

Connections & Conversations

Australian Society of Archivists Conference 2006

Recordkeeping in the Pacific

Records management capacity in the Solomon Islands

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The National Archives of Australia, through the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), is assisting the National Archives of Solomon Islands to improve recordkeeping across the Solomon Islands Government.

The assistance involves the redevelopment of records management policies and procedures across the Solomon Islands Government. This paper will outline the project and its results to date, and will examine some of the barriers to and drivers of good recordkeeping in the Solomon Islands.

‘Solomon Time – how it was to dominate future events I then had no idea. It is liquid, a fluid that cannot be contained, that has no master, that sloshes backward and forward and even from side to side. It has no symmetry or order. Solomon Time plays by nobody’s rules, yet it loosely dictates that something may happen a little late or perhaps a little early or days late or even days early; it may have happened already or it may never happen at all. Schedules and timetables become irrelevancies, arrangements, meetings and deadlines inconsequential.

Solomon Time trickles through every stream in every forest and pumps through the veins of every man or woman born of Solomon. Clocks stop ticking;

wristwatches become mere ornaments. Time is governed by the sun and the moon, by light and dark. Months slip by indistinguishable one from the next. December as hot as May, November as wet as June. Daily routine, apart from the two bookends of morning and evening prayer, is as higgledy-piggledy as a child's toy box. Mealtimes become moveable feasts. Work, rest and play are as confused as three scoops of ice cream melted in the tropical sun.

Days, weeks, years slip by as they do in every other corner of the world, but the islanders pay scant attention to the upturned hourglass. Intent on living, they have no time for Time. Solomon Time can be magical; it can blur, twist, distort; it can transport you into an almost ethereal state of blissful calm and serenity – but then, of course, sometimes it can just be bloody irritating.¹

Some of the records management difficulties that the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) currently faces can be attributed in one way or another to Solomon Time, although there are many more cultural and administrative factors also at play.

The Context

Solomon Islands is a primarily Melanesian country of about half a million people stretched over an archipelago of around a thousand islands and speaking at least 60 distinct languages. The British made the chain of islands a protectorate in 1893 in an attempt to stop the worst excesses of blackbirding, and governed until granting independence in 1978.²

In 28 years of independence only one government has served a full four-year term. The political party system is immature and these allegiances are fluid, as was demonstrated seen following the April 2006 election and subsequent riots, where elected MPs switched allegiances to rally behind different leaders at different times.

With such political instability it is not hard to understand how government administration can decline. Add Solomon Time to this scenario as a further hurdle to efficient administration. Add again an oral culture, where documenting procedures is

¹ Will Randall, *Solomon Time: An Unlikely Quest in the South Pacific*, Scribner, New York, 2002, pp. 33-4.

² United States Department of State, *Background Note: Solomon Islands*, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2799.htm>.

secondary to their oral passing on. Then add the enormous pressure placed on public servants by the 'wontok' culture, where people are powerfully compelled by their culture to share any resource they have access to with those in their language group who are in need. In this environment inefficiency can easily become corruption.

The tensions of 1998 to 2003 are blamed for many current failings in Solomon Islands Government administration. They did indeed cause its final collapse, as government officers were forced to sign cheques at gunpoint and the Prime Minister was kidnapped and forced to resign. Some have argued, however, that the reverse is also true – the failure of government to manage its resources for the benefit of the people caused some of the discontent, which in turn fed on land and ethnic grievances and eventually resulted in the crisis.³

The theme of the 2005 PARBICA conference was 'Recordkeeping for Good Governance'. The National Archives of Solomon Islands was represented there. At its conclusion, the delegates resolved to 'call on Pacific governments to establish national recordkeeping strategies in support of transparent, accountable and efficient governance and to include recordkeeping in national policies and legislation on governance and access to information.'⁴ In response, the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Tourism and Culture in Solomon Islands requested assistance from RAMSI to assess the state of records management throughout the Solomon Islands Government.

The National Archives of Australia agreed to provide this assistance and a technical adviser arrived in Honiara on the 7th of February 2006. The first task was to provide a baseline report on the current state of recordkeeping in the Solomon Islands Government.

The Baseline

The baseline report took about two months to produce and was based on interviews with staff at ten departments within SIG. These interviews revealed that the

³ Ruth Liloqula and Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard, *Understanding Conflict in Solomon Islands: A Practical Means to Peacemaking*, State Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 00/7, Australian National University Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies [Canberra, 200], p. 5.

⁴ Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (Parbica), *Resolutions of Parbica's 11th General Conference*, available at <http://www.parbica.org/conf11>.

traditional registry system established under the British was largely intact in all departments and was operating reasonably well.

The key records management issues identified in the baseline can be largely divided into four categories: awareness, file tracking, disposal and structure and performance management.

There is no overarching records management policy for the Solomon Islands Government. The SIG General Orders are possibly the only policy statement on recordkeeping – and these require only that responsible officers maintain efficient records systems which are uniform throughout each Ministry and that officers adhere to the Manual of Registry Procedures, produced in 1981.⁵ The principles underlying these procedures are good and have served the Solomon Islands Government quite well, where they are being followed. The procedures are, however, now 25 years old and in need of substantial review.

There appears, though, to be only patchy awareness among departmental officers of the existing records management procedures or of what information they should be putting on divisional files, and much important information seems not to be put into proper filing systems. Registry staff are, however, very well versed in the procedures set out in the Manual, even when they do not have a copy of the Manual itself. While the majority of registry staff have had training in filing procedures through the government's public service training agency, the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM), all staff, including senior staff, need more guidance on when they should create and keep records.

Most departments in the Solomon Islands Government use what is called locally a File Index to title and manage their records. The File Index is really just a list that gives the titles of all the files that are available for use in the department. All file titles are pre-determined, and staff are expected to use only the files that appear in the File Index. As a result staff try to squeeze documents onto files that aren't really suitable. This of course makes it extremely difficult to locate the correct file for any given activity which in turn discourages staff from using the filing system at all.

⁵ Solomon Islands Government, *General Orders*.

In addition, there is no form of file registration or movement tracking. The presence of a title on the File Index is the only indication that a file may have been created and there is no reliable central record of its location at any given time.

There is currently no accountable system for appraising government records and authorising their disposal. The National Archives Act⁶ requires that departments make arrangements for the selection of historical documents from among their records, but there seems not to be any documented process for doing this. The current practice is that departments transfer all of their old records to the Archives, which keeps them for 35 years, or 50 years for personnel files. At some point after this period, archives staff conduct a weeding process using their own judgement to select records for permanent preservation. This system is vastly over-retentive, and provides no protection for the archives staff or others against accusations of improper disposal.

The major problem, however, is that registry power has dwindled to control only a small proportion of the records of government – often only personnel records – and the majority of the core records of government business are left to haphazard management within departmental divisions. The quality of this management relies on the common sense of individuals rather than on established procedures administered by well qualified, skilled and trained records management staff. In addition, a lack of resources means that registries often serve more than one department.

Few government plans or processes include performance indicators or service standards. The Office of the Auditor-General this year tabled its first reports to parliament in ten years and there is currently a backlog of around eight years in auditing the national accounts, let alone any targeted audits of particular areas of financial management. Corporate Plans at times appear to be only suggestions, and staff have no reluctance to change to a new course of action when an opportunity arises, with no particular concerns about the ability to meet agreed targets.

The Response

The difficulties identified in the baseline report were common to all departments and stem from a lack of appropriate high-level guidance on records management.

⁶ At the time of writing the Solomon Islands *National Archives Act 1986* had not been gazetted and was not in legal operation.

Registry staff have good basic records management skills and have been very diligent in applying existing procedures. Their training in using those procedures has also been good. Rather, it is the procedures they have been trained to follow that need updating. There did also appear to be fairly strong support for improvement of records management at high levels of SIG and as this high-level backing already existed, an approach that works with senior officers to produce whole-of-government guidance was thought to be appropriate to capitalise on the support.

The first priority was to update the existing Solomon Islands Government Manual of Registry Procedures. Updated procedures can address problems in a number of areas, including by:

- raising staff awareness generally on the importance of recordkeeping;
- providing new guidance to registry staff on file tracking and other management processes; and
- providing suggestions to departments on how they might improve and monitor the overall operation of their recordkeeping systems.

Other suggested approaches had elements that made them likely to be less effective. Conducting awareness training amongst SIG staff at this time could entrench poor practices if there were no updated procedures or other guidance. Development of records disposal authorities, while an important consideration, will take a long time to be completed, and the staff at the National Archives do not yet have sufficient expertise to sustain the work.

However, further recommendations of the Baseline report were that:

- Recordkeeping awareness training for all SIG officers be developed based on the new procedures manual, when this is complete; and
- The Government Archivist, when appointed, place a priority on developing the skills of the Archives' staff to enable the Archives to begin work on developing records disposal authorities.

The Archives

It is probably worth pausing for a moment here to consider the state of the National Archives of Solomon Islands itself. The Archives was established under the British, who constructed a headquarters building and repository soon after independence. At the time it was the only purpose-built archives repository in the Pacific and today it continues to be in reasonable shape.

The last person to be substantively appointed as Government Archivist left the country during the height of the tensions in 1999, was deemed to have abandoned her post and was dismissed. The position has been substantively vacant since that time, with a long-serving but more junior staff member acting in the position. There are officially nine positions in the organisational structure, but because establishments are developed in isolation from budgets, there is not sufficient funding to fill all of those posts. This has not presented significant difficulties in the past because there has never been a time when all of the positions have been filled. There are currently four permanent staff, including the cleaner.

There is not enough shelving for the current holdings of the Archives and records are stacked in shoulder-high piles in corridors and processing rooms. In these conditions, the Archives is barely functioning. The Reading Room opens its doors every day to researchers, but the reference service is quite basic. Because there is no photocopier, researchers are sometimes allowed to leave the building with original records to make copies. Transfers have virtually ceased because there is nowhere to put the records. There is certainly no current capacity for a transparent and accountable appraisal and disposal regime.

The Project Plan

The project plan for developing the new Manual envisaged a series of workshops involving staff from across the Government that would develop the content and make decisions where there were choices to be made between different approaches. The aim of the workshops would be to ensure that the policies and procedures developed in the manual are workable and relevant to all Solomon Islands Government agencies. This approach was also seen as helping to build commitment to the manual throughout SIG.

The first of the workshops was to develop a whole-of-government records management policy. Permanent Secretaries from the Prime Minister's Department, Finance and Treasury, the Public Service Department and the Archives' parent department were invited, along with the Auditor-General, the Ombudsman, the Director of IPAM and the Acting Government Archivist. The workshop had the two-fold aim of making policy decisions about recordkeeping and of getting these key stakeholders on board for the project.

On the day, only the Acting Government Archivist and the Auditor-General turned up, and the workshop was abandoned. The Auditor-General complained to the *Solomon Star* about his colleagues' absence, saying "This is one of the most important workshops that senior public officers should not miss...records management is a major problem in the Government system."⁷ A decision was made not to reschedule the workshops, in part because the support from senior officers needed for the work clearly wasn't there. And so Plan B was developed.

Instead of consulting directly on the content, the Manual has now been drafted based on the extensive consultations done during the baseline process. Drafts of the Manual's chapters are being reviewed by archivists around the Pacific for readability to a Pacific audience and for professional integrity. The key element of the new plan is more widespread testing of the procedures following their drafting. Live testing is even more critical to the project than in previous planning, as the drafting currently relies on the short experience of the technical adviser of records management conditions and capacity in the Solomons. Testing has the added advantage of providing some records management improvements to selected agencies, so that there will continue to be some positive outcomes from the project even if there are further difficulties in completing the Manual.

The First Test

The first area to be tested has been a process for developing Records Plans to replace the File Indexes discussed earlier, which was piloted with IPAM. IPAM provides training for all public servants in administrative skills like basic accounting and computing. It also provides standardised training for registry clerks. IPAM is an

⁷ *Solomon Star*, Thursday 22 June 2006, p. 1.

important ally for the project, as it will be this agency that will need to train records management staff throughout government in the new procedures.

There is an informal philosophy in aid delivery used in the Solomons called 'good enough government'. Good enough government acknowledges that you can't impose a state-of-the-art solution on an organisation that is struggling with the basics. Instead, you need to take the principles that underlie best practice and develop a simple solution that will do a good enough job until there is more capacity to make further improvements. With that in mind, the basic principles of DIRKS were used to develop a Record Plan for IPAM.

There is very little documentation in relation to IPAM's establishment and work. This meant that the analysis of the Institute's business functions had to come largely from the staff. All staff were invited to a workshop to develop the Record Plan. Inviting all staff ensured that there was a broad view of all of the activities of IPAM, particularly in the context of the lack of formal documentation. Involving all the staff who use the filing system in its development was also seen as a way of helping them to understand how it works and therefore have more confidence in using it. Finally, as IPAM is responsible for training all records management staff in the government, the workshop would be a good opportunity to start spreading some better practice messages across the government by including the trainers as well as the senior management and registry staff.

By the end of the exercise four core and seven administrative functions made up of a total of 64 activities had been identified for IPAM. The Office of the Auditor-General reviewed the Financial Management function to ensure that it covers all of the accounting records they would expect a government department to create, and IPAM staff reviewed the draft before it was finalised.

The work with the IPAM was very successful. The staff could see how the process would make their records management easier and they also understood how the analysis of their work could help them to better conceptualise their role as an organisation. The Record Plan may not be the most rigorously constructed of business classification schemes, but it should go a long way toward ensuring that IPAM staff can find the records that they need when they need them.

The IPAM workshop gave further valuable insights into how recordkeeping can work in the Solomons and also provided a better appreciation of the existing capacity for analysing and understanding business processes, which is so vital for recordkeeping activity. Work is continuing with other departments to test and implement other practices, such as file registration systems and file census procedures. Key allies in this work will be the Office of the Auditor-General and the Public Service Department (PSD), who have agreed to be part of the testing process.

All of this work will, however, have been for nothing if there is no follow-up to ensure that the Manual is implemented. If PSD are willing to mandate the use of the Manual, and IPAM are able to update their training to reflect its processes, we will be moving in the right direction.

The Barriers and Drivers

There are plenty of papers in the literature that talk about the things that developing countries need to do to improve their recordkeeping. In Nigeria, a lack of clear-cut records management standards and inadequate professional records management personnel are seen as factors militating against good records management.⁸ In Kenya these factors are also identified alongside inadequate storage, failure to implement recommendations relating to records management and an over-reliance on electronic systems.⁹ A 2003 forum of Pacific archivists identified inadequate legislation, training and resources as key issues.¹⁰ These lists apply equally well to the Solomon Islands. There is relatively little discussion, though, of what makes governments and other organisations want to implement these improvements.

Money talks. Lack of storage, problems with data integrity and subsequent revenue losses seem to underlie a decision to make changes in the Fiji Islands Revenue and Customs Authority.¹¹ In the Solomons, donors are a major source of money, so to some extent if donors want good recordkeeping they will get it. The World Bank

⁸ Stephen Osahon Uwaifo, 'Management use of records in Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria', *Records Management Journal*, v14(2), 2004, p. 89.

⁹ Nathan Mnjama, 'Archives and records management in Kenya: problems and Prospects', *Records Management Journal*, v13(2), 2003, p. 94

¹⁰ International Records Management Trust, *Evidence-Based Governance in the Electronic Age: The Importance of Record Keeping for Good Governance, Summary Session 8, Wednesday 2 April 2003 1700 to 1900 EDT*, available at <http://www.irmt.org>.

¹¹ Lesley J Boye, 'The Fiji Experience: A case study' in Records Management Association of Australasia, *From Concept to Reality: Proceedings 12th to 15th September 2004 21st International RMAA Convention*, p. 227

Archives has done some work aimed at making recordkeeping a condition of funding¹². Pacific-based archivists have supported the view that donors are crucial in instigating change.¹³ The fact that AusAID and RAMSI have identified recordkeeping as an important element of the RAMSI Machinery of Government Programme is also a good sign that donors are taking recordkeeping seriously as a key element of good governance.

Adverse audit reports make people want to improve recordkeeping. The revival of the audit function in the Solomon Islands is encouraging. The Auditor-General is already a clear and vocal ally for the project. Four special audits have recently been completed, all of which have highlighted recordkeeping issues, and responses to audit recommendations have started to come in from departments. It remains to be seen whether the will exists in the highest levels of government to demand adequate responses to audits so that more than lip service is paid to implementing remedies.

While individual recordkeeping disasters may prompt isolated responses and individual officers may have the dedication to pursue change in their own spheres, an appetite in politicians and public service leaders for change is the key to improvement across government. None of the responses identified in Kenya, Nigeria, Fiji and other areas of the Pacific are of themselves very difficult to do. What is required is the political will to make genuine improvements that make real differences to transparency, efficiency, accountability and corruption-fighting. The current work in the Solomon Islands may begin to demonstrate how to make a difference. It is up to the Solomon Islands public servants and their leaders to decide that they want to make that difference.

¹²<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/EXTARCHIVES/0,..contentMDK:20033283~pagePK:36726~piPK:437378~theSitePK:29506,00.html>

¹³ International Records Management Trust, op cit.