



Voices of Survivors and Peacebuilders in Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands Trauma Healing Association (SITHA) & Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR)



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COVER PHOTO

Survivors recalled events and atrocities that happened in the Islands during a workshop using participatory tools. Through community-based discussions, survivors learn about the root causes of the conflict. (AJAR and SITHA)

PHOTO

AJAR, SITHA, Sam Lawrence, and Oliver Foerstner.

DESIGN

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ABOUT AJAR

Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) is a regional human rights organisation based in Jakarta, Indonesia. AJAR works to increase the capacity of local and national organisations in the fight against entrenched impunity and to contribute to building cultures based on accountability, justice and willingness to learn from the root causes of mass human rights violations in the Asia-Pacific region.

ABOUT SITHA

SITHA (Solomon Islands Trauma Healing Association) 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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INTRODUCTION

“[If our community was a house] it would be a slanted house that might fall at any time. All these aspects - participation, accountability, safety and security - are not properly addressed. My question is: How will these be re-established and who is responsible?”

—Female survivor

“The biggest challenge: if justice and truth do not exist, then healing and [a life] free from violence will not be in place, and the house remains incomplete.”

—Male survivor

In 1999, a period of conflict known as “the Tensions” broke out in the Solomon Islands. Until peace was restored in 2003, thousands of civilians were subject to violations including sexual violence, theft, unlawful killing, internal displacement and torture. Many people were left with physical and psychological trauma, while communities faced deep divisions and social mistrust.

In the wake of “the Tensions”, a range of peacebuilding initiatives were undertaken including community reconciliation ceremonies, trials in national courts, attempts to provide reparations, security sector reforms and constitutional change. Of particular significance was the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation

Commission (TRC). Established in September 2008, the TRC collected statements from more than 2,400 victims, witnesses, leaders and persons involved in the conflict while conducting both public and confidential hearings.

On 28 February 2012, TRC’s Final Report was handed to the Solomon Islands Government, and made a range of recommendations based on deep inquiry into the tensions and factors that had contributed to the violations. However, it was not until September 2023 that the Solomon Islands Parliament deliberated the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s paper and its recommendations.

At the same time, the Solomon Islands Trauma Healing Association (SITHA) and Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) began to work on strengthening the understanding of civil society and victims’ groups on the “never again” promises within transitional justice mechanisms. Specifically, how could the findings and recommendations of the TRC process contribute to peace, provide a road map to justice, and take meaningful steps towards social healing. In August and September 2022, SITHA conducted two trauma healing workshops in two locations with 60 survivors of human rights violations and community members (10 men, 40 women.)

This was followed by three Participatory Action Research (PAR) workshops in 3 provinces that provided an opportunity to listen to the voices of survivors, engaging them in dialogue



how to strengthen peace from their perspective. In total 100 persons participated in these discussions (68 women, and 32 men). This action research brings forward insights to local peacebuilding processes, mapping early steps toward a potential path forward.

WHAT IS TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE?

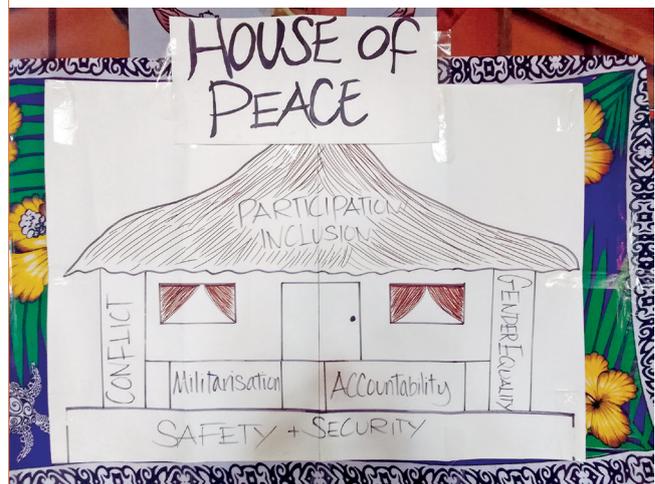
Transitional justice is a response to systematic or widespread violations of human rights. It seeks recognition for victims and promotes possibilities for peace, reconciliation, and just governance. Transitional justice is not a distinct form of justice; it is justice adapted to societies transforming themselves after a period of conflict and human rights abuses.

Common transitional justice strategies involve:

1. **Truth-seeking:** These initiatives seek to establish an accurate record of what happened during the conflict, clarify uncertain events, and lift the veil of silence and denial from contentious and painful periods of history.
2. **Reparations:** Reparations recognise victims' rights and seek to repair harms they have suffered.
3. **Prosecution:** Prosecutions have the potential to reveal how large-scale crimes were committed, and restore victims' dignity and public confidence in the rule of law.
4. **Institutional Reform:** Reforming abusive or negligent security systems and the structures and institutions that support them can prevent recurrence, and provide effective and accountable security to communities.

WHAT IS PEACEBUILDING?

Peacebuilding aims to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening capacity for conflict management, and laying the foundation for sustainable peace and development. It is a complex, long-term process of creating conditions for sustainable peace. Peacebuilding goals promote sustainable peace by addressing “root causes” of violent conflict and supporting local capacities for peace management and conflict resolution.¹ Since the 1990s, led by the United Nations, a more integrated international approach toward peacebuilding has developed.



PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

PAR workshops employed participatory tools developed by AJAR to be used in both conflict and post-conflict contexts.² They were adapted to the realities of the Solomon Islands and

1 Peace: A Peace Practitioner's Guide. University for Peace. Prof Dr. Johan Galtung. Number 13, July 2017. <https://www.upeace.org/files/Ideas%20for%20Peace/Ideas%20for%20Peace%20Vol.%2013.pdf>

2 See AJAR's Unlearning Impunity Manual series, including “Mosaic: A manual for rebuilding lives and communities after torture”. <https://asia-ajar.org/resources/books-research/mosaic-a-manual-for-rebuilding-lives-and-communities-after-torture/> and “Stone and Flower: A guide to understanding and action for women survivors”. <https://asia-ajar.org/resources/books-research/stone-flower-a-guide-to-understanding-and-action-for-women-survivors/>

tailored to the teams' needs facilitating sessions. Four learning tools were selected:

1. **Tree of Peace and Conflict:** A guided discussion inviting participants to identify root causes of conflict and steps towards accountability
2. **River of Life:** Creating and integrating individual and collective timelines by telling stories/experiences of one's life journey
3. **House of Peace:** Analysing peace based on indicators related to safety and security, ongoing conflict, militarization, inclusion, accountability and gender³
4. **Stone and Flower:** Exploration of victim rights to truth, justice, healing, freedom from violence and protection from recurrence

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.

"My mum went through the village, house-to-house, collecting a certain amount [of money demanded by the militants] 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 my mum told them, 'You are demanding as though you have saved or we have kept your money here and then you return to collect it. These people have nothing to fulfil your demands ... My mum told them to return home with the money they had collected: 'It is enough.'

KEY THEMES

During the participatory research sessions, AJAR and SITHA facilitators noted down key themes emerging from the community discussions.

Women and girls as victims; women as local mediators for peace

Many women spoke about their experiences of violence, but some women spoke about their role as mediators. For example, a survivor recalled how her mother acted as mediator when their community faced extortion and intimidation:

"I was 9 or 10 years old when the militants started to harass the people, especially on our island where



Memories of trauma and vulnerability among the elderly, children, disabled

A male community member recalled the terror he and his family felt trying to escape the militia:

"I had a big family so I couldn't move that night because we were scattered. My wife and some of our children managed to escape the next day. My very old mum and some of my children remained

3 This exercise is based on an annual Peace Index developed by the Institute for Economics and Peace using 23 indicators to measure peacefulness. The Index measures a country's level of "Negative Peace" (the absence of violence or fear of violence) considering three domains of peacefulness: 1) Ongoing domestic and international conflict. 2) The level of harmony or discord within a nation - societal safety and security, for example low crime rates, minimal terrorist activity and violent demonstrations, harmonious relations with neighbouring countries, a stable political scene and a small proportion of the population being internally displaced or made refugees. 3) A country's militarisation, reflecting the link between a country's level of military build-up and access to weapons and its level of peacefulness, both domestically and internationally. AJAR has adapted this index to include accountability, gender, and inclusion.

with me and we did not have a chance [to escape] so we kept running about while the militants moved around with their guns. All of us were shaking, fearing death at any moment.”

Another man witnessed the death of his brother as well as the desperate escape of community members to safe havens. He recalled the traumatic event:

“I witnessed my brother dying because of the bullet holes ... One day I saw the people struggling to reach other islands. From our island, we saw that their houses were burnt down from the far end of their village to the other end towards the station. All the people within this community - the old men and women, boys and girls, mothers and their babies, the disabled - were struggling to a safer place to be with their relatives and loved ones.”

A young participant highlighted the deep psychological scars and social impacts of the conflict:

“[That was] the first time I heard a gun fire. By 2004 and 2005, my life had completely changed. I had no respect for people within my community and wouldn't listen to or obey anyone. I couldn't understand my parents' advice because I was traumatised after hearing the sound of the gun during 'the Tension'. My schooling was also affected”.

Ceremonial reconciliation by leaders, yet unresolved issues remain in the communities

Some community members remain critical of the peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts after the conflict. A male survivor said:

“We live with unsolved issues for these twenty years. For all the reconciliation ceremonies done by the chiefs, it is us, the people at the grassroots, who are left with all these issues. I have come to realise that this part of the world has been neglected. People are ignored and have been isolated for a long period of time.”

A female community member criticised the lack of justice in the reconciliation process and called for increased transparency and better provision of services:

“I totally disagreed with the reconciliation done here. It did not involve the victims and perpetrators of the Tension. I didn't see the faces of those people involved during 'the Tension' at the ceremony. 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.

“My expectation is for people to come forward and say sorry in order to heal each other. I strongly support that transparency and justice must exist between us and the government so that the services are properly and adequately delivered.”

“[If our community was a house] it would be a slanted house that may fall at any time. All these aspects - participation, accountability, safety and security - are not properly addressed. My question is: how will these be re-established and who is responsible? [Some members of the] population remains traumatised. They need healing. Who is responsible for this community? It is clear that the government ignores this community and the services it deserves. Most development here is funded by NGOs.”

New and old forms: Recurrence of gender-based violence

In some of the community discussions, a safe space was created to allow women to talk about their experiences which included child abuse, domestic violence, sudden death, divorce, broken homes, alcohol abuse, killing, accusations of sorcery, rejection by parents/partners, abandonment by parents and arson.



It is clear from their responses that in the years since the conflict, residents have faced a lack of human security, development and gender equality. One participant said,

“Safety and security [are an issue]. Crimes are committed in the village: it is not safe anymore; people have to secure their homes during the night. People do not feel safe in their own communities due to high crime rates.”

A consistent theme was family and domestic violence, including incest and sexual abuse:

Abandonment

“My husband left us with no reason. When I returned, he was already with another woman. Life is very hard. I was a victim of domestic violence. My husband treated me very badly. All my children were affected and traumatised, and it affected their education ... I really need help and need to seek professional counselling.”

Culture of silence and lack of services for violence in the family

“I want my (abusive) father to face justice but my mum told us to respect our culture and not report our dad... There are no support services to help children like me and my sisters. I wish I could help my sisters to get the justice they need. A lot of young sexual abuse victims didn't find justice because of our culture.”



Old trauma and new violence

A survivor shared her frustration at the lack of a remedy for her trauma and loss:

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

Role of the church in supporting women survivors

“I grew up with very low self-esteem, felt unloved ... The only place I found comfort is in the church where I grew up and my grandparents who love me.”

Calls for accountability and weak trust in the government

In this situation, survivors and community leaders called for accountability and vented frustrations with government authorities. One participant said,

“I think senior figures are the main cause of the conflict, because they are stubborn and don't listen to people's concerns”.

Another participant said,

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

Impact: Loss opportunities for education

One participant said she had dropped out of school very early, scared to go back to return after the ethnic tension and trauma. A female survivor explained the personal impact of conflict:

“The Tensions' interrupted my schooling and I lost my education opportunity. I was only at form 3 and I didn't make it to the SISC (Solomon Islands School

Certificate) examination because I ran away from school and stayed at home.

“As a victim of the tension, I asked the government if they could assist me. I feel the government should assist or help me because my education opportunity was taken from me: I have no goals and remain a housewife. I really need the government’s assistance to recognise me right now.”

Impact: Poor health and unresolved trauma

Another female survivor argued that the conflict had significant impacts on the community:

“In terms of conflict within my community, we experienced a lot of things. The first thing is that we lived in fear. Fear took away our freedom of movement. We had no access to town and could not afford food: (to fulfil) most of our basic needs, we depended on shops in town.

“The conflict affected our children’s health. When they were sick, we were not able to visit the clinics and hospitals in town. Since we have no local health clinic, we struggled and were only fortunate enough to give them home medicine like herbs. During that time, pregnant mothers gave birth at home which can be a high risk for young mothers and those with complications when giving birth. The students lived in fear and worry, they could not concentrate during their classes or lessons.

“Actually, most people in our community and especially the women have been traumatised. The worst trauma for the women was losing their loved ones and relatives. Those family members who were badly injured died at home, within our families, in our community. Our church life was also affected since people were frightened to walk along the road because the gunshot was often randomly fired.”

COMMUNITY VISION FOR PEACE

Participants were asked to envision what kind of peace they needed in their communities.

A male survivor shared his vision for a future of peace:

“Without participation, accountability, safety and security, there will be no peace. Our community is still in desperate need for a good house of peace. These things will only come when a genuine leader with a good heart and mind helps bring about the fulfilment of happiness. The Government involvement in our community is still minimal and we need further consultation. Transparency and justice must exist to re-establish our relationship with the government and to restore us back to our previous understandings. ... [and] nothing has been done in terms of reparation and [creating a life] free from violence. The biggest challenge remains: if justice and truth do not exist, then healing and [a life] free from violence will not be possible, and the house incomplete.”

The need for gender equality as a foundation for peace was also highlighted:

“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.”



A female participant pleaded for trauma healing programs in the community:

“In my point of view the government does not provide any such programme for awareness raising within our communities. We, the community people, really want and are desperate for such programmes because our communities are victims and were traumatised during the ethnic tension. So, we call on the government to try and find ways to support us with trauma counselling.”

A male participant argued that institutions need to be reformed to assist with peacebuilding into the future:

“I think the government should consider empowering and including the chiefs as paid employees of the government. 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 kept hidden. It should be publicly displayed for all the population to see. I hope the government would consider these suggestions.”

A young woman survivor of family violence said,

“My desire is for our government to provide a place where youths like me can go and seek help. I still have little trust in the government.”

Another participant highlighted the need for greater services and government support for women:

“When my husband left me with 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 recognized us women [and] made funding available and easily accessible so that we can be empowered to generate income if our husbands leave us. Men can easily get away with this kind of behaviour: the policy in place is weak and does not punish men or hold them accountable to pay child support when they go and start a new family.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

All participants from the communities attested to the fact that there has not been a significant outbreak of violence since the end of ‘the Tensions’. This would suggest that although there have been instances of unrest in the country - including April 2006 and November 2021 - the overall peacebuilding initiatives in the Solomon Islands have been relatively successful. Peace in Solomon Islands can be strengthened by disseminating the findings and recommendations of the TRC report. Reiterating a comment made by a participant: “The TRC report is a public document; therefore, it should not be kept hidden.”



The action research indicated that there is a willingness among leaders to implement the TRC recommendations and a strong commitment to ensure the guarantee of non-repetition. Civil society can play an important role in monitoring the progress and – where necessary – helping push forward initiatives. In particular, organisations that specifically work with victims can help inform decisions and design programs.

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

Recommendation 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.***

Recommendation 2

- ***Provide on-going trauma recovery programs, including psycho-social support, economic livelihood empowerment, as well as healing of memory projects for survivors, their families and community members.***

Some community members feel that they lack human security, development and gender equality in the years since the conflict. Participants in all communities shared experiences of intimidation, domestic abuse, early marriage and other related forms of gendered and non-gendered violence both during and after the ethnic tension.

Another important takeaway is the fact that women and girls played a significant role as local mediators for peace during 'the Tensions'. Gender equality needs to be a foundation and pillar for peacebuilding. Religious beliefs and structures at the local and grassroots level which were used to stop youth becoming involved in violations should also be considered as ways to foster and strengthen peace and conflict resolution in the future.

Recommendation 3

- **Support special programmes for women and girls to fulfil their immense potential as peacebuilders in their communities and at a national-level. This includes engaging young men and women in developing innovations to end gender-based discrimination and violence.**

Community members raised a number of initiatives they would like to see implemented, including public awareness and release of the TRC report as well as recognition of victims. There are also a lot of different solutions proposed by local and political leaders. For example, human rights and peacebuilding training should be provided to traditional leaders and church leaders.

Young people are enthusiastic to learn about the root causes of conflict and conflict prevention, including building awareness about the situation of survivors and their families' needs to repair their lives, deepen their understanding of their rights and ways to ensure on-going peace. Youth, as part of the survivor community, can play a strategic role in the process, taking part in peace-building and conflict prevention initiatives that empower survivors, revive trust and transform relationships between survivors and their communities, and between communities and the state.

Recommendation 4

- **Implement the TRC recommendation to establish a mechanism for victim's rights and conflict prevention. Civil society groups must play a key role in peacebuilding and civic engagement for young people, including initiatives that promote gender justice and non-violent communication.**