

*The New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI) undertakes research focusing on engagement with Asia, provides a forum for informed debates, and offers a bridge to Asia-related expertise and research within the University of Auckland.*

## Political Patronage Distorts Disaster Response in Solomon Islands

Most studies of disaster preparedness, response and recovery in Asia and elsewhere are technical. A recent article\*\* about Solomon Islands instead explores political aspects, especially distortions from political patronage – a familiar issue in many parts of the world.

In April 2014, after days of intense rainfall, severe flash flooding displaced tens of thousands in this fragile, post-conflict state of 650,000 people living mostly by subsistence agriculture. Crops were destroyed and already-rickety infrastructure damaged.

Solomon Islands inherited a Westminster-style Parliament upon independence in 1978, but in reality the government's reach beyond the capital, Honiara, is limited. Broadening this reach, the Constituency Development Funds Act 2013 (CDFFA) had empowered the 50 Members of Parliament (MPs) to distribute funds to constituents for vaguely defined "development", with high discretion. Each was now entrusted with 300,000 Solomon Island Dollars (USD37,500) of disaster relief. A significant portion of the discretionary relief funds was provided by Taiwan which is vying for diplomatic recognition by Pacific countries.

To examine the consequences, the researchers interviewed 23 people who had co-managed responses by non-governmental, governmental, multilateral and civil society organizations, and conducted 12 focus groups in three regions. They sought to give voice to diverse lived experiences, including the marginalised.

Responses implicated deep social structures and a persistent patron-client ethos beneath the Westminster surface, particularly explained by wantokism. Literally designating speakers of the same language (Solomons has 70 and a shared pidgin), wantok ("one talk") connotes kinship. Wantokism means favouritism and personal relationships rather than merit-based decision making, or, more positively, a social safety net making up for minimal government service delivery.

Respondents could not discern any distribution criteria. Community members were typically not consulted on their needs. Only participants granted the maximum cash, food and accommodation allowed were satisfied. Some had to pay their MP a part charge. Assistance often reportedly

rewarded or enticed voters – a general election was looming. In Solomons, voting follows kinship and personal allegiances rather than party or ideological lines and favours bigmen who amass and distribute wealth.

Many interviewees considered MPs' distributions fostered dependence by their political clients, encouraged opportunistic exaggeration of needs, and undermined resilience and preparedness by undoing historic reliance on communities' own recovery efforts. Among others, three civil servants said relief was unaccountable, unequal, sidelined mandated disaster ministries and blurred MPs' executive and legislative roles. Besides, most MPs lacked technical expertise.

Drawing on their findings, the researchers argue that MPs had prioritised not the neediest but clients to whom they owed social obligations, as well as political supporters. This fits with official criticisms, after a 2007 earthquake and tsunami and a major cyclone in 2015, of using MPs as relief vehicles and of Cabinet "illegally" bypassing the National Disaster Council.

The researchers conclude that patronage working via MPs' dual roles as legislators and implementers may threaten not only disaster-related accountability, effectiveness and fairness but the whole social fabric: disaster responses reflect society and non-emergency times in Solomons exhibit similar features. Their critical but hopeful approach argues for greater inclusion of those affected by disaster.

\*\*The full study results are available in an article authored by Carl Adams and Andreas Neef: "Patrons of disaster: The role of political patronage in flood response in the Solomon Islands". World Development Perspectives 15, article 100128, 2019.

