

Resolving conflict in Solomon Islands: The Women for Peace approach

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Introduction

Conflict in Solomon Islands is not a new phenomenon. Its regular occurrence has given the people knowledge and skills to resolve conflict in a manner that is fair and responsive to their culture and environment. However, the current so-called ethnic tension conflict is too big and life-threatening and involves modern weapons.

The roles that women have played in the present conflict can be traced back to their hands-on skills and traditional knowledge, to biblical doctrines regarding responses to conflict, and to their love for their nation. In fact, they have expertise in their own right: love, culture and Christianity have equipped women to respond appropriately to tension.

Different cultures in Solomon Islands provide for women's participation in conflict resolution in different forms. For example, in the Areare culture, women intervene by using their clothes, words or body contact. A woman can stand between two warring parties and challenge them by uttering words such as: 'Enough is enough, stop fighting, if you continue to fight after my words, you have walked over my legs'. Among the Areare, any male contact with or over a woman's body is *tambu* (forbidden) and would require compensation, especially if they are in-laws or brothers and sisters. The fighting has to stop immediately and negotiations for reconciliation and compensation begin.

The Bible, too, provides examples of women's role in conflict. Abigail helped to bring peace to her nation through face-to-face dialogue and the sharing of food (1 Samuel 25:1-44).

Also, as mothers of the nation, Solomon Islands women are committed to offering time and gifts in order to ensure a lasting peace.

Love, culture and Christianity demonstrate peaceful and non-violent ways of resolving conflicts. These methods have enabled women in Solomon Islands to play various roles in contributing to the peace process.

Women for Peace group

The ethnic tension and violence in Solomon Islands has affected women and children the most. Because of the inability of the central government to provide security and basic social services to provinces that are not party to the present conflict, it has also threatened and weakened the cords that bind the country together.

Women in Honiara held a roundtable discussion in May 2000, resulting in the Women's Communiqué on Peace. It contains activities that women set for themselves in order to contribute constructively and meaningfully to the peace process. The events of June 2000 constituted the biggest hostage-taking conflict in the history of Solomon Islands. It challenged the current methods and mechanisms designed by and for Solomon Islanders.

Something had to be done, so the Women for Peace (WFP) group was formed. The group consists of women of all ages, religions, walks of life, and provinces, who reside in Honiara, and includes the sisters of the Catholic Church and Church of Melanesia. It is committed to working on a voluntary basis for peace and takes a motherly approach in doing so. The group also recognises the difficulties of Guadalcanal and Malaita women, and encourages them to take an active and leading role in activities.

The group is independent of any political, religious or ethnic movement and welcomes voluntary support from all committed women of Solomon Islands. It works in collaboration with the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), churches, non government organisations, community leaders, chiefs, government and the international community.

Objectives of Women for Peace

The overall objective of WFP is to actively and effectively support and encourage women's initiatives at all levels, in the search for a peaceful solution to the political crisis. The main message is that having peace within yourself will enhance your ability to give peace to others.

Since it started, the WFP group has encouraged various sectors within the government and the communities to work together and settle differences at the negotiation table. It has also made contact with a number of government officials to brief them on the group's objectives and planned activities, to discuss matters of concern, and to make positive suggestions.

The major objectives of Women for Peace are:

- to build trust and confidence with the two militant groups, through listening and exchanging views, in an attempt to restore peace and get them to meet;
- to convince the fighting parties to lay down their arms and thus open the way to democracy and good governance in Solomon Islands;
- to make known to the militants, and the government, the impact of the tension on children, mothers, and other vulnerable groups;

- to share women's views on compensation, law and order and security, and the need for politicians to be united and work together;
- to build trust and confidence with the provincial governments of Malaita and Guadalcanal;
- to mobilise women, chiefs, elders, village leaders, parliamentarians, provincial members, church leaders, and foreign governments to unite and speak with one voice—the voice of peace and reconciliation;
- to join in fellowship with the victims of the tension;
- to meet with government leaders and share women's perspectives on the tension and at the same time offer assistance in the peace process; and
- to alert foreign development partners to the need for their continued assistance, especially in building up the confidence of the police force and in supervising the laying down of arms.

Women for Peace activities

In working towards the fulfilment of the group's objectives and purposes, WFP members have been involved in various activities:

- meeting with militants, government and police representatives;
- representation at ceasefire talks;
- weekly prayer meetings, including the Women's Plea for Peace which was broadcast live throughout the nation;
- forums and conferences;
- visits to displaced families, the hospital and provincial communities, particularly to encourage the re-integration of young militants;
- organised exchange of baskets of essential goods; and
- the wearing of a distinctive uniform: scarves of green, yellow and blue, representing the national flag.

Listening to the views expressed during visits has given the group a deeper understanding of the root causes of the current tension.

Women of the group have donated willingly and lovingly from their own pockets and wardrobes. They have dug deep into their baskets. Because of the work they are doing, the communities continue to donate funds to help meet transport and communication expenses.

Women for Peace utilise non-violent and peaceful methods in making their views heard. The challenge is whether this approach can be effective in an armed conflict situation such as the current one. The women believe that these methods have worked in the cultural and biblical context and that they can contribute to the way forward and will be crucial to sustainable community living and human development. But, for this to come about, peace must be achieved and work must start now by all men, women and the church.

Participation in the peace process

Some general observations can be made about the participation of women in the search for a lasting solution to the current

social unrest. It is clear that the encouragement of cultural diversity and social integration in Solomon Islands, while difficult, can be achieved with respect, love, care, sharing and understanding.

It is also clear, in the work that WFP has carried out, that people want to maintain their roots and cultural diversity while feeling socially integrated. One of the main reasons for the current conflict is that people feel that the political system is not responsive to their needs, and that the legal system has not afforded equal protection to all people in society. These are fundamental requirements for harmony and security and the means by which the social and cultural capital of a community of different ethnic groups can be enriched.

While there is political support for the efforts of women, this has not been translated into practical action to allow for their participation, which partially results from the stereotyping of men and women and the lack of acceptance of all people and their contribution towards peace being equally deserving.

Donor assistance to the peace process

During the last 20 months Solomon Islanders have wrecked the economy, directly by their involvement in the conflict and indirectly by being silent about the impact of the crisis on the country. In the year 2001 Solomon Islands will be fighting for the survival of its children and future generations. It is estimated that \$188 million will be raised by the government in 2001. Of this, \$168 million will be required for debt servicing and only about \$20 million will be left to fund services. Given this situation for the next three years, aid from donor countries will have to finance all government investment and recurrent expenditure.

Those managing the assistance must ensure that aid does not create any more mistakes that will lead to further conflict. In the past, economic growth has not always been a donor priority. For relief and rehabilitation to work, assistance needs to be carefully aimed at sound economic management at all levels within the government machinery, the private sector and civil society. Aid projects must also be properly appraised and monitored to ensure that they are sustainable and do not duplicate the work of others. More importantly, good economic policies are needed to make aid work for the country and these policies must be soundly administered. Outside assistance therefore needs to address root causes of the ethnic tension, national unity, nation building and the creation of opportunities and incentives throughout the country to enable people to remain in their land/locality and still be economically viable. It needs to expand people's capacity and capabilities. It also needs to take into account that concentration of economic and political power may lead to non-sustainable policies at the expense of natural systems upon which the poor rely.

It is important to acknowledge in all of this work that a sense of belonging is an important source of personal fulfilment, well-being, enjoyment, purpose and meaning.

Conclusion

The current conflict between migrants demonstrates the importance of addressing complex problems of urbanisation. Approximately 48 per cent of the population are under the age of 14 years and about 75 per cent are under 30 years. With only 2.4 per cent of the population over 55 years of age, many children and young people are without the guidance of old people in urban centres.

The transmission of knowledge and wisdom to the younger generation has always been a very important part of community living, culture and general socialisation in Solomon Islands. Many of these urban children have less opportunity to learn customary norms and practices or the language of their parents' place of origin. The smaller number of adults has to cope with a great deal of pressure as income earners who provide the basic needs of their children, young people and extended families. The children of intermarriages are experiencing new family structures. This in itself presents a profound cultural and social problem which young urban people are facing. A growing number of young people and children have less security – less land security and emotional security.

Outside threats, culture, social capital, leadership, ethnicity, language, religion and ideology are the social glue that help the system cohere. Our experience in Solomon Islands has demonstrated that such factors, either combined or by themselves, are not enough in dealing with armed conflict. Because of the internal pressures caused by the failure of government policies and strategies, high unemployment and ethnic conflict, the social disintegration that we now see was inevitable. We have turned on ourselves and are tearing ourselves apart on the basis of ethnicity and perceived privilege. A situation of fractured, multi-polar interests has unfolded which now places great demands on the systems of governance. Because the institutions of governance are weak and less durable, ethnic tensions have erupted through society's thin crust more easily and frequently, now that there is no law and order.

Religion and culture have, in the past, often had a humanising effect on society because of their emphasis on ethical values and concern for the well-being of others. However, it has been demonstrated in the current crisis that ethnic separatism can also gain momentum under these circumstances. When only a small minority benefit from economic growth while more than 80 per cent of the people experience real-wage reductions, the ordinary person has looked for easily identifiable scapegoats. For most of the young people involved in the ethnic tension, ethnicity has served as a convenient means of allocating blame and gathering allies.

We must all reach mutual understanding and agreement on quick and effective means for dealing with the profound threat of the tension to the well-being of our country. In armed conflict, outside assistance is a must and we, the Women for Peace, present our appeal for peace to all, but the situation has deteriorated. There is real concern for the fate of many women and children if outside assistance is not forthcoming for the Solomons Islands' conflict.

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of Women for Peace.

Useful background documents

Department of Development Planning 2000, 'Analytical report on monitoring and planning for displaced families: Case study – Malaita', Honiara, January.

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