

Solomon Islands



Civil Society Spotlight Report on SDG 4 for HLPF 2022



■ DFAT staff talk to young children in Sinasu, Malaita, where COESI and member Literacy Association of Solomon Islands are implementing an innovative ECCE program

I. COUNTRY CONTEXT

Although decreasing in severity, the COVID-19 pandemic is still affecting normal life. In November 2021, schools were closed and didn't reopen until June 2022. Freedom of movement was restricted and some businesses closed, which resulted in job and livelihood losses. Inflation seems to be accelerating with high fuel and food prices. To stimulate the local economy, the government is subsidising the production of copra (dried coconut kernels) and its export. To stimulate local construction, the government has put aside SBD 60 million (USD 7.3 million)¹ out of the education recurrent budget for classroom construction.

A strong "anti-vax" movement led to many public servants refusing the vaccination mandate and losing their jobs from the 'No jab, no job' policy. It seems that there are some revenue and thus liquidity issues, with the government unable to pay all school grants. Those schools that have received

grants have been instructed to use 60% for COVID-related safety measures. The government has sent down a deficit budget, borrowing around SBD 900 million (US 110 million).

There has been no real attempt to catch up on lost schooling. There has also been a surge in underage pregnancies with girls being excluded from education. In addition, there is a reluctance from many parents either from confusion over health or financial issues, to send their children back to school, with low registration rates.

II. CHALLENGES IN AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

The Coalition of Coalition for Education Solomon Islands (COESI) completed a study in 2021 on literacy and the use of the vernacular.² It found positive evidence of the impact of the use of the vernacular in pilot areas in the Solomon

Islands and Papua New Guinea (PNG) whilst including locally developed pidgin English. There are signs of continuing interest from governments and COESI will continue to advocate using its 'School Blong Uimi Long Ples' initiative. COESI's home-schooling research³ found that most parents or carers do not have the literacy skills or understanding of pedagogy to help their children home school regardless of whether or not they have the time to do so.

There are multiple barriers for students with a disability, and their existence is barely acknowledged.

There are no funds or mechanisms for students 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.

The Solomon Islands' dispersed population, diverse and rugged terrain and remote geographical locations make delivery of homeschool learning

1 The currency converter used for the SBD figures in this document was XE Solomon Islander Dollar to US Dollar conversion, Retrieved Jun 27, 2022, 06:22 UTC, from <https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=6000000&From=SBD&To=USD>

2 Kauhue, E. & Zobule, A. (2021). The Ace Diversity Model: Embracing Diversity as Opportunity in Teaching Culture and Vernacular In Multiculture and Multivernacular Schools In Solomon Islands. Retrieved from <https://www.coesi.org.sb/download/use-of-culture-and-vernacular-in-schools/>

3 COESI. (2020). Home School Report: Can Home Schooling work in the Solomon Islands?. Retrieved from <https://www.coesi.org.sb/download/home-school-report/>



■ New Zealand High Commissioner visits Sinausu, Malaita, where COESI and member Literacy Association of Solomon Islands are implementing an innovative ECCE program funded by MFAT and Australian DFAT

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difficult without significant resources allocated to materials production and transportation. There is limited and unreliable telecommunications and radio communications access in many communities within each province, implying that the use of these media, such as radio broadcasts, for learning continuity missed many students. Limited equipment and related resources in many schools and communities further restrict the possibilities for homeschool delivery.

School grants paid by the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development to the schools do not cover the running costs of schools in emergencies such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Minister's comments on no free education is a problem.

There are some signs that the Ministry understands homeschooling issues, despite the serious and multiple issues in delivering it. They have been responding to criticism, providing learning continuity programs through the radio and distributing learning materials to some remote communities.

They are open to many stakeholders and are beginning to consult more widely. They are moving in the right direction by strengthening and prioritising parental and community support for children's educational needs in the National Education Action Plan 2022-2026 (NEAP) launched in May 2022. In addition, Early Childhood Education (ECE) reform is a priority area in the NEAP, but it seems the government is looking for partners and donors to implement it.

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 at this time to advocate for bigger support for RTCs, especially in the development of the curriculum.

III. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4'S ROLE IN THE SDGS FOR REVIEW

The Solomon Islands has always been vulnerable to cyclones and other weather events. Sea levels are rising, noticeably in low-level reef islands, causing migration. Mostly, schools close when faced with these events. Rural Training Centres are the closest to good practice when it comes to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), as they promote sustainable livelihoods and self-sufficiency. The government must put more resources into RTCs.

The curriculum is outdated and needs review to bring it up to date with current

trends in global heating. At present, there is no initiative to review the curriculum. Logging is a major industry in the Solomons, but it is barely regulated and lays waste to large areas of primary forest. Local small-scale initiatives are possible and were more successful in the 1980s and 90s, but these are no longer supported by the government, which provides easy access to foreign companies.

The Solomons are doing reasonably well in terms of access and performance of girls in education. There is parity in access in primary education; in secondary girls are outperforming boys and have higher access; but in scholarships, there are more males. The political elite and upper class benefit the most from the corrupt scholarship programmes, sending their sons to college. In the poorer families, girls have slightly higher numbers in secondary schools.

There is no particular division looking after integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Solomon Islands. However, in the Solomons, 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. Girls appear to be performing well

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.

for teachers and learners, and ensure availability in all areas of the country, not just larger settlements. As most people cannot afford masks, these should be provided, or the mandate dropped for schools.

COESI's survey on the government's attempt at homeschooling pointed to long-term issues: three-quarters of schools and students have no access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT), the internet or even power. Some will have access to radio programmes, but there is no TV in most of the country. Any funds used for online learning will benefit a small proportion of the population. The government did produce some printed homeschooling materials, but there is no data on either how many schools received materials, or how effective they have been.

- b. The Ministry should evaluate the effectiveness of their home school materials and their reach, and design programmes bearing these recommendations in mind.

School fees are still being charged, at a much higher pro-rata rate. In any case, education should be free, in line with the Solomon Islands' commitments to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Minister of Education said in June 2022 that 'education will no longer be free.' With the present shrinking economy and inflation, the fear is many learners will be unable to attend school.

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IV. KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. COVID-19 and Equal Access to Education

During the pandemic, we learnt that most learners did not access education during the lockdown and that parents cannot afford fees. There is confusion over the vaccination and mask mandates, with only scattered availability of either in rural areas. This is leading to low registration numbers at schools and poor attendance.

- a. The government must be clear on the vaccination mandates

The Minister of Education said in June 2022 that 'education will no longer be free.' With the present shrinking economy and inflation, the fear is many learners will be unable to attend school.



- c. The government must immediately reverse its plan to do away with its commitment to tuition-free education and pay for students' fees.

2. Promotion of post-secondary training through Rural Training Centres (RTCs)

Many learners leave school with poor literacy and few practical skills to lead sustainable lives. There are no real providers of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) outside of courses run by NGOs and the courses run by RTCs. RTCs, owned and run by Church authorities, offer the only learning opportunities in rural areas and for skills for sustainable livelihood education. There are too few and heavily oversubscribed, and only partially funded by the government. Community learning centres (CLCs), where adult and out-of-school youth's literacy needs could be met, are not supported by the government.

- a. The government needs to support the development of more RTCs in rural areas, and resource them. In addition, the curriculum could be updated to reflect new thinking on climate change and our communities' responses to it.

- b. CLCs should be supported by the government, with small grants via partners such as the Solomon Islands Association of Rural Training Centres. RTCs could support CLCs in this.

3. Inclusion of learners with disabilities

- a. There is virtually no support for learners with disabilities to participate in the formal system. No assistive materials are provided and no teachers or assistive technology. Learners with disabilities rely on special schools funded by NGOs for the little education available. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are hitting those with a disability worse, with little access to health care for those with the virus, and little chance of paying school fees, as they have been hit hardest in the economic downturn. There has been little movement in policy measures for those with a Disability in the last few years.
- b. Additional school grants (per student) must be provided to schools which include learners with disabilities in classroom
- c. The National Disability Inclusive Education Policy urgently needs to be approved by Cabinet. This could be a possible prerequisite for the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
- d. The new Education Act should legislate for compulsory education, meaning that the educational needs of those with disability have to be considered. The Act also needs urgent approval.
- e. 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.
- f. Specific budgets must 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. •



The **Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE)** is a regional association of more than 200 organisations and individuals working towards promoting quality education for all and transformative and liberating, lifelong adult education and learning.

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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).