

Putting People First

Area Based Approaches to Disaster
Response in The Pacific
Solomon Islands discussion paper



For discussion

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Key Takeaways	4
Acronyms	6
Acknowledgements	7
Solomon Islands – International, regional, national dimensions	8
Area based approaches to disaster response	9
Research approach	11
Disaster response in Solomon Islands	12
Urbanisation – Impacts and opportunities	15
Solomon Islands Cluster System	16
Multi-agency, multi-sector collaboration and assessment	18
Localised responses	21
Adaptive, flexible and realistic processes	25
Reflective practice and evaluation	26
Next steps	27
Box 1: Key Issues for Further Consideration	28
References	29

Executive Summary

This discussion paper explores how area-based approaches (ABAs) can contribute to national adaptation and responsiveness to disasters in Solomon Islands. People centred, geographically targeted, and multi-sectorial, ABAs provide a developmental approach to disaster response. Framed around the principles of ABAs (Figure 1), the project draws on international experience through the review of desktop literature relevant to Solomon Islands and exploratory stakeholder interviews to consider the suitability of ABAs to disaster response in Solomon Islands.

Recognising the need for increased collaboration and coordination across sectors, agencies and levels of government, this discussion paper has been drafted to initiate a conversation with Pacific Island people, including government representatives at all levels, local civil society organisations (CSOs) and the wider community involved with and impacted by disaster management and response. It is also an invitation to international non-government organisations (INGOs) working in the Pacific to consider and contribute to an alternative approach to humanitarian disaster response.

Key Takeaways

Past learnings have positively contributed to current practice

Evaluation outcomes from the 2007 tsunami indicated significant issues related to coordination, cooperation, wastage and duplication, and predetermined responses by international and national agencies rather than ones that are responsive to local needs. As a result, the Solomon Islands have undertaken a series of actions including the implementation of the National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP), cluster committee structures, and improvement to assessment, coordination, strategic decision making and implementation.

Locally driven and common assessment tools support collaboration

The common assessment tool supports multi-agency collaboration. Solomon Islands' use of a common assessment tool across government and non-government agencies, whereby data entry is inputted and shared using KoBo Toolbox software¹, has improved the accessibility and integration of data across sectors. Additionally, community driven vulnerability and capability assessments have been valuable when local staff and communities are engaged and have ownership of the process, as well as subsequent actions and assistance. Local approaches for engagement are still evolving, but steadily improving.

Existing community networks increase resilience but require greater support

Community organised savings and support groups run through family, church, women's groups and other community-based agencies provide a rapid local response to disasters and a buffer to disaster impacts on livelihoods and assets but often lack support across humanitarian assistance networks to better develop their reach, responsiveness and capacity. These community networks, shared resourcing approaches, and locally adapted coping mechanisms can provide resilience pathways adapted to local contexts, and better integrate formal institutional actors at city, sector-specific or ward scales with community groups.

¹ <https://www.kobotoolbox.org>

For discussion

There is evidence of low accountability and political biases during the distribution of assistance

The politicisation of disaster response, including control of funds and political biases in their dispersal by MPs, continues to be a challenge. Stronger accountability mechanisms that allocate assistance based on need, rather than subjective criteria, and provide financial and resource allocation accountability to communities and the general public could improve performance while still allowing representatives to look after their communities.

Definitions and delivery of localisation is contested; new platforms for dialogue work well

While localisation is embedded in the NDMP, government and INGOs continue to have a high degree of influence in how localisation is operationalised during disaster periods. Local actors are wary of definitions by outsiders of what localisation is and how it should be implemented, while acknowledging that gender and social inclusion need to be improved in disaster efforts. Issues of local agency and power remain points of tension. Initiatives such as the Australian Humanitarian Partnership have yielded better collaboration between government, local non-government organisations (NGOs) and INGOs through regular meetings to avoid duplication and coordinate efforts across sectors and geographic areas.

More time and resources are needed to maximise the benefits of evaluations and ensure they are distributed to key stakeholders

Local organisations and communities are often not included in evaluation processes and may not be aware of the content of final reports generated. Additionally, continued funding and resources to support the implementation of recommendations to ensure sector-wide change from evaluations is often not available. Some respondents feel that there is not enough learning / knowledge transfer between crises, particularly in terms of actions to minimise settlement in disaster prone areas, improve water and sanitation, and other factors contributing to the human costs of disasters which require systemic interventions.

Acronyms

ABAs	Area Based Approaches
AHP	Australian Humanitarian Partnership
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
FRDP	Framework for Resilience Development in the Pacific
GCW	Guadalcanal Council of Women
HCC	Honiara City Council
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
NAMP	National Adaptation Management Plan
NDC	National Disaster Committee
NDMO	National Disaster Management Office
NDMP	National Disaster Management Plan
N-DOC	National Disaster Operations Committee
NEOC	National Emergency Operations Centre
PWDSI	People with Disabilities Solomon Islands
SIRCS	Solomon Islands Red Cross Society
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
VCA	Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

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The report was produced with contributions from local researchers in Solomon Islands with specific thanks to our in-country researcher Dr Anouk Ride. We acknowledge the support and collaboration of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Australian Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, and Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) specifically Robert Dodds, Leeanne Marshall, Chris Govers, and Beth Eggleston. Finally, the staff at the Australian Pacific Security College for their contributions, including Ali Gillies, Hugh McClure and Kalei Billings-Dugu.

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The views expressed in this report, and any errors and omissions, remain those of the authors.

Solomon Islands – International, regional, national dimensions

Across the region, Pacific Island leaders have made strong calls to action in the face of climate change including the Pacific Island Forum *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*² (2018) and the *Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Action Now*³ (2019). In Solomon Islands, the 2008 *National Adaptation Plan of Action (NAPA)* identified urgent and immediate adaptation needs, noting that agriculture, human settlements, water and sanitation, and human health were all highly vulnerable and priority sectors requiring urgent support to enhance resilience against the impacts of climate change.⁴

Recognising the complexities and challenges of climate change, the *2012-2017 Solomon Islands National Climate Change Policy* presented an opportunity for a better coordinated climate change response and enhanced collaboration between various levels of government, the people of Solomon Islands, international and regional institutions, intergovernmental organisations, and development partners. The Solomon Islands Government (SIG) have adopted the regional Pacific Island Forum Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP) which provides guidance and support for building resilience to climate change and disasters in the Pacific Island region.⁵

Given the importance of location and context to disaster response, this project explores how area-based approaches (ABAs) can contribute to national adaptation and responsiveness which is tailored to place and specifically addresses the ABA 10 key principles (Figure 2). The project draws on international experience to frame the inquiry, reviews academic literature and reports, and finally conducts exploratory interviews with stakeholders representing government, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and local and community non-government organisations (NGOs) operating in Solomon Islands. For this initial study we focused on the greater urban environment of Honiara, but also drew lessons from experiences in other disaster struck areas of Solomon Islands.

Key findings from the research indicate that the development of a National Disaster Management Plan⁶ (NDMP) has improved the function of the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) at the cluster/sectorial level. Additionally, stakeholders reported positive links and communication channels across civil society organisations (CSO), INGOs and government actors, including the adoption of a common assessment tool. Finally, the strength of local systems and structures in preparing and responding to disasters was highlighted, including the strength of women's and disability groups and self-help economic initiatives.

Despite progress in areas such as collaboration and multi-sectoral assessment, challenges and gaps are still evident. Concerns were raised about the politicisation of the disaster response system, particularly in relation to distribution of funds, overly stringent donor funding criteria which restricted program delivery and evaluation of disaster response, and the continued central role of outside agencies in initiating

² <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>

³ <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/50th-Pacific-Islands-Forum-Communique.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.globalsupportprogramme.org/projects/solomon-islands-national-adaptation-programme-action-napa>

⁵ Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific: An Integrated Approach to Address Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management [FRDP] 2017 – 2030 (2016)

⁶ Solomon Islands Government National Disaster Council (2018) National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP).

disaster risk reduction strategies and practice in communities. Many of these issues were also identified across the region and globally.⁷

Area based approaches to disaster response

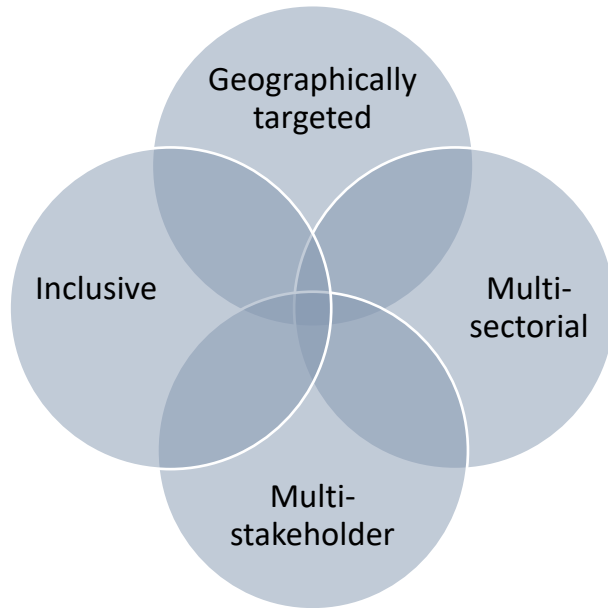


Figure 1 Principles of area based approaches

Area based approaches support people after a disaster in a specific location to transition effectively from relief to recovery'.⁸ ABAs apply lessons from development approaches by planning for longer timeframes, considering short-term recover and long-term development outcomes, and exploring opportunities for wider application and scaling up. ABAs are also known as neighbourhood or place-based approaches. ABAs aim to be an effective means to integrate development and disaster recovery goals, particularly within complex urban contexts.⁹ Recently, Sphere, published *Using the Sphere Standards in Urban Settings*¹⁰ which includes a chapter dedicated to ABAs. This

publication complements the Sphere Handbook, a primary reference tool for national and international NGOs, volunteers, UN agencies, governments, donors, and the private sector, and applies a set of common principles associated with humanitarian responses which advance inclusiveness and local engagement.

ABAs key characteristics¹¹ include (Figure 1):

- *People-centred and inclusive approaches* that engage the whole population within an area – this includes specific consideration for more vulnerable populations including women, children, people with a disability, elderly, LGBTQI people, and people with no legal status.
- *Geographic response* that assesses needs according to physical, social and administrative boundaries. The intention is to address the needs of a target area rather than a target group.
- *Multi-sectorial approach* that engages sectors but coordinates among them, for example health, education, and water sanitation and hygiene (WASH), in response to the identified community needs.
- *Multi-stakeholder approach* that ensures appropriate representation throughout the project cycle. Diverse stakeholder groups are actively engaged, including national and local government, NGOs, civil society, the private sector and INGOs from both the humanitarian and development sector.

⁷ Keen, Barbara, Carpenter, Evans & Foukona (2017) *Urban Development in Honiara: Harnessing Opportunities, Embracing Change*

⁸ Sanderson & Sitko (2018) *Ten principles for area-based approaches in urban post-disaster recovery*, Humanitarian Exchange, Overseas Development Institute

⁹ Urban Settlements Working Group (2019) *Areas-Based Approaches in Urban Settings: Compendium of Case Studies*

¹⁰ <https://spherestandards.org/resources/unpacked-guide-urban-settings-2020/>

¹¹ Adapted from Parker & Maynard (2015) *Humanitarian response to urban crises: a review of area-based approaches*. IIED Working Paper. IIED

Ten core principles for implementing ABAs to provide practical guidance to humanitarian practitioners following rapid onset, naturally triggered disasters in urban areas¹² (see Figure 2).

The ten principles are:

1. Multi-agency, multi-sector participatory assessments for better collaborative efforts and less duplication and wastage.
2. Focus on location that people recognise, eg a particular neighbourhood or district
3. Realistic timeframes for effective recovery, which may be outside the timeframes of humanitarian relief and recovery funding
4. People-centred actions focused on human needs, rather than agency objectives
5. Work with existing governmental and community structures
6. Collaboration between sectors and programmes to ensure all actions are coordinated
7. Flexible and adaptive programming that responds to changes in circumstances
8. Nimble internal systems, including finance and human resources, which can 'gear up' or 'slow down' in response to realities on the ground
9. Plan for scaling-up – there is little merit in one-off small projects, experience need to be shared and adapted for greater impact and efficiency
10. Measure contribution not attribution, i.e., the collective improvements within a location by all actors, rather than the impact of just one agency.

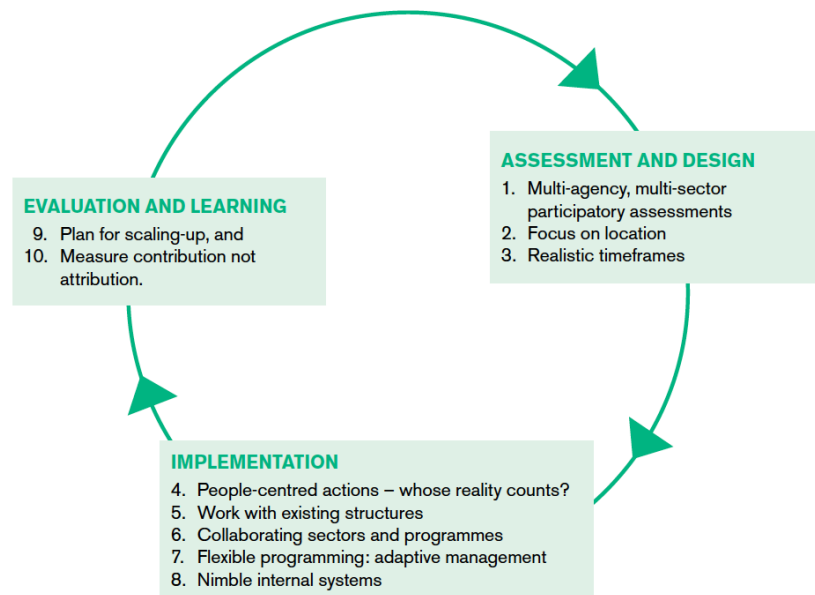


Figure 2 Ten Principles to area based approaches aligned to the project management cycle¹²

¹² Sanderson & Sitko, (2017)

Research approach

A series of semi-formal interviews were carried out to explore the use of area-based approaches in urban areas. Interview questions were formed using the 10 Principles of ABAs¹³ and categorised into four key themes:

- multi-agency, multi-sector collaboration and assessment
- localised responses
- adaptive, flexible and realistic process
- reflective practice and evaluation.

Figure 3 outlines the organisations and sectors interviewed. Interviews were conducted in Solomon Islands Pijin.

A total of 11 interviews were conducted from April to August 2020 in Honiara, Solomon Islands. Seven men and four women were interviewed, including one woman with a disability. This representation of gender reflects the predominance of men in formal employment in Solomon Islands. Ethnicity and age data were not collected due to confidentiality concerns and the small data set which would make any correlations not valid. All interviewees were Solomon Islands nationals.

It is noted that many interviewees, particularly government and international NGO sources, were under pressure during this period with increased responsibilities, funding, and projects due to the COVID-19 situation. There were also specific issues, notably the temporary stop to work of the Guadalcanal disaster division due to corruption concerns at Guadalcanal Provincial Government, and political, environmental and security related disruptions to the work of Honiara City Council staff during the period interviews were sought that made availability of interviewees more difficult.

Most interviewees were known to the local interviewer prior to the conduct of the interview, there were not any ethical or other concerns raised as part of the interview process.

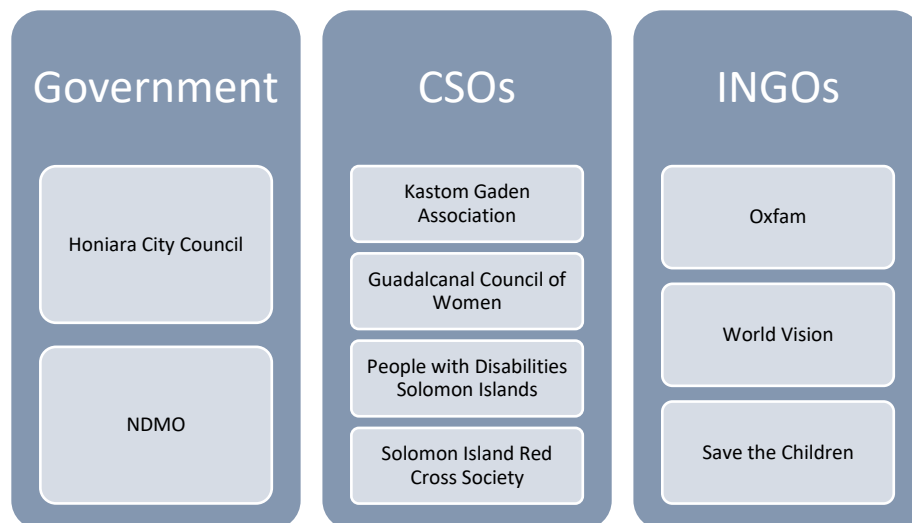


Figure 3 Summary of organisations interviewed

¹³ Sanderson & Sikto (2017) *Urban area-based approaches in post-disaster contexts*. Guidance note for Humanitarian Practitioners. IIED

Disaster response in Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands is highly vulnerable to the impacts of global climate change. Climate pressures, including sea level rise, coastal erosion, ocean acidification and increasing water and surface air temperatures are contributing to an increase in frequency and severity of disasters. In addition to the immediate impacts of disasters (including loss of shelter, access to food and drinking water, and injury and loss of life) there are longer term challenges associated with livelihoods, food security, physical and mental health and wellbeing, gender inequality, and protection of those most vulnerable. As a result of the increasing economic and social challenges facing the region, some Pacific leaders and community members are advocating for a transformational response to climate change action that aligns with and builds on the Sustainable Development Goals¹⁴ and considers the needs and impacts of those most vulnerable.

The NDMO is the primary institution that coordinates disaster response in the Solomon Islands. Working with national and provincial governments, NGOs and civil society groups, the NDMO generally responds to disasters according to geographic areas. It coordinates the first assessments following disasters, supplies tools for assessments and community-based risk reduction, and facilitates and endorses Village Disaster Risk Plans. Village Disaster Risk Plans were formulated with support from NDMO and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and include scoping hazards and setting up early warning systems. Recent interventions are now attempting to address high risk areas, such as peri-urban settlements in Guadalcanal (that is surrounding areas of Honiara). Disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities are organised at the local level by village level committees. Greater inclusion of local people and communities aims to identify risks in conjunction with scientific input (particularly mapping¹⁵). These DRR local plans are facilitated by government and by some INGOs such as Oxfam and World Vision, using similar processes for communities to identify and address risk. Not all provinces/areas are covered by these facilitated risk plans, and some communities have developed their own plans independent of outside facilitation, particularly for evacuation and early warning.

Following the 2007 tsunami, a major sectoral review of disaster assistance was undertaken through a series of workshops, resulting in funding for the NDMP, cluster committee structure and additional coordination, strategic decision-making, and implementation functions. NDMO and relevant stakeholders are guided by the NDMP which includes key principles of support for self-help, multi-hazards assessment approaches, and greater inclusivity. Based on the *National Disaster Council Act 1989*, the plan sets out a framework for institutional and operational disaster management, recovery and rehabilitation, and capacity building, within which national and provincial government, NGOs and civil society groups are expected to work.

Within the NDMP, the function and role of the National Disaster Council (NDC) is to oversee and direct arrangements at the national, provincial, and local levels for preparedness, response and recovery from disaster. The NDC established the National Disaster Operations Committee (N-DOC) to manage the operationalisation of disaster assessments and the coordination of sector and provisional response. The primary function of the N-DOC sector committees is to prepare for and deliver sector responses to disaster

¹⁴ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

¹⁵ See for example: https://www.fukuoka.unhabitat.org/programmes/ccci/pdf/HURCAP_final_Endorsed.pdf

events and coordinate the sector agencies within the Committee which includes contributing to assessments of impacts through the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) process and to decision-making of the N-DOC. Individual agencies within the Committee remain accountable for their own planning and response in line with the Committee framework.¹⁶

Figure 4 and 5 outlines the institutional framework for disaster management and the arrangements for nation level operations in the Solomon Islands.

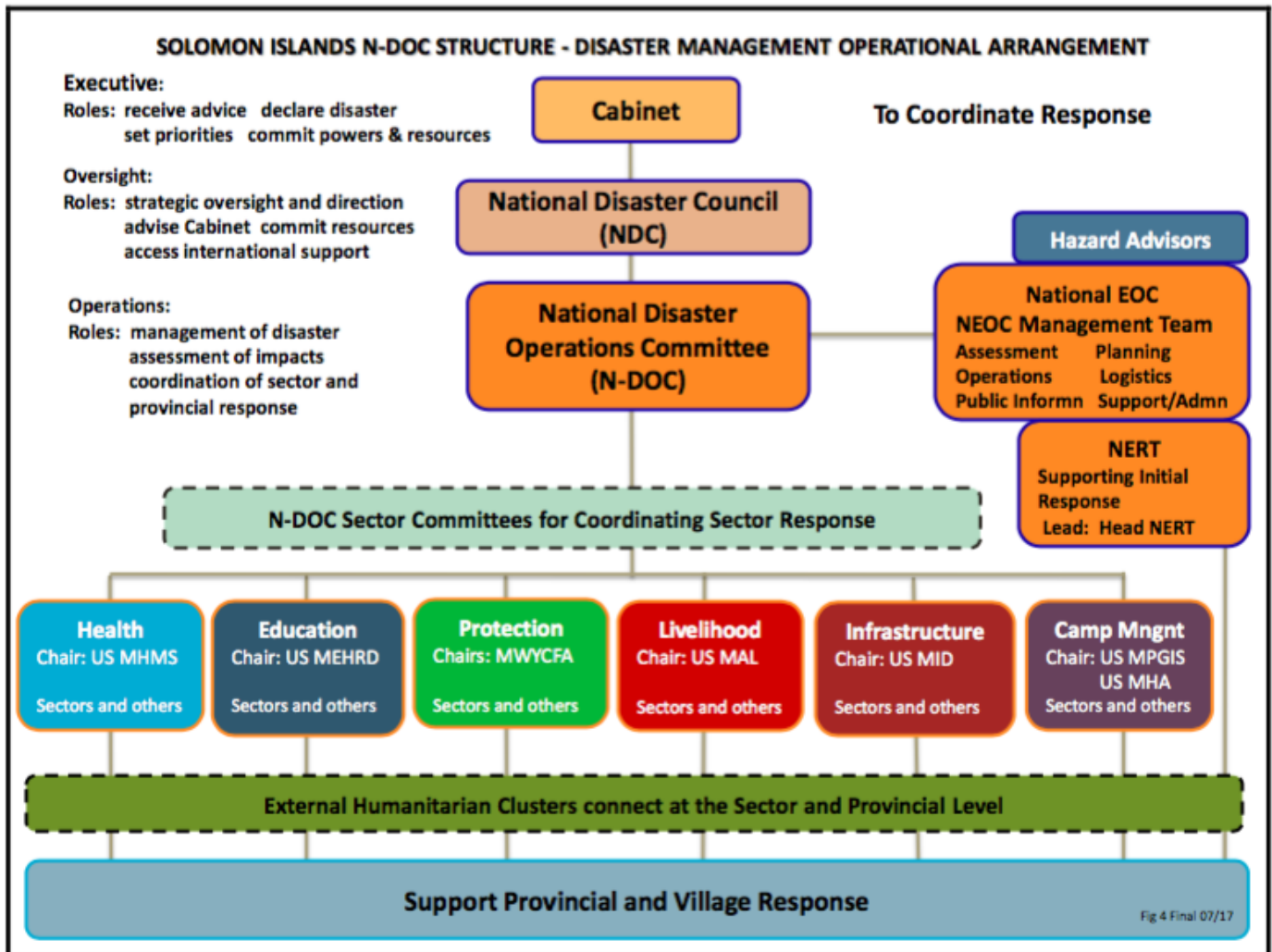


Figure 4 Solomon Islands National Disaster Operations Centre Structure

¹⁶ NDMP (2018)

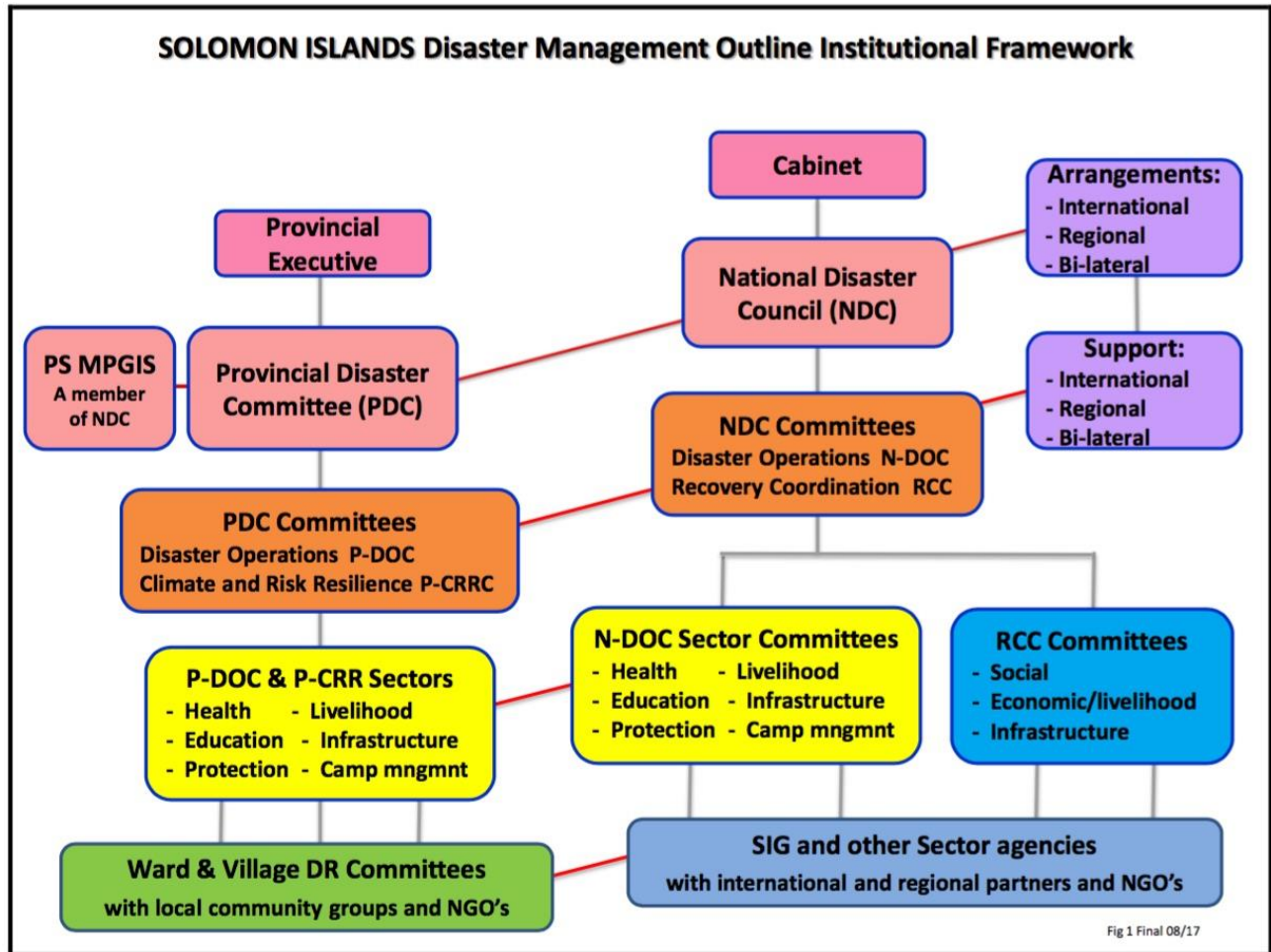


Figure 5 Solomon Islands Disaster Management Outline Institutional Framework

Urbanisation – Impacts and opportunities

As with most Pacific Island countries, Solomon Islands is rapidly urbanising.¹⁷ Lack of urban planning and management of urban sprawl has contributed to large parts of the urban population living in informal settlements, many of which are located in disaster-prone areas and poor access to services.

Solomon Islands capital city Honiara faces extreme land and population pressures. It has an annual urban growth rate of 4.7%¹⁸ and the number of households are projected to increase 4 times between 2009 and 2050 in and around Honiara.¹⁹ Overcrowding is common and leads to health risks and strain on services. The west and central part of Honiara is located on a narrow coastal plain, exposed to risks of sea level rise and is susceptible to storm surges while east of town and peri-urban areas (Lungga Delta) are low-lying and susceptible to flooding.²⁰

“Housing shortage and high rental costs in the city have driven an increasing number of middle and high-income earners into informal settlements, exacerbating health and social issues, as these areas are often lacking in key urban services, such as water and sanitation.”
UN Habitat report, 2012

Informal settlements are characterised by a lack of legal land tenure and governance arrangements (although culturally recognised customary arrangements may apply). They continue to be seen as illegal settlements by policy makers, rather than a form of resilience. This means authorities are reluctant to engage with residents in informal settlements about services and urban planning. This lack of long-term planning and strategic coordination relating to informal settlements was highlighted by stakeholders as a significant concern for Solomon Islands’ ability to prepare for and respond to disasters.

The emergence of the global health pandemic COVID-19 in early 2020 has generated significant disruption for Honiara city, as it has been designated an “emergency zone” due to the potential spread of coronavirus. Various government responses have included restricting travel (especially international), posing lockdowns on movement for 1-3 days, temporarily closing informal roadside markets, and shutting educational institutions for several months. In addition, exports of major industries such as fishing, logging, mining and agriculture have taken a dramatic downturn resulting in half of 100 companies surveyed laying off staff or planning to, and 34% of these companies firing more than 40% of their workforce.²¹ This adversity affects community resilience and resources to respond to disasters.

These shocks, emanating from international economic conditions and local governmental decisions, have produced concerns for localised conflict, poverty and food security.²² Many people temporarily migrated back to the provinces putting additional pressure on agricultural production. Reports indicate increased

¹⁷ Keen, Barbara, Carpenter, Evans & Foukona (2017) *Urban Development in Honiara: Harnessing Opportunities, Embracing Change*

¹⁸ UN Habitat (2012) Report on Migration and Urbanisation Honiara

¹⁹ Ministry of Lands, Housing and Survey (MLHS) (2015) Honiara’s Future: an investigation to identify land for further expansion. Honiara: SIG.

²⁰ Reuben & Lawry (2016) Effectiveness of evacuation facilities in Honiara City, Solomon Islands: a spatial perspective. *Natural Hazards* 82:227–244

²¹ SICCI 2020, Survey summaries as accessed on Solomon Islands Chamber of Commerce website www.solomonchamber.com.sb

²² Ride & Kekea (2020) Together or apart against COVID19? Solomon Islands’ State of Emergency, Policy Forum

hardship and rationing food in some communities due to scarcity and the influx of people to rural areas or reduced cash flow due this new and evolving situation.²³

“The Solomon Islands National Disaster Management Office has a very clear structure and governance leading down to the community level.”
Alice Hou,
Guadalcanal Council of Women

Challenges with disaster response efforts are complicated by the rise of urbanisation and the increase in urban informal settlements. Identifying the boundaries of communities, inhabitants belonging to settlements, and governance structures and preferred consultative forums is complicated. Suburbs and streets are without formal names and demarcation, meaning if one area is identified as at disaster risk or disaster affected, a definition of that area for authorities and residents may be unclear.

Unlike rural areas, where indigenous and place-based communities have traditional structures for governance and land use, urban populations are less likely to have the same community structures which can make local coordination, inclusion and engagement hard. Some of the older urban communities have established governance structures, with traditional chiefs of some urban areas providing leadership. In some parts of Honiara, Crime Prevention Committees have been set up with urban area-based leadership, to manage and prevent low-level crimes and provide a contact point between community and police. Such focal points for decision-making in urban areas can be useful in response to disasters. In other areas, points of engagement are less clear.

Solomon Islands Cluster System

While it differs to the international cluster approach, the Solomon Islands cluster system provides a relevant national framework and complements the regional and international response arrangements. Cluster Committees comprise all relevant sectors as outlined in Figure 6 and are tasked with disaster response. For the COVID-19 situation, there are new committees in charge of quarantine centres, health services, and other essential elements such as immigration.

The cluster system, which was developed to improve implementation by coordinating agencies, has been largely successful in the local context. All consulted reported that there had been improved communication and coordination, but

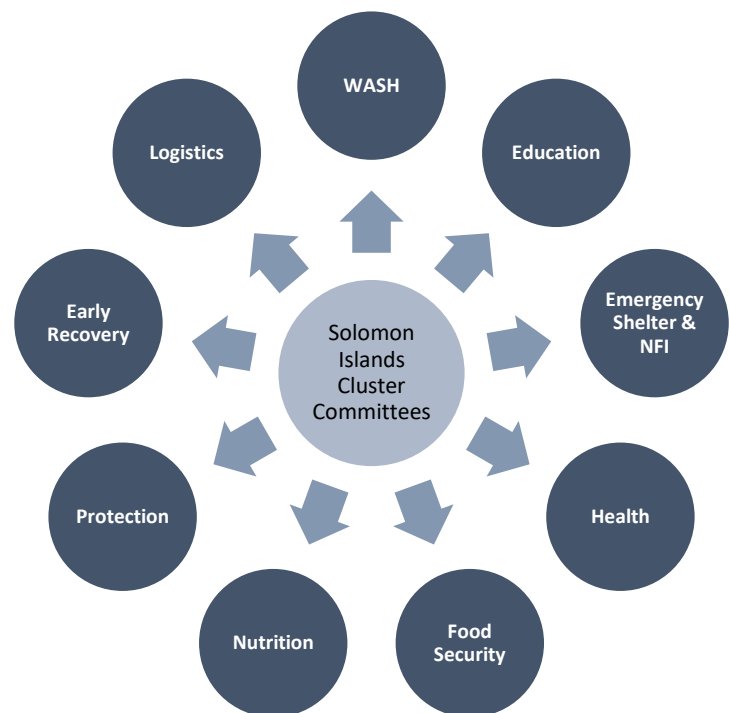


Figure 6 Solomon Islands Cluster System

²³ See for example, Eriksson H, Ride A, Boso D, Sukulu M, Batalofo M, Siota F and Gomese C. 2020. Changes and adaptations in village food systems in Solomon Islands: A rapid appraisal during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Penang, Malaysia: WorldFish. Program Report: 2020-22.

improvements were still possible. The cluster system includes three levels of actors – government (national and local), international NGOs and civil society organisations. While all three levels participate in the cluster response, the level of engagement is uneven, with CSOs and local authorities such as city councils and provincial governments reporting less influence over spending than other organisations

With patchy urban community governance structures in place, local participation in cluster decisions can be challenging. Wherever possible, the participation of key CSOs representing women and people with disabilities try to coordinate input from their members to key decision-making committees, but with limited resources these efforts are also not consistent across communities. In general, stakeholders acknowledged more needs to be done to make the system inclusive of marginal and diverse stakeholders (such as those with disabilities or living in informal settlements) through collaboration and working across clusters to address disaster risk factors that affect responsiveness.

Significant improvements and developments in disaster management have contributed to a more cohesive and coordinated response to disasters in the Solomon Islands. The NDC facilitates strategic coordination across government Ministries, while the cluster system supports coordination across the wider government and non-government stakeholders. These clearly defined governance structures and mechanisms for response offer a relatively robust approach which operates effectively at a national and regional level.

“High on the list of identified gaps across all organisations was the technical capacity and expertise needed to promote gender mainstreaming, disability inclusion and child protection. Disability inclusion was the lowest ranked performance indicator and all partners acknowledged the need for greater effort and resourcing towards this area.”

Source: Disaster Ready Solomon Islands Progress Update Report, June 2018

The central function of the current humanitarian system is to coordinate and deliver goods and services to communities impacted by disasters. Its contribution to long-term resilience building is less well defined. Since its introduction, international aid agencies and the Solomon Islands government have responded to disasters via the cluster system. Established as a mechanism for improved coordination, the cluster system has proved to be largely effective and a notable improvement from previous more ad hoc arrangements. Challenges remain for building resilience over the medium to long term in urban environments susceptible to disasters.

As a result, the sector is calling for approaches that are more responsive to complex systems, collaborative in their interventions, and inclusive of marginal and diverse stakeholders (such as those with disabilities or living in informal settlements).

Multi-agency, multi-sector collaboration and assessment

Collaboration

The majority of stakeholders interviewed commended multi-sector and multi-agency collaboration and noted the marked improvement of both since 2010. Of specific note was the formulation and adoption

“Our local NGOs that are based in Honiara are the ones which the government and the council depend very much on because they have their resources readily available. When anything happens, we just place a request to them and they will support.”

Nelson Anaia
Disaster Officer - HCC

across government and non-government agencies of the NDMP as a guiding document for all disaster projects and assistance, the establishment of coordinating committees for key functions (e.g., shelter, water/sanitation) representing relevant agencies. The use of the KoBo Toolbox²⁴ common assessment tool has institutionalised and routinised multi-agency collaboration.

Several examples of effective mechanism collaboration and strategy development were identified, including the Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) which fosters collaboration partnerships across government, INGOS/NGOs and CSOs. Similarly, an example was provided whereby an INGO seconded local staff from the disaster management unit of a provincial government to increase collaboration across scales.

While noted by most as markedly improved, multi-sectoral and multi-agency collaboration and coordination were still acknowledged as requiring further development. For example, with the common assessment tool, training and expertise were needed by all people using it, particularly in regional areas. Without training across sectors and levels of government consistency and reliability of data collected varied.

“Coordination is set out in the Plan. AHP partners are in the centre of this book, so we have a really good relationship with Red Cross, Oxfam, World Vision, Save the Children, those ones know how to link in with the arrangements. World Vision say for WASH, they link in with Ministry of Health that heads WASH, that process is starting to work.”

Loti Yates
Director - NDMO

The recent COVID-19 pandemic highlighted difficulties when the system was required to respond to new scenarios. The response, ranging from health to economic, was reportedly less coordinated than the usual disaster responses which have a national plan and well-used systems to

“COVID coordination is a bit scattered compared to disaster times, [Ministry] Health is leading, with NDMO, other government agencies, but its new and more difficult to draw together and keep track on what is happening.”
SIRCS Respondent

require reporting and consultation. The COVID-19 situation has created the need for authorities to collaborate with each other (such as customs and immigration and health) and evolve supporting systems. For the national COVID crisis authority structures were also modified; a coordinating committee with direction from the Prime Minister’s Office, rather than using a pre-existing coordination structure, is being applied requiring administrative and operational adaptations.

Broader structural issues create difficulty when trying to mobilise the various agencies, these include lack of transparency and accountability of funds channelled through MPs. Added complications occur when land tenure is poorly defined such as in

²⁴ <https://www.kobotoolbox.org/>

informal settlements. Intervention and recovery strategies to increase the capability of food systems and the informal sector to cope with shocks such as disasters and COVID-19 require clarity of leadership, financial assistance channels and communities in need. While coordination was high in disaster response, whole-of-government approaches outside of disaster response times that could address underlying vulnerabilities or reduce risks was reported as more difficult.

Assessment

The key tools used in pre and post disaster assessments are the NDMO online KoBo Toolbox²⁵ assessment form and the Community Based Risk Reduction Handbook for Local Facilitators - a handbook for practitioners on how to identify communities in need and undertake a Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) and develop Village Risk Reduction Action Plans and Village Response Plans using local and participatory approaches. The approach allows considerable scope for communities to set priorities and have ownership of disaster risk reduction and response. The tools are used by NDMO, Red Cross and the AHP, as well as local NGOs and CSOs.

“We always work together with NDMO, so we use the KoBo Toolbox, sometimes paper and pen but the same form, and use local volunteer teams to go out and do assessments to feed into the operations centre.”
SIRCS Respondent

The assessment tool was formed collaboratively with coordination by NDMO and has been updated/adjusted periodically based on feedback from committee members. Larger organisations, notably Oxfam and Solomon Islands Red Cross Society (SIRCS), have trained some smaller CSOs to use the tool during disaster assessments. The assessment tool has different sections with different components for disaster, gender, livelihoods, and is the result of stakeholder consultations on what information they

“I think the difficulties that we experienced in involving communities in assessment was there were high expectations from the communities when they see, especially our organisation, people going into their communities. It sort of raises their expectations about what will be delivered to them. Another difficulty that we experienced was also around communities arguing among themselves, saying that some of them were missed out during the assessments, because they were not in their communities during that time of assessment”
INGO Respondent

need in an event of a disaster. According to NDMO, while some training has been undertaken, there is a need for further training on how to use the tool across all the sectors and provinces. At times alternatives to data upload via internet connectivity is required, thus procedures need to be in place to ensure manually recorded data is entered into central digital systems. Nevertheless, the tool has been used in several disasters and is assisting on the speed and relevance of data collected in initial periods after disasters. All non-government agencies reported assessments working well to capture key data and share amongst agencies responsible for disaster response.

Some organisations use their own assessment tools to add depth to their community understanding and identify pathways for support. This can be needed for new or emerging issues related to disaster and COVID-19 risk, whilst providing insights for the future refinement of commonly used tools. For example, one CSO organisation undertook domestic surveys of Guadalcanal women affected by COVID-19. Through a *tok-stori*²⁶ based approach they were able to

²⁵ <https://www.kobotoolbox.org/>

²⁶ Tok-stori is an indigenous methodology for research, for further details see the work of Kabini Sanga.

understand how they were coping in their communities, their fears, their hopes and their understanding of COVID-19. Similarly, an organisation supporting persons with a disability noted they adapted

“Coordination of assessments after disasters is done by government as the coordinator, government calls partners in humanitarian sector to meet and make a plan for assessments, rapid assessments, then after there are sector assessments. This is following some lessons learnt through previous disasters where coordination was a big issue. Everyone uses the Kobo Assessment Tool provided by NDMO.”

INGO Respondent

assessment tools to include data for their own purposes: “During our visits, we used the health assessment form to help assess our new and old clients with disabilities who need replacement of wheelchairs, crutches, and white cane for the blind. We provided registration form to register new clients with disabilities, or unregistered elderly people or others in need. PWDSI also uses the survey form with questions related to this COVID-19 pandemic.”

There was a high degree of satisfaction with current tools, and no interviewees expressed a desire for different or significantly modified tools (other than sufficient training for all to use them). There was satisfaction with the consultative process in creating the multi-agency tool for assessment and the use of cultural and local practices to obtain consent to do research and other work in communities. Noting though that improvements can always be made, several challenges included reducing biases and human error, and a lack of training and preparedness to deliver the assessment. One key informant highlighted that the current tool is set up for multi-agency teams including health and agriculture; however, there were gaps relating to specific sectors, notable gender and protection which are not well covered and require additional data collection. As such, it was noted the tool is useful for initial damage assessment which provides immediate information around humanitarian needs and information to the relevant decision makers about what needs to be actioned and supplied.

Community Participation and Localised Approaches

Those interviewed generally agreed that communities played an active role in disaster response, including assessment and prioritisation of response by those intervening. One key informant explained how their organisation uses local community contacts following a disaster to verify information and if possible, recruit volunteers from that community to do the survey assessment. Once identified, the volunteers are trained how to do the assessment. There needs to be checks on assessment biases, including issues of staff in agencies preferencing their family and communities. However, training and verification was used to minimise biases and identify those most at need of a response.

“During the processes, communities are the key responders within their own setting. They are involved in the assessment. One thing that the community can participate in is to provide information regarding impacts it has on their community. In Honiara there are different ethnic groups and settings and the community can be involved in leading assessment teams. Villages have their own systems so assessment teams have to adhere to what the community tells them to do...”

Loti Yates
Director - NDMO

"...the community know about their localities, and the population that they are in, and the different types of people that they have. Also, it's very important to have the community serving their own communities, because once we have a person from different countries come to different communities, they might miss somebody or they might not know the environmental tone of the communities. So it's good to have communities involved, also when we involve communities we help empower, build empowerment for community resilience and taking ownership."

Alice Hou
Guadalcanal Council of Women

Practices of participatory approaches included focus group discussions, locals assessing impacts, communities distributing assistance, and local volunteers collecting assessment stories. Benefits of community-led responses, as noted by those interviewed, included a more rapid response, increased knowledge of local systems and networks, and strengthening ownership and self-sufficiency among community members.

Several interviewees highlighted that some groups could be better included and, in some cases,

marginalised people were being left behind. Examples were provided whereby INGOs and NGOs applied a 'one size fits all' response which did not fully account for social diversity and variations of need between social groups. One key informant explained that while existing decision-making structures were used as an entry point to communities, not enough attention was given to power differentials and uneven representation of community members in governing bodies. Greater representation across the various community groups including women, youth, elderly, and churches would strengthen disaster response and recovery. Barriers to participation in current processes included access to infrastructure and finance, issues affecting persons with limited mobility because of a disability or age; and information dissemination and assistance access among those with low literacy. As challenges to participation in disaster response

were greatest for already vulnerable groups, specific networks (e.g. working via women's groups) were needed to increase participation.

"I think participation is limited especially when we count the participation of women, youths and people with disabilities, their voices are still forgotten when it comes to disaster response"
PWDSI Representative

The complexity of engaging urban populations was highlighted. Unlike rural populations, urban areas were densely populated with unregistered streets and communities, and settlements can be unclearly defined with respect to leadership and boundaries. This makes it difficult to know the size of the community and the needs of

the population.

Localised responses

The scattered and remote nature of the Solomon Islands mean that community members themselves are often the first responders to disasters, and assistance from government and other organisations may take days to arrive, if it comes at all. As communities have developed their own adaptations to climate change, so too have they developed and relied on oral histories, traditional knowledge and practices, and social networks to prepare and respond to disasters. For instance, community members in Nea, which experienced a tsunami in Temotu in 2013, when surveyed, reported their primary source of information about disasters was oral history, not any media or

"A thing different to that of communities in rural areas, is that communities in Honiara are overpopulated. We do not have registered streets and communities. Overseas they have streets and numbers. For example, if we say Kukum, we do not know where it starts and where it ends. So, we do not really know the size of a community."

Nelson Anaia
Disaster Officer - HCC

government source.²⁷ Conversely, an earlier study²⁸ detailed how immigrant populations died at higher rates during the 2007 tsunami in Western Province as people did not recognise signs of impending tsunami. More recent studies on adaptive capacity have illustrated the “highly context-specific nature of adaptive capacity” due to cultural diversity, traditional knowledge and skills, and situational differences of communities and regions across Solomon Islands.²⁹

Different local CSOs and humanitarian organisations include assessments and approaches that are context specific and inclusive of vulnerable people in communities, including the poor, people with disabilities, children and youth. A SIRCS review of the VCA³⁰ identified the critical importance of ownership and leadership in the process of assessment and noted that the intent is for local committees to work through these issues in its DRR and response to disaster. Experience from a community in Makira province indicates how vulnerability assessments can be designed in participatory ways.³¹ In this case, the participatory assessment and action process had three tiers of involvement and involved 821 people. The lessons learned from their experiences of working in community include: use facilitative rather than directive methods; working with, enhance and build local institutional capacities; focus on the co-learning of participants as a key outcome of research; leverage local skills and capacity building; and, enhance linkages across geographical and political scales. Devising methods that are inclusive of women and counter aid-dependent attitudes were among local issues being tackled as part of the Makira project, and were common challenges of participation in other parts of Solomon Islands.

“Assessments are participatory, we go house to house, and talk with elders and pastors in communities and also have community profiles to work from and then talk with each household. If people in the community understand our work it’s good, the challenge is not to set expectations too high so people do not complain when we come in. There is often delays in responses, depending on funding, so it’s best to work with communities to help them help themselves.”

SIRCS Respondent

Existing Structures

One of the best buffers against hardship after disasters are communally organised savings and support groups organised through family, church or women/youth organisation networks.³² This was witnessed during the market closures brought about by COVID-19. A women’s led savings group in a community in West Guadalcanal had almost \$140,000 SBD³³ in community savings. They were able to create their own stimulus package whereby households could access \$25,000 SBD³⁴ in assistance to deal with problems they were facing such as reduced access to food markets and job/livelihood loss. Established as a way to

²⁷ Ride, A., Kii, M., West, G & Hila, D (2013) *Information in Natural Disasters – Solomon Islands*. Australia: AUSAID/SOLMAS

²⁸ McAdoo et al (2008) Indigenous knowledge and the near field population response during the 2007 Solomon Islands tsunami

²⁹ Warrick et al (2016) The ‘Pacific Adaptive Capacity Analysis Framework’: guiding the assessment of adaptive capacity in Pacific island communities. *Regional Environmental Change*. 17. 10.1007/s10113-016-1036-x.

³⁰ Solomon Islands Red Cross Society (2005) *Solomon Islands: From risk assessment to community actions*. Switzerland: ICRC

³¹ Fazey et al (2010). A Three-Tiered Approach to Participatory Vulnerability Assessment In The Solomon Islands. *Global Environmental Change*. 20. 713-728. 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2010.04.011.

³² Ha’apio, M.O., R. Gonzalez & M. Wairiu (2018) Is there any chance for the poor to cope with extreme environmental events? Two case studies in the Solomon Islands. *World Development* 122 (2019) 514–524

³³ Approximately \$22,500 AUD

³⁴ Approximately \$4000 AUD

empower women to increase financial security, the savings initiative has the ability to respond quickly to challenges that arise during disasters and provide much needed finance for recovery or basic needs.

As with locally formed support groups, churches are an important source of counselling and psycho-social and economic support after disasters. Many of these groups coordinate cash or in-kind contributions for

“Churches or the women's group, because they don't have to wait for assessment, they just see from their own eyes then they do the response. So, there is always participation happening within like 72 hours of the disaster when a disaster strikes.”

Alice Hou
GCW

their congregation or community disaster affected members. The Disaster Ready project³⁵, operating under the AHP, coordinates information across different churches in relation to disaster preparedness. Some churches are significantly more active than others in response to disaster with varying degrees of interest by church leadership in engaging in relief and recovery over long term. Some of the variation among church groups was related to pre-existing relationships with INGOs, or access to other external support.

Similarly, active and responsive local governance, and the recognition of local governance by formal government institutions, has also been found to be a key factor in whether community resilience was higher, or lower, in areas around Gizo, Western Province, which experienced a devastating tsunami in 2007. Chiefs, churches and local NGOs reliant on local volunteers (notably SIRCS and Kastom Gaden Association) were first responders and organised evacuations, supplies of water and food, and later building materials to rebuild homes and planting materials to restart food gardens. The i-Kiribati communities experienced deaths and injuries and widescale resettlement due to damage, a process complicated by the lack of land tenure for these 2nd or 3rd generation migrant families and lack of support for key local institutions such as churches and schools. Interventions were seen by this community as of limited value in building back, as they could not engage with the longer term issue of land tenure and rights of this migrant community. On the other hand, Indigenous landowners were better able to build back homes and gardens in the absence of external support (leveraging community networks), or to access external aid funding for building back schools and basic infrastructure.³⁶

The unintended consequences of disaster relief and lack of fit with local systems was highlighted by Ha'apio and colleagues in a study comparing adaptation to extreme weather events in two Solomon Islands communities. The first case was a rural community in the Western Province that was hit by the Tsunami of April 2007; the second a community settled in an informal development on a flood-prone area in peri-urban Honiara that was hit by a flash flood in April 2014. Factors identified as contributing to recovery and the local decision making of disaster affected communities included the social cooperation system or the Wantok System³⁷, the government's role in responding to catastrophes and managing requests and delivery, and household net worth. The review found the farm household

“Localisation I am having difficulties, not really to have something bad to say about internationals coming in, but when people say localisation, I say: localisation for who?”

Loti Yates
Director - NDMO

³⁵ <https://www.australianhumanitarianpartnership.org/solomonislands>

³⁶ Ride & Bretherton (2011) Community Resilience in Natural Disasters, *Palgrave*

³⁷ Nanau (2011) The Wantok System as a Socio-Economic and Political Network in Melanesia. *OMNES: Journal of Multicultural Society*

model was most appropriate to describe informal households and their resilience: “In spite of the extreme poverty observed, and the lack of government assistance, we conclude that amenities obtained from the community (through the Wantok system) and household net worth (including the availability of common pool resources) enabled them to cope with the catastrophes.” This included borrowings from family tribe and church groups. The study suggests a focus on household net worth over other measures in looking at how poor communities cope with disasters.

While more problematic in the past than now, issues relating to international agencies applying a “one-size-fits-all” approach and delivering unrequested activities were noted by interviewees in relation to current discussions. These reportedly created friction between international and national agencies, as externally developed approaches could operate outside the coordinated system of government and non-government approaches.

Locations

CSOs indicated that locations for assistance are generally chosen by government in the initial rapid assessment, in consultation with international NGOs, which have high degrees of influence because of their knowledge of certain communities, experience in related projects, and capacity to leverage funds. One key informant explained that in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, AHP organisations decided to split up into different locations, responding to the existing communities where they were already working. Additionally, if an INGO was working with two different communities, they would identify any communities in between, visiting them in an effort to scale up assistance efforts, ultimately, increasing the impact without significantly increasing the workload.

“Most of our NGOs have their catchment communities’ areas that they already implement most of the activities. They have good linkages and networking within the communities, perhaps, the resources are still limited to reach all communities where developments are needed.”

PWDSI Representative

Part of the decision making for locations is based on information from communities provided to the government or the INGOs. One stakeholder consulted felt that assistance for risk reduction and longer-term projects was largely focused on rural rather than urban locations. Rural policy biases have been noted in other research.³⁸

“In disaster work in Honiara city, an issue is that bigger disaster projects that look at disaster, climate risk, preparedness projects to help communities, always goes to the provinces and not Honiara. Honiara only has projects like women’s saving clubs but not disaster projects. Provinces are targeted areas for projects. They did not realise that the same risks in the provinces are also being faced by people in Honiara. When they go down to the rural areas often, Honiara is being missed out. Honiara has a lot of populated areas and it has a different setting, different ethnic groups and everything depends on money. In the community, you can find food in the bush. But in Honiara, everything depends on money. So, when a disaster happens in Honiara, people are more affected than those in the rural area because of its cash economy. When there is no food, there is basically no food, unlike those in the rural areas where they will still have access to food.”

Nelson Anaia
Disaster Officer - HCC

³⁸ Barbara & Keen. (2017). Urbanisation in Melanesia: The Politics of Change. Development Bulletin. 78. Pp 16-19.

Adaptive, flexible and realistic processes

Timelines

Stakeholder feedback identified that at times there were delays in government responses, often occurring as a result of the distance between Honiara and some commonly affected disaster areas, or as already noted the legal status of urban settlements or their accessibility. An example of the challenges of distance includes the remote islands in Temotu province, which are accessible by a minimum 3-day ship travel, and irregular flights. Even in and around Honiara there could be weeks before assistance was supplied. NDMO expressed a preference not to put set timelines on assistance due to logistical and supply issues, and the large areas of the country not covered by freight and other services. These delays necessitated a higher degree of self-reliance for isolated or marginalised communities and those cut off by the impacts of disasters. One key informant explained that the the delays in response, in some instances, increased the resilience of the community as it required them to not only be prepared for the impacts of disaster such as food shortage, but also to implement their own recovery initiatives and strengthen local governance.

“Damage assessment is done according to the timeframe but when it comes to distribution of items, goods it will take two or three months to reach the communities.”

PWDSI Representative

“It depends on government processes to set a time frame. Sometimes people demand things to be done immediately. But it all depends on the government's processes which are different to people's opinions. When the government has its time frame, it is set in a way when resources will be available. Somehow people expect response to be immediate and mainly right after a disaster and they thought that it is an easy task. where the next day after a disaster, supplies arrive.”

Loti Yates

Director - NDMO

As with other elements of local disaster preparedness and response, underlying socio-economic factors, such as food insecurity and poverty, necessitated longer term approaches. This was witnessed with the recent economic downturn compounded by COVID-19. One INGO noted that the first round of funding for response by INGOs was small and intended to be for a short period of time. The key informant noted that while the second phase of funding was longer, around 18 months, when it came to food security and livelihoods, these time frames are not enough to change livelihood practices and outcomes, such as to support small farms, markets, and agricultural cash crops for export.

SIRCS reported they had changed from a project to programme approach which allowed for greater flexibility around timeframes and provided opportunities for more long-term engagement, with one staff member commenting: “instead of a big short project that will raise expectations, something that will happen over a long time, in my view it’s better for the Solomon Islands context”. INGOs were more likely to report fixed timeframes, with some noting the pressures to spend money and complete activities in donor-set timeframes that can undermine more sustainable development outcomes.

Scaling Up

Scaling up activities was most often reported in relation to practices that were easily understood and replicable, without added financial and material resources, from one community to another. Organisations working on DRR identified various tools being adopted by other non-project site

communities. This was reported to have occurred as a result of community members sharing their DRR learnings with other communities in close proximity. This, however, is not always the case. One key informant noted that community-led scaling up initiatives for agriculture / food security can be impeded when target communities are hesitant to share their learnings with neighbouring communities, particularly if they view the new skill as one that will benefit them financially.

Disability and women's networks reported scaling up amongst networks of people in similar situations. An example included women's weather watch, which included groups of women based in each of the provinces whose role is to provide the weather information to women in other communities during bad weather and disasters. With a focus on engagement and support of girls and women with disability, this women's organisation leveraged their existing networks across provinces to help mobilise other local networks within their communities to better support the vulnerable in times of crisis.

The majority of stakeholders cited extra funding as a requirement to scaling up and identified that communities needed assistance to kickstart initiatives and develop community disaster plans. Initiatives that worked well, such as establishing community disaster plans, have been replicated by various projects with different funders, and coordinated by government and in INGO projects in communities. INGOs staff viewed scaling up in geographical terms, particularly trying to spread out from "our" communities to neighbouring ones which was easier and more cost effective than going to "new" areas.

One senior government member noted that opportunities to scale up and learn from the experiences of other countries in the region remained limited and could be expanded.

Reflective practice and evaluation

The series of workshops to review disaster assistance following the 2007 tsunami and develop the National Disaster Management Plan was cited as having a large impact on disaster responses, as it was followed by funding for the National Disaster Management Plan, cluster committee structure and other improvements to coordination, strategic decision making and implementation.

Changes to practice occurring as a result of evaluation and feedback can be seen with AHP organisations piloting cash vouchers as a way to provide support that directly reaches affected people through individual accounts. This form of assistance where disaster affected people can decide what their needs are and receive funds to spend as needed has been requested since the 2007 tsunami.³⁹

Those interviewed had limited involvement in formulating evaluations and as such their ability to reflect on evaluation processes and outcomes as a process was constrained. In nationally-based Disaster Risk Reduction work, often the local committees identified how the DDR plan would be monitored which contributed to local influence over evaluation. When actions required extra resourcing beyond communities, responsiveness depended on networks and access to finance.

³⁹ Ride & Bretherton (2011)

One key informant reported that when sector-wide evaluations were done by central government ministries or by international donors/INGOs (such as by UN agencies), there were good recommendations, but they tended not to be followed by funding to implement sector-wide change. A stakeholder working on disaster response described an experience where the evaluation was conducted by international donors and international headquarters and the stakeholder had not seen the report. This highlights some of the challenges associated with better networking evaluation processes and outcomes to avoid siloed approaches or exclusion of local actors.

The shortcomings of evaluations could start early in externally initiated projects when local communities were often not part of setting project priorities. When projects were not inclusive from the start, the result can be that evaluations become “just for the donor.” In these cases, the evaluation is more about meeting externally set aims and outcomes of the project, rather than serving sustainable community resilience. The interviewee noted that change required systemic transformation of donor funding and systems; however most saw this as beyond their influence.

Next steps

There is no question that the Solomon Islands and the Pacific will continue to face large scale disasters. So, are the current systems for response equipped to deal with the increasing severity and intensity of events? The ABA principles provide an alternative framework to support disaster response in the Pacific that is contextually focused, leverages existing structures and promotes increased sector and agency collaboration and coordination. Additionally, they promote the adoption of agile and adaptive response mechanisms and a focus on more sustainable and developmental outcomes.

This paper presents an opportunity for further discussion and lesson sharing both in the Solomon Islands and across the Pacific region to better understand how, and if, ABAs can offer an approach to disaster response that strengthens what currently exists. A summary of possible areas for consideration is summarised in Box 1.

Box 1: Key Issues for Further Consideration

Recognising the opportunities for learning between countries, is there an effective way of reflecting on past experience, sharing lessons and scaling up successful initiatives across the region?

Suggestions include a regional workshop between NDMOs (and other emergency management agencies) that could transition into a more formal community of practice.

How can we promote and strengthen interventions which support longer-term economic resilience?

A multi-stakeholder forum to discuss how best to support more communities with savings initiatives and sustainable livelihood alternatives could prove beneficial. Similar to the above regional NDMO workshop, this would offer an opportunity for learning across sectors and organisations, and building local resilience.

What mechanisms might best facilitate increased transparency and efficiency of funds distribution to communities affected by disasters?

This may include introducing transparency protocols/requirements for funds allocated to Members of Parliament, and creating options for cash transfers via canteens or individuals to increase recovery options and spending locally, rather than delivery of goods.

Where are efforts best placed to strengthen existing mechanisms that support those most marginalised and at risk?

Greater engagement and opportunities to share information and experiences around issues of social inclusion and organisational inclusiveness among disaster response agencies.

How can the system extend beyond short term response and increase coordination and strategic action on longer term issues that affect disaster vulnerability and risk?

Including investment in informal settlements in and around Honiara, food security, water and sanitation, and access to community health education. By increasing long term capacity, ensuring more inclusive engagements, and strengthening critical infrastructure, communities will be better prepared to cope with future shocks.

Testing the system and our networks through scenario exercises, a good way to learn?

Disaster response is complex and changing. Would carefully structured scenario exercises across sectors and across countries help to reveal where information flows, collaborations and, even regional action, could be strengthened?

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