

## Beyond the Bottom Line

*by Joses Tuhonuku, Solomon Islands.*

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All of the Island States have been colonies not very long ago. Most of us got our independence in the '70s. More than 80% live in rural areas. Literacy, compared with Australia is not very high. The bottom line for the majority is some basic services: health, education, communication, and some basic economic infrastructure which gives opportunities to be able to earn some cash income to be able to pay for certain things which have to be paid for in cash, because most of our people live off the land.

For this there are three requisites: We need to have good governance and sound economic management. We need the rule of law. We are striving to have good governance – we have a constitution which prescribes what we should do. The rule of law has to be something that enables us to have good governance and sound economic management.

But there is a problem. There is a big threat to that prerequisite – that is corruption. Our experience of the last 20 years is that when there is corruption it affects governance, it affects our ability to provide sound economic management. It leads to us not having those very basic services. Corruption, I believe, is something that exists everywhere, including Australia. But in terms of its impact on people – there is a big difference between developed countries and developing countries. In developed countries there is an economic cushion. In developing countries, once there is corruption – and in SI it is endemic – once there is corruption it hits the most basic needs of the citizens because we don't have the kind of economic cushion that you have. It means not enough classrooms. Not enough beds in hospitals. Not enough food to feed the patients. It hits us rock bottom.

So while you have the luxury of being able to have the time apart from your system and institutions that can deal with the problems, we don't seem to have the time. It's so urgent it must happen now and it's not happening. The important thing is: What are we going to do about corruption? I used to think you could stamp out corruption. After 20 years involved in these things I realise that it's impossible to stamp out corruption. What we have to do is organise ourselves to deal with corruption. We have to factor those things in. This is how I see my involvement with Winds of Change and Transparency Solomon Islands as small institutions that exist outside the pillars that have been set up to look after the country and ensure that they scrutinise not just the individuals but those institutions. In the last 10 years corruption has become almost a way of life in Solomon Islands, it affects the whole system. Even the leadership that got commissioned to deal with corrupt leaders got caught up. It was a very corrupt set up. Even the electoral commission. You go through a lot of the so-called democratic institutions - they were affected by the kind of corruption or level of corruption we had in the country. I believe what we have to do now is be prepared for a long haul. We must make sure that we have a very strong chapter of Transparency Solomon Islands. We must ensure that we have the Winds of Change and all these civil-society type of organisations. We must make sure that we develop them so that we will keep at the fight. We must

not give up, must not give in, must not expect that it is going to happen overnight otherwise we will be very dissatisfied.

My last point is the relationship between the people and their government in Solomon Islands. There is great mistrust. They don't trust the leaders now in Solomon Islands. It's very hard to do something when there is that mistrust. So there is a lot of work that must be done. It has advanced to a higher level. We have diplomatic relations with a lot of countries - bilateral arrangements - for example Australia. In Solomon Islands since independence we have been able to raise the capital for our current budget. We depend very heavily on our aid donors for our development budget. Australia has been a very generous sort of donor to Solomon Islands over the years. One good example is when the RAMSI was coming over to Solomon Islands to get us out of the problems we had, it has been financed and led by Australia. I must say, what our Prime Minister has been doing up till now - we are very ashamed and we are embarrassed by that. Because I think that the people of Solomon Islands - they appreciate very much what the Govt of Australia and the people of Australia have done to us through RAMSI, and in our culture we really appreciate it. I think our Prime Minister has embarrassed us by behaving in a way that almost suggests that Solomon Islands people do not culturally appreciate what friends or other people do to them. So the relationship between Australia and Solomon Islands is not very good at the moment. Whatever the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister have been saying is not representative of the view of the Solomon Islands people. And if you ask "why are they still in power? - Corruption is keeping them in power. There are people there, some embassies and foreign missions and private companies or business houses, especially the logging companies. Whoever they want to keep in power - they've got the money to do it. They can easily bribe so many Members of Parliament to remain with someone. So that is the situation we are in in the Solomon Islands.