



SOLOMON ISLANDS



Celebrating International Mother Language Day with the theme, "Multilingual Education is a Pillar of Intergenerational Learning" at the Solomon Islands National University (SINU) (2024)

2024 CIVIL SOCIETY SPOTLIGHT REPORT ON SDG 4

I. COUNTRY CONTEXT

The Solomon Islands is a small Island state in the southwest Pacific, made up of approximately 1,000 Islands, many divided from each other by large stretches of ocean. A third of these Islands are inhabited, mostly by people living in small settlements. Many communities live without access to electricity or telecommunication, and few have passable roads. The population of 761,000 is growing rapidly at 2.25% per annum. This continuous growth is causing a youth bulge in the population with related problems for the government and the community.

In April 2024, the Solomon Islands held general elections. The new government's policy statement is built on four key pillars: Economic Transformation, Unity and Stability, Infrastructure Development, and lastly, Human Capital Development, which prioritises education, healthcare, and skills development. Effectively, the same party remains in power and owns the 2024 budget, in which the education budget remains high, at around 29% of the total.

Since the Solomon Islands' Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2020, the country has experienced growing

growing instability. The government's decision to sever official ties with Taiwan and establish a security pact with China, while simultaneously maintaining relations with Australia, has created a complex and tense environment. This move has led to the unprecedented situation of Australian, Chinese, Fijian, and Papua New Guinean forces policing the streets together. Domestically, the new relationship with China has sparked significant political divisions, particularly in Malaita Province, where local leaders initially rejected the partnership and refused investment from Chinese companies.

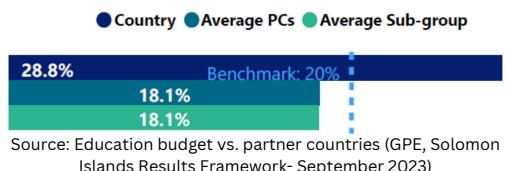
Despite these tensions, there has been a notable shift in the Malaita provincial government's approach after the new provincial election in April 2024. Under the leadership of Premier Elijah Asilaua, the province has become more open to collaboration with development partners. This positive change has encouraged various projects, including road maintenance, the construction of new bridges and market houses, renovations at Kilusakwalo School, and the establishment of a new hospital for Malaita. Although the political landscape remains fragile, with figures like former Premier Suidani and ex-Prime Minister Sogavare continuing to

COUNTRY FACTS AND FIGURES	
Population:	724,273 (2022)
GNI per Capita (PPP\$)	3,080 (2023)
Income Group	Lower-Middle Income
HDI: Value/Rank	0.562 / 156th out of 193 (2022)
Education Expenditure (% GDP)	7.9% of 2021 GDP (Solomon Islands 2023 budget)
Education budget as % of the entire govt. budget	29% of government budget (Solomon Islands 2023 budget)
Upper Secondary Completion Rate Female / Male	16.9 (2018) / 16.0 / 17.9
SDG 4 Trend	■ Major challenges remain
Climate-related disasters:	
Total No. of disasters*	1 (2020-22)
Regional Mean/Median	9.3 / 4
Risk Management Index:	
Climate-driven Hazard & Exposure	2.6 (2022) Regional Mean: 4.6
Lack of coping capacity	6.5 (2022) Regional Mean: 4.3
Vulnerability	4 (2022) Regional Mean: 3.4

*Drought, Extreme temperature, Flood, Landslide, Storm, Wildfire

influence the scene, Malaita's new openness to development offers a glimmer of hope amidst ongoing instability.

Post-pandemic GDP recovered, but revenues have fallen steadily, down 20% from 2018 to USD 366 million.¹ As revenues have fallen, the government has been running large deficit budgets. The relatively huge infrastructure built for the South Pacific Games in 2023 was undertaken with Chinese assistance and borrowing. The cost was SBD 367 million (USD 43.7 million)² from the current 2023 development budget, equivalent to 31% of the total. Nevertheless, education spending remains high as a percentage of the total budget but declined to 29% of the total.



II. PROGRESS TOWARDS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SDG 4

“Recommendation 7 05- Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development

The Committee notes the absence of suitable data to properly inform the country human development needs. The Committee recommends that the Ministry work with Ministry of Planning and the Ministry of Commerce to develop a suitable evidence-based study that supports the National Human Resource Development Strategy.”

Extract from the Public Accounts Committee Budget Report 2024

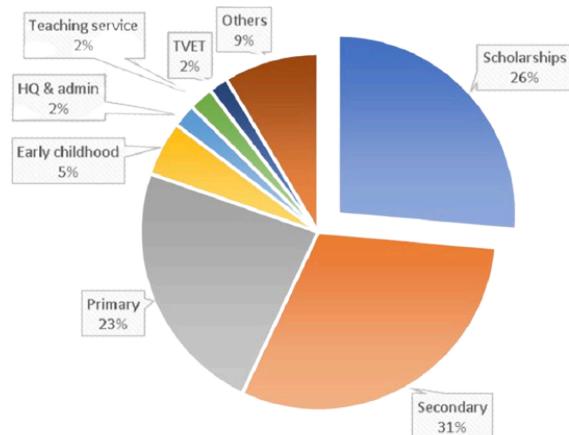
Before we examine progress, the lack of data available is an issue. Apart from the Ministry's 2020 Statistical Digest (just published in 2024), there is no other recent data available to measure progress. Even in the Digest, much of the data is from the period 2017-2019. The problems with the Solomon Islands Education Management Information System (SIEMIS) data collection system have been acknowledged but not yet fixed. It is five years since the last Ministry's annual report. On this theme the comment from the Public Accounts Committee is damning, suggesting a lack of cohesive planning or implementation in the Ministry. (ibid)

Whilst data has been lacking, the Ministry has made some progress, on issues pointed out during the last VNR. Of significance is the design and passing of the new Education Act, which will hopefully form the foundation of an improved system, and the accompanying guiding principles.

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

The Coalition on Education Solomon Islands (COESI) welcomes the priorities in the National Education Action Plan (NEAP) 2022-26 to remove the moratorium on the registration of additional community ECE, start to address the issues with scholarships by only offering them to accredited institutions, increase post-secondary pathways and 'second chance' for skill training, and improve quality at Rural Training Centres (RTCs). COESI also welcomes the attention being paid to community engagement and early childhood development and compulsory Pre-primary Year (PPY) for all 5-year-olds.

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



Source: Analysis of 2023 Approved Recurrent Education Estimates, SIG Recurrent Estimates (2023)

The members' Constituency Development Fund continues to suck millions of dollars out of the annual budget to be distributed at the whim of MPs. There have been multiple issues with the scheme, and its use as a re-election fund. Planning and programming should go through government ministries which are responsible for agreed actions and delivering services, not the whim of MPs. The CDF should be halted in its present form.

Doubts remain over the effectiveness of the split in ministerial responsibilities and the formation of the Solomon Islands Tertiary Education and Skills Authority (SITESA).

The government is still unable to provide free education – without it, education cannot be compulsory and free must mean completely free, not just Tuition Fee Free; without proper grants reflecting real costs in school, school committees will continue to charge various other fees to support the school and find a way around regulations on free schooling.

III. CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN THE SDG 4 IMPLEMENTATION, FOLLOW-UP, AND MONITORING

The lack of sufficient space for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to participate in the monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals implementation (SDGs) and the government's National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP) objectives monitoring is an ongoing challenge. While the government does hold consultation meetings from time to time with CSOs, there are areas of concern that have been overlooked.

The main challenge is finding ways for the government to take serious action on the issues raised by CSOs. The lack of coordination among the government and stakeholders has also resulted in gaps and negligence.

1 Government of Solomon Islands, Final Budget Outcome 2022.

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

Key messages from Solomon Islands 2020 continued

Civil society reviewed recommendations in 2020 and the six areas highlighted for urgent action. Four years later, one area has seen improvement (early childhood education or ECE) and one (data collection) has gone backwards. The other four remain the same.

- **Access.** Insufficient grants to schools lead to fees being charged and students excluded.
- **Skills for living in the Solomon Islands.** There is no concept of lifelong learning, no real policy or practical access to quality technical and vocational education.
- **Inclusive education.** Children with disability, marginalised groups and those in the remote have been overlooked for many years.
- **Literacy and numeracy.** Children are leaving school with very poor levels of literacy and numeracy. The government has changed its approach to ECE and the use of the vernacular.
- **Education financing.** Sufficient budget needs to be ring fenced to improve access and the quality of education in the Solomons, not frittered away on international scholarships.
- **Education data.** There are large gaps in data collection, especially on literacy and numeracy as well as on disability in the community, and how to practically address including those children with a disability in the education system.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are multiple relevant and good policies covering most main areas of interest in Education in the Solomon Islands. Instead of endless revisiting and revising of these policies, now is the time for action and implementation. This is a message to donors as well as the government who are partly responsible for this over-indulgence in policy development.

In the Solomon Islands, COESI's community-based "Skul Blong Yumi Long Ples" model for Early Childhood Education (ECE), supported by various partners and the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD), is praised for its success in producing vernacular materials and enhancing literacy. The continuation and expansion of this program is advocated. The Ministry has made good statements and recent administrative orders about the use of vernacular early years education.

Emphasising the importance of vernacular education from ECE to Year 4, there's a call for MEHRD to improve vernacular curricula. Additionally, the integration of culture and indigenous knowledge into the curriculum from an early age is encouraged, with financial support for cultural teachers. With limited formal employment opportunities, the government is urged to increase support for Rural Training Centres (RTCs) and modernise their curriculum to include technology and income-generating studies. Lastly, the MEHRD is encouraged to collaborate with COESI and other NGOs, utilising the Gender, Age, Place, Socio-Economic, Ethnicity and Disability (GAPSED+) equity framework in policymaking and programming.

YOUTH: PERSPECTIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A large majority (66%) of the population is now aged 29 and under. With little prospect of employment at home, many young Solomon Islanders are looking for work elsewhere. In 2024, there were 6,800 working in Australia's Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, and this is expected to grow to 16,000 in the next four years.

If the planned expansion comes about, remittances will become very important for the country's economy, equivalent to 20% of the government's budget. Not everyone thinks it is a good idea, describing the scheme as youth export. With rural areas of the country losing young populations, and many tertiary-qualified people also heading overseas, the country is facing a brain drain.

School grants need to be increased, so that education is free and compulsory. In 2023, COESI organised a GAPSED training with youth from the Mbokona community in Central Honiara. The youth stated that the overwhelming reason for dropping out from the formal system was poverty, as education is not free. Community members pointed out the schools' demands for different fees and payments from parents, as school grants are insufficient to run the schools. Clearly, if education is free and compulsory, schools must be provided with sufficient funds by the government.

Other feedback from the youth pointed to the inappropriate nature of the curriculum, which appeared to be preparing students for work as administrators, not for a skilled future. The system should incorporate skills training. **A model of livelihood training- Rural Training Centres (RTCs)- exists and should be expanded throughout the islands.**

The formal education system fails to equip students with the necessary life skills and entrepreneurial abilities and does not sufficiently challenge their critical thinking. This, along with the disillusionment and demotivation resulting from the education system's shortcomings, leads to negative behaviour such as excessive use of drugs and alcohol consumption.

The situation is further complicated by the lack of a proper system to monitor and support students leaving high school and studying abroad and for university graduates unsupported upon their return.

These issues underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms in the education system and greater investment in youth development.



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



ASPBAE
Asia South Pacific Association
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