. While this arrangement was not desirable, it was the solution found for those specific circumstances. It reflected the organisational imperatives, the limited human resources available to the office, and the actual working relationships. Importantly, this change also provided me with greater legitimate access to the Board.

The work plans for the office were optimistic and did not account for the tenuous condition of the organisation. Ultimately the Board was faced with the dilemma of choosing between trying to meet external expectations and taking the time to ensure that there was a stable base to work from. Their choice was to focus on getting the foundations right. They recognised that without this, any efforts to provide services were bound to fail in the longer term. The analogy used to describe the situation was that, if DSE was a canoe, it had many holes and was nearly swamped. It had also lost its paddles and most of its crew. Before trying to

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<sup>5</sup> Sir Rabbie Namalin (2004:pg 43) *Governance Challenges for PNG & the Pacific Islands*. DWU Press, Madang, Papua New Guinea; Steven Ratura (2004: 91) *Governance Challenges for PNG & the Pacific Islands*. DWU Press, Madang, Papua New Guinea.

set off on the journey people wanted to travel, it was necessary to first take the canoe to shore, repair it, and get some new paddles and crew.

Taking what appeared to be a step backwards was a difficult decision for the Board. There were high expectations from members, SIG, and Donors that DSE needed to be 'up and running' as quickly as possible so that it could help coordinate the vastly increased development assistance entering Solomon Islands. Their choice required a willingness to examine past problems and to make decisions - no matter how difficult - to address these.

## **PART 2: Challenges to strengthening NGOs**

This part presents some of the key challenges for building capacity of NGOs in Solomon Islands. It is not a comprehensive analysis of challenges, and therefore does not present a framework that could be used for capacity building as such. These challenges have been grouped into three categories that can remind us of the need to think about capacity building as part of a layered development process to be analysed on number of levels: a) Practice - personal/interpersonal processes important for working with people; b) Difficulties in organisational and network development; and c) Broader issues relating to the strengthening of civil society strengthening.

### **Practice: personal & interpersonal processes**

This section draws upon the principles of community development principles for working effectively with people.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Relationships**

The idea that relationships are essential to a development process is not new. The importance is restated here because I observed that much of the 'development' activity in Solomon Islands is not relationship based. There is no one 'right' way to establish and maintain relationships but at the least it involves negotiating a place and obtaining permission as someone from 'outside' a community to be an actor in promoting change. It requires a willingness to stand alongside people as they choose the path they wish to follow. At the same time there is a dynamic tension in that there must be an openness to question practices that may be self serving. It is useful to remember that outsiders are not bound by the same constraints and so can play a different role, by asking questions that may be difficult for a local person to ask.

As an outsider, one must constantly remain aware of working in a cross-cultural environment. Most simply, this involves remembering that you are a guest and that the behaviour of each guest helps shapes how the next one will be received. It is important to accept that as an outsider one's understanding of a culture, politics, and social dynamics will always be limited. A good example of this is access to information. While information and knowledge may be forthcoming on some levels, there are likely to be other unseen dynamics at work. You may only learn of these if you stumble across them, or inadvertently cut across them. In such a situation, people may not directly question your action; a common response is to wait, knowing that things can return to the way they were once you have gone.

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<sup>6</sup> It is acknowledged that other disciplines also offer many insights into understanding the micro processes of working with people. Examples of relevant community development literature are: Beresford & Trevillion (1995) *Developing skills for community care: A collaborative approach*. Arena Ashgate. Publishing Ltd, ISBN 1-85742-236-8; Craig & Mayo (1995) *Community Empowerment: A reader in participation and development*. Zen Books, ISBN 1-85649-337-3; Ife (1997) *Community Development: Creating community alternatives - vision, analysis and practice*. Addison Wesley Longman Australia Pty Ltd; Kelly & Sewell (1996) *With Head Heart and Hand*. Boolarong Publications, Brisbane.

A sign that often indicates people are unhappy, or that something is troubling them, is when people 'go far away' or withdraw. This is a good cue to slow down, backtrack, and try to understand what is going on from a different perspective.

It is important to respect and try to build on previous efforts. There have been countless volunteers, consultants, and development workers who think that their plan is the one that will make a 'real' difference. As a visitor, it is important to check that your ideas of what should be done are relevant to local priorities. There is increasing wariness of what visitors offer, and their motives for doing so. It is easy to encourage people to make changes. However the consequences of challenging norms and power bases are borne by those taking a stand, while the visitor is free to leave when ready. Establishing positive relationships requires both a demonstration of capability (or expertise) and a commitment to supporting people through a change process. This sense of partnership is perhaps more important in the long term than whether a role is defined as inline or as an advisor.

### **Sharing skills and knowledge - enhancing individual capacity**

It is not always easy to identify gaps in our own skills. Besides being embarrassing or shameful, we may simply not know what we do not know. In Solomon Islands, it is not unusual for someone to have excellent skills in certain areas such as community practice, but have limited organisational experience or skills such as basic computer & IT literacy, written English, filing and information management, etc.... For a person in a senior NGO position, it can be confronting to acknowledge the need and take the time to improve their skills. This can result in a tendency to avoid certain types of work, and/or to get others to perform required tasks. Advisors can easily be utilised in this way.

This said, in my experience people appreciated the opportunity to learn skills, especially those that will help them in their everyday work. Given the importance of flexibility and repetition, a workplace-based training approach proved more effective than a one-off workshop format. With this strategy, it can be difficult to find people with the required expertise who can provide intensive ongoing support. It is also essential to make sure the basics are well covered before introducing more sophisticated tools/skills. It may be that people have undergone similar training in the past and the introduction of new terminology and concepts could serve to confuse rather than consolidate. It is also important to build on past learning to ensure that it is well understood and not merely copied/applied by rote. Perhaps the biggest challenge is fostering a workplace that is also positive learning environment. In line with theories of adult learning, the objective should be to encourage people to take responsibility for their own learning, so that they can identify the areas they would like to improve.

### **Building a commitment to change**

It is not uncommon to hear that the reason a particular task cannot be done, or an objective cannot be met, is due to a lack of capacity. There is a limited pool of people with the confidence, experience, and qualifications to take on leadership roles. A lot of effort is being given to developing leadership, but this takes time. While many younger people have the enthusiasm they need opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities

One of the challenges for emerging leaders is to have opportunities to take on more senior leadership roles. There is a well-recognised need in Honiara for generational change. While older leaders have made an invaluable contribution, others are now looking for the chance to play their part within NGOs and civil society. It may be that the civil conflict has led senior leaders to feel a need to stay on because of unfinished business. Finding ways to achieve a respectful

transition, that allows for the passing on of skills, knowledge, and responsibility is desirable. Unless elders can step away with some dignity, newer leaders will be less inclined to put themselves forward.

In nurturing new leaders care should be taken not to overwhelm them. The use of internships where people can gain experience without the burden of full responsibility is something that could be used more often. The potential for worker burn out is also high. There are pressures for talented people to take on numerous responsibilities. As well as the confusion of wearing multiple hats, the result can be that tasks are missed or not given the attention they require. It may be better to allow people to focus on doing a few things well.

After lengthy periods of training and resourcing there is however a point where the question must be asked whether someone is committed to what they are supposed to be doing. It is difficult to assess or demonstrate commitment from the outset; it is the actions, not the words that must tell the story. At the heart of this is the need for people to have enough confidence in what they are doing to take responsibility to see things through. It is also important to be mindful of the cultural disincentives to people showing initiative. This could be due to a fear of others being jealous, of being seen as different or trying to present themselves as better than others. In other circumstances, it is easier if somebody from outside can make a difficult decision, such as sacking an employee. This way the responsibility rests with someone not affected by social bonds. This may be an easier short-term option, but it can create reliance on external support.

Finally, it is important to remember that everything that an outsider does is under scrutiny. Often an advisor can be critical of their colleagues' behaviour without seeing the parallels with their own actions. Likewise it is also useful to remind people who are critical of their leaders that their actions may be the same, just on a smaller scale. Thus it is important to try to ensure that your actions and words are consistent and, in the renowned words of Mahatma Gandhi try 'to be the change you want to see'.

## **Organisational & network development challenges**

While NGOs are a relatively new concept to Solomon Islands, they have made a significant contribution to the development of the country and are accepted as an important part of civil society along with Church and other community groups. There has been a gradual evolution of NGOs since the arrival of International NGOs in the 1970s and the founding of home-grown organisations from the mid 1980's. More recently there has been increasing numbers of provincially and locally based organisations. The initial focus of NGOs was to work directly with communities though this has been expanded to include a more direct role in advocating for change in Government policy and practice.<sup>7</sup>

### **Type of organisation**

Typically an NGO is registered as a Charitable Organisation with the Registrar's Office of the Solomon Islands Government. Registration is not required unless an organisation wishes to own property, gain membership to organisation like DSE, or appear more credible to donors. Locally based organisations must fulfil the same requirements as a national organisation, however the process of registration (which must be done in Honiara) and the rules of association can be onerous for them. NGOs are an introduced concept to Solomon Islands and as such, they can act as a useful bridge between donors, government and communities. However more can be done to adapt these organisations so that they are more culturally appropriate.

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<sup>7</sup> From discussion with Dr John Roughan formerly of SIDT; Moore (2004) *Happy Isles in Crisis: the historical causes for a failing state in Solomon Islands, 1998-2004*. Asia Pacific Press, ISBN 0 7315 3709 2

Most importantly it should not be assumed that, as they currently stand, they provide the best model for organising at the local/village level.

While there are many organisational challenges facing NGOs, acknowledging this is not intended to give a negative picture but rather to provide focus for where improvements can be made. NGOs have many strengths, most important being the talent and dedication of people working in the sector. While the following challenges are those faced by DSE, there are undoubtedly some parallels for other NGOs.

### Realistic expectations of DSE's role

Many NGO members did not have a clear understanding of DSE as membership based organisation. Depending on the type of member, there were quite differing perspectives of what DSE should be doing. Even though DSE was down, there was an expectation that it continue to take responsibility for the coordination of development activities. This was despite other organisations being much better resourced and equipped. At times it felt like the failure of DSE was a convenient excuse for a lack of coordination and cooperation, without other organisations taking some responsibility for the situation. The reality is that the effectiveness of an agency like DSE is dependant on the willingness of its members to work together.

External stakeholders, such as government and donors also had similar expectations of DSE at that time. For example, within two weeks of my arriving at DSE, a staff member went to a conference in New Zealand. Within one month of this, another invitation was received to attend a two-day regional planning workshop in Samoa. Due to flight schedules this would have entailed the same worker being away for two weeks. For these events, the office did not have current information on the topics, nor a knowledge of which organisations were already working in the relevant areas.

It was regularly expected that the DSE office, as distinct from network members, would directly participate in all activities and readily have to-hand information and opinions on every sector NGOs covered. Rather than trying to be seen as the source of knowledge, effort was made to present the DSE office as a conduit through which to connect with the right people. To act as a conduit it was necessary to improve communication with, and between NGOs. It also required that opportunities and invitations were appropriately shared between members in a timely way. In addition the office had to stay focused on its core business of providing services to support NGOs. There are countless ideas of what should be done (often advocated by somebody outside the sector) but these must remain a secondary priority until DSE can deliver on the basic services that will aid coordination and has further regained the trust of NGOs.

### Improving governance

Like many institutions in Solomon Islands, NGOs experience a number of governance challenges. Here I outline a few that were particularly pertinent. A fundamental issue was helping the Board understand its role and supporting Board members to put this into practice. It is not uncommon for the NGO Boards to struggle to meet regularly and to hold proper Annual General Meetings each financial year. It is also difficult for Board members to be sufficiently informed so that they can set effective policy to guide the operations of the organisation. The quality of board governance is also affected by the small pool of people available to act as members on boards and management committees. This can result in one person sitting on several Boards at the same time. For such people it is difficult to find the time to be involved to the extent required, as well as fulfil

their own work commitments. The limited pool of people involved in governance also increases the potential for conflicts of interest. For example, a representative of organisation X may be a member of organisation Y's board. While a representative of organisation Y may be a member of organisation X's board. Both may prefer to take a hands-off approach to their board responsibilities lest the same scrutiny be applied to their own organisation.

A further challenge is that awareness alone is not sufficient to ensure that an organisation is well governed. In circumstances that require difficult decisions, it is often the cultural, social, and family relationship obligations that take precedence over organisational imperatives. These are important considerations, and it is essential for an outsider to appreciate that the consequences associated with breaking these norms are greater than any organisational consequences. In such situations it is not a matter of defining absolutes but finding a good balance on a case-by-case basis.

In terms of network governance, that is promoting more transparent and participatory planning and decision-making processes between NGOs, an important consideration is that the majority of these organisations are based in Honiara. It is difficult for provincially - or locally - based entities to participate in ongoing networking activities and to establish meaningful working relationships outside of their specific areas of interest because of time, resource, and communication constraints. In addition, it would be beneficial to try and institutionalise relationships and practices between organisations. Many of the working arrangements and cooperation between agencies are based upon individuals and their relationships. There is a danger that such partnerships may be lost when there is a change of key staff.

#### **To establish legitimacy and build membership**

All organisations need credibility. For DSE, regaining the trust of NGOs and increasing membership was essential to establish its legitimacy for the role envisaged in its draft strategic plan. Some of the more successful strategies used to achieve this were:

- To initiate more participatory approaches to planning and decision making between NGOs, including transparent and merit based selection of representatives for specific sectors in which NGOs were working; developing guidelines for NGO leaders intending to stand for election; and initiating a strategy to enhance communication between NGOs and with their development partners.
- Demonstrating tangible benefits to members through improved and timely services like information dissemination and training opportunities
- Working in collaboration with other networks that had similar interests and objectives. This collaboration tended to be small scale, and was aimed at establishing better relationships in anticipation that more formal agreements might be forthcoming in the future.
- Developing better domestic links to communities. To date this has been through the establishment of provincial focal points, though more can be done to draw upon NGOs and other networks so as to avoid duplication and potential competition.

#### **Strong organisational foundations**

Strengthening governance and implementation of a strategic plan requires a minimum level of resources, skills, and infrastructure. Thus in tandem with these more strategic processes, attention needed to be given to building a strong base to work from. This included:

- Renovation property and equipment and development of maintenance plans for these assets;
- Implementation of systems of planning, management, and reporting; and
- Investigation and resolution of problems such as debts and finalisation of key establishment tasks that had never been fully completed including registration as a charitable organisation and legal ownership of property. While the DSE continued to operate, these issues were liabilities that increased the organisation's vulnerability.

### Staffing/ Human resources

It is difficult to recruit suitably qualified and experienced personnel. In part this reflects the rapid increase in demand for local workers in the 'development industry'. While all organisations experience this problem, local NGOs struggle even more as they cannot match the pay, conditions, and opportunities offered by international NGOs, managing contractors, and Donors.

There generally is a high mobility of people moving between positions and organisations, or to undertake further education. In less than twelve months, there was a turnover of five staff members from a team of four in the DSE office. Two people went to work for a donor, another to a managing contractor, and one went to the private sector. The fifth person was not retained because project funds were expended. The high mobility of the labour force means that investment in individuals can result in losing them to a better paying organisation, thus benefiting the other organisation and undermining the capacity building efforts of small organisations. Another concern with the high mobility is when a person who has not performed well in their current position is able to take a position (often more senior) with a new employer before the consequences of their current performance is apparent. It is also the case that recruitment of personnel may be based on relationships and informal networks rather than on a merit based process to find the best person. Seeing situations like this occur reduces the incentive for others in the sector to maintain their own standards.

Another key human resource consideration is to be mindful of the pressures a staff member may be experiencing outside of their working life. There is often a high level of absence due to illness or family obligations, for others, coming to work may provide respite from troubles in their home life. In such an environment, concepts of productivity and performance evaluation seem quite foreign. However, the introduction of these types of processes can be less intimidating if they are framed as tools for identifying learning goals, and for building a case for why good performance should be rewarded.

Another challenge for DSE has been to ensure continued external technical support. Two years is a short time in a development process and the importance of sustained assistance is well recognised. Again, finding the right people for these roles is important, and of course these roles should be regularly reviewed so that they bring to the organisation the expertise that is required. It is also important to allow sufficient handover between people working in support roles. This reduces the drain on local staff in that they do not need to tell their story again, and gives a new person access to information they may not feel comfortable to otherwise ask for. The information is also more likely to be presented in a way that they are more culturally able to comprehend.

### Appropriate resourcing

A common observation is that NGOs can easily lose sight of their own development agenda, and chase donor funding objectives in order to remain financially viable. Having limited funds and legitimacy gave DSE more freedom to be creative and do

things differently - there was less to lose if things did not work out. There was also a pressing need, however, to secure enough funds to put the organisation on a stable footing. The challenge was to get the right resource 'fit'.

Once DSE had recovered to an extent, there was increased interest from donors to discuss possible funding. This interest was a sign that things were moving in the right direction, but it also distracted from the process of addressing key issues such as resolving debts, building legitimacy, and improving governance. There were also concerns about being overwhelmed by too much funding without having well established systems of management, or the human resources to deliver quality outcomes. Part of this concern was the Board's acute awareness of the implications that further financial mismanagement could have for the organisation. The decision was made to seek only enough funding to undertake its core work, and that extra funds would be sought once a level of capacity had been demonstrated. Even with this approach, it was difficult to decide how much money would be enough. Without an agreed and transparent NGO wage scale, and the rapid inflation of transport and related items, it is hard to know what are reasonable costs.

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### Progress with rebuilding

Despite all the challenges discussed above, much progress has been made in the rebuilding of DSE. The organisation is now on a stable base from which it can consolidate its gains and it seeks to fulfil its envisaged role envisaged. Some of the highlights include:

#### Governance

- More than 40+ financial members for the 2005/2006 financial year
- Strategic plan 2005-2007 adopted
- AGMs held in 2004 & 2005. New Board elected: This saw a smooth generational change in leadership. The new Board has support and trust of sector, a mix of local and INGOs represented, new & existing members, young & older members, gender balance, diverse provincial representation.
- Board highly involved in the rebuilding work - ownership & clear sense of what they want to do
- Generally increased trust and legitimacy in DSE, with recognition from Donors and SIG
- Completed registration with SIG as a Charitable organisation.

#### Management & administration

- Repaired and renovated DSE buildings & upgraded office equipment
- Secured the financial situation
  - Identified debts and negotiated repayment agreement - \$100 K + already repaid, using self generated income.
  - 3 year core funding agreement with NZAID + support AusAID (via CSP) & EU
  - Improved financial planning and control
- Implemented systems of planning, information management and reporting
- Human Resources: Clarified staff roles (developed PD's), and adopted merit based recruitment processes. Currently recruiting a new team. Envisaged that this will include 10 local positions, plus three volunteers to provide ongoing technical support.
- Organisational culture has moved to team-based approach to the work, where shared responsibility and initiative are encouraged.

### Programs/services

Programs and strategies designed to achieve strategic plan objectives

- **Capacity building:** completed ACFID/CDI Leadership & NGO management training project; established and strengthened provincial focal points. Project developed into an ongoing Program  
PIANGO/UNITECH GDP Not-for-profit management courses to be delivered in SI
- **Networking and cooperation:** communication strategy implemented; facilitated dialogue with RAMSI, promoted more participatory & transparent processes of decision making between NGOs
- **Information & research:** limited NGO/civil society mapping and profiling project (Honiara and national NGOs database). Plans for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> editions.

## Challenges to strengthening civil society

While this paper has focused on the experience of one NGO, it should be remembered that there are many other elements to civil society in Solomon Islands. It is also good to be mindful that NGOs are only a means to an end and that ideally their work should complement the efforts of others who share similar values and objectives. With increasing interest in the role civil society might play in nation building, there could be more thought given to what the strengthening of broader 'civil society' may entail. Here I outline some of the possible ways forward.

### **Better understand civil society**

There is an argument that while the state in Solomon Islands is weak, the society is strong.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that traditional methods of organising contribute more directly to people's well-being than do institutionalised systems of formal government. To some extent this is borne out by the experience of some NGOs who have observed that development projects are most effective when delivered within family and clan groups. This raises a question as to how - or if - this strength might be shaped into a voice that can be heard more coherently at the provincial and national levels. Even the more formally organised sections of civil society, like Churches and NGOs, find it difficult to be an effective conduit of community concerns and interests. This reflects the challenge of having or mechanisms of civic engagement that can bridge traditional approaches with the system of national government. Added to this is the diversity of traditional practices within the country, so that mechanisms and processes that suit one group may not fit another. Perhaps the fundamental question is how to bring decision-making closer to the people who are affected.

A further complication is that individuals and groups who wish to advocate causes at the national level may use terms such as 'civil society' and 'non-state actors' so as to strengthen the legitimacy of their claims. Care should be taken to ascertain how representative their views are. The application of external definitions of society can also cause confusion. At a local level, it is difficult to make such clear-cut distinctions of society. The line between government and non-government can be quite fluid and an individual may simultaneously be involved in government, education, the church, and NGOs. It is also difficult to make a clear distinction as to who is a donor. This distinction depends very much on one's perception. To a small NGO, a donor could be a foreign aid program, an international institution, or even an international NGO. For a village the same NGO

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<sup>8</sup> Turnbull (2002) *Solomon Islands: Blending Tradition Power and Modern Structures in the State*. 22 Public Admin. Dev. 191-201.

could also be viewed as donor in that it brings some benefit into their community (eg, funds, knowledge, demand for services and goods, or even entertainment).

### **Better quality and use of information**

There is a general lack of information with which to make informed decisions about the allocation of funding and the design of programs on offer. The Solomon Islands Government (SIG), donors, and NGOs, do not have ready access to a consolidated body of information about community priorities, other development agencies and their work, or the history of development activities in the same area. One reason for this is that data collected by one agency is typically not comparable with that of another. This makes it difficult to combine the information into a broader picture. This is made harder by what some might describe as a cultural reluctance to share the information they have with others who may have different or competing agendas.

### **Employment options**

For many people, NGOs and civil society groups present a good employment path. The motivation for working in the sector may be more about access to a secure path to professional development, than a vocation inspired by passion and beliefs. It should not be assumed that those working in this sector necessarily adhere to a higher moral standard than others. Governance is just as important here as it is for Government or the Donor community.

### **Realistic development expectations**

For a person living a village-based life, with out much exposure to other lifestyles, it is difficult to have clear understanding of what 'development' might entail. Very often they only see part of the picture. They might see the potential benefits of development, but not the undesired changes and the associated costs. Without this knowledge, it is difficult for them to make informed choices and to negotiate agreements that reflect their true interests. They must rely upon what others tell them and are therefore more vulnerable to being misled or manipulated.

More thought should be given to the pace at which change can occur. Greater exposure to global culture and a cash economy involves significant change. It is important in such a process that people are able to value the knowledge, skills, and assets they already have. They need to find ways to adapt the new opportunities so that they enhance their well-being, rather than fundamentally reshape their lives in the image of others. Too rapid a change has the potential that the costs will out weight the benefits. It may better to apply the maxim, that 'less is more' and focus on quality incremental outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

In many respects it might have been easier to let DSE go and start again with a new organisation. This certainly would have been the simpler option, but going through the process of rebuilding DSE provides an example of how problems can be addressed. While this work does not directly translate into 'development' benefits for the people of Solomon Islands, strengthening governance is part of the process through which people can establish ways of being and doing that help bridge different cultures. It is prudent to be circumspect with what has been achieved. Only time will tell whether what was done will last. There are many existing, as well as new challenges ahead. At this time DSE is struggling to recruit suitable staff to positions with the employment conditions it can offer. There has also been change in the Board composition, due to the resignation of some members who took up new employment outside the NGO sector. The reality for DSE is that it is only now at a point where it can truly build organisational capacity. Perhaps most

importantly people associated with the organisation are energised and see a way forward for themselves.

There is no denying these significant development challenges facing Solomon Islands, but these should not be overstated in comparison to those faced in other countries. As an 'outsider' it is challenging to fully appreciate the nuances of the issues facing Solomon Islands and to allow people the time and space to decide what path it is they wish to follow. It is easy to judge and blame, but it is more constructive to be aware of our own motivations, fallibilities, and to accept that no one has all the answers. Despite the fragile nature of organisations and institutions, if the work is based on genuine relationships and commitment, then there is much to be optimistic about.

*"To know the truth, you must give up your certainty"*

*anonymous*