



On the Same Track

ADB roads and bridges in the Solomon Islands are improving thanks to the almost complete Post Conflict Emergency Rehabilitation Project.



Honiara - Several times a week, Mary Puke travels from Visale in West Guadalcanal to the Central Market in Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands. Before the road and bridge network was rehabilitated, the 80-kilometer (km) round trip used to take about 6 hours. Now, after ADB's Post Conflict Emergency Rehabilitation Project (PCERP) began in 2002 to rehabilitate damaged roads and bridges in east and west Guadalcanal, and on the island of Malaita, the same trip takes only 2 hours.

"Better roads and bridges mean I can get my mangoes to market more quickly and they are fresher when they get there," said Ms. Puke.

Solomon Islands is located just east of Papua New Guinea, and is the third largest archipelago in the South Pacific. It comprises almost 1,000 islands only about one third of which are inhabited. The islands cover a sea area of more than 1.35 million square kilometers and are mostly rugged mountains and coral atolls.

Worst Conditions

Major infrastructure linking provincial and market centers to communities in east and west Guadalcanal and on the Island of Malaita were destroyed during ethnic tensions in 1999-2000. Bridges were bombed and roads were severely damaged. A peace agreement signed in October 2000 ended almost 2 years of conflict between groups from Guadalcanal and Malaita provinces. While the peace deal was good news, communities were left without access to markets, clinics, schools, and agricultural services.

"Frankly speaking, these were the worst conditions I'd seen in nearly 30 years of working on road projects," said Rishi Adhar, Senior Project Implementation Officer from ADB's Pacific Liaison and Coordination Office.

Fruit vendor Wilson Manei illustrates the impact of the improved roads. "After the tensions, the roads were in terrible condition," he said. Three times a week, Mr. Manei travels from his home in Numbu, East Guadalcanal to the Central Market to sell pablos, a type of citrus fruit. "Before the roads and bridges were repaired, very few trucks would attempt the trip to the market which meant I couldn't get to there to sell my fruits, so I could not earn money."

In 2005, after the project had a major change of scope, AusAID (Australia's overseas aid program) made additional funds available through its Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) budget. RAMSI is a partnership between the Government and people of Solomon Islands aimed at helping create the conditions necessary for a return to stability, peace, and a growing economy. NZAID (New Zealand's overseas aid program) injected additional funds into the project, joining forces with Solomon Islands Government, ADB, and AusAID to expand PCERP.

Successful Project

"PCERP has been widely regarded as being quite successful, delivering on its original objectives in an environment that was still quite fragile," said RAMSI Development Coordinator Paul Kelly. "PCERP also contributed to economic growth in Solomon Islands. A working network of improved roads and bridges (particularly in rural areas) has joined communities together and become a lifeline to markets, and hospitals."

When PCERP is completed in 2008, about 102 km of sealed roads, 65 km of gravel roads and 51 bridges in Guadalcanal and the island of Malaita will have been rehabilitated. "On a daily basis, you see a huge volume of people traveling from the west and east to Honiara in the back of trucks and in buses. That didn't happen before because the roads were full of pot holes and gullies. This is another sign of PCERP making a positive impact on the lives of Solomon Islanders," said ADB's Adhar.

The iconic Tanavasa Bridge, west of Honiara, captures the spirit of the project, as Mike Qaqara, Deputy Project Manager of PCERP, explained. "The Tanavasa Bridge was blown up during the conflict and its loss meant people from the west could not easily travel to Honiara to go to the market, or access other essential services in town."

Rebuilt under PCERP, the Tanavasa Bridge has become much more than a concrete and steel structure that links the east and west sides of the island. During the opening of the new bridge in December 2006, it was unofficially named "The Bridge of Peace" by people from the surrounding communities. It is symbolic of the trust and cooperation that now exists between communities previously at war.

Impressive Results

"The Solomon Islands Government is very impressed with the results of PCERP," said Moses Virivolomo, PCERP Coordinator and Undersecretary in the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development. "We asked ADB to do the project for us because they are well known for their technical expertise in infrastructure and transport."

While good roads have largely improved the lives of Solomon Islanders, Mr. Virivolomo pointed out they have caused a few unexpected problems. "When the roads were repaired suddenly people drove much faster. There was an increase in accidents, so right now the government is looking into rolling out a public awareness campaign about the dangers of speeding, and establishing pedestrian crossings and speed control signs. That is one of the big lessons we learned from PCERP."

Both NZAID and RAMSI maintain that PCERP was a very good project for its time. RAMSI's Paul Kelly said, "PCERP was a very tangible and powerful project for the community and donors to see in a postconflict environment." The cofinanciers say they learned a lot about transport infrastructure during the course of the project, because transport infrastructure is not a traditional niche area for them in Solomon Islands. Both agree ADB's expertise in this area was key to them joining the project.

ADB, AusAID, and NZAID have all signed the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which commits the development partners to coordinate and harmonize to achieve increased aid effectiveness. Talking about the advantages of coordination, NZAID Manager Guy Redding said, "It's much more effective to work together than to work individually. It's important to share information to ensure we don't duplicate effort. By pooling our different ideas we generally come up with a much better result."

Mr. Redding pointed out that while PCERP is a good example of donor harmonization, he would like to see coordination go a step further and see donors adopt more of a sector-wide or strategic approach in the transport sector. "So rather than think about separate transport projects, we need to discuss ways in which we can coordinate to provide sectoral support in the transport area to help the Solomon Islands Government achieve its aims outlined in their transport strategy and interlink different forms of transport."

Next Step

The Solomon Islands Road Improvement Project (SIRIP) follows PCERP as the next big roads and bridges rehabilitation project in Solomon Islands, and is more of an integrated project of assistance than its predecessor. Of SIRIP, Mr. Virivolomo of the Solomon Islands Government said, "SIRIP provides policy advice, and capacity building for the Ministry of Infrastructure. It's also engaging much more with communities and the private sector to try and promote labor-based methods of road maintenance, which is one of the most important innovations of the project."

Mr. Virivolomo said his government is very aware of the problem of dispossessed, unemployed youth in the country and in the region. The government plan to engage youth, school dropouts, and women's groups and provide opportunities for them to work in road maintenance close to home.

The women of the Kusiko community have voiced their support for participating in road maintenance for a fee. Maria Pernada said she would like to participate and earn money that would help pay for her children's school fees. As Mr. Virivolomo points out, "The Kusiko community in West Guadalcanal is made up of about 22 villages and more than 400 people, so hopefully their willingness to participate in future road maintenance programs will lead to other communities in Solomon Islands embracing this task."

Mr. Virivolomo confirmed that his government had increased its road maintenance budget and all roads under PCERP have been included under the government's annual road maintenance plan. Mr. Virivolomo added, "Engineers estimate that maintenance may extend the life of a road in Solomon Islands by 15-20 years, which suggests that road maintenance is a crucial, cost-effective investment for the future. We just need to spread the word."

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