

Solomon Islands

Civil Society Spotlight Report on SDG 4 for HLPF 2023



Representatives of South Pacific Coalitions in Honiara (March-April 2023)

I. COUNTRY CONTEXT

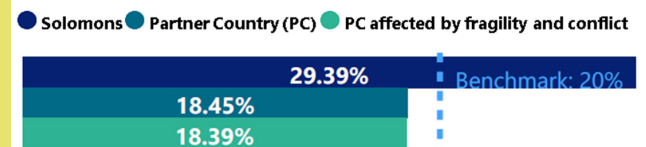
The Solomon Islands is a small Island state in the South West Pacific made up of approximately 1,000 Islands, many divided from each other by large stretches of ocean. A third of these Islands are inhabited, mostly by people living in small settlements. Many communities live without access to electricity or telecommunications, and few have passable roads. The population of 761,000 is growing rapidly at 2.25% per annum. This continuous growth is causing a youth bulge in the population with related problems for the government and the community. A majority of the population (66%) is now aged 29 and under. With little prospect at home, many young Solomon Islanders are looking for work elsewhere. In 2022 nearly 4,000 were employed in Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme,¹ described by some as 'youth export'.

Most of the population is involved in subsistence agriculture, with less than a quarter in paid employment. The official language is English, although Pijin English is widely used as the language

of communication. The Solomon Islands is highly vulnerable to natural disasters including cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods and drought. The country is highly vulnerable, ranked 2 in the World Risk Report 2021.² Solomon Island borders were re-opened in June 2022 for the first time since closing in March 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period the health of the Solomon Island population declined, and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MHMS) reported deteriorating health indicators in many major areas.

Politically and economically, the country has become more unstable. In November 2021 the capital Honiara was rocked by a series of demonstrations, leading to the looting and burning of many Chinese-owned businesses. Protests were in response to the government's decision to cut official ties with Taiwan. The country signed a security pact with China in April 2022 and accepted low-interest loans to improve communications using

Average of gov. expenditure on education as a % of total gov. expenditure



GPE 2025 results framework for the Solomon Islands

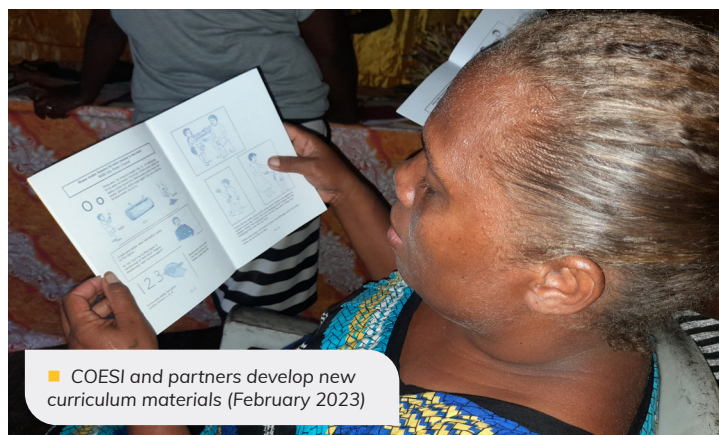
Huawei-provided infrastructure.³ They also received grants to help fund the South Pacific games to be held later in 2023. A closer relationship with China has implications for the Solomons' other allies. It seems that the Solomon Islands has become a prize in the geopolitical struggle for influence in the region, with Australia and the United States also involved.

The Solomon Islands' new relationship with China has also seen domestic political splits, with one province, Malaita, declaring its refusal to accept the relationship with China, and rejecting inward investment from Chinese companies. The Malaitan premier didn't last long, however, ousted from his position in February 2023. Meanwhile, Manasseh Sogavare, the Prime Minister, postponed the general elections.

1 DFAT, Solomon Islands development report 2021-2

2 See <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/worldriskreport-2021-focus-social-protection>

3 See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/19/solomon-islands-secures-100m-china-loan-to-build-huawei-mobile-towers-in-historic-step>



Finance and the budget

The GDP dipped to USD 1.54 billion in 2020 due to the pandemic but recovered to USD 1.63 billion in 2021.⁴ Government revenues have fallen steadily, however, down 20% from 2018 to US \$366 million.⁵

As revenues have fallen, the government has been running large deficit budgets. A particularly expensive project they have undertaken is hosting the South Pacific Games at a cost of USD 43.7 million⁶ (SBD 367 million) from the current 2023 development budget, equivalent to 31% of the total. Nevertheless, education spending remains high as a percentage of the total budget, consistently 30% or above. As the government grows its deficit budgets (estimated 31% of expenditure for 2023), gross government debt as a percentage of GDP is rising. The latest available data shows it increased to 15% in 2021.⁷

II. Progress towards the Achievement of SDG 4

Although the Solomon Islands government has shown a willingness to accommodate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and align policy and programmes towards them, progress in implementation is slow. Some priority issues set out by COESI in its previous Spotlight Report are certainly considered, but the budget required has not been made available. Areas of progress include vernacular teaching in early years, continued and slowly increasing support for Rural Training Centres and the new Education Bill, which, should it be passed, will enable much greater inclusion of those

with a disability. On the other hand, other GAPSSED+ equity and inclusion dimensions of Gender, Age, Place, Socio-Economics, Ethnicity and Disability, show little change.

The Solomon Islands' planning commitment to the SDGs is explicitly

reflected in the Government's National Development Strategy (NDS) 'Improving the Social and Economic Livelihoods of all Solomon Islanders', launched in 2016. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) is directly aligned with the NDS under Objective Three: 'All Solomon Islanders have access to quality health and education.'

The Medium-Term Strategy: 'Ensure all Solomon Islanders can access quality education and the nation's manpower needs are sustainably met' was adopted to achieve Objective 3. The NDS has a performance framework which matches selected targets from SDGs with the NDS Medium Term

Strategy targets and then details performance Indicators. The National Education Plan (NEAP) has

an implementation framework that breaks down the strategy into 5-year chunks. The current NEAP is for 2022-6. The 2022-6 NEAP also addresses alignment with the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF).

In May 2023, a review of the NDS was launched, with local civil society and other key stakeholders invited. Prime Minister Sogavare re-iterated the key objectives of quality education for all, with the benefits of development equitably distributed. The reviewed NDS should guide government policies and activities, and budget preparation processes.

One difficulty in assessing education achievements and performance in the last three years is the lack of available data. COVID had a major impact on collection and analysis. The latest available education sector data is from the various Ministry

of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD) reports published in 2019 and the NEAP 2022-6. Overall budget documents available have actuals up to 2021.

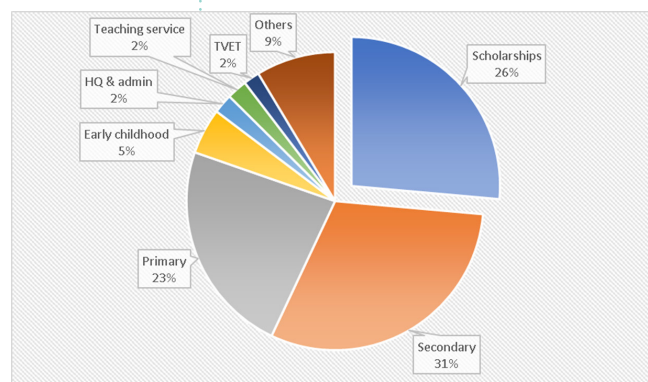
The recurrent budget is taken up mainly with the payroll, the second highest budget head is grants to schools. Spending on scholarships takes a large percentage of the remainder.

Whilst hosting the South Pacific Games seems to be the priority, members of parliament's constituency development fund (CDF) continues to take a large share of the development budget. The education development budget is used for the maintenance and building of new infrastructure and gets less than 6% of the budget.

COESI welcomes the priorities in the National Education Action Plan NEAP 2022-6 to remove the moratorium on the registration of additional community ECE, start to address the issues with scholarships by only offering them to accredited institutions, increase post-secondary pathways and 'second chance' for skill training, and improve quality at Rural Training Centres (RTCs). COESI also welcomes the attention being paid to community engagement and early childhood development and compulsory Pre-primary Year (PPY) for all 5-year-olds.

However, COESI does not see the necessary changes in the distribution of education funds that will enable the NEAP, hence, it will continue to advocate for a redistribution of education funds. At present, the education budget is top-heavy, with huge amounts spent on scholarships and the tertiary sector to the detriment of basic education and vocational skills training. Funds must also be redirected to the early years (3 and 4 years) of education, not just encouragement.

Caution and care are also urged when addressing RTCs quality and



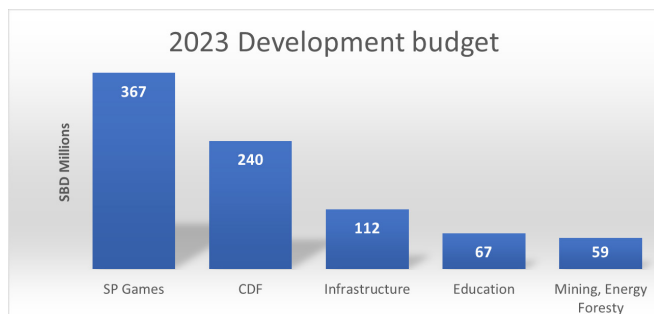
Analysis of 2023 Approved Recurrent Education Estimates. Source SIG REcurrent Estimates 2023

⁴ GDP (current US\$) - Solomon Islands | Data (worldbank.org)

⁵ Government of Solomon Islands, Final Budget Outcome 2022.

⁶ See Majority of Solomon Islands Pacific Games costs yet to be spent, CEO says - ABC Pacific.

⁷ SI Ministry of Finance government debt statistical bulletin (March 2023)



curriculum. RTCs should not be turned into formalised schools. They are there to serve the skills training needs of the large majority of the population that lives in rural areas.

On Inclusion

COESI remains disappointed that serious issues of equity remain. To this end, COESI along with its partners in the South Pacific has introduced its Gender, Age, Place, Socio-Economic, Ethnicity, and Disability framework (GAPSED+) to better focus planners' approach to access. COESI will continue to advocate within the Ministry to use this framework. Officials from the MEHRD have already taken part in this training.

The 2022-6 NEAP talks of reducing exclusion, and has made the first steps. The Ministry established an inclusive Implementation and Monitoring committee in 2020 to support the Implementation of a draft Gender Equity in Education Policy and an Action Plan. This, however, remains in the draft stage.

Girls have slightly greater access and higher performance in Basic and Secondary education. However, the number of tertiary scholarships awarded to females is showing signs of a decline, down to 37% in 2020 from 42% in 2019 and 59% in 2018.

The Ministry also has drafted a National Disability Inclusive Education Manual (IE Manual) under the new Education Bill that is still waiting (May 2023) for tabling. This has an accompanying education legislative framework. Should the Bill be passed in its present proposed form, it will give a big boost to the inclusion of those with a disability in the Solomons' formal education system. However, the implementation of a relevant policy in this area with an accompanying budget has yet to take place. At present, there are no funds or mechanisms for learners with a disability to join mainstream classes, and just a few small donor-funded schools specialising in assisting those with a disability. There is limited finance either in school or in the family to pay for

phone data, printing, transport or other learning materials.

Early childhood education (ECE) is one of the two priorities in the 2022-6 NEAP, which talks about the removal of the moratorium on the registration of

additional community ECE, but in the latest budget, there is no sign of extra funds to make this happen. The 2023 budget of USD 6.4 million is the same as the previous two years. 280 schools are registered and supported, and 284 are not.

Literacy in the general population is barely mentioned, and when it is, it is in a multi-stakeholder approach, which is code for others and NGOs will be responsible. In any case, there is no money for it in the 2023 budget. A small grant for the community has been routed to Rural Training Centres. At-risk youth are mentioned along with out-of-school children and those with disabilities for second-chance education.

III. Civil Society Engagement in the SDG 4 Implementation, Follow-up, and Monitoring

The Solomon Islands has well-thought-out national planning frameworks, explicitly aligned with the SDGs. This includes the education sector with its updated NEAP. The education division has also been revising its education legislation, with a Bill due for tabling to Parliament, but being held up for two years in the aftermath of COVID-19 and ongoing political struggles and domestic unrest.

Civil society has been involved to some extent. COESI has a good relationship with MEHRD and has been invited to various planning forums on the Education Bill and the NEAP. Other civil society organisations have also been involved, including the Development Services Exchange (DSE), the umbrella organisation for civil society in the Solomons. The COESI coordinator is a board member. DSE offers a route for synergy for stakeholders and is supported as a member of the Pacific Island Association of NGOs (PIANGO). COESI is also a member of the Education Donor Partners Group and was supported to present its strategic plan.

The government shows some commitment to involving CSOs - for example the May 2023 launch of the NDS. The government has also shown itself willing to work with CSOs in areas where it feels it lacks expertise. For example, COESI and its partners, the Literacy Association of the Solomon Islands (LASI) and Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE), have been implementing an innovative approach to preschool education, Skul Blong Uimi Long Ples, developing materials in the vernacular, and strengthening community involvement in the management of the Early childhood education (ECE) centres. The Ministry of Education has been collaborating closely on this project. Ministry officials also participated fully and positively in COESI's Equity and Inclusion Training GAPSED+ and its youth action research in April 2023.

One criticism of the government is the lack of meaningful collaboration in the early stages of planning. This means ideas of change from the Talanoa (or Tok Stori in Melanesia) have little chance of reaching the current agenda. The budget process also reinforces the current expenditure, the tendency being to take last year's budget, leave most things the same, and fiddle around the edges. Another issue is that draft policies are produced, but are not implemented or subject to endless revisions.

IV. SDG 4 Interlinkages with Other SDGs

At the strategic planning level, the government makes these alignments and connections in its documents, such as the NDS. However, there seems little programmatic connection except that mediated by ODA. For example, in SDG 6 there is a WASH project funded by UNICEF, but there is no real attempt to fix the sanitation and clean water supply situation at schools, with many schools having none. The situation is particularly poor in rural areas, and it is clear that they are being excluded from this.

The lack of water and sanitation is also affecting attendance at schools. Girls have inadequate washing facilities to deal with menstruation, meaning they may miss a week of schooling every month. Children are often used to fetch water in villages, often from a distance, meaning they miss part of their school

day. Logging and mining continue to pollute waterways and destroy spring and river sources of clean water. Spills from mining and logging are affecting reef and mangrove quality, reducing the food supply from these sources. Linking to this also is the colonisation of food, with more and more people not knowing how to grow local food, instead buying rice, noodles, and tin fish.

Literacy in the community remains very low, and there is no government support for any adult education programmes to address this.

In equity and inclusion goals, there is no particular division looking after integrating the SDGs in the Solomon Islands. However, the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs works across portfolios. The Ministry of Education has a gender-focal person, the Director of Policy. In comparison with boys, girls appear to be performing better in education, and women seem to be making inroads in leadership roles. There are now four female parliamentarians, a female provincial premier, and a female ambassador to the UN, the US and Canada.

NGOs have always been educating communities about the sustainable use of their marine and land resources, but there is little connection between the government and this work. There is a regional organisation, the Pacific Community governed by the 22 Pacific nations, of which the Solomon Islands is a member, that draws connections between the SDGs, including Goals 4, 5, 14, 15, and 17, and forms partnerships to carry out its work. Partners include the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat. The Pacific Community (SPC) works with the policy division at the Ministry of Education.

V. Key Messages and Recommendations

The Talanoa

In the Pacific, the education 'Talanoa' (or Tok Stori in Melanesia)⁸ (or discussion),

⁸ Self-determinism and indigenous education; perspectives from the Pacific (asphae.org)

contains key analysis and demands related to the perceived failure of the Pacific education system to implement aspects of the SDG 4 agenda that seem aligned with decolonisation. Civil society in general and COESI members see several key issues that need to be addressed:

- The use of English rather than local vernacular as a language of instruction in the early years;
- Curriculum that continues to ignore the history and culture of indigenous peoples, instead using images, experiences, and concepts from the colonisers; a highly formalised education system, 'chalk and talk', whose only pathway for many is early push out from formal education at Year 8, or even earlier at the end of Year 6;
- A focus at MEHRD and indeed government level on the outside: on employment overseas under Australian and New Zealand schemes, and on scholarships to overseas tertiary institutions as some kind of a solution;
- Important education sectors are underfunded, including ECE, basic and post-basic education, adult literacy and community education. The large majority of the budget is consumed on the payroll, school grants and scholarships, with little left over for anything else;
- Dire quality of education services – woeful inspection, little in-service or poor-quality pre-service training, accelerating overcrowding, a little attempt to include marginalised populations; a strong and growing rural-urban divide, with resources largely consumed in urban areas, which also have access to digital resources;
- The lack of livelihood education, skills for sustainable living, the ignoring of the lived reality of most local communities, and an inadequate and underfunded TVET system.

Recommendations

1. **Early childhood education (ECE).** The government must allocate sufficient resources to end the moratorium on the registration of ECE centres and further support models of vernacular and cultural learning as promoted by COESI in its Skull Blong Uimi Long Ples (SBULP) project.

2. **Post-basic and post-secondary pathways.** The Solomon government has always supported Rural Training Centres (RTCs) with grants, teacher salaries, and facilitating bilateral donors to support them. There is an opportunity to advocate for bigger support for RTCs, especially in the development of an appropriate curriculum, and to upsize existing centres. The local learning centres must be supported by the government for literacy and skill programmes in the community.
3. **Talanoa or Tok Stori.** Policy and programmes must be re-oriented towards the agenda of the Talanoa, especially in local and community learning with a more appropriate and decolonised curriculum. There is plenty of discussion in the Pacific about what this means. Essentially, giving a greater voice to parents and communities and support in co-designing appropriate and relevant curriculum, and putting resources into implementing it.
4. **Scholarship programmes.** The scholarship programme must be reduced, and parity be given to females, with opportunities for those with a disability. Savings can be redistributed with the education budget to priorities such as ECE and post-basic sectors.
5. **Ensure real free basic education for all.** School fees are still being charged. Solomon's donors have shown willingness to support basic education with basic school grants; they need to continue to do this, whilst also down-sizing the scholarship programme and using the funds for basic and post-basic education.
6. **Inclusion of learners with disabilities.** Additional school grants (per student) must be provided to schools which include learners with disabilities in classroom learning, and their teachers and assistants. The Education Bill, which supports those with disabilities should be tabled as soon as possible. People with disabilities must be involved in the framing of any disability policies. A fair proportion of scholarships should be made available for learners with disabilities and specific budgets must also be allocated to begin the training of Teacher Aides that will support learners with disabilities and to make classrooms and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools inclusive. •



Coalition for Education Solomon Islands (COESI)

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The Coalition for Education Solomon Islands (COESI) is a coalition of non-government organisations dedicated to the advancement of educational opportunities for all Solomon Island citizens, especially those from marginalised and disadvantaged groups. COESI aims to provide a focal point through which civil society can contribute to education policy debates; provide knowledge-building awareness on the SDG 4 agenda, targets and indicators at the national level; to undertake research on education policy issues; to act as an information source for civil society organizations with an interest in education; to strengthen the capacity of its members, and civil society more broadly, and to participate actively and with authority in public debates on education in the Solomon Islands. COESI is a member organisation of the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE).

With support from

