

**Sowing the seeds of conflict: Britain's development legacy to independent
Solomon Islands**

Frederick Isom Rohorua

Doctoral Student

Te Aka Whanaketanga (*Development Studies*)

Te Pua Wānanga ki te Ao (*The School of Māori and Pacific Development*)

Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato (*University of Waikato*)

Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand

[fir3@waikato.ac.nz]

Abstract

It is argued here that independent Solomon Islands was poorly prepared for the development tasks that lay ahead. That argument is based on the nature of the last two development plans produced for the British Solomon Islands Protectorate before the departure of the British. The failure of the British to take development planning seriously left the newly independent country with a range of problems that even very experienced politicians and administrators would have found extremely difficult to address adequately. As there can be little doubt that the later outbreak of ethnic tension related, in part at least, to the perception that development activities had had little effect on the lives of Solomon Islanders (particularly rural Solomon Islanders), it follows that responsibility rests not only with Solomon Islanders themselves, but also with the British.

Introduction

In a general sense, national development policy and planning is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon (Todaro, 2000) which is conceived of in terms of progress, as a means-to-an-end – part of that wider understanding of societal change that involves technical and bureaucratic processes of social engineering (Bendix, 1962; Weber, 1976). This conception is underpinned by European/ Western social thought as inherited from the Enlightenment, a critical aspect of which is its theoretical conception as the manifestation of Reason. National development policy and planning therefore encapsulates the historical experience of the Occident (as opposed to that of the Orient). It is an expression of that confidence in human rationality that led Karl Marx (1912, 1950, 1964, 1970) to object that philosophers have merely interpreted social reality, the real challenge and imperative being to change it, the implication being that it can be changed for the better. In this sense, national development policy and planning in the Solomon Islands can be seen as a bureaucratic process with important political dimensions.

Development planning in the South Pacific

The South Pacific Islands region has a very particular economic and geographical nature. It is made up of small and scattered tropical islands which are characterised by highly open mixed economies, largely involving the production of primary commodities. The private sector, conceived of as the engine of economic growth, is generally treated as being 'sacred', the result being that governments generally plan only for the public sector, any intervention in the private sector being largely restricted to the indication of priority areas and the offering of investment incentives in line with national development policy objectives. There is, in addition, a pragmatic awareness that the particular characteristics of the region are such that development

plans can be seen as broad guidelines to assist in a movement towards development and modernisation rather than as “rigid blueprints for modernization” (Chand, 1984, p. 764). Chand (1984, p. 765) has argued that there are three different, but not entirely dissimilar, approaches to national development planning in the South Pacific Islands, all of which are underpinned by the rationale of economic growth. Most countries begin with a “capital development budget” approach; some adopt an “integrated public investment programme” approach; others adopt a “comprehensive planning” approach, generally involving complex mathematical models and the establishment of “a set of clear objectives and relatively precise targets” for from three to five years, and allocating resources in line with specific targets which are generally determined by the government of the day. According to Chand, most countries in the South Pacific, apart from the Solomon Islands, had adopted a comprehensive planning approach by the early 1980s. The fact that the Solomon Islands was an exception to this suggests that political factors may have been more significant than pragmatic ones.

Development planning: British Solomon Islands Protectorate

As in the case of Fiji, the Solomon Islands, as a former British colony or protectorate, was subject to “the introduction by the United Kingdom of the Commonwealth Development and Welfare Grant Scheme under which British colonies were required to submit development plans in order to qualify for financial aid” (Government of Fiji, Fiji’s Sixth Development Plan, 1971-75, Suva, 1970). Thus, the initial move towards development planning was a colonial government initiative.

Before the country gained political independence (1978), the British produced at least six development plans in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. The last two, dated 1968 – 70 (*DPS 5*) and 1971 – 73 (*DPS 6*), indicate a three yearly planning cycle. The overall objective of these development plans is indicated at the beginning of *DPS 5* (p. 1):

2. The objective of the Fifth Development Plan remains as for the Third and Fourth Development Plans:-

“To develop the national and human resources of the Protectorate with the object of strengthening the economy to enable the standards of living in all sectors of the community to be raised.”

Thus, development planning was conceived of as a government responsibility, one that involved ensuring that the country’s human and natural resources were developed in such a way as to help build up the economy in order to raise the standard of living of the islanders. What this brief statement reveals is that the colonial government had definite views about (a) the need for development and (b) the purpose of that development – to raise the standard of living. Inevitably, this conception of development was based on British experience and had a clear political dimension.

The *Fifth Development Plan* is a clear example of a ‘capital development budget’ approach. In retrospect, such an approach to development planning can be seen as a consequence of the need to rebuild the economy of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate following World War II which ended in 1945. Indeed, a document produced in June 1965 – *The Development of the Economy of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate* – clearly indicates the development planning philosophy of the

times. It incorporates a number of conclusions, including two “particularly necessary” things for the “future economic development of the Solomon Islands”: “greater knowledge of the territory’s potentialities” and a “comprehensive view of its economic structure” (p. 35).

Before reaching those conclusions, the authors of *DPS 5* note that the “economic structure of the British Solomon Islands is determined . . . by its geographical layout” which was seen as having critical economic implications for development planning (p.1):

From an economic point of view . . . the group consists of a large number of separate units of production, most of which are separated by long over water distances; and moreover, while so far as their external trade is concerned the relative importance of the islands varies considerably (and not necessarily in accordance with the size of their populations) no one of them has a dominating position compared with the others.

What appears to have been evident to the authors of *DPS 5* was that this plantation-based economy was predisposed to uneven development: only those islands deemed suitable for coconut plantations would have their own unit of production. Contextual realities of this kind were to have a considerable impact on development thinking at the time of political independence.

The June 1965 Report records the principle exports from the British Solomon Islands Protectorate for the period 1958-1964. Although copra was the major export, there were other export commodities (such as trochus shells, timber and cocoa) whose volume was considered insufficient to justify quantification (p. 3):

Principle exports – 1958-1964		<u>'58</u>	<u>'59</u>	<u>'60</u>	<u>'61</u>	<u>'62</u>	<u>'63</u>	<u>'64</u>
Copra	%	95.7	90.1	87.2	88.8	91.5	91.5	88.3
Others- Trochus shell								

What the above table clearly demonstrates is that the economy of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate was essentially a plantation economy based on a single export commodity, copra. It is therefore not surprising that the colony had to rely heavily on foreign aid in order to finance its development plans. Nor is it surprising that multinational companies took the opportunity to invest in Solomon Islands plantations.

The colonial government hoped to address the issue of lack of economic diversity. Therefore, one of the ‘particularly necessary’ things the report highlighted was the need for “greater knowledge of the territory’s potentialities” in relation to soil characteristics and the possibility of growing crops that would be suitable for export. The second ‘particularly necessary’ thing was gaining a “comprehensive view of [the] economic structure [of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate]”, with particular emphasis on the problems associated with the scattered nature of the islands and the difficulties of communicating and transporting goods both within and beyond the

islands (p. 35). These difficulties were compounded by disparities among the different islands in terms of population density and in terms of “their degree of participation in an exchange [capitalist/market] economy” (p. 35).

The Solomon Islands became a British protectorate in 1895. The fact that the British clearly had little idea of the development potentialities of that protectorate in 1965 (seventy years later) indicates an astonishing degree of complacency and neglect. In fact, following the Second World War, especially during the late 1940s and 1950s, active local protest movements against the colonial administration emerged in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. British attempts at development planning and administrative and political reform should be seen in this context. To some extent at least, they represented little more than an attempt to appease Solomon Islanders. In such a context, the conclusion that Britain did not prepare the Solomon Islands adequately for political independence seems unavoidable. In fact, British interest in its Pacific Islands territories appears to have been focused largely on Fiji. The Western Pacific Colonial office was located in Suva, the capital of Fiji, and this office had administrative oversight not only over the Solomon Island Protectorate, but also over other territories such as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, now two separate independent nations, Kiribati and Tuvalu respectively.

The type of development planning employed by the British can be described as involving a ‘capital development project’ approach. The *DPS5* development budget (p. 1) provides an illustration of this:

3. The total funds available to finance the Plan amount to \$7, 924,900 derived from the following sources:-

	\$
Allocation of Colonial Development and Welfare Funds notified by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs	4, 910, 300
Other Funds controlled by the Minister of Overseas Department To finance research	597, 900
Protectorate Special Funds (Japanese Assets and Trading Corporation Realisation)	189, 000
Contribution from Protectorate Budget	352, 100
Australian South Pacific Technical Assistance Programme	77, 100
Bank Loans	1, 610, 000
United Nations Development Programme	25, 000
World Health Organization/United Nations Children Fund	147, 500
United Kingdom Technical Assistance	4, 000
Oxford famine Relief	<u>17, 000</u>
Total Funds Available	7, 929, 900
Add for planning purposes only 10% of Commonwealth Development and Welfare allocation	<u>491, 000</u>
Total used for planning purposes:	<u>\$8, 420, 900</u>

More than half of the budget was derived from Colonial Development and Welfare Funds (\$4,910,300), the remainder coming largely from bank loans which contributed one and half million dollars (\$1,610,000). Contributions from the Protectorate's own budget are less than a quarter of a million dollars (\$352,100). This illustrates the high level of dependency of the Protectorate on external funding and foreign aid. It also clearly demonstrates that economic development in the Protectorate had been insufficient to generate the required funds. This state of affairs had not improved significantly by the time the *DPS6* was released (1 June 1971). In this context, it is important to bear in mind that prior to World War II, much of the development activity in the islands (apart from that conducted by multinationals and individual planters and traders) was conducted by missionaries and the Christian churches. These activities also centred on plantations, but also and perhaps more significantly, involved efforts to strengthen communication and transport and included the establishment of training institutions, schools, clinics and hospitals. In fact, only one secondary school was ever built in the Solomons by the British government.¹

A careful reading of *DPS5* and *DPS6* clearly illustrates the fact that, when it did eventually decide to become more active in the protectorate, the British colonial government controlled the whole national development process. Thus, for example, *DPS5* refers to three important changes in relation to previous development plans. One of these was that Colonial Development and Welfare funds could now be applied only to capital projects (rather than to both recurrent and capital projects). This meant that recurrent projects were to be funded from sources other than the Colonial and Welfare funds. This decision was reflected in the following principles (*Fifth Development Plan 1968-1970*, p. 2):

8. The following principles have been observed in selecting projects for inclusion in the Plan:-

- (1) certain projects which were undertaken during the Fourth Plan period and which have not yet been completed have naturally had to take first priority in the Fifth Plan;
- (2) in deciding what new projects should be included consideration has been given to the requirements of agreed policy as expressed in White Papers agreed by the Legislative Council and as modified by the capacity of the Departments of Government to implement such projects and by the aid ceilings imposed for development expenditure in 1968, and likely to be imposed for 1969.

The underlying rationale appears to have been the avoidance of waste. Prudence and sound management appear to have been the order of the day. From Britain's point of view, this was perfectly reasonable at a time when Britain itself was also rebuilding after the ravages of World War II. However, in imposing such restrictions, the government was exercising its sole sovereign authority in such a way as to limit the development of the protectorate.

The second change to which reference is made in *DPS5* is the decision to group projects into six categories (rather than into four categories as was previously the case) (*Fifth Development Plan 1968-1970*, p. 3):

10. The breakdown of the Plan by classification of major projects is:-

	\$	%
(1) Administration and Organization	356, 000	4.31
(2) Physical survey and Census	170, 000	2.06
(3) Communications	2, 116, 000	25.62
(4) Natural Resources	2, 328, 300	28.19
(5) Social	3, 209, 800	38.96
(6) Miscellaneous	<u>79, 500</u>	<u>0.96</u>
Total Committed	8, 259, 600	100
(7) Uncommitted Colonial Development and Welfare allocation as described in para. 8 (4)	<u>161, 300</u>	
	<u>8, 420, 900</u>	

It is clear from the breakdown of actual costs and percentages for the various projects that more was to be spent on “economic and communications schemes” than had previously been the case, with less being spent on “education and medical projects” (i.e., social services projects) (p. 2). A target figure of \$161,300 remained uncommitted in order to allow for (a) a degree of flexibility should preliminary estimates prove to be too low; (b) the inevitable carry over from year to year (without upsetting too seriously the balance of new projects planned for the succeeding year); (c) the inclusion of some small new projects (p. 2). Such a small exigency fund suggests a high level of confidence in the planning process, a high level of confidence that seems difficult to justify in the light of actual achievements.

The third change referred to in *DPS5* was the intention to cap the actual rate of expenditure to an annual ceiling approved by the British Government (as opposed to controlling the expenditure on schemes over the period of the plan as a whole) (p. 2):

(3) in the years 1964 to 1966 under spending on Colonial Development and Welfare account has been as much as 40% of expenditure. It has accordingly been judged prudent to plan for expenditure on this account 10% in excess of known allocations for the years 1968/1969 and 1969/1970. Actual expenditure will be controlled strictly in accordance with the annual estimated provision as approved by the Legislative Council . . .

The three changes to which reference has been made (the limitation of Colonial Development and Welfare funds to capital projects; the percentage reduction in spending on education and medical projects; annual project funding capping) were, no doubt, from the British government’s perspective, simply pragmatic measures designed to avoid wastage and to ensure the success of the plans. However, they did not represent any growth in understanding of the real needs and interests of the people of the islands. This is particularly true in the case of the percentage reduction in spending on education and medical projects. Furthermore, *DPS5* (p. 3) introduced some significant caveats, including a surprisingly direct statement that the plan was not based on any professional economic appraisal, and a decision to include neither private sector projects nor projects requiring more than a two year implementation period:

11. The Plan does no more than set out projects in the public sector which it is intended should be implemented in the two year period 1968 – 1970. It does

not embrace projects in the private sector and is based on no professional economic appraisal, nor are national income statistics available from which a projection can be made of the effects of the developments planned. Nevertheless, it is considered that the individual schemes reflect a proper sense of priorities and a balanced approach to the development of the protectorate as a whole.

In other words, the British government was not prepared to conduct the type of research that is necessary for effective development planning. Its so-called 'proper sense of priorities' and 'balanced approach' was based on nothing more than assumption. It had nothing to say about the real needs of the islanders, nothing to say about why the projects identified were considered important or what benefits were expected as a result of their implementation. At best, this approach could be described as blind optimism on the part of the British administration; at worst, as culpable neglect of its responsibilities. There appears to have been no sense of accountability for the effects of this type of inadequate planning activity.

Needless to say, the same sense of 'blind optimism' evident in *DPS5* is also evident in *DPS6*. It is stated in the Introduction to *DPS6* that the plan "sets the pace for major transformation of the economy of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate" (*Sixth Development Plan 1971-1973*, p. 4). It is envisaged, in particular, that during the 1970s there would be "increased participation in and responsibility for policy formulation by the Protectorate's own citizens, investment in major new projects in agriculture, forestry and mining and the achievement of an educational system designed to produce the manpower needed to sustain and expand the economy as well as attain a high degree of localization of posts presently held by expatriates" (p.4). Even so, although the continuing substantial dependence of the economy on the public sector is noted, it is not addressed. Furthermore, the document itself again refers (as in the case of *DPS5*) to the lack of statistical information. Even basic information about the country's economy is absent. Indeed, there is a complete absence of any genuine policy and planning framework (p. 7). Nevertheless, the planners reported that the plan reflected "honestly" and accurately, the "circumstances of the Protectorate" (p. 4). In view of all of this, the stated confidence in the future can be seen to have been nothing more than empty rhetoric. After all, constitutional changes, involving planning for self-government, were already well underway. The British government would not itself have to deal directly with the consequences of its failure to take development planning in the Solomons seriously. It could point to its optimistic forecasts prior to independence and blame the Solomon Islanders themselves if these forecasts were not achieved. After all, independent Solomon Islands would have the advantage of being able to draw on the services of the *Statistical Office* (set up in 1970) and the permanent *Planning Unit* (set up in 1971) (p. 7).

The British, without any apparent sense of embarrassment or paradox, announced in their planning document (*DPS6*, p. 5) that planning was, in fact, not possible in most sectors:

6. It has not been possible to make specific investment projections for the private sector, and local government is still at a rudimentary stage and is in no position to engage in planning.

Failing entirely to address one aspect of this problem (planning for private sector development), they went on to note (p. 5) that:

It is intended during the plan period to upgrade local government so that local councils can play an effective role in the preparation and implementation of the Seventh Development Plan.

Underlying this type of statement is the clear message that the British could not themselves be expected to take any responsibility for past, present or future planning deficiencies. So far as past and present planning deficiencies are concerned, it is important to stress that the British Solomon Islands Protectorate had, at the time of *DPS6*, been under British control/ protection for over half a century. So far as future planning deficiencies are concerned, it is important to note that the mere establishment of a Statistical Office and a permanent Planning Unit, together with the (unspecified) upgrading of local councils, could hardly be expected to be sufficient remedy for many decades of inadequate and incompetent planning efforts.

The frenetic development activity by the British in relation to the Solomons after World War II was more apparent than real. The agitation of the islanders made development activity necessary; the economic situation faced by Britain itself (in recovering from World War II) created difficulties in relation to development activity beyond its own shores. Thus, it is observed in *DPS6* that the “overall objective of the Sixth Development Plan is to lay the basis for substantially reduced external dependence in this [1970s] decade, a pre-requisite for effective self-government” (*Sixth Development Plan 1971-1973*, p. 5). The hasty departure of the British from the Solomon Islands may have been due, in part, to an awareness of the fact that they had failed to deal adequately with development issues.

The British approach to development planning in the Solomon Islands was a centralised one. The efforts of local people were conducted in the context of a policy framework established by the Colonial Office in London. Their task was simply to design development plans that reflected the political and ideological thinking of the British government of the day. Within the Protectorate itself, development planning was also a highly centralised exercise involving bureaucratic processes. All of this centralised planning took place in the absence of any real understanding of the economy and without recourse to statistical information. So far as the British were concerned, the process was directed largely by political expediency. Thus, development planning in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate can be described as a bureaucratic process that was largely politically motivated.

Conclusion

In hindsight, it is clear that the task that successive Solomon Islands leaders have had to tackle since independence in attempting to encourage the economic development of indigenous Solomon Islanders was an extremely difficult one. In addition, the level of difficulty was not fully appreciated at the time of independence. Early optimism was initially replaced by caution, and that caution has, in turn, been replaced by cynicism. That cynicism no doubt played a role in the outbreak of ethnic conflict in December 1998. There can be little doubt that the failure of Solomon Islanders themselves to address issues of development adequately was an important factor. It needs to be said, however, that, so far as development planning is concerned, the situation left to

them by the British contributed in no small measure to the problems the country has had to face subsequently.

Endnotes

1. This was KGVI which was initially built at Auki in Malaita, but later relocated to Honiara (which became the capital after the original capital, Tulagi, was completely destroyed in World War II).

References

- Bendix, R. (1962). *Max Weber: An intellectual portrait*. London: Heinemann.
- British Solomon Islands Protectorate. (June 1971). *Sixth Development Plan 1971-1973*. Honiara: The Secretariat.
- Chand, G. (1984) Development planning systems in the South Pacific region. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, July-September, 30 (3), 463-788.
- Economist's Branch. Colonial Office. (June 1965). *The Development of the Economy of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate* (Photocopy transcript). Fiji: Pacific Collection, USP Library, Suva, Fiji.
- Fiji Ministry of Finance. Central Planning Office. (1970). *Sixth Development Plan, 1971-75*. Suva: Central Planning Office.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (Eds.). (1912). *Capital: A critical analysis of capitalist production* (14th. ed.) (S. Moore & E. Aveling, Trans.). London: William Glaiser.
- Marx, K. (1950). *The poverty of philosophy*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Pub. House.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (Eds.). (1964). *The Communist manifesto* (P. M. Sweezy, Trans.). New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Marx, K., & O'Malley, J. J. (Eds.). (1970). *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of right'* (A. Jolin & J. O'Malley Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Todaro, M.P. (2000) *Economic development* (7th Edition). Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Weber, M. (1976). *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (2nd ed.) (T. Parsons Trans.). London: Allen & Unwin.
- Western Pacific High Commission. British Solomon Islands Protectorate. (May 1968). *Fifth Development Plan 1968-1970* (Legislative Council Paper No.41). Honiara: BSIP.