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# Regional Perspectives Research Project – Phase 2 summary report

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# Understanding the Pacific: Insights from Solomon Islands and Vanuatu

The Regional Perspectives Project, led by the University of Adelaide (UoA) in collaboration with Solomon Islands and Vanuatu partners and Australia's Defence Science and Technology Group (DSTG), was about listening to, and learning from, Pacific people on a range of topics that reflect Pacific priorities, including relationships with other countries.

The project aimed to help Defence to better understand Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, develop more sustainable and culturally sensitive engagement strategies, and play its part in creating a safer, fairer, and more stable and prosperous Pacific Islands region.

To do this, researchers used traditional local storytelling methods to gather data – 'tok stori' in Solomon Islands and 'storian' in Vanuatu. These approaches gathered in-depth and diverse views directly from the people living in these islands. The information collected is crucial for ensuring policies are fair and well-informed, culturally sensitive, and beneficial.

Phase 1 of the project concluded in June 2024 with an interagency analytical workshop in Canberra. The visit to Canberra also included a presentation of the Phase 1 summary

report by the Pacific partners to members of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and a workshop with stakeholders from across the Australian Government. These activities were mutually appreciated; one member of Team Vanuatu, Ketty Napwatt, described them as a “life-changing” experience.

Phase 2 of the project continued to listen to Pacific voices through:

- reporting back to the research participants about their stories as reflected in the Phase 1 summary report; and
- taking a deeper dive into understanding the findings from Phase 1 through gathering more data across both countries.

This report presents a summary of the key findings from Phase 2 and should be read in conjunction with the summary of Phase 1 published in June 2024. This report begins with a summary of the project’s key findings and then moves on to the two country reports.

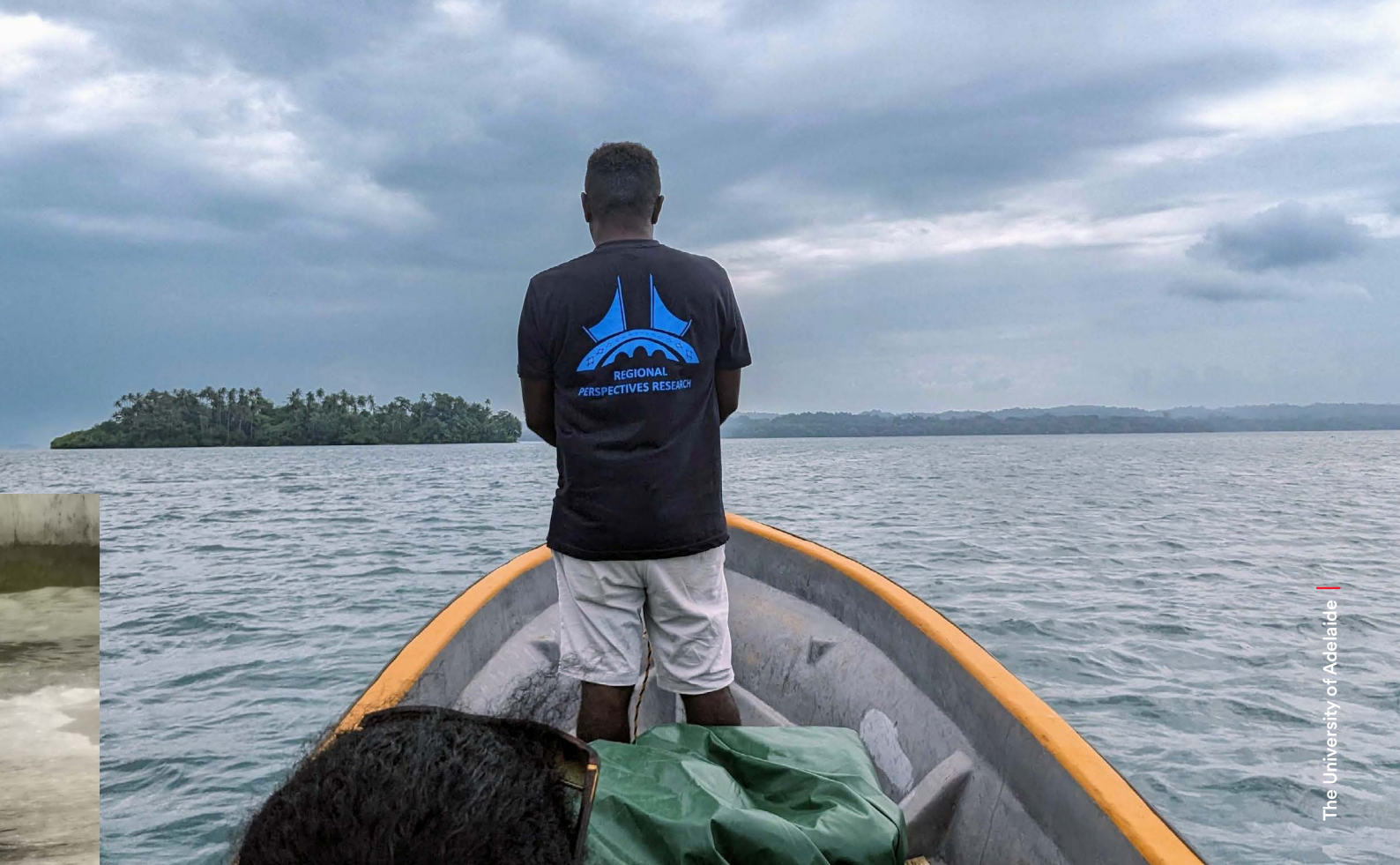
Photo credit: Maualaivao Maima Koro



## Acknowledgement

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the many communities across Vanuatu and Solomon Islands who made invaluable contributions to this research. Their trust and willingness to gift their knowledge has been the cornerstone of the Regional Perspectives Project. We feel sincere gratitude for the support of community elders and leaders in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, which was crucial to the success of this project.





## Key questions

The research sought to address the following key questions:

- How do people in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu view safety and stability, and how do these views vary within each country and between different communities?
- What are the main concerns of people in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and how do these concerns change between regions within each country?
- How do people in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu take action to solve their own problems?
- Who are the foreign players involved in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, what methods are they using to influence these countries, and which methods do the locals feel most connected to and why?
- How do the actions of these foreign players affect independence and the ability to handle challenges in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands?

During Phase 2 we added these additional questions:

- What role could Solomon Islands and Vanuatu play in making a peaceful, stable, and prosperous region?
- What information and news would you like to access in your community and what stops you from accessing it?
- What makes you feel valued when you communicate with others, and why?

# Summary of findings

## Solomon Islands

### 1. Connection, communication, and information

Throughout the research, issues of connection, communication, and access to information emerged as perhaps the most pressing set of obstacles to people and governments getting things done. It is hard to get around the country, hard to buy and sell things, and hard to get information on everything from agricultural techniques to government policy and programs. Digital communication is both making more information accessible and adding to confusion and uncertainty.

### 2. Bilateral partnership

Solomon Islands and Australia are very close neighbours and share a long history, featuring highs and lows, from RAMSI and various emergency responses to Blackbirding. Today, the relationship, while warm, is thin. Australia gives a lot in aid but buys almost nothing from Solomon Islands. Few Australians visit Solomon Islands, and it is very difficult for Solomon Islanders to come to Australia. Solomon Islanders generally know two things about Australia: RAMSI and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme (usually referred to by research participants as the Seasonal Workers Program).<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Youth, women, and people with a disability

Challenges facing all Solomon Islanders are particularly acute for young people, women, and people with a disability. For each group, efforts to organise and improve their lives are hampered most pressingly by difficulties in engaging effectively with the Solomon Islands Government. Each group also experiences particular challenges: for example, people with a disability face the barriers of infrastructure not designed for their needs; youth are at the sharp end of social change and struggle to find meaningful work; and women experience gender-based violence and political underrepresentation. Australia is well-respected by women's and disability groups for its innovative and well-targeted programs, but it does not appear to have the same recognition for work with young people.

### 4. Governance

Top-down political governance is only one third of the story in Solomon Islands. Around the country, people experience governance across three dimensions: established but sometimes weakening traditional systems; highly influential church systems; and government systems that people find confusing and unreliable. People recognise that resources and assistance should come from the government, but they are increasingly frustrated by its failure to bring about change.

### 5. Peacebuilding

Past violence continues to be a present problem around the country, as people fear a resurgence of the violence that characterised the tensions. But more pressingly, family violence and abuse is an urgent problem, as it is in many Pacific countries. Violence involving youth is also a widespread concern. Solomon Islands needs to both resolve the challenges of the past and face up to the crimes of the present.

1. Note that participants often speak about the PALM scheme interchangeably with the longer-running Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme run by the New Zealand government. Under the PALM scheme, people from nine Pacific Island countries, including Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, can work in Australia in a sponsored position for either: short-term (seasonal) contracts of up to nine months, or long-term contracts of up to four years.



# Vanuatu

## 1. Community centred development

Participants overwhelmingly called for community centred development driven by traditional values, equitable access, and active participation to foster resilience, inclusion, and trust. This approach highlights the need for holistic, culturally rooted approaches to governance, infrastructure, and empowerment.

## 2. Integration of customary and modern governance

Integration of customary and modern governance systems is a priority, as both have strengths that could respond to the development and security challenges of Vanuatu and provide a more inclusive approach to governance. Cultural integrity and preservation are impacted by modernisation and there is a need to find solutions on a Vanuatu structure that can harness the strength of globalisation alongside traditional values and governance mechanisms. Christianity and traditional values remain crucial for fostering social cohesion.

## 3. Leadership and political transparency

Leadership and political transparency could be strengthened by more awareness and effective information flow within communities and across the state apparatus to ensure effective community engagement at the political level. Prioritising people and community development are important, with consultation and regular visits by political leaders and officials to communities essential.

## 4. Climate-induced and natural disasters

Climate-induced and natural disasters continue to define and impact Vanuatu's development and security environment.

## 5. Security and community development priorities

Security and community development priorities are: infrastructure development (roads, electricity); access to essential services such as education and health; access to banking services; strengthening border security; reinforcing appropriate law enforcement mechanisms; and

focusing on community-driven development. These priorities are critical for future stability. Sustainability relies on effective communication, transport networks, and human capability.

Social issues remain a concern, such as the negative impacts of the labour mobility schemes, unemployment, alcohol, and drug-related issues, land disputes, and over-population in some urban areas in Port Vila.

The social and economic impact of absconded seasonal workers are a significant concern and contributing to insecurity within communities.

Photo credit: Linda Kenni





# Recommendations

These recommendations have been developed by the research teams and are based on the combined findings of Phases 1 and 2 of the research. There is strong resonance between the findings of the Regional Perspectives Project and those of the 2024 Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into *Pursuing the Priorities of the Pacific*. The University of Adelaide submitted the Phase 1 summary report to that inquiry, and it was cited in the Committee's report.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Pursuing the Priorities of the Pacific*, Canberra: Parliament of Australia, 2024, pp. 22 and 28.



# Solomon Islands

## 1. Connection, communication, and information

The Australian government could:

- 1.1 Find new ways, working within government systems and local protocols, to get good information on donor programs to where it is needed, including through partnerships with the churches as the communication network with the greatest reach within the country, and coordination with other donors on the provision of critical transport and communications infrastructure across all provinces.
- 1.2 Continue the reform that it is undertaking to support Solomon Islands' civil society sector, including through a funding model which provides longer-term financial support to CSOs or umbrella bodies to act as ongoing conduits of information between their members and to the government in Honiara.

The Solomon Islands government could:

- 1.3 Ensure that information on community development and key sectors is shared by building the capability and visibility of Ward Development Committees, national CSOs, churches, and peak bodies, and through developing digital information channels. Consider whether the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021 needs to be updated to reflect the role of artificial intelligence and its impact on the quality of information accessible to people.
- 1.4 Work with the international community on the provision of good quality communications infrastructure, with a focus on ensuring that women, people with a disability,

and other vulnerable groups have access to appropriate smartphone and satellite WI-FI technology.

## 2. Bilateral partnership

The Australian Government could:

- 2.1 Enhance the cultural awareness of its personnel working on or in Solomon Islands. The research team, in consultation with communities around the country, has prepared a set of sample 'cultural protocols' for engagement, which follow these recommendations.
- 2.2 Create tangible and sustainable projects in partnership with the Solomon Islands Government and local organisations and build the trade relationship between the two countries to bring Solomon Islands' trade levels more in line with its neighbours in the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER Plus) and to help reduce Solomon Islands' dependence on aid. This could include investing in the economic development of industry and businesses.
- 2.3 Find the balance between taking skilled workers for labour mobility programs and ensuring that they are not disproportionately affecting the local skilled labour force.

The Solomon Islands government could:

- 2.4 Improve coordination between government ministries to best communicate the country's development priorities and be in a better position to collaborate with its aid partners.
- 2.5 Increase exports by analysing why there is a trade imbalance between

Solomon Islands and the other Melanesian countries and how the PACER Plus agreement has been implemented. Focus on exports of agricultural products, for example by facilitating buyer networks with local producers and provincial centres, other provinces, and overseas markets, and assisting in navigating biosecurity regulations.

- 2.6 Improve the reintegration of seasonal workers to utilise the skills they have acquired.

## 3. Youth, women, and people with a disability

The Australian government could:

- 3.1 Partner with women's, disability, and youth groups to implement initiatives targeting marginalised peoples in areas such as employment, sports, and the creative arts.
- 3.2 Fund local initiatives aimed at improving the rights and inclusion of people with a disability, protecting victims of domestic violence, and addressing its root causes.

The Solomon Islands government could:

- 3.3 Honour its promises made to people with a disability, youth, and women, as failure to uphold them risks fuelling frustration and anti-social behaviour. This includes adequately funding the actions listed in the *National Youth Policy 2017-2030* <sup>3</sup>.
- 3.4 Better incorporate women, people with a disability, and youth into all levels of decision-making processes and target economic empowerment initiatives and accessibility of education for marginalised groups.

3. <https://solomons.gov.sb/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SOLOMON-ISLANDS-NATIONAL-YOUTH-POLICY-2017-2030.pdf>

## 4. Governance

The Australian government could:

- 4.1 Work with the Solomon Islands Government, and where appropriate, church and traditional governance structures, to ensure that it reaches the most remote people.
- 4.2 Ensure that when engaging at the community level, notification of this work has reached the different levels of government and traditional leaders. This includes engaging with the appropriate contact person for a particular project.

The Solomon Islands government could:

- 4.3 Improve communications and understanding of government systems, processes, and opportunities. This also includes bottom-up communications so people at the community level can engage with officials to get the information they require.
- 4.4 Prioritise and create initiatives to strengthen traditional governance.

## 5. Peacebuilding

The Australian government could:

- 5.1 Reprioritise support for peacebuilding in its aid, police, and justice assistance programs.
- 5.2 Ensure conflict sensitivity across all programming.

The Solomon Islands government could:

- 5.3 Act on the findings of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- 5.4 Adequately resource the Ministry of Traditional Governance, Peace and Ecclesiastical Affairs, and particularly its work in helping traditional leaders to perform peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the community.
- 5.5 Prioritise ensuring accessible and effective access to the police and justice system for women and children. Part of this includes increasing the funding to Safenet,<sup>4</sup> the Public Solicitors office and Youth and Women's groups.<sup>5</sup>

- 5.6 Create ward-level centres for people to access information on support for victims of gender-based and family violence.

- 5.7 Build peacebuilding into government youth programs.



4. Safenet Solomon Islands, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2017/12/improving-the-nations-safenet>

5. Solomon Islands National Council of Women, <https://www.solomonislandsinfocus.com/sincw.htm>; Young Women's Christian Association, <https://www.preventionweb.net/organization/ywca-solomon-islands>; Vois blong Mere, <https://www.preventionweb.net/organization/vois-blong-mere>



# Vanuatu

## 1. Connection, communication, and information

The Australian Government could:

- 1.1 Simplify the funding criteria for accessing community grants and improve awareness of Australian-funded projects and their benefits to communities.

The Vanuatu Government could:

- 1.2 Make high-level decisions in consultation with communities and voters to ensure inclusivity, proper representation, and political accountability.
- 1.3 Include and share disaster preparations, agriculture, and livelihood topics in official communication with communities.

## 2. Education

The Australian Government could:

- 2.1 Consider a culturally sensitive education policy at tertiary level by offering scholarships for students to study in contexts that are appropriate and useful to Vanuatu, where their learning can be easily transferred to practice.

The Vanuatu Government could:

- 2.2 Prioritise education opportunities, including economic pathways for young people that enhance social cohesion and positively contribute to communities, as youth idleness was identified as being linked to crime and insecurity. Fund local youth training centres and community policing. Link skills training to local markets and community needs.

## 3. Bilateral Partnership

The Australian Government could:

- 3.1 Invest in long-term relationships grounded in mutual respect by avoiding top-down impositions.

## 4. Development

The Australian Government could:

- 4.1 Support sustainable infrastructure by focussing not only on delivery but also on local ownership, maintenance and sustainability.

The Vanuatu Government could:

- 4.2 Address persistent challenges in critical infrastructure such as health, education, and water in remote areas such as Torba, Ambrym, and in the Tafea province.
- 4.3 Provide stronger support to growing microfinance schemes and economic activities to maximise their impact.
- 4.4 In partnership with the governments of Australia and New Zealand, invest in solutions to prevent, manage and address the negative impact of labour mobility schemes.

## 5. Governance

The Australian Government could:

- 5.1 Amplify traditional governance by collaborating through traditional systems, especially community level decision-making processes and other existing mechanisms.

The Vanuatu Government could:

- 5.2 Support chiefs and churches with appropriate resources for effective governance. In consultation with appropriate authorities, invest in training for community leaders, including female and youth representatives.
- 5.3 Where appropriate, translate policies into legislation to enforce compliance and implementation.

# How we gathered our data

In the Pacific Islands region traditional data-collection methods, such as surveys and key informant interviews with elites, often miss diverse community voices, leading to an incomplete understanding of local social, political, and environmental issues.

This makes it difficult for both Pacific Island countries and their partners to make informed decisions. Past efforts have struggled with logistical issues, lack of infrastructure, and the wide geographical spread of the islands. They have also often overlooked the unique cultural and social aspects within Pacific Island countries, leading to misunderstandings.

This project took a new approach by deeply engaging with communities in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu using traditional local storytelling methods that respected local cultures, which enabled participants to gift their knowledge to our teams of researchers. This allowed us to get a clearer and fuller picture of local conditions and opinions and to identify differences across Solomon Islands' and Vanuatu's provinces. We conducted extensive fieldwork, using open-ended questions to hear from a wide range of people, ensuring our findings genuinely reflected their views.

This project also took a new approach by seeking to be mutually beneficial to both

the funding government agency and to the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu partners leading the research. Each step, including identifying project aims, research questions, and designing methodologies, was co-designed by the Solomon Islander, ni-Vanuatu, and Australian researchers.

Reflecting an emphasis on localisation, the research was led by Jennifer Wate and a team from Development Services Exchange in Solomon Islands, and Linda Kenni and a team from Vanuatu. Reflecting the prioritisation and foregrounding of Pacific voices and perspectives, the data was analysed by the Solomon Island and ni-Vanuatu researchers. This report, and others generated by the project, were written by the Solomon Islander and ni-Vanuatu research partners.

The project was guided by a co-created Data Collection Plan, Communications Plan, and a robust Cultural Protocol to ensure that it was conducted in a way that respects the agency of the Solomon Islander and ni-Vanuatu research partners, research participants, and the broader Solomon Islands and Vanuatu communities.

The improved understanding of the perceptions of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu people outlined in this paper is invaluable for policymakers and regional partners, providing essential insights into the real effects of international relations on the lives of people in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Although these insights specifically reflect the communities visited and might not represent wider national opinions, they are crucial for refining current policies and guiding future studies to include more regions.

Opposite, photo credit: Team Solomon Islands







# Understanding Solomon Islanders' perceptions: key insights from Phase 2

Authors: Jennifer Wate, Alice Houanihau, Inia Barry Wickham, Cathie Konainao, Samantha Lianga, Finley Harrison, James Cox

This abridged summary presents the key findings from research conducted in Solomon Islands during Phase 2 of the Regional Perspectives Project. The research team was primarily composed of and led by Solomon Islanders from Development Services Exchange, the national umbrella body for civil society organisations in Solomon Islands, in partnership with Peacifica, an Australian peacebuilding NGO. The Solomon Islands and Vanuatu teams worked closely with the project leads at the University of Adelaide (UoA) and DSTG on refining the project's objectives and developing the research questions and methodology.

## Methodology

The methodology for the Regional Perspectives Project used a grounded theory approach. This involved the research team analysing qualitative data from semi-structured conversations informed by a set of open questions to identify significant issues and detailed findings. The full report includes many specific examples that are representative of larger trends. By conducting two phases of data collection and analysis, we could validate its findings with the research participants and do a limited longitudinal exploration of some of the issues raised.

A distinctive feature of this research is that it has pursued the principles of collaboration and localisation – as far as possible – from conception through to completion. Participation by the full research team in all aspects of the design and implementation of this project was not new to Phase 2.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, a major innovation in Phase 2 was to bring participating groups together, rather than travelling to each one. This helped promote dialogue and shared learning between communities.

Discussion and empowerment was evident in the opportunity to sit beside people from other communities and talk about issues together. This appeared to be especially the case for men. Women from different communities typically knew each other better than the men did.

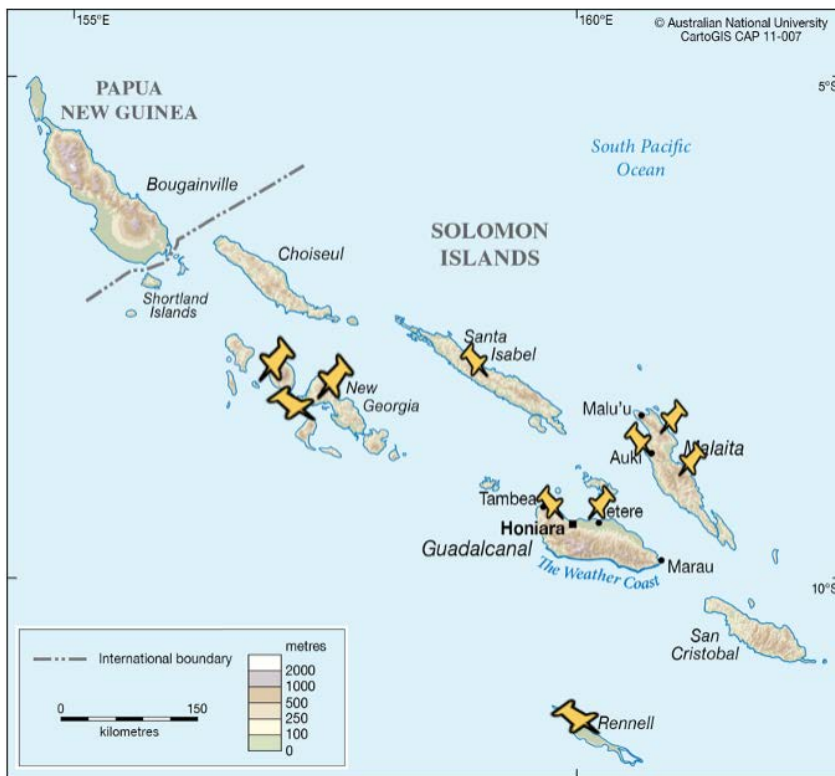
'Reporting back' was also an intrinsic part of fostering an ongoing conversation between the participants and researchers. Discovering others share your views and there are shared interests was positive confirmation the project was enabling for all.

The opportunity to speak directly with Australian Government officials at the collaborative workshop in Canberra in June 2024, enhanced this inclusive approach. Reporting back on these engagements, the conversation ebbed and flowed in ways that gave participants an understanding of how their insights were being communicated and received in Canberra.

6. An outline of the formation and collaborative design of the project and Phase 1 data collection is contained in the initial summary report.



## Data collection locations



National report back: MTGPEA, Provincial Government, MPGIS, Honiara City Council.

Provincial report back: Western, Guadalcanal, Isabel, Malaita, Renbel

Community report back:

- Western: Gizo & Kaza, Egholo & Dunde
- Guadalcanal: Verahue
- Malaita: Auki, Buma, Central Malaita
- Isabel: Kologaru

CSOs: People with Disability Solomon Islands, Isi Akson Theatre, Apunēpara Ha'amwaora Natural Resource Association, Ahetaha Conservation Association, Solomon Island Rangers Association

Key informant interviews: Honiara City Mayor, three civil society and community leaders

[Map: ANU CartoGIS CAP 11-007]

## Limitations

The Solomon Islands research team was determined to get 'beyond the capital' to avoid focusing only on easily accessible locations. This determination paid off as the teams were able to reach five provinces (i.e. Guadalcanal, Malaita, Isabel, Rennell and Bellona, Western), plus Honiara. In most provinces they met 2-4 communities and several key informants, ranging from community leaders to provincial officials. While much was consistent, there was discernible variation between different locations.

Solomon Islands is, however, a challenging and diverse nation for research work. Getting to communities entailed combinations of small aeroplanes, ferries, open outboard motorboats, and 4-wheel drives on very poor-quality roads. This was itself time consuming and expensive and a good demonstration for the team of the challenges that people around the country face in travel and access.

For these reasons, the teams did not reach Temotu, Central, Makira, or Choiseul provinces. Guadalcanal provincial officials also pointed out that the team did not venture into the inland areas of the province, which are also very hard to access and differ in many ways from the coast.

# Key themes

## A changing domestic landscape

The understanding of Solomon Islands that emerges from this research challenges stereotypes of it as a country that is isolated and disengaged from the outside world, and that is contending with legacies of violence. Nor is it simply a theatre for geopolitical games to be played out. Isolation and violence are widely shared problems, but Solomon Islanders are nonetheless actively interested in and engaged with the outside world. Issues like the rise of Chinese influence, the experience of COVID-19, and the steady rise in access to the internet are making external issues more relevant to the daily lives of Solomon Islanders.

These changes are taking place while people's daily lives continue to be rooted in traditional ways of living. Village-based decision-making and problem solving, intimately bound up with the local church, is the starting point for how most people around the country live their lives. Provincial and national government influence is growing, albeit uncertainly.

## Challenges to community well-being

Community well-being in Solomon Islands is built on a three-legged relationship of tradition, church, and government, formally recognised as the 'tripod system' in Isabel, but used informally in other provinces. Typically, however, the effectiveness of this arrangement is compromised by weaknesses in some or all of these elements and by the challenges of communication, travel, and trade. When government fails or local leaders fail in their responsibilities, it is ordinary citizens who suffer.

These challenges are keenly felt by Solomon Islands youth, who perhaps more than any other group are contending with tensions between established and emerging ways of being a Solomon Islander. Changing expectations and demands mean that traditional village life may not be attractive, while there are not enough jobs or things to do in town. Many young people are rising to these challenges, emerging as innovators

and leaders locally and nationally. But some young people have turned to violence and substance abuse to manage this, and both established and emerging ways of managing these difficulties are struggling to do so.

Many issues, like dealing with the impacts of climate change and getting basic services to remote communities, are also subject to these constraints. Research participants demonstrated that they are resilient and enterprising in how they are finding their way through, and it may be the case that more remote communities are more resourceful in this respect. It was apparent that with reliable information on government assistance and initiatives hard to come by, people act opportunistically, looking first to their MPs and other arms of government and then to other sources like NGOs and donor governments.

## Empowering traditional governance, women's organisations, and youth

One of the highlights of the Phase 2 discussions was an emphasis on empowering traditional governance, women's organisations, and youth. For example, the women's group at Munda stated that the Solomon Islands Government should empower traditional government and women's organisations through the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children. They further stated that 'temporary special measures' should be introduced to the government system so that women could have their own election to be included, such as via reserved seats in Parliament, as currently there was less opportunity for women.

The Gizo and Kaza participating communities in the Western province raised the issue of how to connect the existing structure of chiefs in the communities, since over time the churches had taken over the responsibilities of the chiefs.

Youth make up most of the population in Solomon Islands and are the most vulnerable to emerging conflicts. Empowering young people within their communities is crucial for maintaining peace and security at the community level.

## Impact of geopolitics

Transparency and responsibility in geopolitics was raised by the participating communities across each research location. When talking about geopolitics, participants talked about both how Solomon Islands engaged with other countries, and the contest between other countries for influence. It was also sometimes a reference to the Taiwan/China switch. For example, according to Verahue community, geopolitics caused both positive and negative impacts on Solomon Islands, and participants claimed that the China switch created political instability and confusion.

In contrast, a leader of a community-based organisation (CBO) in Honiara claimed that geopolitics was an opportunity to empower the government and people to be self-reliant. They suggested that Solomon Islanders could build their own nation, use their own resources, build awareness, and take advantage of funding coming into the country. However, they argued that the government needed to restructure its approach by utilising the country's resources through planning, because currently the government approach created aid dependency. Government mismanagement and corruption were perceived to result in lack of self-reliance and to create competition.

## Considerations for external actors

External actors like the Australian Government need to appreciate the domestic context as they consider how to engage most effectively, supportively, and respectfully with Solomon Islanders. They should bring a keen awareness of the strength of tradition and of the determination of Solomon Islanders to participate in the modern world; and stand ready to assist both ordinary Solomon Islanders and the government to make their systems and structures work. It should be emphasised that any donor has only a supporting role in this. The overwhelming majority of the Solomon Islanders who participated in this research stated that it was foremost the responsibility of themselves, their





Photo credit: Team Solomon Islands

leaders in communities, and those in government to bring about the future that they want for their children.

### Potential for misinformation and digital exclusion

Communities in Solomon Islands are experiencing rapid changes to their communication networks. Usage of mobile phones and satellite data ('Wi-Fi') is increasing in a society that has predominantly used people-to-people communication and radios as their main sources of information. Access to phones for news and information is rapidly increasing. There appears to be a very rapid transition from radio to smartphones. The speed of this change has meant that people's online literacy has not kept up with the advancement in technology, leaving communities exposed to misinformation or cybersecurity threats.

Previously, news and important information came predominantly from the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation or one of the few national newspapers. Now, through access to

the internet, the potential sources of information are endless. The increase in options has created competing narratives, with possibility for misinformation, but also greater freedom in the information that people choose to consume.

Many Solomon Islander people have limited media literacy and little ability to differentiate between facts and misinformation. The increase in media sources has blurred accepted narratives and made information more contentious. While diversity of opinion can be valuable, it also requires skills to discern the quality of the views on offer.

A matter of some concern is how the switch to mobile phones from radio may alienate those who are unable to use this technology or to understand written information. Written information from the government is communicated through English, rather than Pijin or a local language. This potential driver of inequality may also have a gender dimension, as women's literacy is often lower than men's in rural areas. Access to technology may also be restricted along

gender lines. These issues may also apply for people with disability, with a double disadvantage as the right technological aids could be a huge boon to some.

This is one area where younger people have a natural advantage and a potential leadership role, as they tend to be early adopters and to have greater facility. Prioritising young people for digital literacy training would be valuable.

This should be a central concern for the Solomon Islands and Australian Governments as they consider how to communicate with Solomon Islander people about how they approach certain policy areas. The Australian High Commission in Honiara has been aware of this for some time, for example with its outreach via social media taking a 'Pijin first' approach. But messaging could go further with greater use of video (in Pijin) alongside text to make information more accessible to non-literate people – bandwidth and data permitting. The Solomon Islands Government could also take these lessons on board as it expands its own digital footprint. Awareness

raising on digital literacy and safety should be a priority of the government and donors. This can target all groups in different ways but is potentially an opportunity for younger Solomon Islander people to take a leadership role.

## Need to strengthen people-to-people channels of communication

Most communities still rely on long and fragile chains of communication passed from person to person, but information can become garbled as it is passed on. Some information can be withheld, either accidentally or maliciously, as part of the exercise of power. Social dynamics can also affect who is included and excluded in information sharing.

Personal communication continues to be a key conduit of information from the government. Christmas, for example, is a time when people returning to the village from Honiara bring with them news and information from town. All such communication is by its nature informal, irregular, and of varying quality.

This informal system does not provide effective avenues for villages to communicate their needs or obtain the information they would like. Communication is top-down, directed from the government to the community, and there is no infrastructure to enable individuals to get information they need from the government. The most common upwards communication pathway seems to be via MPs, primarily with the intention of accessing Constituency Development Funds (CDFs). CDFs are public development funds allocated to constituencies to support rural development initiatives according to constituency development priorities.<sup>7</sup> Ward Development Committees seem to still be on the periphery as a channel for communication and resource allocation. The ability to obtain information from the government would, according to the data we have collected, increase peoples' sense of feeling valued and empowered.

Even as digital technologies become prominent, governments should not lose

sight of the continued prevalence of such personal forms of communication. Village meetings drive action in communities and are especially powerful when supported by accessible printed information and in person visits.

## Information needs

Participants from all provinces mentioned that they wanted more information about the Solomon Islands Government's community development programs. The CDFs were the main policy cited. The CDFs are funded by the government with partial support from the People's Republic of China aid program, but they are administered by local MPs, meaning that communities attribute their benefits to their MP.<sup>8</sup> Because it is associated with MPs, the distribution of development funds under the scheme can directly influence and be influenced by voter behaviour.<sup>9</sup> To increase this influence MPs can either target their supporters or advertise the projects they fund; ensuring the CDFs remains visible in the community.

Participants in the community and from government were less aware and interested in international funding and opportunities from aid partners. No donor programs other than the 'Seasonal Worker' scheme (as the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme (PALM) is generally known) were mentioned by the community groups in Renbel, Western Province, and Malaita.

Participants from all provinces wanted information from the government on policies or updates which would enable them to develop their communities and empower underrepresented groups to participate in the decision-making process. Women's and youth groups particularly wanted more information about government policies and opportunities to influence government decision-making.

## Barriers to informational awareness

Although 44.6% of the population have a mobile phone (37.6% in rural areas),

according to the latest census, the usability of these phones is tied to their ability to connect with mobile networks.<sup>10</sup> Access to electricity also challenges peoples' ability to connect to mobile phones, the internet, and radio broadcasts.

While the increasing usage of phones with internet connectivity has seen peoples' news and media consumption shift from radios to mobile phones, this is community and location dependent. Although the radio is still regarded as the dominant method of media delivery, stakeholders need to adopt a communications strategy which uses different modes of delivery and is locally sensitive to the method that the community wants to receive the information.

Many participants reported that they were disinterested in current affairs and preferred to access Facebook. There was a clear discrepancy between community groups wanting to know more information and members of those communities not actively consuming that information on digital platforms. This disinterest in external information may link to the sentiment of hopelessness with failed projects or promises that are not kept. This sentiment was expressed strongly in Western Province, but it was also raised in the Guadalcanal provincial headquarters key informant interviews and the Kologaru community groups.

Nevertheless, participants across the country were critical of what they saw as the government's poor communication structure. Community groups said that there were no effective links or networks from primary sources of information down to the receiving end in the communities. The government's communication structure relies on the long chain of communication remaining intact from the national government through the provincial level to the ward level and down to the community. This means there are many links through which information flows can be broken. Even if you live next to the provincial headquarters (Buala women) or were actively seeking information (National Council of Women) there are no formal avenues to access it.

7. Constituency Development Fund, <https://solomons.gov.sb/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Constituency-Development-Fund-leaflet-2022.pdf>

8. Futaiaisi, D (2023) Nodes and Networks: *The Governance of Constituency Development Funds in Baegu/Asifola and Gizo/Kolombangara*, Doctor of Philosophy thesis submitted to Australia National University, p.8.

9. Futaiaisi, *Nodes and Networks*, p.13.

10. Solomon Islands National Statistics Officer (September 2023), Solomon Islands 2019 Population Census, p.122.



## Communication supports

The churches are the primary communication network in certain regions due to their extended reach through their members and existing infrastructure. The churches are also viewed as trustworthy and able to reach all people in the community. One key informant interview with the Guadalcanal provincial government mentioned that international donors are reluctant to partner with church groups, and that this risks alienating a key communication network. They perceive it as “the one hand that reaches everyone”, and in times of tension “it was the local community leadership in partnership with the church that upheld peace, not police.”

Personal connections are also key enablers of people-to-people communication. As an Egholo resident observed:

*“The only time that we will hear something is when people come into our village.”*

Alternatively, the absence of personal connections or negative relations can be detrimental to the transmission of information, where community members withhold information to another over personal animosity.

Honiara-based CBOs and the Egholo Secretary both mentioned the potential for central points of information within the village that the community could access. Verahue community groups raised awareness programs and workshops as a useful tool for community members to receive information and immediately clarify it with the communicator. Verahue is a coastal community within the Guadalcanal province.

## Solomons Islands and Australia: a relationship ready for enhancement

Participants were aware and appreciative of labour mobility opportunities in Australia, but they were concerned about the social issues they brought to the country and the reintegration of workers. The provincial government leaders of Guadalcanal were critical of labour mobility schemes; many were aware of the benefits, but concerned that they used Solomon Islands workers to develop businesses in Australia and New

Zealand. Other community participants observed that workers were returning to the country with skills that were not applicable to the domestic employment situation, meaning many individuals had the same job prospects as when they left.

Solomon Islands’ decision to switch diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the Peoples’ Republic of China (PRC) has led to more competition between countries to gain influence in the country. Provincial government leaders recognise this strategic opportunity and are open to engaging with anyone, but preferred partners exist. Australia is undoubtedly a preferred partner, but for many observed the relationship tends to blow hot and cold and was largely limited to aid or humanitarian work.

In this environment it is therefore important the Australian Government builds on its longstanding relationship by communicating its value as a partner beyond aid – following up with clear action in areas like trade, visas, work opportunities, and climate action.

The way Australia engages with Solomon Islanders is also very important. Solomon Islanders of course recognise that outsiders (even from elsewhere in the country) will do things differently; however, even a superficial understanding by a visitor of protocols around entry, gift giving, apology, and important life and community events will go a long way to building relationships of understanding and respect.





Youth engagement

Youth engagement is crucial, as the youth are a large population group that is becoming increasingly isolated from village life and effective engagement in modern society. Youth (people aged under 30) are approximately 64% of the population and experience higher rates of unemployment than the national average.<sup>11</sup> The Solomon Islands Government has recognised the position of youth as the leaders of tomorrow and has developed a national youth strategy, yet it remains an unimplemented policy with no funding attached. Critically, young people are not simply a problem to be fixed. Instead, young people should be central to the development strategies of the government and of any donor. As the largest, healthiest, best educated, and strongest part of the population, their well-being is fundamental to that of the whole country.

Violence and conflict

The Solomon Islands Government needs to take seriously the work of resolving the troubles of the past, to ensure safe access to police and justice, and to address the underlying causes of family violence. The social unrest known as “the tensions” are now more than two decades in the past. However, during our interviews with focus groups at Munda, Verahue, and Malaita, it became clear unresolved issues from that time continue to weigh on people’s minds. Fears of renewed violence are well-founded, as riots have occasionally flared up, reopening old traumas. What also emerged in Phase 2 was the presence of family violence, both as violence against women and abuse of children. The Hon. John Tuhaika Jnr (Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Peace, Traditional Governance and Ecclesiastical Affairs - MTGPEA) believes traditional approaches to peacebuilding and

conflict resolution can solve community problems, especially those involving youths engaged in alcohol and drug abuse leading to disturbances of the peace that threaten local security. He recommended supporting conflict resolution through training and strengthening families, community, church leaders and network of chiefs. During a Tok Stori in October 2024, the Permanent Secretary acknowledged the challenges ahead:

*“Right now it is not land disputes, but people disputes, which result in people’s relationships collapsing. Disputes between families are very difficult to resolve and that is a difficult reality.”*



Above and opposite, photo credit: Team Solomon Islands

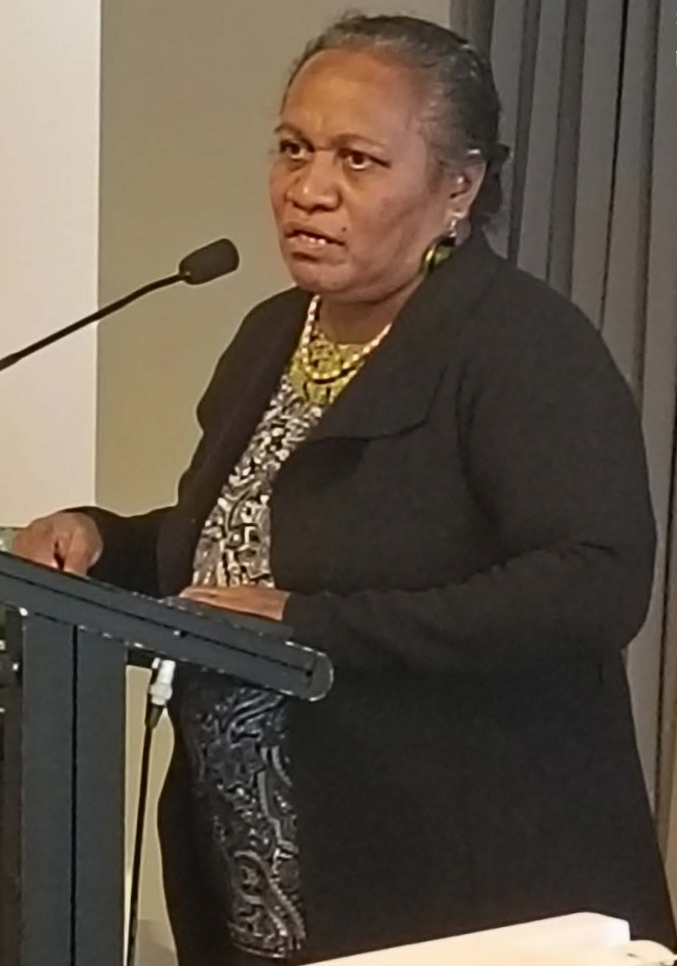
11. Solomon Islands National Statistics Officer (September 2023) Census 2019: Solomon Islands Population and Housing Census, page 16



REGIONAL  
PERSPECTIVES RESEARCH

# Regional Perspectives Research Project

Amplifying Pacific voices and  
informing Australian policymaking





# Understanding Ni-Vanuatu perceptions: key insights from Phase 2

Authors: Linda Kenni, Rebecca Iaken, Kiery Manassah, Ketty Napwatt, Maima Koro

This abridged summary presents the key findings from research conducted in Vanuatu during Phase 2 of the Regional Perspectives Project and is to be read in conjunction with the Phase 1 report to appreciate the findings of this study. The local research team led by Linda Kenni worked closely with the project leads at the University of Adelaide (UoA) and DSTG on refining the project's objectives, research questions and methodology.

## Methodology

Our methodological approach was grounded on the principles of transparency, respect, and an acknowledgment of the participants' ownership of their knowledge and ways of knowing, use of culturally appropriate tools and protocols, and above all, a commitment to 'do no harm'.

We accordingly sought to develop common goals and build trust through socialisation. Socialisation was mainly intended to legitimise the project in Vanuatu, by being transparent and demonstrating respect through following due protocols. The project was socialised informally and formally with the High Commissioner of Vanuatu, HE Samson Fare, who verbally relayed his support. Team Vanuatu subsequently held socialisation meetings with politicians, senior government officials, Area Administrators, community representatives, and chiefs. It must be noted that socialisation of the project was impacted by the political situation in Vanuatu.

Pacific methodological approaches and tools such as consensus building, the Samoan consultative principle of *soālaupule*, and the Vanuatu storytelling tool known as *storian*, were key features of our methodology. It is important to note that these cultural processes and protocols are to be understood within the context of this research collaboration, as whilst the mechanisms are transferrable, the context (people, place, activity, issue(s)) will define its appropriate application in practice.

## Reporting back

A key aspect of the Phase 2 research methodology was reporting back on the Phase 1 findings to participants and other interested community members, which was well appreciated. One of the positive outcomes of our reporting back was the sharing of information in a holistic manner. For example, though communities continue to face development challenges, such as access to services, significant progress has also been achieved. Before this project, this progress was not well-documented or shared by either communities or government bodies to inform decision-making. The Phase 1 reporting back became a useful mechanism for people to see the range of issues faced and the progress made to address them across the country. It reinforced realities such as Vanuatu's geographical challenges, the tensions of multiple systems (donor, local governance structures, national, provincial, community, individual, collective), and the value of sharing lessons learned in the face of ongoing funding barriers.

Over twenty invitees who attended the national report back event in Port Vila in October 2024 were delighted to have been involved in the research and its findings. Those present represented all sectors including government, church, chiefs, and in particular communities that were contacted for the study in Efate. DFAT was also represented at the launch. At the end, Commissioner of Vanuatu Maritime Safety Authority (VMSA) Less Napuati congratulated Team Vanuatu for presenting the findings. He raised a question about one of the key recommendations for foreign



interventions to recognise and work with existing structures – requesting more clarity. The research team clarified that existing structures included both formal and ‘informal’ ones, starting at national/government level to local village community level. It included both traditional and church communication channels and protocols. Participants overwhelmingly supported this recommendation as it is linked to their view of the recognition of their traditional structures and use of local expertise.

At the national report back event Shefa Provincial Secretary General Lionel Kaluat echoed the sentiments expressed by the VMSA Commissioner and asked whether the Regional Perspectives Project could consider the need for ‘preservation’ (of everything that is Vanuatu) and ‘local ownership’ of the development process and agenda. The research team replied that one of the key strengths of the project was its emphasis on using local expertise and local agency, and that understanding of the context remained paramount.

## Data collection

Data collection for Phase 2 commenced in September 2024 and focused on the same participants visited during Phase 1 (as much as possible). With travel challenges, a strategic decision was taken by the research team to approach people from the outer islands who had travelled to Port Vila on official government business or for personal interests. A Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs (NCC) meeting was convened in Port Vila in November 2024, which enabled the research team to storian with ninety-one traditional leaders following approval.

Area Administrators from Penama and Malampa were also in Port Vila at the time of the data collection, enabling their perspectives to be included. This strategic decision enabled the project reach to expand the research from the four provinces of Tafea, Shefa, Sanma, and Torba in Phase 1 to include all six provinces of Vanuatu with the inclusion of Penama and Malampa. As a result, a total of 408 participants participated in the second phase of this research.

## Data collection locations

📍 Phase 1 - 280 participants (>19% female) 📍 Phase 2 - 408 participants (53% female)



## Limitations

Most members of Team Vanuatu are located in Port Vila, with one in the remote province of Torba. Communication and mobility challenged data collection, including limited internet connectivity and challenging transport infrastructure, particularly following the liquidation of the national airline carrier Air Vanuatu in May 2024. Passenger boats became the primary mode of transportation to the outer islands, which were often at full capacity. Severe weather conditions and climate-related disruptions also contributed to the difficulties faced by the team. As a country constantly in a state of recovery from cyclones, this study was conducted as communities were rebuilding from the devastating effects of twin cyclones Judy and Kevin in 2023.<sup>12</sup> In December 2024, the

capital Port Vila suffered a devastating 7.3 magnitude earthquake that killed 14 people and wounded over 200 people.<sup>13</sup> The earthquake also generated heightened mental and emotional distress for many community members. Persistent aftershocks contributed to widespread anxiety, prolonging the community's recovery and delaying their return to normalcy. At the political level, the country experienced three governmental changes in 2023 and held its first ever national referendum in 2024. The dynamics of the intense geopolitical environment also impacted the project. The challenges of this study are unique: it was not capacity, time, or resources as often is the norm in such projects. Nevertheless, the ability of Team Vanuatu to navigate those challenges to complete the project is a testimony of their commitment and belief in the value of project

12. Vanuatu Cyclone Judy and Kevin 2023: DREF Operation Update. (2023). Reliefweb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-tropical-cyclone-judy-and-kevin-2023-dref-operation-update-mdrvu010>.

13. Vanuatu earthquakes: Devastation and urgent need for support. (20 January 2025). Caritas. <https://www.caritas.org.au/news/blog/vanuatu-earthquakes-devastation-and-urgent-need-for-support/>

# Key Themes

## Unequal development

Unequal development remains evident across the research sites. This is unsurprising given the short timeframe between the two phases of data collection (September 2023 for Phase 1 and August 2024 for Phase 2), and the reality of systemic developmental challenges, as well as social issues caused by limited economic opportunities and governance challenges impacting communities, especially young people.

Participants referred to change using the binaries of “good” and “bad”, often in relation to systems, people, relationships, or programs. Positive changes in infrastructure, such as roads in Ambae, Tanna, and Malekula were viewed as “good” changes, as they improve livelihoods and alleviate hardships.

Remote areas of Sanma and Torba were described as being in a ‘state of hibernation’, with the same developmental issues noted in Phase 1 stemming from their remoteness: access to quality roads, schools, and health facilities; communication; and transportation. Community members expressed frustration with their political leaders. This view was eloquently reflected by a community elder from Torba:

*“[The] current situation at the national level (political instability) has caused the country to fall backwards, everything seems to be falling apart, worse than before independence, it’s a serious challenge indeed.”*

Participants also noted that change is slow, as an example, a community member observed that “road access is still a big challenge, and it has been a long-time cry of the community, and no response from the government.”

However, unequal development is not necessarily determined by geography. Areas such as Eton and Teouma, which are only a few minutes from Port Vila, experience similar developmental difficulties to those in the remote areas. As one participant from Eton noted:

*“One main need of this community that is a few minutes’ drive to Port Vila, is that there is no electricity. School needs electricity and students need power, and teachers need electricity to help the students learn. This village needs electricity. In terms of education, we now have a Year 10 but with the lack of electricity, students do not have enough time to study.”*

The lack of local infrastructure means development is unequal across the provinces and within islands. However, the completion of four new feeder roads in Penma Province near the central hub of West Ambae has provided employment for young people from all the thirty-five communities in the region. The locally maintained health centre near the coast at Nduindui is another example of the positive benefits of investment in infrastructure. Such community led and sustained initiatives illustrate how invested the people of Vanuatu are in driving positive change themselves.

Communities have also demonstrated their resilience in the aftermath of disasters. Vanuatu has half a dozen active volcanoes. Regular cyclones and earthquakes also occur. The Manaro volcano eruption of 2017, in particular, changed people living on Ambae Island in Penama Province, as many parts of the island were deemed uninhabitable due to the impact on housing, crops, and water sources.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the Government of Vanuatu ordered the immediate evacuation of the entire population (approximately 10,000 people) to the neighbouring island of Maewo.

Recalling the effects of the disaster and recovery efforts, community members in Ambae who were relocated as a result of the volcano eruption noted an increased focus on economic matters when they returned to their homes. One Ambae resident reflected on the impact of the volcano and their relocation influenced people’s approach to their daily lives:

*“People consider situations and think more seriously about their livelihoods after their repatriation back to Ambae. There is more business activities in West Ambae compared to the South Pentecost area council. In 2024, Ambae made 2.4 million vatu from business licence fees. From January to March 2025, 3 million vatu has been collected.”*

The significant natural and man-made challenges faced by communities, compounded by unequal development, does not define the spirit of resilience of the people of Vanuatu, who take action to survive and enjoy their lives. A woman in Torba found herself taking the lead in the church community activities “...because there was a lot of talk and no action.” Faced with the social inertia, she took action to “...set the pace...” and decided on what actions to take, noting that “...[a]fter a while, people slowly learn to use their [own] initiatives without being told.”

Such observations suggest individual levels of education or awareness can influence whether people can engage effectively in affecting change within society.

Participants commented positively on the availability of banking services (like Western Union) in remote communities such as Aneityum that rely on tourism. Access to technology has “allowed people to hold accounts and save money” reducing the need to travel all the way to Port Vila. An Aneityum resident said that the ability “to spend and shop” reflects a growing sense of freedom and satisfaction among communities in hard-to-reach areas:

*“[The] standard of living has changed due to sufficient income attained from visitors from cruise ships. There are proper housing and solar systems in some houses.”*

However, participants were aware that while tourist activities bring in money, some voiced their fears that increased affluence might negatively affect

14. At the heart of the Ambae volcano emergency response | UNICEF Pacific Islands (website accessed 28 August 2025)





some people, especially children, as crystallised by one Aneityum resident:

*“More imported products are being consumed because of the fact that more people have an income from tourist activities, and this will lead to non-communicable diseases.”*

## Leadership and governance

Since its independence in 1980, successive governments in Vanuatu have sought to create a more inclusive form of government, one distinct from the days of the British-French condominium.

The 10-Year Decentralization Implementation Plan articulates the Vanuatu Government’s vision for a fully decentralised governance system, emphasising transparency, community participation, and effective local administration.<sup>15</sup> The current administration views the subject of decentralisation as “...a matter of both objective necessity and popular demand, taken a central place in all past independence government programmes of democratisation and economic development”.<sup>16</sup>

Area Administrators (colloquially known as “AAs”), who are formally part of this process as public servants, are highly

respected; one community member observed that the “people can feel the impact of these changes and AAs can also see the big changes in people’s lives.” Some Area Administrators view their roles as “the ears, nose and eyes of the government.” Similar views were expressed by senior government officials in Phase 1. Nevertheless, issues remain around the resourcing of Area Administrators’ offices. Moreover, the slow pace of progress on addressing longstanding social issues across the country is proof that efficacy officials differs from province to province.

Participants’ storians (narratives) reflect their aspirations for strong political leadership in the form of ethical and visionary leaders. One Erromango resident commented that:

*“[We] need good leaders in parliament, we need someone that knows the outside world... and can uphold the Conventions out there. We need to put the right man in place, no give and take system and no buying of votes.”*

Participants across all communities believed government services played an essential role in supporting health, education, infrastructure, small business, and economic development, and

collaborative approaches (internal and external), where necessary. Participants stressed the importance of traditional networks and formal institutions in addressing social issues. Especially in urban areas with dense populations, where traditional governance systems, such as the church networks or the Malvatumauri (Council of Chiefs),<sup>17</sup> might be perceived as weak.

Similar to Phase 1, strong leadership was seen as key factor in maintaining social cohesion. In Shefa province, factionalism among leaders was cited as the primary cause of recent land disputes. One community member from Pango, citing the need for unity, took this notion further:

*“Vanuatu is currently experiencing [a great deal of] internal turmoil, which it needs to sort out, so that it does not lie open to outside intrusion. The government needs to sort its problems and maintain a strong national cohesion to protect its border[s].”*

Many participants had genuine concerns about corruption and graft, with one Eton resident noting that:

*“Every Bill that passes through Parliament must pass through the Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs and the Christian Council of Church for their inputs before it becomes law. If a man wants to contest the election in their constituency, the church leaders and community must have a say or review of their eligibility. I see many MPs putting tenders on projects; they also eat from that money. During the tender screening process, they have their rotten people inside, who [also] eat from that money. Some things to improve is that there are too many little political parties. It is good to have two or three with the understanding that other parties may come back.”*

Overall, during the Phase 2 data collection there was no change in

15. Government of Vanuatu - Department of Local Authorities (Policies) (website accessed 28 August 2025).

16. Ibid (website accessed 28 August 2025).

17. The Malvatumauri, formally established under the Vanuatu constitution, aims to preserve and promote culture by support local language learning, and encourage customary practice.

public distrust of political leaders, with communities in some areas reporting disappointment with traditional and church leaders. As an Erakor (Port Vila)<sup>18</sup> community member observed:

*“The biggest issue in our community is that the role of chiefs does not exist anymore. There is no leadership in terms of chiefs, and we have chiefly issues. Chiefs are not uniting to safeguard our village or our resources compared to [the] outer islands, where the chiefly structures are well organised.”*

## Labour mobility

As in Phase 1, the pros and cons of labour mobility schemes,<sup>19</sup> mainly the tensions between the economic benefits vs social issues such as the breakdown of families, the impact absconding workers, the draining of community resources and much needed expertise in areas such as health and education were again raised during participants’ storians.

As one community member from Aneityum summarised the economic benefits of the labour mobility schemes:

*“those who went on labour mobility are engaged in retail shops, they have more children going to schools, and more money to buy more things.*

*The labour mobility schemes has good sides, it brings income to the community; however, it has also resulted to a lot of broken homes.”*

The status of absconded seasonal workers was a new issue raised in Phase 2. A community member from Eton expressed concern that a “number of people from Eton [a community located on the east coast of Efate island in the Shefa Province about half an hour drive to the capital Port Vila] who have absconded, do we know what’s happening there, whether they will return or not and we want to know where or which parts of NZ or Australia they are in. We want to know whether they will ever return or whether they have a job or not. We are very interested to know.”

Social issues were reported more frequently during the Phase 2 data collection, with communities reporting

problems such as youth related issues with sedentary lifestyles, alcohol, marijuana, and noise. Land disputes and related issues, migration (internal and external), youth unemployment, and tensions from the erosion of cultural values were also reported.

## Information and communication

As Vanuatu is one of the countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change with active volcanos, participants across the country prioritised access to information about the weather and response services when disasters occur. This highlights the importance of understanding local context when seeking to understand peoples’ interest in information and modes of communication.

The sources of information that people trust is determined by their experience and the reality of what services are accessible and affordable where they live. Participants in Phase 1 and Phase 2 were mostly interested in information relating to their safety and priorities (both personal and collective).

Improved connectivity in remote areas has shaped people’s views on technology and communication. Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT) satellite communication systems (typically 75cm to 3.8m) have transformed access to communications, allowing users to transmit and receive data, voice, and video signals. These systems are commonly used in remote locations or where traditional terrestrial infrastructure is unavailable or impractical, offering reliable communication for businesses and individuals. A participant from Penama province observed that:

*“People in these areas do not have good frequency so radio is hard. The V-SAT connectivity helps a lot especially during cyclones.”*

People’s interest in reliable information and access to data related to climate change. One participant from Teouma, just a short 20 minute drive from Port Vila, noted:

*“Information about the climate to inform farmers on how to plant*

*resilient crops for any type of weather. How to build a house to preserve and protect the seeds during rainy season. Teouma valley has water coming up whenever there is rain due to the soil type. How do you preserve food during rainy season?”*

Many participants also emphasised the importance of transparency relating to development-funded projects. This prevalent view was eloquently summarised by a youth representative from Shefa province:

*“Awareness raising is important prior to any project implementation in the community, so there is good understanding and partnership before implementing projects in the community. Relationship building is also important for the sustainability of projects and initiatives in the communities. There is no need to impose any knowledge -use existing networks in the community using chiefs, churches, elders, mama’s group, etc. Respect in the communities is very important... It is important to establish mutual understanding and be specific about the benefits of the communities. Who will participate and who will benefit. There needs to be clarity around this.”*

Due to remoteness, a person’s access to information is often determined by their circumstances. Human networks, therefore, play a fundamental role in the transference knowledge – including news. Church pastors and ministers, including the chiefs, are influential sources of information and truth.

According to an Erronmango resident, church networks provide essential community information during services:

*“Information still comes through the church channel. Telecommunication is really bad, so re-installation of High Frequency radio or satellite phones is a must. We need vital weather updates for transport, shipping routes, and disaster preparedness”. One government official observed that, due to budgetary limitations, “to support police officers, I pin*

18. Erakor is a small island in the Pacific Ocean on the outskirts of Port-Vila, belonging to the Shefa Province of Vanuatu.

19. The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme allows Australian businesses to hire workers from nine Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste when there are not enough local workers available. For more information, see PALM scheme (website accessed 29 August 2025).



*up notices when I go out to the communities so that we could partner with police and other government agencies on ground to do interventions in our communities.”*

In areas where Area Administrators are active, people increasingly rely on them for information on government services including disaster response and preparedness. Some Area Administrators (from Penama and Sanma) have set up a community Facebook page as a communication tool with the community.

A Lounahum community member observed that:

*“News is sourced from word of mouth, it is more trustworthy than social media.”*

Indeed, most of the older generation in the outer islands prefer the radio to social media as a source of information, as the Internet is not accessible in every community. Installation of Elon Musk’s Starlink network and VSAT (mentioned earlier) have improved internet connectivity. Access is limited by cost and a general scepticism of social media. This finding was supported by a study led by Priestley Habru, a member of Team UoA, for ABC International

Development in 2024. As noted in the Vanuatu country report, “radio remains the only viable medium for the rural population”, although the Vanuatu Government’s Universal Access Policy has improved access to high-speed internet in many areas, which has motivated audiences – particularly younger ones – to transition from radio to digital media.<sup>20</sup>

Perceptions of the technological risk to social cohesion was present in both phases of data collection, such as the erosion of values and disrespectful behaviour. In areas such as Teouma in Efate (Shefa Province), where access to mobile devices is high (50 per cent of participants use Facebook and use radio and SMS texts are information campaigns). This includes information on disaster preparation, agriculture and wellbeing.

Participants view non-verbal communication through the lens of values, trust, and relationships. A community member remarked that “Attitude has to be good then people will listen....honesty through your actions; people will see you are honest and they will listen to you...You say something or you promise something, you must follow through. If you don’t, then

*there is no respect. When you talk think about good things to say before you talk. When I share a joke with someone and if she does not share a joke back but walks away, then I know she does not value me”.*

According to participants, patience and listening demonstrate respect; in the words of a community member:

*“Traditionally, people demonstrate a lot of respect through direct eye contact and attentive listening... speaking only after listening....tone of voice, low quiet slow voice signify respect. They use respectful terms of addressing a person of status or rank. They do not move away until the conversation has ended properly”.*

These perspectives demonstrate that Pacific people’s beliefs and value systems differ and highlights the importance of non-verbal language. One of the elements about respect is the value of silence, which is a very powerful language in the Pacific.<sup>21</sup>

## Respect and relationships

Participants concurred that, in the words of one research participant:

*“Respect, humility and respectful language determines respect from the people”.*

Participants agreed that respect and humility are spiritual non-negotiable values central to the quality of the relationships and wellbeing of their communities. As described by a community member, “respect is when there is a disagreement or argument, and we make every possible way to solve it. In Vanuatu, we call it Nasara”.

As another community member observed, typically

*“community members would automatically respect church leaders and expect the reciprocal respect from them. They view church leaders as more respectable than community leaders/ chiefs. People prefer to go to Pastors or elders with their problems because they view their strength of spiritual connection as more powerful and effective in resolving issues”.*



Photo credit: Māualaiavao Maima Koro

20. Priestley Habru, Claudina Habru, Jope Tarai, Christine Thyna, and Joanne Wallis, State of the Media: Vanuatu, Adelaide: ABC International Development, 2024, p. 6, <https://www.abc.net.au/abc-international-development/state-of-the-media-vanuatu-2025/105005760>.

21. Vaai, U. L., & Nabobo-Baba, U. (2017). ‘Introduction’, in Upolu Lumā Vaai and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba. In The relational self: Decolonising Personhood in the Pacific (pp. 1–21). Suva: University of the South Pacific Press.

However, respect can quickly be lost; as one community member remarked:

*“personal character of a person in terms of their integrity and credibility must be protected at all times especially in isolated and close-knitted communities. Once you put a foot wrong, news will spread very rapidly, people will lose respect for authority and this will affect social cohesion within the community. Loss of cooperation between leaders and the people will be rampant”.*

It was also clear from participants that actions that ‘walk the talk, and talk the work’ demonstrate respect, as following through on promises reflects respect and makes people feel valued.

In addition, according to research participants, being valued is also about the recognition of local expertise evident in people’s endorsement and appreciation of the local researchers’ lead roles of the Regional Perspectives Project. All participants expressed sincere gratitude and pride in having local expertise lead the research and in seeing the local team members present their perspectives back through academic reports as “true reflections” of their storians. As one community elder and leader shared during the national feedback forum in Port Vila, people have come and asked him lots of questions in the past. He had never seen a report from previous research projects and the findings he saw in the Vanuatu Regional Perspectives Project Phase 1 report reflected his views. This sentiment was shared by all participants who participated in Phase 1 and in the report back forums. The sense of pride, empowerment, and being valued in seeing their voices published and knowing that they had been presented and discussed in Canberra in June 2024 are sentiments words fail to capture.

Reflecting those values, the use of local skills was a strong message voiced by participants at the national report back/data collection forum in Port Vila in October 2024, and echoed by participants in the remote regions. Importantly, participants identified that local involvement is key to the sustainability of development. As one community leader summarised:

*“CARE comes with the water project and when they go back things gets destroyed. People depend on CARE to come back and repair it. The best thing is to get people take ownership of the project and they will repair things when they get bad”.*

## Preservation of culture

Preservation of culture was a strong national vision expressed by participants in Phase 2 across the research sites, and generally refers to three core elements: education, land, and language. Whilst custom and tradition were recognised as underpinning the security and resilience of communities in Phase 1, cultural preservation was not highlighted. Shefa Secretary General Lionel Nasome Kaluat made a specific recommendation relating to cultural preservation:

*“I would like to recommend to Australia if they could expand this [Regional Perspectives] project to include school curriculum through the Vanuatu National University or through USP in order to preserve local customs. We can talk all day about development but if our kids are not taught these values, then there is no ownership. With information technology and the internet, there is so much for the young generation to process and decipher. Unless authorities do something about it,*

*we will lose many of these values that are critical to our development as a country.”*

Secretary General Kaluat also noted that cultural preservation is about land tenure systems and ownership, as “culture is closely tied to land”. Participants reported that land disputes are disrupting families and communities, and each community has their own land tenure system. There are also concerns about the loss of communities’ mother tongues when, in the words of a community member, “young people nowadays cannot speak their mother tongues fluently”. Participants noted that preservation of language is about ownership and identity.

## External partners

As in Phase 1, except for some in the government sectors in Port Vila with direct interface with external partners, the majority of participants do not view engagement with external partners through a geopolitical lens. Perceptions of external partners were determined primarily through community priorities and by their visibility on the ground, the direct benefits of their programs to communities (or lack of), and whether they meet local priorities. For example, participants positively reflected on the impact of: a roads project funded by China in Tanna and Malekula; labour mobility schemes by Australia and New Zealand; school grants by Australia; local mothers’ gardening projects funded by the Chinese; Peace Corps by the US; and humanitarian relief by Australia. Notably, participants also expressed positive views about water projects implemented by CARE, Red Cross, and World Vision, but did not mention which donor country or agency had funded them.

Photo credit: Linda Kenni









## Further enquiries

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### **Kaurna acknowledgement**

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Kaurna people, the original custodians of the Adelaide Plains and the land on which the University of Adelaide's campuses at North Terrace, Waite, and Roseworthy are built. We acknowledge the deep feelings of attachment and relationship of the Kaurna people to country and we respect and value their past, present and ongoing connection to the land and cultural beliefs. The University continues to develop respectful and reciprocal relationships with all Indigenous peoples in Australia, and with other Indigenous peoples throughout the world.