

Brief Review of the Solomon Islands NHDR 2002: Building Unity

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, Consultant
For the NHDR Unit

The First National Human Development Report for Solomon Islands “Building a Nation”, was published by the Government of the Solomon Islands with technical support from UNDP and launched on the 7th of November 2002 in the capital, Honiara.

The NHDR is a policy document prepared for the Government and includes specific recommendations for human development policy making by various line ministries.

Overall Logic of the Report

The Report has a clear overall logic and is in three parts: Part I includes a theoretical chapter, laying out the main theoretical framework of human development, sustainable human development, poverty reduction, basic needs approaches, good governance, and holistic approaches to development. Chapter one also identifies the main threats to HD in the Solomon Islands: poverty, corruption, inappropriate education, erosion of subsistence sectors and social safety nets, male dominance and high population growth rates. Chapter 2 gives a description of the history and population of the Islands, and chapter 3 gives an overview of the four pillars of HD: a long and healthy life, knowledge, income and participation, with the latter receiving only brief attention. Part two II dwells deeper into these four elements, with each receiving a chapter of analysis of *why* they are important, *what policies* are enacted in the country, what have been the *trends*, and what additional *policy measures* are needed. These are followed by a chapter discussing economic management. Part III introduces a detailed medium term Agenda for Human Development in the 21st Century, including challenges, strategies, planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring.

The theme and Main Messages:

The Report argues that national unity and community empowerment depends on an expansion of development choices. The country needs to make progress in restoring social services, narrowing political divisions and building economic infrastructure for better livelihoods.

The theme chosen for the Report, Building a Nation, seems appropriate for a country emerging from years of social instability and ethnic conflict. Although the impact of this conflict on such sectors as health, economic planning and education are touched upon very briefly, the Report could have benefited from a more thorough analysis of the root causes of instability. The reader of this NHDR does not walk away with an understanding of what the nature of the conflict was and how it can be avoided. In fact, the multi-ethnicity of the society is downplayed throughout the Report. Statistics and analysis provide a good disaggregation of gender and provincial gaps, but not by ethnic group. Social unrest in the Guadalcanal Province has had an impact both on the province as well as on the national economy and the budget, has led to migration, loss of 8,000 jobs, public infrastructure breakdown, interruption of social service delivery etc. Political stability and restoration of services, law and order and faith in the system are immediate tasks of the Solomon Islands. Future Reports may want to further explore the

relationship between conflict and human development, which is unfortunately scantily developed in this NHDR.

Another dividing fault line which deserves further attention is the traditional versus modern systems of governance. On the one hand, Solomon Islanders rely on time tested and effective community modes of collectivism, extended families and clan cultures. Chapter 1 argues that the unique cultural values need to be maintained and promoted, and Chapter 2 provides a very interesting description of the kinship system based on land ownership, self-sufficiency, barter systems and traditional conflict resolution through consensus among tribes, clans and families. Chapter 3 juxtaposes the traditional with the modern system of governance (the Constitution, the legislative, executive etc), with a thorough evaluation of the implementation of this modern system and its shortcomings, and a number of recommendations for “good governance”: in terms of inclusive governance, rule of law, transparency of decision making and accountability. The clash of culture with the new systems of governance have led the Solomon Islanders to change governments 10 times in 23 years of independence and demonstrate little confidence in national and local governments. The NHDR would have been of unique interest if the relationship and interactions between these two systems of traditional and modern systems of governance had been analyzed and evaluated further. Where are the areas of compromise? How can these two systems co-exist? What areas of potential conflict or lessons are learned?

Added to this challenge is the impact of globalization in the country, which the NHDR does not adequately address, but may want to analyze in future reports.

Context: Analysis of Human Development

Chapter one argues for the relevance of HD to the context of Solomon Islands: A development agenda based on people’s capabilities and good economic management (based on developing export industries, access to markets, labor intensive growth, technology and education). Poverty eradication is discussed in terms of “relative” and not absolute poverty, and a basic needs approaches, argues the Report, needs to be adopted through minimum requirements of a family for consumption and essential services for the poor. A multi-dimensional approach to development, argues the Report, calls for the government to provide basic social services for the most vulnerable. The Report also calls for enhancing the role of provincial governments, the private sector, churches and NGOs in providing social services.

A chapter on health gives a very thorough analysis of trends in communicable and non-communicable diseases, as well as other threats to health including disability, nutrition, family planning, child abuse and domestic violence. Selected surveys are discussed (but not properly attributed), programmes are evaluated, and shortcomings identified. The chapter also discusses human resources, infrastructure, private and non-governmental services and expenditures. A chapter on Education mentions that education is not compulsory, that there has been a substantial increase in education enrollment at the primary and secondary levels, and that tertiary education is provided by the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education, supplemented by an overseas scholarship scheme. Operational budgetary allocation is disproportionately allocated towards higher levels of education at the expense of the lower levels. Formal education suffers from lack of quality, irrelevance of curricula, and is largely complemented by non-formal education through community-based groups, vocational training, etc. Ironically, the operational.

Both chapters argue for improving access to services, and for curbing government expenditures, deemed unsustainable, too high and inefficient, with services needing to be shared with the private sector and non-Government organizations. The HD Agenda proposed in the NHDR, however, prescribes higher percentage rates of government expenditure for these sectors.

Chapter 8 discusses economic management, and points to, among other things, the challenge of aid dependency, high levels of government expenditures, worsening balance between revenues and expenditures, weak private sector and ineffective and inefficient public services. The chapter provides forecasting by the Central Bank, and concludes with prescriptions of structural reform: Macro-economic stability, public sector reform, political and government system reforms, basic trade skills, private sector reform, banking system reforms, etc.

With the challenge of avoiding crisis and instability, a development agenda for the Solomon Islands may need to focus more on poverty eradication and equitable distribution in addition to efficiency of the budget and service delivery, with which the Report is primarily concerned. With a lack of equitable distribution of any growth strategies, and without proper participation in decision making and planning, the dangers of marginalization loom in the horizon. This would have required more emphasis on a long term vision of the Solomon Islands, based on a society where all ethnic groups and provinces, as well as men and women from rural and urban areas, benefit from the government restructuring proposed in the Report, with the more immediate goals of stabilization of the budget, restructuring of the financial sector, infrastructure building and enforcement of law and order.

The major contribution of the Report are the development options that it lays out in the final chapter, making it an appropriate policy oriented document, both analytical and prescriptive. The HD Agenda, which was derived through brainstorming with policy makers and NGOs, is very detailed, with specific goals set in different sectors, and implementation mechanisms laid out. Specific prescriptions are given to various line ministries to devise their medium-term strategies and their work programmes, and recommendations include cutting down the number of ministries to ten with a hub of development planning under one central ministry of Economic Development, and budgeting responsibilities of the Ministry of Finance. What is however unclear is the relationship between this proposed agenda and the Government's Medium Term Development Strategy for 2002-2004.

Although specific sectoral recommendations are welcome, the NHDR could have focused at the same time on what makes a true Human Development Agenda: A long term vision that calls for inter-sectoral coordination, participatory planning by all stake-holders, and a development agenda which is rights-based, rather than only based on the basic needs approach. In this sense, a HD Agenda for the 21st Century could have focused further on the goals of equity and growth, through the means of an equitable regional development, and inclusion of the contribution and needs of different groups of people. The issue of provincial development and rural development, as well as equitable distribution of development opportunities, and the contribution of people to this Agenda are under-emphasized in the NHDR.

Two other elements may be missing for the HD Agenda: 1) the specific role of the NGOs as well as that of donors and international organizations working in the Solomon

Islands, and 2) a discussion on what can impede the success of this Agenda, a cost-benefit analysis of the chances of success and failure.

Process of Preparation:

The Report takes pride in being written by the Solomon Islanders themselves, which included a Core Team led by Donald Kudu, a National Steering Committee as well as comments from a large number of readers. The process of preparation is very well outlined in the Acknowledgements, which describes the a) background papers, b) provincial workshops, c) student essays, d) submissions by government officials at the national and regional levels and NGOs and e) a general brainstorming to derive the policy recommendations and priorities outlined in the final chapter. A notable omission is the role of other UN or International Organizations working in the Solomon Islands, and the institutional affiliation of the members of the three teams (core team, Steering Committee, and Readers) in order to point out the inter-disciplinary and broad-base inclusion of constituencies for the Report. The Report is exemplary in outlining the process of preparation in its introduction.

Presentation:

The NHDR, edited and laid out in Queensland, Australia, is a prime example of a professional production. It begins with a map of the Solomon Islands, a Foreword by the Ministry of Planning and Human Resources and one by the UNDP Resident Representative in the country. It is a brief and concise report of 80 pages, divided in two parts and 8 logical chapters. The Report has an excellent technical note and glossary of terms as well as a long list of references. It also includes well presented and properly sourced figures and tables, boxes on specific programmes, and a number of cartoons and photographs, making it attractive and readable.

The Report is complemented with a CD rom, which includes background papers and the winning essays from a Student Competition on the environment, rebuilding society and on good governance. The Report, the background papers, student essays, statistics and other information on the workshops at the provincial level are presented in a well-organized website, <http://www.peoplefirst.net.sb/SIHDR/default.asp>

Data

The data presented in the Report is mostly from a 1999 census as well as selected surveys of the 1990s, which are not always properly attributed. No alternative data is presented from international sources. For a first NHDR, the Solomon Islands Report team has carried out an exemplary attempt to calculate the Human Development Indices. The HDI is calculated using 1999 estimates of GDP as PPP and again using nominal GDP, by province. The HDI is presented in the Annex tables, but not discussed in the main text. An Alternative HDI is calculated by province, substituting income with access to economic assets (average of % in paid employment and % economically active) and better living conditions (average of % with access to safe water, modern toilet facilities, electricity and working radio). The HDI for the Solomon Islands is also compared with those of other Pacific Islands nations but not other countries. The HPI and GDI are calculated by province, based on data from the 1999 Population and Housing Census. The indices are disaggregated by gender and provinces, but not by ethnic group, which is a pity, since they could shed some light on the sources of instability in the country.