

Perhaps none of the Pacific island countries is experiencing more challenges than the Solomon Islands as they wrestle with complex issues of how to make their children safe. Formal institutions and the protections they can offer are only now beginning to come into being. Even so, resources to support those efforts are slim. Most penal laws, including those that would protect children, have yet to be updated from 1963. That is only the beginning. Impediments to a unified system of child protection resources are legion. Less than two percent of Solomon Islanders speak the official language English. This is a country of 64 distinct languages, so many in fact that family loyalties and business connections have often based solely on “wantok” i.e. if you speak the same language as I do, we can and will form alliances. This is a country honey-combed with these alliances and their defacto laws, as well as more traditional tribal ones. This is a country with vast stretches of sea between many of its component islands. Several of the country’s provinces are rebuilding after the tsunami of 2007. Several more are emerging from a post-conflict context after ethnic disputes so deep that the young were often made their victims.

Forty-one percent of Solomon Islanders are under the age of 15. Only a little over half of those children are considered safe in their schools, according to stakeholders. Over 70 of caregivers use corporal punishment as a means of discipline. CPBR found that a great many of Solomon children “had no idea why” they are being punished. Perhaps even more disturbing, the vast majority of Solomon children do not have a clear sense of which is an appropriate touch, which is not. Indeed, only two percent of Solomon Island caretakers feel confident that they know what to do if their child has been sexually abused. Nearly one in five children in the Solomons is living away from home in one of a variety of “hosting” situations. Nearly 20% of the parents of those hosted children only assume the young people are safe. They have no way of verifying this. Meanwhile, child prostitution and exploitation is on the rise.

What this report set out to do

Four Pacific Island governments – Fiji, The Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Kiribati, in partnership with UNICEF, came together to create a regional “The Pacific Government/UNICEF Child Protection Plan 2008-2012.” Steering committees from each government in collaboration with UNICEF called together a group of consultants uniquely able to draw up a strategy ground-breaking in its comprehensiveness for the region.

The goal:

- reduction in the violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children in the Pacific Island countries.

The threefold strategy:

- an examination of the legal systems that impact the children
- an examination of social services that impact children
- an examination of a child's more intimate and immediate community and familial environments.

“Child Protection Base Research” (CPBR) consultants defined a series of very specific steps to be taken in each country to reach clearly demarcated outcomes by 2012. Not only that, CPBR offered ways to measure each targeted step along the way.

Indeed, CPBR is as promising as it is, at least in part, due to the time and resources spent in pinning down a realistic base-line for current country by country practices from which to proceed. Interviews and workshops took place and questionnaires were distributed in a wide-range of geographic areas, 30 in the Solomon Islands: urban, peri-urban, rural areas and even the most remote of islands. Communities who had not been and would not be working with UNICEF were included in the fact-finding as control-groups. Field workers and other consultants from CPBR reached out to literally thousands of regional stake holders: magistrates and police, social service workers and volunteers, NGO staff, church leaders, community activists, chieftains, teachers and parents, and always to children as well.

Base-Line Finding

There are currently severe limits in the ability of the law to facilitate Child Protection in the Solomons.

It is nearly impossible to make any viable plans, legal or otherwise, for child protection, let alone evaluate their success, without an accurate birth count. To date in the Solomons, there is at most minimum compliance with birth registration requirements; birth registration procedures seem unusually complicated. (See recommendations for output 1.1). According to CPBR consultants, in some areas of the Solomons, access to birth registration may be the lowest in the entire Pacific. Coming close to an accurate count of Solomon Islands' children is made even more difficult due to increasing urban drift and subsequent squatter settlements in cities such as Honiata.

It is nearly impossible to make viable plans for child protection without a codified legal definition of child abuse. There is movement by some in the Solomons to write a national children's policy into law, but attempts to do so have been stalled for years (See recommendations for output 2.4).

In 2007, however, a break-through did come when “no drop” policies were established in law: no sexual or domestic abuse offender’s case may be dropped by police or magistrates. It must be heard in court. (See findings for Output 1.2.)

And yet in seeming contradiction, to date in the Solomon’s there is no codified legal definition of child or domestic abuse, no spelling out of children’s rights, no clear-cut breakdown of the responsibilities of government offices, courts and traditional authority figures within child protection networks.

In fact, this issue of an understanding of the boundaries between the roles of traditional chiefs and the roles of the state law system, an understanding not only in theory but in practice, may be the most significant challenge to the development of the judicial system in the Solomons.

Child protection in the Solomons must be approached by using both formal and informal ‘justice’ systems.

Eighty-three percent of those interviewed by CPBS consultants stated they would choose “informal” i.e. traditional approaches to resolving conflict. Only 18 percent of informants said they would bring the matter to the police.

To further complicate matters, the Solomon Islands is a culture where justice is based on the tradition of “compensation.” Things get settled outside formal systems. These settlements and the traditions can focus more on inter-familial and community peace-making than necessarily the best interests of the child, let alone underlying custodial, familial or community issues. Changes in awareness, custodianship or social structures are not always pursued after compensation has been made.

Still, CPBR consultants emphasize the importance of the recognition by the formal institutions in the Solomons of community based restorative justice mechanisms. While some of these mechanisms may be flawed, these justice systems represent cultural traditions that not only must be acknowledged but may eventually form a spring-board for authentic and far reaching approaches in child protection.

It is clear that child protection in the Solomons must be approached then using both formal and informal systems. The welcome the Solomons have given to the various NGOs now working in the country has made that task easier.

An essential role for NGO’s in the Solomons: Save the Children at work with the judiciary.

There are several well-organized NGOs at work here, but none has made more of a commitment to work both formally and informally than Save the Children (SAC). Not only is it working with local life skills/rehab for child offender programmes, SAC has recently begun to work with the nation’s judiciary. SAC has developed a series of

insertions for the Solomon's Judicial Bench Book, which offer guidelines for best juvenile justice practices. SAV has made ad hoc training on these principles available to any number of magistrates and judges. (See findings for Output 1.2.)

Likewise, Solomon judges have piloted workshops with chiefs. Although the workshops did not focus on matters of child protection. (the focus was land law), having such a well-received workshop may set a precedent for other workshops on child protection issues protocols.

As stated above, currently only 18% of those interviewed told CPBR consultants they would seek out police to solve a conflict or a problem. And yet, tribal chieftains are not always the best solution. Women, especially, told CPBR consultants that chiefs were often less than interested in protecting the rights of the powerless. Even in the best of circumstances, as current tribal law is meted out, chiefs are not always accountable to victims/survivors.

Police training, investigative resources severely limited within the Solomons' Child Protection initiatives.

The Solomon Islands police force is faced with covering vast territory with myriad logistical problems and extremely limited resources. Many rural areas have virtually no relationship with the police or knowledge of how to report abuse, violence, exploitation or to whom.

The vast majority of the police who receive child victims/survivors and make reports have had no specialized training. There are precious few resources even to protect a child making a claim of abuse. This is true both inside and outside of court. There are substantial delays in almost all prosecutions. There is also a real problem concerning the confidentiality of the reports in the hands of police, magistrates and most especially medical personnel. While there is a Sexual offenders Unit, it is small and there are almost no resources for investigation or follow-up. The Solomons have few safe houses.

Another challenge is police conduct itself. Although there is a Standing Orders rules book governing police conduct and protocols, its use has been described as "inconsistent" by those interviewed by CPBR consultants. There seems to be only a vague awareness of its requirements.

Not surprisingly then, it is not standard practice for the police to contact parents or a social service agency after a child offender has been taken into custody

Essential role of NGO's: police training

Even so, progress is being made. NGO Save the Children is working with the Standing Orders rules book to develop and clarify policies and procedures. Among other issues, these revisions present opportunities to address police violence and to introduce training

in alternative non-violent methods of discipline and interrogation. Compliance with the Standing Orders provisions has recently also been included as a performance indicator for police supervisors.

Diversions, Rehabilitation: issues around inter-agency communication and tracking both of cases and programs

According to law, the police in the Solomons already have some discretion concerning diversion and alternative sentencing for youthful offenders. The problem, again, is with infrastructure. Police may not know of available programs or mentoring opportunities. There are no formal diversion procedures or support services. There is therefore no training for police in ‘best practice.’ Neither is there a tracking system of ‘best practice’ or even “better practice” educational models in service of rehabilitation.

There is, however, some good news. A 2008 governmental initiative was begun to further basic inter-agency – police, judicial, social services -- communication protocols in the Solomons. (see tk) Staff from the Solomon’s department of social welfare are now routinely making visits to some of the country’s correction facilities. This is the first time a governmental agency has undertaken such an initiative. It is clearly an important first step. (See findings for Output 1.2.)

Still, whatever social services, including rehabilitation and life skills, are available in the Solomon Islands comes largely from NGO’s rather than the government itself. There are as yet no meaningful legislative or institutional protocols in place to support the policy provisions or activities of regional partners who are beginning to work in the Solomons, such as Community Welfare Volunteers.

But grass root efforts continue. Various church groups have become increasingly active in this areas as well, markedly so after the ethnic tensions of the late 1990s. Womens’ groups and those of youth are emerging from the efforts of organizations. Such local, initiatives present further promising opportunities for child protection awareness.

How does a community in the Solomons understand child protection? “Seeking Justice” is often far from the best child-centered strategy.

According to information gleaned from CPBR consultants, 75 percent of caretakers in the Solomons are confident that they know what to do if a child is hurt. Thirteen percent are not sure. This group presents an important opportunity to increase child protection in the community.

However, out of the 75 percent of caregivers who expressed confidence in their know-how, only 30 percent saw their role as child-centered. Sixty-eight percent focused instead of “seeking justice” for the child. Caregivers often resort themselves to aggressive behavior.

This belief in retaliation as the best response to a child's experience of violence is an attitude deeply engrained in the culture. Yet, as mentioned earlier, this is not necessarily in a child's best interest in terms of ameliorating underlying causes or even the painful experience itself.

Sexism

Good father-daughter relationships are the exception rather than the rule throughout the Solomons, according to the information gleaned by CPBR consultants.

Battering of women is not uncommon. Yet out of the extremity of that experience, women's groups are being born, many of them focused on issues of child protection.

The marriage of girls as young as thirteen is not unusual in the Solomons.

The team sees a need for more positive models in male/female relationships of every kind, in the hopes that the next generation may see women and girls as fellow human beings with the same rights.

Corporal Punishment at home and at school

Seventy-two percent of the caregivers – both men and women --who responded to CPBR consultants stated that they used corporal punishment on their children.

Although such punishment has been officially outlawed in schools, only 20% of child-care respondents were against teachers using corporal punishment.

As stated above, only 57 percent of stakeholders in the Solomons told CPBR consultants that children were safe in schools. (See findings Output 3.2.)Teachers frequently use corporal punishment, although some feel it is not the most effective form of discipline and have expressed enthusiasm over learning alternative methods. Rule-making in the Solomons' schools is top down, with little or no involvement of children in decision making or policy development.

Children rarely go to caretakers for protection from sexual abuse

When children in the Solomons find themselves hurt or in trouble, the vast majority talk to their peers rather than an adult. Some children told CPBR consultants that they feared disbelief or even a beating if they told "secrets" to an adult. (See findings for Output 3.4.) This, coupled with wide-spread confusion of the part of children as to what is an acceptable touch as opposed to what is not, does not bode well for a child seeking help in the face of abuse, particularly sexual abuse. Only two percent of Solomon caregivers feel confident to know what to do if a child has been sexually abused.

Extended “hosting” families and communal ties play a vital role in the raising of children within the cultural context of the Solomon Islands. How safe are these children?

Even without urban/rural drift, even without the paucity of schools in rural areas, a sizeable percentage of Solomon families would be sending their children to live with other caretakers. This is a Pacific Island custom deeply rooted in an understanding of community and its obligations.

This practice is not as wide-spread as it once was, but 17 percent of Solomon children are still living in a “hosted relationship.” Thirty-four percent of Solomon care-givers whose children are being “hosted” either don’t know if their children are safe, or know that they are not. Sixty-three percent are assuming their children are fine, but that assumption is based only on feedback from hosts, not from the children themselves. (See findings for Output 3.2.)

CPBR consultants recommend that some monitoring be put in place to insure that the children are safe where there are hosted. Ideally, the Ministry of Education would develop a mechanism through the schools of checking the welfare of students. CPBR recommends the mandating of reports on child abuse of all types.

Prostitution/ Sexual Exploitation Rarely Prosecuted

It is extremely rare for matters of commercial sexual exploitation of children to be formally reported to the police despite common knowledge of child prostitution.

Police do not patrol the coast for commercial sexual exploitation of children in relation to fishing boats commonly known to be utilizing the sexual services of young girls

Social Services Task Forces are setting up inter-agency communication networks, but those networks do not at this time involve legal actions. (See findings for Output 1.2.)

CPBR consultants concluded that caretakers in the Solomons have yet to understand the complexities of abuse of power involved in sexual exploitation or indeed in more generalized abuse.

Looking forward

Even as the Solomons must take on its lack of formal institutions and infrastructure, even as concepts of “retribution” and punishment too often replace vital child protection awareness in communities, there is reason for hope.

- According to CPBR investigations, there has been a decrease in the use of corporal punishment of 7-11% in just one generation of caretakers. Several of the

caretakers interviewed cited an increase in their “awareness and education.” One caretaker went on to say, “My parents did not understand me as I understand my children.” (See findings for Output 3.2.)

- The door is certainly open for more awareness training. The Solomon Islands has an extensive distance learning program in place. CPBR consultants recommend using that program to further child protection awareness and skills.
- If more of the Solomon’s chieftains were to take up child protection principles, a multitude of highly effective community based networks would emerge. Grass roots women’s groups are already involved with a number of such initiatives.
- Young people in the Solomons overwhelmingly turn to their peers for support and solace. CPBR sees both an opportunity and an obligation in the Solomons to empower children to give appropriate peer support to each other. Already a great many churches in the Solomons have developed youth groups which can play an important part of this generations’ education, let alone awareness of their rights as children and young people.

insertions for the Solomon's Judicial Bench Book, which offer guidelines for best juvenile justice practices. SAV has made ad hoc training on these principles available to any number of magistrates and judges. (See findings for Output 1.2.)

Likewise, Solomon judges have piloted workshops with chiefs. Although the workshops did not focus on matters of child protection. (the focus was land law), having such a well-received workshop may set a precedent for other workshops on child protection issues protocols.

As stated above, currently only 18% of those interviewed told CPBR consultants they would seek out police to solve a conflict or a problem. And yet, tribal chieftains are not always the best solution. Women, especially, told CPBR consultants that chiefs were often less than interested in protecting the rights of the powerless. Even in the best of circumstances, as current tribal law is meted out, chiefs are not always accountable to victims/survivors.

Police training, investigative resources severely limited within the Solomons' Child Protection initiatives.

The Solomon Islands police force is faced with covering vast territory with myriad logistical problems and extremely limited resources. Many rural areas have virtually no relationship with the police or knowledge of how to report abuse, violence, exploitation or to whom.

The vast majority of the police who receive child victims/survivors and make reports have had no specialized training. There are precious few resources even to protect a child making a claim of abuse. This is true both inside and outside of court. There are substantial delays in almost all prosecutions. There is also a real problem concerning the confidentiality of the reports in the hands of police, magistrates and most especially medical personnel. While there is a Sexual offenders Unit, it is small and there are almost no resources for investigation or follow-up. The Solomons have few safe houses.

Another challenge is police conduct itself. Although there is a Standing Orders rules book governing police conduct and protocols, its use has been described as "inconsistent" by those interviewed by CPBR consultants. There seems to be only a vague awareness of its requirements.

Not surprisingly then, it is not standard practice for the police to contact parents or a social service agency after a child offender has been taken into custody

Essential role of NGO's: police training

Even so, progress is being made. NGO Save the Children is working with the Standing Orders rules book to develop and clarify policies and procedures. Among other issues, these revisions present opportunities to address police violence and to introduce training

in alternative non-violent methods of discipline and interrogation. Compliance with the Standing Orders provisions has recently also been included as a performance indicator for police supervisors.

Diversions, Rehabilitation: issues around inter-agency communication and tracking both of cases and programs

According to law, the police in the Solomons already have some discretion concerning diversion and alternative sentencing for youthful offenders. The problem, again, is with infrastructure. Police may not know of available programs or mentoring opportunities. There are no formal diversion procedures or support services. There is therefore no training for police in 'best practice.' Neither is there a tracking system of 'best practice' or even "better practice" educational models in service of rehabilitation.

There is, however, some good news. A 2008 governmental initiative was begun to further basic inter-agency – police, judicial, social services -- communication protocols in the Solomons. (see tk) Staff from the Solomon's department of social welfare are now routinely making visits to some of the country's correction facilities. This is the first time a governmental agency has undertaken such an initiative. It is clearly an important first step. (See findings for Output 1.2.)

Still, whatever social services, including rehabilitation and life skills, are available in the Solomon Islands comes largely from NGO's rather than the government itself. There are as yet no meaningful legislative or institutional protocols in place to support the policy provisions or activities of regional partners who are beginning to work in the Solomons, such as Community Welfare Volunteers.

But grass root efforts continue. Various church groups have become increasingly active in this areas as well, markedly so after the ethnic tensions of the late 1990s. Womens' groups and those of youth are emerging from the efforts of organizations. Such local, initiatives present further promising opportunities for child protection awareness.

How does a community in the Solomons understand child protection? "Seeking Justice" is often far from the best child-centered strategy.

According to information gleaned from CPBR consultants, 75 percent of caretakers in the Solomons are confident that they know what to do if a child is hurt. Thirteen percent are not sure. This group presents an important opportunity to increase child protection in the community.

However, out of the 75 percent of caregivers who expressed confidence in their know-how, only 30 percent saw their role as child-centered. Sixty-eight percent focused instead of "seeking justice" for the child. Caregivers often resort themselves to aggressive behavior.

This belief in retaliation as the best response to a child's experience of violence is an attitude deeply engrained in the culture. Yet, as mentioned earlier, this is not necessarily in a child's best interest in terms of ameliorating underlying causes or even the painful experience itself.

Sexism

Good father-daughter relationships are the exception rather than the rule throughout the Solomons, according to the information gleaned by CPBR consultants.

Battering of women is not uncommon. Yet out of the extremity of that experience, women's groups are being born, many of them focused on issues of child protection.

The marriage of girls as young as thirteen is not unusual in the Solomons.

The team sees a need for more positive models in male/female relationships of every kind, in the hopes that the next generation may see women and girls as fellow human beings with the same rights.

Corporal Punishment at home and at school

Seventy-two percent of the caregivers – both men and women --who responded to CPBR consultants stated that they used corporal punishment on their children.

Although such punishment has been officially outlawed in schools, only 20% of child-care respondents were against teachers using corporal punishment.

As stated above, only 57 percent of stakeholders in the Solomons told CPBR consultants that children were safe in schools. (See findings Output 3.2.) Teachers frequently use corporal punishment, although some feel it is not the most effective form of discipline and have expressed enthusiasm over learning alternative methods. Rule-making in the Solomons' schools is top down, with little or no involvement of children in decision making or policy development.

Children rarely go to caretakers for protection from sexual abuse

When children in the Solomons find themselves hurt or in trouble, the vast majority talk to their peers rather than an adult. Some children told CPBR consultants that they feared disbelief or even a beating if they told "secrets" to an adult. (See findings for Output 3.4.) This, coupled with wide-spread confusion of the part of children as to what is an acceptable touch as opposed to what is not, does not bode well for a child seeking help in the face of abuse, particularly sexual abuse. Only two percent of Solomon caregivers feel confident to know what to do if a child has been sexually abused.

Extended “hosting” families and communal ties play a vital role in the raising of children within the cultural context of the Solomon Islands. How safe are these children?

Even without urban/rural drift, even without the paucity of schools in rural areas, a sizeable percentage of Solomon families would be sending their children to live with other caretakers. This is a Pacific Island custom deeply rooted in an understanding of community and its obligations.

This practice is not as wide-spread as it once was, but 17 percent of Solomon children are still living in a “hosted relationship.” Thirty-four percent of Solomon care-givers whose children are being “hosted” either don’t know if their children are safe, or know that they are not. Sixty-three percent are assuming their children are fine, but that assumption is based only on feedback from hosts, not from the children themselves. (See findings for Output 3.2.)

CPBR consultants recommend that some monitoring be put in place to insure that the children are safe where there are hosted. Ideally, the Ministry of Education would develop a mechanism through the schools of checking the welfare of students. CPBR recommends the mandating of reports on child abuse of all types.

Prostitution/ Sexual Exploitation Rarely Prosecuted

It is extremely rare for matters of commercial sexual exploitation of children to be formally reported to the police despite common knowledge of child prostitution.

Police do not patrol the coast for commercial sexual exploitation of children in relation to fishing boats commonly known to be utilizing the sexual services of young girls

Social Services Task Forces are setting up inter-agency communication networks, but those networks do not at this time involve legal actions. (See findings for Output 1.2.)

CPBR consultants concluded that caretakers in the Solomons have yet to understand the complexities of abuse of power involved in sexual exploitation or indeed in more generalized abuse.

Looking forward

Even as the Solomons must take on its lack of formal institutions and infrastructure, even as concepts of “retribution” and punishment too often replace vital child protection awareness in communities, there is reason for hope.

- According to CPBR investigations, there has been a decrease in the use of corporal punishment of 7-11% in just one generation of caretakers. Several of the

caretakers interviewed cited an increase in their “awareness and education.” One caretaker went on to say, “My parents did not understand me as I understand my children.” (See findings for Output 3.2.)

- The door is certainly open for more awareness training. The Solomon Islands has an extensive distance learning program in place. CPBR consultants recommend using that program to further child protection awareness and skills.
- If more of the Solomon’s chieftains were to take up child protection principles, a multitude of highly effective community based networks would emerge. Grass roots women’s groups are already involved with a number of such initiatives.
- Young people in the Solomons overwhelmingly turn to their peers for support and solace. CPBR sees both an opportunity and an obligation in the Solomons to empower children to give appropriate peer support to each other. Already a great many churches in the Solomons have developed youth groups which can play an important part of this generations’ education, let alone awareness of their rights as children and young people.