



CASE STUDY

Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice In The Solomon Island

**The Solomon Islands Trauma Healing Association &
Asia Justice and Rights**



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ABOUT US

Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) is a regional human rights organisation that works to increase the capacity of local and national actors, in particular victims, victims' groups and local civil society organisations (CSOs) in the fight against entrenched impunity. This work focuses on conflict transformation, human rights documentation, education and the development of strong south-south connections across the Asia-Pacific region.

Solomon Islands Trauma Healing Association (SITHA) was established to support communities to gain skills and knowledge through trauma healing. Focusing on providing trauma support and rehabilitation to individuals and communities who are affected by conflict or any social issues in the Solomon Islands, SITHA aims to promote relationships that encourage inclusiveness and participation in decision-making structures and to foster sustainable peace and unity through a healing process within the family and community as a whole.

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Chapter I: Background on Conflict in The Solomon Islands, The Ethnic Tension

The Solomon Islands is a South Pacific archipelago of nearly 1,000 islands, with nine main island groups. Following independence in 1978, the Solomon Islands faced challenges in establishing stable governance and social cohesion. Due to the British colonial legacy, development and employment on the largest island, Guadalcanal, were far greater than in the rest of the country.

As a result, settlers migrated to the capital of Honiara on Guadalcanal, resulting in a fourfold increase in the population between 1970 and 1999. Migrants, mainly from the neighbouring island of Malaita, often settled on land they did not own, sparking resentment among the local population. The inward migration, combined with corruption and mismanagement of the economy, increased tension and hostility between ethnic groups. In 1988, a petition called the Bona Fide Demands of the Indigenous People of Guadalcanal was presented to the government. These demands were ignored, and social grievances descended into violent conflict in the late 1990s.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, armed groups with a mix of legitimate and illegitimate motivations formed across the country. There was a complete breakdown of law and order. The main parties were the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) — also known as the Isatabu Freedom Fighters (IFF) and later the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) — and the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). As the conflict continued, new militia groups formed under various banners. Criminal gangs used the political conflict as a cover for violent activities, while in the West of the country, armed militants from the neighbouring territory of Bougainville joined the conflict.

In 2021, a new round of unrest broke out along existing ethnic divisions. This conflict was ignited by the government's decision to strengthen ties with the People's Republic of China. Forces within the country in favour of Taiwanese support opposed this move, sparking both peaceful and violent demonstrations. Neighbouring countries also weighed in, fearing a closer relationship between China and the Solomon Islands might undermine their interests.

The events of 2021 reflect the impact of transitional justice in the Solomon Islands. The unrest did not evolve into a larger conflict, was confined mainly to the capital, and was brief. While not all mechanisms were successful, peace and stability proved resilient.

Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding in the Solomon Islands

The response to mass violations included hundreds of traditional reconciliation ceremonies, scores of trials of militant leaders in the national courts, an independent truth and reconciliation commission,

limited and uneven attempts to provide reparations for victims, necessary security sector reforms, constitutional changes, and other steps to reduce the potential for recurrence.¹

compensation scheme was established wherein the government agreed to recognise Taiwan in exchange for a \$25 million loan from the EXIM Bank. However, due to a lack of clear guidelines, regulations, and government capacity, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) later concluded, “the result was corruption, misappropriation and abuse of a significant portion of the funds earmarked for compensation.”²

In 2002–2005, the Office of the Prime Minister created the Department of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace under the Ministry of Home Affairs. From 2006–2018 the Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace (MNURP) was officially established as a separate entity with a mandate of “peace and reconciliation, post-conflict reconciliation, truth and reconciliation and national unity programs.” The ministry was tasked with implementing the term of the Townsville Peace Agreement, including National Reconciliation and Healing, rehabilitation of ex-combatants, reparations, and an Amnesty Act.³ In 2019, MNURP was replaced by the Ministry of Traditional Governance, Peace and Ecclesiastical Affairs.

In September 2008, the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established. It collected statements from more than 2,400 victims, witnesses, leaders, and others involved in the conflict, and conducted both public and confidential hearings. In February 2012, the TRC Final report, “Confronting the Truth for a Better Solomon Islands,” was handed to the Solomon Islands Government. The commission identified root causes of the conflict, including unequal development levels, the lack of a solid national identity, a weak police force, political leaders using violence for their gain, lack of control of guns, using political goals to form armed groups, impunity, failure of the rule of law, and a failure to celebrate diversity.

The TRC estimated at least 200 people died in the conflict, with most deaths the result of direct fighting, including combat, torture, beatings, kidnapping, and abductions. The TRC also recorded 307 cases of individuals deprived of their liberty, 95 illegal detentions by state forces, more than 1,400 reports of torture and ill-treatment, 63 cases of sexual violence, tens of thousands of persons forcibly displaced and homes destroyed.³

¹ For a fuller account, see Transitional Justice Case Study: Solomon Islands, SITHA and Asia Justice and Rights <https://asia-ajar.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Solomon-Islands-Case-Study.pdf>

² TRC Report 2012: p. 278. See also: Nicole Dicker (2017), “Development Aid for Reparations in the Solomon Islands,” p. 203.

³ These findings were not made public until 2013, when the editor of the report unofficially posted it online. See: “Government Disappointed Over Unofficial Release of TRC Report,” The Solomon Times (Honiara), 01 May 2013. <https://www.>

Recommendations included rehabilitation of victims, decentralisation of governance structures, and promotion of social and cultural activities to strengthen national unity. The TRC also recommended empowerment of women and legal protection of their ownership of land, property, and shares, as well as reserving 30% of parliamentary seats for women.

The TRC recommended a law to create a new commission to strengthen national reconciliation. This commission would develop a Comprehensive Reparations Plan, including a national register of victims as well as programs to help repair their lives. Recommendations also included reforms to avoid recurrence of conflict and mass violations.

After a wait of over ten years, in September 2023, the Parliament deliberated the TRC report's findings and recommendations. The parliament members' proposals included land reform, a federal system of government, youth programs, education, and development strategies.

Chapter II: The Current Situation of Peace and Violence

SITHA conducted participatory action research workshops in the three provinces of Malango, Auki, and Marau. Discussions were based on six indicators of peace: ongoing conflict, safety and security, militarisation, inclusion, accountability, and gender. This interactive method empowered local actors and victims, with women well-represented, to create their own long-term and inclusive vision of peace.

Old and New Conflict

Since the end of the ethnic tension, there has not been a significant outbreak of violence or unrest in the communities where PAR was conducted. Although there has been unrest in the country, including in April 2006 and November 2021, peacebuilding initiatives have proven relatively successful.

However, some communities faced a lack of human security, development, and gender equality in the years since the conflict.⁴ What's more, a failure to address the impact of the conflict means it continues to affect many lives. One young man highlighted these deep psychological scars and lasting social impact.

The first time I heard a gun was in Kwauware when the Eagle Force shot at us. In 2004 and 2005 my life completely changed. I wouldn't listen or obey anyone in the community. I had no respect for people within my community. I couldn't understand my parents' advice because I was traumatised when I heard the sound of the gun during the tension. My schooling was also affected. (Male, youth)

Another female survivor shared her frustration at the lack of remedy for her trauma and loss:

Our house was burned to the ground. There has been no reconciliation, even though we reported the case and the people who did this were known to the police. I'm still traumatised by this event. I wish we could settle this so I don't need to live in fear anymore.

Some children were forced to drop out of school at very early ages. A female survivor explained the impact:

The tensions interrupted my schooling, and I lost my opportunity for education. I was only at form 3 and I didn't make it to the Solomon Islands School. (Female, survivor)

⁵ This snapshot of the current situation of peace and violence uses the following peace indicators: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/chart-of-the-week-indicators-of-peace/>

Safety and Security in the Community

Community discussions created a safe space for women to talk about their experiences, including family and domestic violence, child abuse, divorce and rejection, alcohol abuse, abandonment by parents, and arson. One female survivor recalled:

Some people in my community accused my father of sorcery when someone in my village died. So one night, when we were sleeping, these bad people came to our home and lit a fire to burn us all alive. They surrounded our house with local weapons. Luckily, my mother woke up smelling smoke, and we all escaped before they did the evil act of harming us. Our house was burned down, and there has been no reconciliation even though we reported the case and the people who did this were known to the police and the village chief. I'm still traumatised by this event. I wish we could settle this so I didn't live in fear anymore. (Female, survivor)

According to some participants, sources of insecurity persist. There are unresolved hostilities between the Indigenous Birao people and migrants from the island of Marau. Some groups feel a need to be better represented in local government and parliament. A perceived lack of attention, and the failure to provide services, also impact feelings of security. According to one female survivor:

If my community were a house it would be a slanted house that would fall anytime. All these aspects — participation, accountability, safety and security — must be addressed appropriately. My question is: how will these be re-established and who is responsible? As we all experienced, this community was one of the hotspots during the ethnic tension, and the population is traumatised. That's why they need healing. Who, then, is responsible for this community? The government ignores this community as a recipient of service delivery. Most development here is funded by NGOs. (Survivor)

Feelings of safety and security decrease when there is more violence in the community, including family and domestic violence:

Crimes are committed in the village, so it's not safe anymore. People have to secure their homes during the night... People don't feel safe in their communities due to high crime rates. (Survivor)

Militarisation

Some participants expressed frustrations with the role that security forces, in particular the police, have played in the escalating conflict:

I think the police are to be blamed. They think they are above the law and take sides during conflict. Instead of helping calm the situation, they escalate it by taking the side of one ethnic group. (Survivor)

Tensions have been increasing recently due to the government's decision to end ties with Taiwan and

seek diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. Increased bilateral cooperation with China culminated in a draft security cooperation agreement released in March 2022.

The reaction of some countries — primarily Australia and the United States — contributed to tensions and militarism. For example, in November 2022 Australia finalised a shipment of MK18 semi-automatic rifles and police vehicles to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF)⁵. Foreign media outlets and politicians also spread false information that China was planning to build a navy base in the Solomon Islands.⁶

Participation and Inclusion

Participants envisioned the kind of peace they needed in their communities. Many responses involved a role in the truth-seeking process. One male survivor explained that participation of the Marau community is essential to sustainable peace:

Without participation, accountability, safety and security, there will be no peace. In reality, the Marau community desperately needs a good house of peace. With a good heart and mind, these must be fulfilled in the thinking and happiness of a genuine leader. The Government involvement in our community is still at the bottom of the line, and that has never been at all fulfilled and we need further consultation. Transparency and justice must exist to re-establish our relationship with the government and to restore us from our previous understanding. Justice and truth are not correctly fulfilled... Nothing has been done in terms of reparation and [a life] free from violence. The biggest challenge is if justice and truth do not exist, then healing and [a life] free from violence will not be in place. Thus, that house is still incomplete. (Male, survivor)

Many women spoke about their experiences of violence, but also how they have been involved in mediating in the community. For example, one female survivor noted how her mother acted as a mediator when the community faced extortion and intimidation.

I was 9 or 10 years old when the militants started to harass people, especially on the island where my parents lived. Some men came and demanded a certain amount of money. My mother became the mediator between the people on the island and the militants. She went through the village, house-to-house, collecting a certain amount before she went back and told them we only collected this amount. They sent her back for another expected amount, but the collection was still unsuccessful... Then she told them, "You are demanding as though you have saved or we have kept your money here, and then

⁶ See Kate Lyons, "Australia delivers police vehicles and rifles to Solomon Islands in 'game-changer' donation," The Guardian (Sydney), 2 November 2022 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/02/australia-delivers-police-vehicles-and-rifles-to-solomon-islands-in-game-changer-donation> and Rod Mcguirk, "Chinese ambassador says Solomons pact no threat to Australia," Associated Press (Sydney), 12 May 2022 at <https://apnews.com/article/china-australia-beijing-scott-morrison-solomon-islands-79ae78cb455a961d2f55890d7df87d91>

⁷ A good example of this sentiment is Peter Jennings, "To stop Chinese bases, Australia must lead in the Pacific," Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), 26 March 2022. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/to-stop-chinese-bases-australia-must-lead-in-the-pacific/>

you return to collect it. These people have nothing to fulfil your demands.... She told them to return home with the money they had collected: "It is enough." (Female, survivor)

Despite the role women have played as mediators during and after conflict, the need remains for greater gender equality in community and political life:

To live in a comfortable house, we need gender balance so that everyone respects each other within our community life, within the provincial government and also at the national level. (Survivor)

Accountability

Discussions revealed clear frustration with the lack of accountability for those responsible for violence. Survivors and community leaders vented their frustration with government authorities.

I think senior figures are the leading cause of the conflict, because they are stubborn and don't listen to people's concerns. (Survivor)

A female survivor from Marau explained the importance of accountability in the reconciliation process:

I didn't see a perpetrator coming forward and saying sorry to me for burning my house. The reconciliation was done between two innocent people. I expect people to come forward and say they are sorry in order to heal each other. I strongly support that transparency and justice must exist between us and the government so that services are correctly and adequately delivered. (Female, survivor)

A male participant argued institutions need reform to assist with peacebuilding in the future.

The government should consider empowering and including the chiefs as paid employees. This support will enable them to be loyal to their duties. Secondly, I think the TRC's report is a public document. Therefore, it should not be hidden. It should be publicly displayed for all the population to see.

Gender Equality and Minority Participation

Equal participation by minority groups, including women and children, is essential to building lasting peace in the Solomon Islands. However, minority groups are not adequately represented in the political sphere. These groups can access essential services but often do not have the representation needed to provide feedback or raise concerns. One young female survivor of family violence said:

My desire is for our government to provide a space where youths like me can go and seek help. I still have little trust in the government. (Female, survivor)

Another female survivor reflected on the need for greater access to services and government support for women:

When my husband left me with three small children, I was helpless and hopeless. I didn't know where to go or who would help me. It would be good if our government recognised us women [and] made funding available and easily accessible to us so that we can be empowered to generate income if our husbands leave us. Men can easily get away with this behaviour, but the policy is weak because it cannot punish men or hold them accountable for paying maintenance for their children when they start a new family. (Female, survivor)

Chapter III: Community resilience

Truth-seeking and peacebuilding have successfully fostered and developed community resilience while addressing ethnic conflict. Some participants believed that traditional values in the Solomon Islands, which are based on a culture of respect, have supported community resilience. These values and traditional ways of life create space to integrate culture and religion into the healing process. The Solomon Islands is blessed with valuing, respecting, and appreciating our traditional ways of life. These qualities, together with our Christian values, contribute to the community's resilience.⁷

⁸ Interview with Rueben Lilo, a former Director of Peace and Reconciliation under The Ministry of National Unity Reconciliation and Peace (MNURP).

Chapter IV: The transitional justice process has made efforts to nurture peace successful

Local and national peace processes have emerged in response to conflict in the Solomon Islands. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission opened a dialogue, facilitated by traditional and church structures through storytelling, closed hearings, and renegotiation of personal identity. However, many of the strategies have focused on quick fixes, falling short in addressing the root causes of violence. In reflecting on horizontal and vertical conflict, it is important to address the root causes of conflict as part of the truth-seeking process.

What I mean by horizontal is our historical narratives need to be addressed better. Because in the vertical aspect, we have to look to transform ourselves before we can resolve our issues and transform the nation. Justice, truth, healing, and peace are the main four things that must be taken care of by the vertical. This includes people, their families, the community, the province, and the nation. The Solomon Islands needs to be focused on addressing conflict and healing. There is a need to focus on social rehabilitation and heal the heart's wounds. (Rueben Lilo, MNURP).

Such an effort must ensure a consistent peace framework that includes healing. Significant investment in social rehabilitation must support victims of conflict and heal the wounds of the past. While local customs and ceremonial efforts by elders have been influential at a local level, some community members remain critical of efforts that fail to provide support to rebuild their lives and communities. One male survivor explained:

For these twenty years, we have lived with unresolved issues. For all the reconciliation ceremonies done by the chiefs, it is we, the people at the grassroots, who are left with all these issues. I have realised that this part of the world has been neglected. People are ignored and have been isolated for a long time. (Male, Survivor)

Chapter V: The role of the TRC in delivering peace and justice⁸

<p>Supporting women, youth, and other vulnerable groups</p>	<p>Women have played a pivotal role in peacebuilding as negotiators between local communities. However, they remain largely excluded from formal political spaces, while family and domestic violence is increasing.</p> <p>In early 2024, the Minister for Education said that LGBT rights will be recognised in the peace curriculum developed from the TRC process. A curriculum that encourages fair treatment regardless of gender, sexual orientation, health, disability, religion, race, or ethnicity is a sign of progress.</p>
<p>Addressing cycles of trauma and violence</p>	<p>Safenet is a network that provides support and healing from trauma and violence through bodies that include the Christian Care Centre, Family Support Centre, RSIPF Family Violence Office, RSIP sexual assault UNIT, Safe Place Clinic, SIPPA office, and HCC clinics. These support services support women who face trauma and violence. However, cycles of trauma persist.</p>
<p>Strengthening trust towards the state and each other</p>	<p>The Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF) has contributed to conflict due to poor management and inequitable sharing. In 2023, Parliament passed an RCDF bill that recognised partnerships and provided heavy penalties to those who misused funds. Civil society hopes these legislative changes will strengthen trust in government institutions.</p> <p>While communities have played a significant role in peacebuilding through customary reconciliations, wounds remain. Dealing with these wounds requires short, medium, and long-term strategies for truth, justice, healing, and peace at all levels.</p>

Chapter VI: Conclusion and Recommendations

The conflict known as the “ethnic tension” broke out in the Solomon Islands in the late 1990s. By the time peace was restored in 2003, thousands of civilians were subjected to violations, including sexual violence, theft, unlawful killing, internal displacement, and torture. In the wake of the conflict,

⁹ This table includes information and analysis from an interview with Rueben Lilo, former Director of MNURP.

peacebuilding efforts included community reconciliation ceremonies, trials in national courts, attempts to provide reparations, security sector reforms, and constitutional change.

Although unrest has simmered, including in April 2006 and November 2021, there has not been a significant outbreak of violence since the Tensions ended. This outcome suggests that peacebuilding initiatives have been relatively successful.

The most significant peacebuilding and transitional justice mechanism, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), collected statements from more than 2,400 victims and conducted both public and confidential hearings. In February 2012, the TRC Final report, which included recommendations, was handed to the Solomon Islands Government.

Despite the passage of time since the conflict, the community still grapples with human security, inequitable development, and gender equality. Many people remain anxious about the possibility of renewed violence. A perceived or actual lack of attention to community needs, as well as insufficient service provision, undermines people's sense of security. Militarisation persists, and accountability for past violence remains elusive. Minority groups, including women and children, face barriers to equal participation in the peacebuilding process. Nevertheless, the community's resilience endures, bolstered by traditional values rooted in respect. These values and practices have created opportunities to weave culture and religion into the healing process.

A significant breakthrough occurred in 2023 when parliament discussed the TRC report. Next steps for the TRC, and for building peace, are public dissemination of the report and implementation of the recommendations.

The Solomon Islands Government, working together with civil society, women's groups, and community leaders, should:

1. Develop a strong community-based program to disseminate the key findings and support the recommendations of the TRC report, including a strong focus on the next generation.
2. Implement trauma recovery programs that include psychosocial support, economic livelihood empowerment, and memory healing projects for survivors, their families, and community members.
3. Create programs to empower women and girls to realise their potential as peacebuilders in their communities and at the national level. These efforts should engage young men and women in creating innovative solutions to combat gender-based discrimination and violence.
4. Implement the TRC recommendation to develop and legally establish a Reparation Policy for Conflict Prevention and Victims' Rights into a Commission and Post Conflict Reintegration Policy DDR into a legal Mechanism for safeguarding victims' rights and preventing conflict. Civil society organisations should be integral to peacebuilding and civic engagement for youth, focusing on initiatives that advance gender justice and promote non-violent communication.

