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**Education in a post-conflict context: pathways to participatory
school governance in Solomon Islands**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the pathways to greater participatory approach in school governance as an element of development and post-conflict reconstruction. Although participation in school governance is meant to produce multiple benefits for school and society, it may not be achieved without establishing the tenets for reconciliation and peace. Therefore, the article begins by examining the pathways to establishing reconciliation and peace which is important to any post-conflict reconstruction initiative. Secondly, so much reliance on participatory governance in the absence of accountability may aggravate rather than diminish the social divisions that are particularly dangerous in post-conflict reconstruction. Hence, it is crucially inseparable to integrate teaching and learning-based accountability in post-conflict governance of schools. The paper proposes that as a development and post-conflict reconstruction tool, school governance should be premised on broader participation, including the excluded.

Keywords: school governance, Solomon Islands, education, post-conflict reconstruction

Introduction

Promoting 'participatory governance' in conflict contexts is a new orthodoxy among governments and international organizations. This phrase is becoming a global buzzword in international development work, and noticeably borders on the 'poverty alleviation' and 'human capital' themes (Botchway, 2000; Cornwall, 2003; Ackerman; 2003). This jargon has emerged recently in programmes that promote international assistance for countries or regions at war or in conflict, thus establishing itself in the new post-conflict paradigm. In post-conflict contexts, the increased role of participation is evident from the greater involvement of parent-teacher associations, parent-school councils, and other varieties of community-based school management organizations. The belief that small civic associations are key ingredients for strengthening civil society and enhancing democracy provides persuasive theoretical support for post-conflict reconstructions. This paper focuses on the participatory approach in school governance which has become part of the formula to achieve both traditional development goals and social reconstruction after the ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands.

The terms 'conflict context' and 'post-conflict context' are used in this paper with particular reference to the Solomon Islands. The country went through a period of turmoil from 1998-2003. The post-conflict era began in 2004 and continues until

today as reconstruction programmes are still being implemented in all the sectors of the country. Using the Solomon Islands crisis and its post contexts, this paper aims to explore the pathways to greater participatory approach in school governance as an important element in the country's reconstruction.

As a background to the exploration of greater participation in school governance, the discussion begins with an overview of historical and developmental trends of school governance in the Solomon Islands. These trends are further examined in relation to school governance today as they are applied in theory and practice. The essence of participatory school governance as it is being initiated in the Solomon Islands post-conflict context is discussed. The discussion addresses four key issues: establishing reconciliation and peace through school governance mechanisms; integrating teaching and learning-based accountability; broader participatory school governance; and including the excluded.

Solomon Islands school governance: historical and development trends

In Solomon Islands, there are well established ways by which communities initiated their young people into the accepted values, skills, knowledge and attitudes of society before the introduction of formal schooling. Education in this period was founded on traditional methods. The methods of teaching used were observation and participation in daily community activities. Learning began by imitating until such time as the skills taught were mastered. All the activities were undertaken in the home, village and in the community.

Formal schooling was introduced in the country by early Christian missionaries with the purpose of evangelising the islanders into the Christian faith. Islanders were taught how to read the Scriptures and follow what the missionaries regarded as acceptable Christian conduct. The curriculum also included aspects of agriculture, carpentry, health, reading, writing and arithmetic, with the local vernaculars as the medium of instruction (Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development 2005).

Following the arrival of missionaries, Solomon Islands was then colonized by Britain and was declared the Solomon Islands British Protectorate. As part of the colonization process, the colonial government began to establish schools and stressed academic education with English as the medium of instruction (Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development 2004). As the colonial government became increasingly actively involved in education, it took over many of the mission schools. While this is well received by some of the mission schools for financial reasons, the Seventh Day Adventist church opted to be independent of the colonial government. Nevertheless, the government assumed responsibility for teacher training, the curriculum, examinations and the provisions of facilities and resources.

Prior to Solomon Islands attaining its independence from Britain on 7th July 1978, education largely focused on self-reliance (Bugotu et al. 1973). However, the curriculum then was not relevant to the local context as the education system was importing British curriculum and examinations (Bugotu, et al. 1973). Even after independence expatriates were still hired as principals and teachers, and English continued to remain as the sole language of instruction (Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development 2005). The academic governance of the schools has been perceived by many as the way forward to self-reliance. This is an initiative for the elite because only a small proportion of the population has completed

secondary education and ended up with white collars jobs in the government. The majority of the student population joined the exodus of school dropouts.

School governance today: theory and practice

On 7th July 2009 Solomon Islands completed 31 years as an independent nation. Within these years of nationhood, many developments have taken place. In the education sector, a number of reforms have been implemented. While these reforms are intended to improve education provisions in the country, the traditional state of school governance in the recent years has been criticized. Today in many school systems governance with its reliance on professional expertise has been challenged (Wirt & Kirst, 2001). Like other schools in the world, Solomon Islands schools have become increasingly political as an influx of new actors has arrived on the scene. Despite the tradition of local control, the national government dictated the shaping of education policy. Parents and taxpayers have also increased their claims to the governance of schools in the name of transparency and accountability. Moreover, teachers have acquired more power as a direct result of unionization. Indeed, the governing of public education as in most developed nations like the United States has been ‘reconstructed’ (Chapman, Boyd, Lander & Reynolds, 1996).

To understand the ongoing reconstruction of public education, a model of school governance has been adapted from the work of Lundgren and Mattsson (1996). Lundgren and Mattsson argue that the governing of any educational system is a function of two dimensions: locus and agency (see Figure 1). On the ‘locus’ dimension, authority can be situated entirely within a school community, as is generally the case in Solomon Islands community high schools and private schools.

Figure 1: Two-dimensional model of school governance

		LOCUS	
		External to School Community	Internal to School Community
AGENCY	Professional	Unions Professional Associations	Teachers Principals-as-Leaders
	Bureaucratic	State Departments of Education School Boards Superintendents & District Staff	Principals-as-Managers
	Communal	National PTA Other Interest Groups	Individual Parents Local Parent Groups Local Community Groups

Source: Lundgren and Mattsson (1996, p.142)

In contrast, schools in other countries can be directed almost entirely by outside agents. Since the Revolution two centuries ago, schooling in France has been

under the direct jurisdiction of the state (La Bell, 1982). Thus, French schoolchildren of any given age in every school at any given hour are hearing lessons on the very same thing (Kirst, 1984). For Solomon Islands schools, there is a mixture of how power is exercised. When it comes to curriculum, the national curriculum is taught in all private and public schools. On the other hand, the day-to-day administration and management of the school is neither exclusively inside nor exclusively outside of the school community. Instead, decisions are usually made in consultation with the guidelines of education policy from internal and external sources.

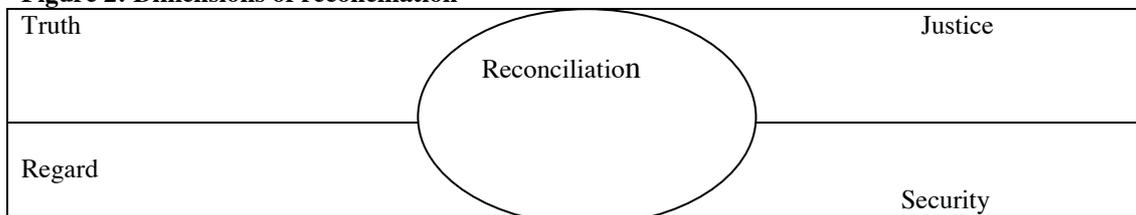
The second dimension of the school governance model, ‘agency,’ highlights the conflict between professional and political control over education. In the first row of Figure 1, ‘professional’ refers to the idea that school reform and improvement efforts should emerge from within the teaching profession. This emphasizes the need for teacher autonomy together with a political view of school governance (Lortie, 1975). Newer concepts of professionalism regard teachers as a self-regulating, self-disciplined group who together are responsible for evaluating the quality of their own practice (Forsyth and Danisiewicz, 1985). Central to these ideas, as stressed by Hargreaves (1994), are reform efforts that emphasize teaching teams over hierarchies, mentoring over supervision, and professional development over in-service education.

Establishing reconciliation and peace through school governance mechanisms

The central primary challenge of rebuilding conflict-torn societies has to do with “mending relations and with restoring dignity, trust and faith ... More than the physical, institutional or systemic destruction that war brings, it is ... the destruction of relationships ... that has the potential to undermine the solutions to all other problems...” (UNRISD 2000, p.1).

The national reconciliation and peace programmes in Solomon Islands seem to anchor well in the dimensions of reconciliation suggested by Kreisberg (2004). He defines the concept of reconciliation as those initiatives that ‘help transform a destructive conflict or relationship, and proposes progress towards attainment of *security* and *justice* needs. He further viewed “mutual recognition or *regard* and the sharing of perspectives or *truth*-getting, as the other ...components of reconciliation and peace” (Kreisberg 2004, p.82). Drawing on Kreisberg’s work, the rest of my paper summarizes the ways in which these reconciliation dimensions (Figure 2) have been adopted in Solomon Islands in an effort to reach lasting peace.

Figure 2: Dimensions of reconciliation



Source: Kreisberg (2004, p.82)

The process to establish reconciliation and peace started after the ethnic conflict with the help of a Donor Peace and Restoration Fund. The Fund which ran from 2000-2004 mainly concentrated on rebuilding schools burnt down during the conflict. In the post-conflict era numerous reconciliation initiatives have been undertaken which receive mixed reactions. However, this does not deter the government from pursuing lasting peace in the ‘happy isles.’ In the 2008 national

budget the government has allocated SI\$5 million for National Reconciliation and Peace programmes. Of this amount, more than SI\$3.3 was for the truth and reconciliation process, SI\$700,000 for promotion of national unity and peace; and SI\$500,000 is allocated for training workshops and seminars for leaders to deal with conflict and prevention of violence. SI\$450,000 was allocated for the promotion of peacebuilding, and partnerships and networks (Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation, 2008). These national peace programmes bring together different sectors of Solomon Islands communities. Educational initiatives like seminars and workshops would forge the coming-together of communities and, according to some researcher (Anderson, Doughty and Olsen 2003; Fred-Mensah 2004), such initiatives support and promote the rebuilding of trust and relationships at community level. These relational approaches in the Solomon Islands are all necessary components of reconstruction process which are creating signs of peace.

When it comes to participatory governance, Spence (2007) noted that the vehicle for relationship building is the structure of school governance. In Solomon Islands, organised school activities bring people together. For instance, parties to the Solomon Islands ethnic conflict are representatives on the school committees, and make mutual decisions about governance of schools. Similarly, conflicting parties could find themselves working together in school fundraising drives. Thus it is clear that the mechanism of school governance provides a safe environment to re-establish broken relationships. These democratic processes provided by the schools could undoubtedly make a real contribution to peace and reconciliation in Solomon Islands.

Integrating teaching and learning-based accountability

When I examined the quality of learning in Solomon Islands urban community high schools, I found that there was poor quality learning after the country emerged from the ethnic conflict (Maebuta, 2008). It is interesting that such quality of learning is not proportionate to the dramatic increase in the educational spending over the years. This finding implies the need for integrating teaching and learning-based accountability in the governance of schools as one of the Solomon Islands reconstruction initiatives.

Rather than monitoring quantity inputs like building more schools and training more teachers, teaching and learning-based accountability - what Elmore, Abelman, and Fuhrman (1996) call 'new educational accountability' has focused school governance on student performance. The governance of most schools today in Solomon Islands fails to scrutinize the performance of the classroom teaching and learning. The teaching and learning-based accountability policies include content and performance standards, stringent assessment systems linked to the curriculum, sound reporting systems like school report cards, rewards to schools for exemplary performance or performance gains, and state intervention for schools with poor performance records (Ladd, 1996; Macpherson, 1998).

Integrating teaching and learning-based accountability in the governance of schools in post-conflict environments would entail rewards, sanctions, and the public disclosure of examination scores comparable across schools, which will give educators the incentive to refocus their energies toward student achievement. According to Elmore (1990), only about one fourth of the teaching population possesses sufficient intrinsic motivation to undertake the hard work of reform. Accountability policies provide extrinsic motivation by focusing public attention on high and low-performing schools and provinces. Such attention is "highlighting model practices and ensuring that poor practices begin to change. Low-performing

provinces want to get out of the spotlight” (Elmore, Abelman & Fuhrman 1996, p. 96).

In the school governance literature there is a less-favoured belief, however, that education system-based accountability may actually be “inconsistent with important attributes of teaching-learning and teachers’ motivation and, therefore...alone limit the potential of accountability to stimulate substantially higher levels of student learning” (Adams & Kirst, 1999, p. 465). Unless system-level policies have been developed at least in part by practitioners and have gained legitimacy locally, they will not, according to this view, work to motivate educators to improve student achievement (Cibulka & Derlin, 1998; Newmann, King & Rigdon, 1997). At the very least, they must be supplemented with capacity-building measures to enhance the ability of educators to respond constructively to reforms (Cohen, 1996).

Finally, Elmore (1990) warns that, if “schools are buffeted and pulled in conflicting directions by numerous forces demanding accountability ... their very responsiveness to these forces makes a coherent internal structure problematical”(p.8).

Broader participatory school governance

Broader community participation in school governance holds weight when it supports social reconstruction in an appealing manner. However, when it is undertaken inclusively it enhances efforts in stabilizing post-conflict societies. In the case of Solomon Islands, participatory governance carries the crucial promise of reconstructing social fabric that has been destroyed after the conflict. Parent-teacher associations and other forms of community participation in school governance, as suggested by Burde (2004), are considered “ideal civic organizations because they can ‘double-task’ - they may improve educational outcomes and at the same time provide a vehicle for broader social change” (p.75). Bringing about community participation in school governance is regarded as social capital. In the words of Putnam (1993) social capital refers to the “features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (p. 167) and cites parent-teacher associations as creating a particularly productive form of social capital.

Post-conflict governance as a tool to economic recovery needs to increase levels of social capital so that the excluded community members are partners in the reconstruction process. As such, Putnam (1993, 2000) argues that increasing levels of social capital is critical to successful governance. This would forge civic engagement, increase social capital and political participation. In this context, Scholzman, Verba, and Brady (1999) refer to political participation as providing “the mechanism by which citizens can communicate information about their interests, preferences and needs - and generate pressure to respond” (p. 430). The thrust of their argument is culturally appropriate in Solomon Islands. Promoting education for social reconstruction through community participation in school governance offers both the promise of citizens particularly as *wantoks* in generating responses to their interests, and the possibilities of mending *wantok* networks to advance post-conflict reconstruction. The *wantok* network is a traditional social system which includes kinship, clan, ethnicity and language. According to Kabutaulaka, (1998) “today the *wantok* network has become more complex with the inclusion of modern institutions such as churches, unions, sports clubs and other forms of social groupings” (p.21).

When these social groups have political alliances and national affiliations, they become influential in post-conflict reconstruction.

Metz (1990) argues that district administrators, teachers, community members, and parents may all have different visions for their schools, some that highlight individual achievement and others that focus on social integration, community cohesion, or character development. As stakeholder power and governance patterns shift, so too will the various visions accommodated in the culture and practice of the school. However, these different visions can be harmonized through the engagement of these different stakeholders in the governance of the school.

Including the excluded: breaking cultural barriers

Leadership in Solomon Islands culture (*kastom*) follows the 'big man system.' People become leaders when they gain influence by the manipulation of their abilities around followers and resources. Today, most leaders are elected through either consensus or popular ballot. In rural villages, *kastom* dictates the roles of women and men. Household duties are the preserve of the women, as well as gardening tasks such as organizing garden boundaries, planting, and weeding. Men took care of felling trees to clear areas for gardens, building canoes, hunting, and fishing. *Kastom* has influenced and dictated governance at all levels in the country. For instance, women have little input in most national affairs. Since independence only one woman has been elected as Member of Parliament.

How can school level governance challenge such existing social norms and cultural barriers that may perpetuate inequity and exclusion? Similarly, how can school enable the empowerment of excluded and marginalised groups? The 'big man' system continues to be predominantly active in school level governance. As a result women and parents from poor households, disabled or other excluded groups are marginalized. It is obvious that most school governance reproduces the traditional social organization by predominantly appointing male members of the local elite to school committees. Thus, there is a wide disparity in participation with regard to socio-economic background as well as gender or other forms of traditional marginalization, giving rise to an urgent need for policy intervention to enhance social inclusion in educational decision-making.

Even though school governance tends to emulate the 'big man' ideology, the marginalized groups can still be part of the educational decision-making. As a pathway to post-conflict reconstruction school governance must enlarge circles of participation to include women and marginalized groups in a range of educational decisions that are continuously the role of professional educators or the elites of society. "This enlargement must be emphasized, strived for and made a priority in the transfer of authority, because education for all will only truly be for all if we all feel represented at the table of decision-making" (UNESCO, 2007 p.5).

In Solomon Islands composition of school committees often reflects existing social divisions. In most cases women are not included on school committees and often do not attend meetings. When they do attend they do not participate in the discussion. Emphasizing genuine participation along with appropriate training, carefully constructed mandates, and equitable composition of groups may increase effective involvement (Levin, 1998).

Inclusive community participation in school governance further raises questions on the role of the state. Community participation should complement and check the state, not replace it. Most importantly, the purpose of participation is to

provide a space for community voices and 'claim making' (Botchway, 2000). In upholding the principles of democracy, school governance must challenge existing cultural barriers that continue to perpetuate inequity and exclusion. This warrants a policy intervention to enhance social inclusion in educational decision-making at all levels.

Broader and inclusive school governance can be effective if those who are participating are active in decision making. Passive participation in school governance could allow elites to take charge, while the rest uncritically observe how decisions are made. To include the excluded community groups in the governance of the school, these groups' voices must be heard and their views must be included in the decisions made.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the pathways to greater participatory approach in school governance as an element of development and post-conflict reconstruction in Solomon Islands. The ethnic conflict in Solomon Islands, and its subsequent reconstruction initiatives, is symptomatic of a society that determines to reconcile the hurts of the past while forging a way forward. As discussed in this paper, one of the ways forward to bring healing, reconciliation, unity and peace is through the school governance mechanisms. A greater engagement of the community in school governance can help achieve truth, security, mutual respect and justice.

Greater community participation in school governance serves no purpose in the absence of quality teaching and learning. Therefore, the importance of quality education has placed a heightened focus on accountability for teaching-learning performance. In other words, greater involvement of the community in school governance is purely to support the delivery of quality teaching-learning. It is for this reason that teaching and learning-based accountability is emphasized as one of the pillars of today's school governance. Once the tenets for accountability in teaching and learning are established, schools need to accelerate their governance to a broader level that could see the excluded members of the community playing a vital role in school affairs.

In short, establishing reconciliation and peace through the school governance mechanisms, practising teaching and learning performance-based accountability policies, and the engagement of broader and inclusive participatory school governance are the pillars to empowering the community and all the stakeholders. However, caution is in the field of educational development a vibrant civil society producing greater community participation but promoted with uncritical enthusiasm runs the risk of leaving communities disillusioned and disempowered in their post-conflict reconstruction initiatives.

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