THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

Population
581,318 (2008 estimate)

Land
Geography: Over 900 islands, rugged mountains, volcanic and coral atolls
Climate: Equatorial and tropical monsoonal

People
Religion: Christian
Language: English (Official), Melanesian Pidgin, plus 120 indigenous languages

Economy
GDP per person (PPP): $1900
GDP by sector: Agriculture: 42%, Industry: 11%, Services: 47%

Government
Parliamentary democracy
Background

The Solomon Islands are located in the Southwest Pacific about 1,900 kms northeast of Australia. Almost 1,000 islands stretch in a 1,450-kilometer chain southeast from Papua New Guinea across the Coral Sea to Vanuatu. The largest islands of Choiseul, New Georgia, Santa Isabel, Guadalcanal, Malaita, and Makira are mainly volcanic. They have rainforested mountain ranges, deep narrow valleys, and coastal belts lined with coconut palms and ringed by reefs. The smaller islands are generally atolls and raised coral reefs.

Within these islands 537,000 people share a total land area of approximately 27,500 sq. km. The population is predominantly Melanesian (about 95%) although there are smaller Polynesian, Micronesian, Chinese and European communities. The social structure is diverse, complex and often varies from island to island. Approximately 15% of the population lives in urban areas, the rest live in small villages in rural areas. The bulk of the population depends on agriculture, fishing, and forestry for at least part of their livelihood. In some areas logging is causing the rapid degradation of both land and marine environments.

The Solomon Islands experience a tropical monsoonal climate all year round. The mean temperature is 27°C and humidity ranges between 60% and 90%. Annual rainfall is high, ranging from 2,000 millimetres to 3,000 millimetres. Most rain falls between November and April. Cyclones occur regularly during the rainy months.

GDP per capita is $US 1900 (PPP). Most manufactured goods and petroleum products must be imported and many communities are very isolated and accessible only by boat or air. Accessing public facilities such as schools or health clinics will often involve long walks or a boat, if one is available.

Life expectancy is 63 years and many babies die before their first birthday (24 per 1,000 live births). The leading causes of death in children under the age of five years include acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea, malaria, peri-natal complications and injuries. Seventy percent of people have access to safe drinking water while only 30% have access to improved sanitation facilities. There are low levels of HIV/AIDS but risk factors are high.

In the mid 1990s, conflict between the people of Guadalcanal and the people of Malaita broke out, causing significant disruption to civil society and the economy. A protracted period of violence and civil unrest known as “the tensions” followed. Since 2003 the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), a partnership of 15 countries, has helped the Solomon Islands Government to restore law and order, rebuilding government institutions and encouraging the resumption of economic growth. Some tensions do remain, however, and migration to urban areas continues to place pressure on
infrastructure and increase the demand for water, sanitation, housing, education and health services.

In the Solomon Islands traditional and formal legal systems coexist. For many people, particularly those living in more remote communities, traditional systems are more readily accessible. In many senses, traditional systems of justice function very effectively, however, they are not necessarily child focused.

**Disaster context**

The Solomon Islands are located in one of the areas most prone to natural disasters in the world. Our proximity to the Bougainville and Tonga trenches ensure that significant earthquakes are regularly felt, particularly on the western side of the Solomon Islands. These earthquakes sometimes trigger destructive Tsunamis. A location on the “Pacific Rim of Fire” also means that the Solomon Islands has a number of above ground and submarine active volcanoes, with submarine eruptions occurring as recently as the year 2007.

Tropical cyclones, often accompanied by storm surges, and flooding on the larger islands, are also a regular occurrence in the Solomon Islands. Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Zoe, which struck the extremely remote island of Tikopia late in December 2002, is an example of how vulnerable the small communities of the Solomon Islands are to disaster, but also how resilient communities can be. Despite the fact that Zoe essentially stripped Tikopia of all shelter and vegetation, and fouled the island’s only fresh water supply, none of the approximately 1,200 people on the island lost their lives. This is notwithstanding the fact that the isolation of the community meant that it was several weeks before any form of assistance was able to be delivered. Although no lives were lost, and external support was provided, the Tikopia community still suffered terrible hardship in the weeks, months and even years after Zoe struck.

Global warming is expected to compound many of the threats the Solomon Islands faces. Over time, climate change may alter precipitation patterns, intensify extreme weather events, contribute to ocean acidification, increase air and ocean temperatures (leading to more frequent cyclones) and contribute to sea-level rise.

The IPCC describes a range of tangible outcomes which may stem from climate change, including:

- That sea-level rise may exacerbate inundation, storm surge, erosion and other coastal hazards, threatening vital infrastructure, settlements and facilities that support the livelihood of island communities.
- That water resources in small islands are likely to be seriously compromised.
- That coral reefs, fisheries and other marine-based resources will degrade.
• That subsistence and commercial agriculture on small islands will become less reliable and productive.
• That sea-level rise, inundation, seawater intrusion into freshwater lenses, soil salinisation, and decline in water supply are very likely to adversely impact coastal agriculture.

For a country like the Solomon Islands, where fishing and subsistence agriculture are the very basis of existence for most people, this is a frightening prospect. Our communities are not sufficiently resilient to withstand the more regular and more intense natural disasters which climate change is forecast to bring. Our communities are remote, isolated, subsistence based, with low disposable incomes and savings bases to draw upon when livelihoods are damaged. Because it is so much harder for us to respond and rebuild, we often suffer disproportionate social and economic damage at the hands of disaster.

In the short term natural disasters can bring death, injury, and economic and social upheaval to our communities. In the long term, they can bring degraded infrastructure, population displacement and urbanization, among other problems. Unfortunately, the March 2009 IPCC scientific update conference in Copenhagen found that the worst-case impact scenarios outlined in the IPCC’s Fourth Assessment Report may be overly conservative.

Combatting climate change also presents challenges that go beyond the need for more resources. Climate change has been described as a “slowburning emergency”. Many of the adverse effects of global warming will develop over long periods of time. This poses a challenge to Governments and their development partners, who traditionally engage on much shorter project cycles. In short, our country, the Solomon Islands, is already suffering disproportionate economic and social hardship at the hands of disaster, this hardship is forecast to intensify, and our current systems and resources find it difficult to manage this challenge effectively.

**Impact on Children**

For children, the problems brought by disasters are often felt most acutely. They are physically more vulnerable than most adults during the disaster; for instance the majority of drowning victims during a flood, tsunami or storm surge are usually children. They are also more vulnerable to the disease which often arises post disaster. Socially too, they are vulnerable, without the power or knowledge often required to negotiate for their rights or interests or to avoid harmful situations. Further, the issue of intergenerational justice is important in the Solomon Islands, as the vast array of issues affecting children’s health, education, rights and well-being for the future are affected by decisions made now regarding climate change and disaster risk reduction.
Experiences

In recent years there have been a number of examples of small to medium scale emergencies which have affected the Solomon Islands.

April 2007 – Gizo Tsunami

On 2 April an earthquake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale struck the Western and Choiseul provinces of the Solomon Islands, just off the coast of Gizo, 350 kilometres northwest of the capital Honiara, causing a localized tsunami. 52 people were killed, 9,000 displaced, and an estimated 40,000 were affected of which 21,000 were children. Affected areas included Shortlands, Munda, Noro, Vella la Vella and Kolombangara, with the worst hit being Gizo, Simbo, the western coast of Ranonga and the central-southern coast of Choiseul. An intense relief operation focussing on water and sanitation, health, shelter, protection, infrastructure and education was required. Whilst overall this response was a success, the Gizo Tsunami has left a legacy of displacement. Three years on, there are still some communities who are unable to return to their original land or establish a permanent place of residence, with their displacement sometimes causing tensions with neighbouring communities and land owners.

March 2010 - Tropical Cyclone Ului

Tropical Cyclone Ului formed west of Santo Island in Vanuatu on 12 March. The cyclone gained strength as it moved on a westerly course toward the Solomon Islands. By 15 March, the cyclone intensified to category four and sat above the provinces of Makira and Rennell/Bellona bringing storm force winds and heavy rains. Isabel, Malaita, Guadalcanal and Temotu provinces were also affected. The cyclonic conditions caused flooding, damage to food gardens and structural damage. During this period, the Solomon Islands also experienced widespread power failure and communication network breakdowns. However, fortunately, the damage caused was not as bad as expected, with approximately 3,000 people believed to have been directly affected.

February 2010 – Guadacanal, Isabel, Makira and Malaita flooding

Over 15,000 people were affected by severe flooding and landslides on the islands of Guadacanal, Isabel, Makira, and Malaita. These areas, many of which already suffer from underlying water and sanitation issues, suffered from damaged infrastructure, a lack of clean drinking water, and damage to crops and gardens diminishing access to nutrition and income.

Two deaths were reported.
January 2010 – Rendova Earthquakes

On Monday 4 January two earthquakes, measuring 6.6 and 7.2 on the Richter scale at a depth of approximately 36 km, occurred in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands. There were a number of aftershocks over magnitude 5.0 during the subsequent two days including one quake of magnitude 6.9. The quakes triggered landslides, a localized tsunami, and caused damage to homes and other buildings directly. The main island affected was Rendova, population 4,887. Of this approximately 150 households and 1,000 people were directly affected. A small resort on a nearby island was also very severely damaged. No deaths were reported, however, significant water, sanitation, hygiene, health and shelter issues did emerge which were addressed by the government and humanitarian partners during the response.

February 2009 – Guadacanal Floods

Heavy rains in late January caused flooding in Guadalcanal, Malaita, Makira and Central provinces. An accurate estimation of the number of people affected was not reached. Ten deaths were confirmed, however, the death toll is likely to have been considerably higher. The floods caused significant damage to infrastructure and left an intense need for clean water, shelter, food and medical supplies.

Achievements

In attempt to reduce the impact of disaster events such as those described above, the Solomon Island Government is implementing a range of initiatives designed to reduce disaster risk, some of which are described below.

Education - Recovery Action and Rehabilitation Project (RARP)

Within two weeks of the April 2007 Gizo Tsunami the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) conducted a rapid assessment to appraise damage to schools in the affected areas. The assessment found that as many as 18,200 students had had their schooling significantly disrupted and that 44% of education personnel had had their homes destroyed or severely damaged.

To address these and other issues the Solomon Islands Government partnered with UNICEF to form the Recovery Action and Rehabilitation Project. The project committed to reconstruct or rehabilitate 142 schools which had been destroyed or damaged by the disaster, along with associated staff housing, and incorporating DRR principles. Specialised architects were engaged to create designs which were both child friendly, well located taking into consideration disaster risk and enrolment considerations, and earthquake resistant. Not only will these measures decrease the risk of future death or injury amongst
students and staff in Solomon Islands schools, they will also reduce the likelihood of damage to the schools themselves and hence future repair and reconstruction costs which would otherwise arise as a result of natural disasters.

Of course, undertaking such a large project presents challenges. Many of the schools need to be built in extremely isolated locations. This presents significant challenges relating to logistics and the procurement of appropriately skilled labour. Further, where schools need to be relocated, securing access to the new site can require a long and complex process of negotiation. Nevertheless, at this point in time 25 schools have been completed, including 8 which were previously totally destroyed, 12 which had suffered from major damage and 5 which had suffered more minor damage. Work is in progress in 34 schools and another 49 schools are proposed for redevelopment.

**Community Welfare Volunteers**

The Community Welfare Volunteers project aims to help children in selected geographical areas of the Solomon Islands grow up in home and community environments that are increasingly free from violence, abuse and exploitation. The concept was first introduced after the 2007 Gizo Tsunami when affected communities were under extreme stress.

Community Welfare Volunteers receive training in child protection principals and voluntarily work in their own communities to increase the awareness of child protection principles and integrate child protection/family welfare activities into their community. Community Welfare Volunteers work within existing community plans, working in coordination with churches and religious groups, Sunday schools, existing youth and women groups, NGOs, etc.

Currently, a total of 100 Community Welfare Volunteers are working in 58 communities in Western and Choiseul provinces with a total population of approximately 25,000 people. Additional training and toolkit resources are being developed which aim to enhance Community Welfare Volunteers’ understanding of child protection and family and community welfare issues. These resources will also increase the volunteers’ capacity to identify problems, map community resources, plan and conduct activities and support communities to solve their problems.

There is significant evidence that the program is beginning to enjoy both success and public support. In the past year, 14 new communities in Western Province have spontaneously requested to join the Community Welfare Volunteer initiative and 21 new Community Welfare Volunteers were appointed and trained by the Social Welfare Department. Further, when 41 Community Welfare Volunteers were interviewed during a monitoring trip across Western Province in 2010, 32 mentioned that they have seen changes within their communities as a result of Community Welfare Volunteer Work, and that relations between parents and children have improved. All 41 Community Welfare Volunteers interviewed
confirmed that the program has proved to be helpful in “making people in the community be more careful about the way they discipline children”.

**A revised National Disaster Management Plan which explicitly recognizes issues relating to child rights**

In October 2009 the Solomon Islands National Disaster Management Office released a revised National Disaster Risk Management Plan. Disaster Risk Reduction is now recognised within the plan as being an equally important element of overall disaster management as disaster response. Further, the unique and substantial needs of children within disasters are explicitly recognised. Consequently, this new plan provides a much more effective framework within which Disaster Risk Reduction activities, especially those with a child focus, can be implemented.

**Strengthened legal framework for supporting children**

A considerable amount of work has been done in the Solomon Islands to develop a legal framework which protects the rights of children in the past few years. For example, Cabinet has endorsed a process for development of Child and Family Welfare Law and the Attorney Generals department has confirmed two State Counsels as drafters to work with UNICEF in this process. A skeletal framework of a Child and Family Welfare Bill has been developed. A way forward for consultation on the Bill has also been agreed following a Technical Working Group consultation workshop with key partners.

A Court Procedures Manual to address Juvenile Justice has been drafted and there has been direction by the Chief Justice that all Juvenile Court matters are to be tried only by Magistrates trained in Child Rights and Juvenile Justice. Court Screens (instead of the CCTV used in developed countries) are now being employed as tools in the Magistrates Court to protect children victims /witnesses who give evidence and mitigate the fear associated with confronting the alleged perpetrator in court.

Support to strengthen the Civil Registration/Birth Registration system has also been provided through innovative approaches such as "I Count".

**Challenges still faced**

**Capacity and resources**

There is a need for capacity building amongst duty bearers, particularly those responsible for disaster management, to encourage a culture focused on prevention of child protections issues rather than a culture constantly focused on responding. The redrafted National Disaster Risk Management Plan is a very good start on this front, for it provides explicit and credible guidance on the need for both disaster risk management and child rights. However, the reality is that only a select group of people are intimately familiar with these documents. To achieve a genuine commitment to the principals of Child Rights and Disaster Risk Reduction an understanding of the
principals, and benefits, of these concepts is required across a broad range of senior and influential government personnel. Gaining this commitment and understanding remains a challenge when the demands on the time and attention of key people from other, also worthy, interests is so great.

Likewise, finite resources face competition from a range of other priorities.

**Retaining committed and talented staff in the public sector**

A further challenge is retaining those staff which do develop an understanding and passion for Disaster Risk Reduction and Child Rights principles. Often, because such skills are so unique, local people who develop these skills find that they can command considerably higher salaries in the private sector than they can working for the Government.

**Greater coordination and cooperation between donor agencies**

There remains a need for greater coordination and cooperation between donor agencies. Such coordination can ensure that a more strategic approach is taken to addressing Disaster Risk Reduction and Child Rights issues and a more efficient allocation of scarce resources.

**Opportunities**

**Community resilience**

As the people of Tikopia demonstrated at the end of 2002, there is incredible resilience already within our communities. It is essential that this strength is maintained, and even, if possible, increased. Not only are traditional, community based mechanisms for DRR the easiest for our people to implement, they are also the cheapest.

Consequently, documenting existing traditional DRR techniques is essential. In a country as diverse as the Solomon Islands, there is likely to also be a great diversity of traditional DRR technologies. With so many small and fragile communities, it is easy for these technologies to be lost.

These technologies are, however, no use to communities if they are sitting in a library. We must also ensure that they are practiced and maintained. To do this, we must as a community and a country remember to value our own practices and provide incentives to people to use them.

We must also be careful not to provide disincentive to traditional DRR activities. One of the hardest decisions to make is when to intervene to support a community after a disaster. However, as a nation we must encourage individuals, families, and communities to be the front line in disaster risk reduction, and management. And we must not undermine their incentive to actively reduce their risk by providing relief in circumstances other than those of the most genuine hardship. If we do, we will alleviate some short term suffering, and perhaps enjoy some political accolades, but we will also rob that community of a little bit of their own resilience, independence and strength.

Whilst using and maintaining the knowledge and practices we already have is essential, there are alternatives to the status quo. As a country, we have a responsibility to be open to new Disaster Risk
Reduction methods and find ways to adopt those which are appropriate to our circumstances to our own needs. Equally importantly, we must be prepared to critically evaluate new methods, accept that not all that is new and foreign is good, and reject those alternatives which we do not think will work, no matter how strongly they are advocated.

Finally, as previously mentioned, we have a responsibility to ensure that all the considerable good work which is being done in the area of disaster risk reduction, from the grass roots right through to policy level, is appropriately coordinated. To make the most of our limited resources we must eliminate duplication, ensure that all work is complimentary to an overarching strategy, and that gaps are filled.

**Safer Schools**

The experience of the 2007 Gizo Tsunami highlighted how vulnerable many Solomon Islands schools are to disaster. This is an issue which is now getting global recognition with the acknowledgement that the level of casualty in some of the largest natural disasters in recent history, including Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, the Sichuan earthquakes in China, and the Pakistan earthquakes, could have been substantially reduced had schools been more disaster resilient.

The RARP project discussed above outlines some of the reasons for wanting to construct more disaster resilient schools. Over time, there is every reason to want to expand this reconstruction/retrofitting effort to all schools in the Solomon Islands in a similar manner. In fact, the learnings from the RARP project should allow us to do it better.

Such efforts provide opportunities on so many levels. Non-disaster resilient schools can not only make injury or death more likely, but the damage to and/or destruction of the physical infrastructure is a great economic loss for a country; the cost of reconstruction can be a substantial burden on the economy.

Children are able to quickly integrate new knowledge into their daily lives. They can also serve as a source of family and community knowledge on health and safety behavior, which they carry home from school. Thus, making disaster prevention a school focus provides a significant opportunity for building the disaster resilience of an entire community.

Beyond this, safer schools can serve as emergency shelters to protect not just the school population but the community a school serves. They can also be community centers to coordinate response and recovery efforts in the aftermath of a disaster. Further, taking a very long term view, improved schools should lead to improved education outcomes, improved education outcomes are linked to improved economic outcomes, and stronger economies are known to be more disaster resilient.

**Health facilities**

The learnings we take from safer school construction can, in time, be taken also to other community facilities such as health facilities. This will provide the same economic benefits from reduced reconstruction costs in post disaster settings as for schools. But more importantly, it will reduce the underlying vulnerability of the community. By strengthening health facilities, the likelihood of those
facilities surviving a disaster and being operational at the other end are increased. With this comes an increase in the quality of health service which children and their communities can expect in a post disaster setting and an increased level of resilience. It will also provide an additional option for communication links with central controllers during a disaster response. Communication with remote areas is difficult at the best of times in the Solomon Islands, but in a post-disaster setting it is even more so. Being able to get rapid information and assessments regarding the health and other aspects of the community through health centres will considerably strengthen the capacity for a strong disaster response if and when it is needed.

Conclusion

The Solomon Islands is a small country highly vulnerable to disaster. The lives of our people are closely connected to the land and the sea and, due to climate change, we can expect that not only may these great resources become less productive, but potentially also more dangerous in the future. We must manage these risks, but the reality is we must do so with limited resources. Our first goal should be to nurture and protect what we already have. To document, protect and encourage the many disaster risk reduction technologies that already lie within our communities. We can then build on this foundation, adding new knowledge and practices from external sources, with a special focus on protecting the rights of children, who are particularly vulnerable during times of disaster. With targeted, sensible investment in key areas: Education, Health, our communities, and our legal structures, we can make steady progress to reducing disaster risk, protecting children, and encouraging the continued development of the Solomon Islands.