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# SOLOMON ISLANDS' ROAD TO RECOVERY FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Key Findings of Public Opinion Research  
August 2021

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NDI (or the Institute) is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental organization that works in partnership around the world to strengthen and safeguard democratic institutions, processes, norms and values to secure a better quality of life for all. NDI envisions a world where democracy and freedom prevail, with dignity for all. The Institute's work in the Pacific Islands aims to support inclusive and citizen-centered governance by advancing domestic election monitoring efforts, strengthening civil society, enhancing government transparency and accountability, and raising awareness on barriers to women's political participation. NDI began working with civil society and women activists in the Pacific Islands in 2015.

Cover photo: Voters heading to the Provincial Assembly to hear the election results, Gizo, 2019, Zelda Hilly @NDI

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# I. Executive Summary

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**The government's measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are largely seen positively, as they have contributed to keeping the country safe, but widespread rumors drive persistent COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy.** In contrast with the strong approval of the government's anti-COVID-19 health measures, there is near-universal agreement that there is a lack of transparency in government when it comes to public funding of pandemic recovery policies, which drives calls for more efficient monitoring, especially in terms of the COVID-19 Economic Stimulus Package (ESP).

**Access to basic services is seen as satisfactory in the context of the pandemic,** though people believe that the government should do more to develop the country outside the Capital Territory. The national government is seen as performing well when it comes to ensuring access to public services such as free healthcare and education, as well as improving key infrastructure. Still, the manner in which natural resources are managed is seen as opaque and detrimental to the interests of Solomon Islanders.

**Unemployment and the increased cost of living drive pessimism in the future of the country.** Solomon Islanders across provinces and socio-demographic groups call on the government to address deep-seated economic concerns. Demands for paid work opportunities are highest in the capital, Honiara. Men and those over 45 years old are significantly more concerned about the cost of living.

**Confidence in government is tenuous, but some hesitate to voice their discontent.** Eleven percent of survey respondents say they trust government ministries "a lot" and 37 percent "trust some," while a large majority do not trust the Parliament to act in their best interests. Freedom is held in high regard by Solomon Islanders, but not all feel they can speak their mind freely and publicly about issues that concern them the most. While many say that they feel free to criticize the government's performance and lack of progress on addressing corruption, some worry about reprisals in voicing their concerns.

**Strong institutions, independent monitoring, and civic education are needed to effectively fight corruption.** The sense of urgency the public feels around corruption can be harnessed and supported by creating opportunities for citizens to engage with the government and anti-corruption institutions. Corruption is viewed as pervasive and affecting every area of public life. The political elite is viewed as manipulating the system and taking advantage of leadership positions to serve their own interests and those who support them.

**Solomon Islanders praise diversity and harmony, but competition for resources and changing social behaviors threaten the social fabric.** A sense of unfair distribution of resources can create tension not only between citizens and their government, but also between provinces, within the community, and in the family. Women and youth are disproportionately affected by the nexus of poverty, violence, and crime. The research also finds that there is a clash between more progressive and more conserva-

tive Solomon Islanders, with the latter lamenting that some CSOs and increased access to technology, especially social media, promote “Western,” liberal values and behaviors.

**Almost unanimous trust in religious leaders and high confidence in CSOs’ ability to deliver at the grassroots level drive wide support.** CSOs are generally trusted for their long-term engagement and respected for their efforts across a range of sectors, particularly in providing assistance to marginalized populations, including children in need, people with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, and at-risk youth. There is a demand for an increased presence of CSOs on the ground, more awareness, and more sustainable funding.





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# II. Introduction

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## II.1. Research Context

Solomon Islands has a recent history of civil unrest, weak governance institutions, and dependence on international aid and foreign investment for development. Corruption and long-unaddressed grievances have led to a perception that the political elite is disconnected from local realities and people's everyday needs. International analysts and Solomon Islanders alike have been concerned that weak political institutions can enable state capture by the narrow interests of the political elite, allowing incumbents to stay in power by gaming the political system, particularly through the manipulation of Constituency Development Funds (CDFs),<sup>1</sup> Ward Development Committees,<sup>2</sup> cross-border voter registration<sup>3</sup> and vote buying,<sup>4</sup> and allocating infrastructure and development contracts in an untransparent manner.

This public opinion research was conducted in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly to other countries in the Pacific Islands, restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the COVID-19<sup>5</sup> virus have proven efficient, but studies show that in many countries, corruption has become even more of an issue during the pandemic and a lack of political integrity and emergencies have fed off each other, creating a vicious cycle of mismanagement that has deepened the crisis.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, countries that perform poorly in controlling corruption have tended to breach human rights and democratic norms in their management of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> For instance, some have been concerned that the Solomon Islands Government may want to curtail freedom of speech, a fear that almost became reality

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1 CDF refers to government funds that are given to members of parliament to spend within their constituency districts. Kerry Baker, "The surprising sameness of Solomon Islands elections," *The Interpreter* by the Lowy Institute, April 23, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/surprising-sameness-solomons-elections>.

2 Ward Development Committees have members elected by local residents of each ward to advise the elected member of parliament who represents the ward. WDCs also oversee the spending of CDF funds, in cooperation with their member of parliament representative. UNDP, *Solomon Islands Development Finance Assessment*, <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/sites/www.un.org.ohrlls/files/solomon-islands-dfa.pdf>.

3 James Batley, Colin Wiltshire, Joanne Ridolfi and Athena Rogers, "The Voter as Commodity: The Phenomenon of Cross-border Voter Registration in Solomon Islands," *Australian National University Department of Public Affairs InBrief* 21 (2019), [http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2019-11/dpa\\_ib\\_2019\\_21\\_batley.pdf](http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2019-11/dpa_ib_2019_21_batley.pdf).

4 Koroï Hawkins, "Vote buying and cross-border registration mar Solomon Islands elections - ANU," *RNZ*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/409374/vote-buying-and-cross-border-registrations-mar-solomons-election-anu>.

5 For a list of government actions in response to COVID-19, including repeated renewals of its State of Emergency orders, see UNESCAP, "Solomon Islands COVID Country Profile," last updated March 23, 2021, [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/2021-03/Solomon%20Islands\\_COVID%20Country%20profile%20230321.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/2021-03/Solomon%20Islands_COVID%20Country%20profile%20230321.pdf); "SOPE ends soon," *Solomon Star*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.solomonstarnews.com/index.php/news/national/item/25882-sope-ends-soon>.

6 Jon Vrushi and Roberto Martínez B. Kukutschka, "Why Fighting Corruption Matters in Times of COVID-19," *Transparency International*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2020-research-analysis-why-fighting-corruption-matters-in-times-of-covid-19>; Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index," 2020, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020>.

7 Vrushi and Kukutschka 2021.

in November 2020, when the government announced its intention to ban Facebook under the guise of preventing the spread of misinformation.<sup>8</sup> The initiative received an angry response online and was eventually dropped. This controversy took place just a few days after the government had suspended the nurses' trade union for protesting against the lack of COVID-19 protective equipment.<sup>9</sup>

The decline of state coherence goes hand-in-hand with shrinking social cohesion. Increased competition for resources and a deteriorating quality of life—compounded by the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis—have disproportionately affected marginalized groups, in particular by increasing the incidence of violence against women. Divisions between provinces run deep, and the wounds created by the civil conflict that took place from 1998 to 2003, locally known as “the tensions,” are still present. For instance, disagreement with the national government’s decision to recognize China led to increased hostility between Malaita and the national government, culminating with Malaitan Premier Daniel Suidani announcing an independence referendum in September 2020.

However, inter-province competition for resources and demands for secession<sup>10</sup> are not new in Solomon Islands—or limited to Malaita—and are supported by a feeling that provinces other than Guadalcanal, where the capital Honiara is located, are being left behind when it comes to development, public services, and economic opportunities. Additionally, a lack of jobs and increased cost of living, especially in Honiara, drive some people back to villages, which has only further increased citizens' resentment. This resentment not only prevents the formation of a cohesive national identity; it also perpetuates vulnerability to future calls for secession. Internal turmoil adds to the challenge of being positioned on geopolitical fault lines, raising concerns about the country's resilience to withstand pressures from countries with interests in the islands' resources and strategic location. The geopolitical struggle for influence between China and democratic countries in the region complicates existing political tensions in the Pacific nation and reinforces internal divisions as foreign actors vie for influence.

In the absence of public, independent, and statistically representative data, it has been difficult to quantify the timeline and intensity of changes in public opinion related to the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Solomon Islanders' top-of-mind concerns, corruption, and social cohesion. This study thus aims to fill that gap by anchoring qualitative information in objective numbers to provide a baseline upon which future research into public opinion in Solomon Islands can build.

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8 Evan Wasuka, “Solomon Islands set to ban Facebook in the name of ‘national unity,’” *ABC News*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-23/solomon-islands-set-to-ban-facebook-for-sake-of-national-unity/12910786>.

9 Solomon Islands Government, “Suspension of Solomon Islands Nurses Association [SINA] as a Trade Union,” November 2, 2020, [https://solomons.gov.sb/suspension\\_of\\_the\\_solomon\\_islands\\_nurses\\_association\\_sina\\_as\\_a\\_trade\\_union/](https://solomons.gov.sb/suspension_of_the_solomon_islands_nurses_association_sina_as_a_trade_union/).

10 “Western Breakaway Movement,” *Solomon Islands Historical Encyclopaedia (1893-1978)*, <https://www.solomonencyclopaedia.net/biogs/E000340b.htm>.

## II.2. Methodology

In April-May 2021, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) commissioned a two-pronged research study consisting of a national survey followed by qualitative research, to understand public perceptions around issues related to political transparency and accountability in critical sectors in Solomon Islands, including public awareness and perceptions of COVID-19 policies. This independent public opinion research aims to provide the Government of Solomon Islands, civil society, and the international community with insights to enable them to respond to the evolving needs of Solomon Islands citizens. Evidence-based analysis can help inform public policy and programming aimed at strengthening citizen engagement, democratic processes, and inclusive development in Solomon Islands. The study identifies priority areas for citizen monitoring and advocacy for responsive policy making, and informs how and where CEPPS/NDI and other organizations can focus their engagement in the country. The study serves as a benchmark for future research efforts in the country and the Pacific region, providing a baseline of perceptions from which changes in attitudes can be measured and assessed over time.

Tebbutt Research was commissioned to conduct a national survey and six in-person focus groups in the three most populated provinces in Solomon Islands. The national survey, fielded between April 22 and May 20, 2021. A number of 1,249 Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) were conducted with respondents aged 18 years or older. The random sample of mobile phone numbers uses the Random Digit Dial (RDD) method for respondent selection. Interviews were conducted by local interviewers, in English and Solomon Islands Pidgin.

Province, gender, and age within province quotas were applied to ensure a representative national sample. Given the specificity of nested quotas, no weights have been applied to the final data set. The average margin of error (MoE) is +/-2.8 percent at the 95 percent confidence level; MoE at the subgroup level varies by subgroup sample size. Significance testing at the 95 percent confidence level has been applied to the final data. Statistically significant differences between population subgroups are noted throughout the presentation (e.g. any reference to “significant differences” has been statistically verified, as have references to groups where support is “highest” or “strongest”). Mobile phone penetration is estimated at 77% or more across Solomon Islands.<sup>11</sup> The response rate was 62 percent. It is estimated (using 2009 census data) that about 47 percent of the population is under 18 years of age. In determining survey quotas, we calculated 18 to 19-year-olds as 40 percent of the 15 to 19-years-old age group.

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<sup>11</sup> Telecommunications Commission Solomon Islands, Annual Report, 2019, <https://www.tcsi.org.sb/index.php/library/annual-reports/88-2019-annual-report-low-resolution-version/file>.



**Table 1. Survey Sample Distribution**

Province	Male 18-29	Male 30-44	Male 45+	Female 18-29	Female 30-44	Female 45+	Total
Malaita	51	44	40	54	45	40	274
Guadalcanal	53	46	35	53	44	29	260
Honiara*	62	49	32	58	50	21	272
Western	30	30	26	30	28	22	166
Other**	49	51	44	51	48	34	277
<b>Total</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>1249</b>

\*Capital Territory

\*\* Choiseul, Isabel, Rennell-Bellona, Central, Makira-Ulawa, and Temotu

Each province of Solomon Islands is distinct in terms of culture and geographical spread, giving the qualitative component of the research breadth. Two focus group discussions were conducted in each of the largest three provinces—one with men and one with women. Adults between the ages of 25 and 40 were invited to participate in groups with the understanding that these respondents would be able to speak to the views of multiple generations living within the same household—children in their care as well as older adults they may live with. Each discussion accommodated between 7 and 8 participants. Focus groups were conducted in a mix of English and Solomon Islands Pidgin, depending on the language preferences of participants. The analysis was conducted on the English language transcripts.

**Table 2. Focus Group Discussion Details**

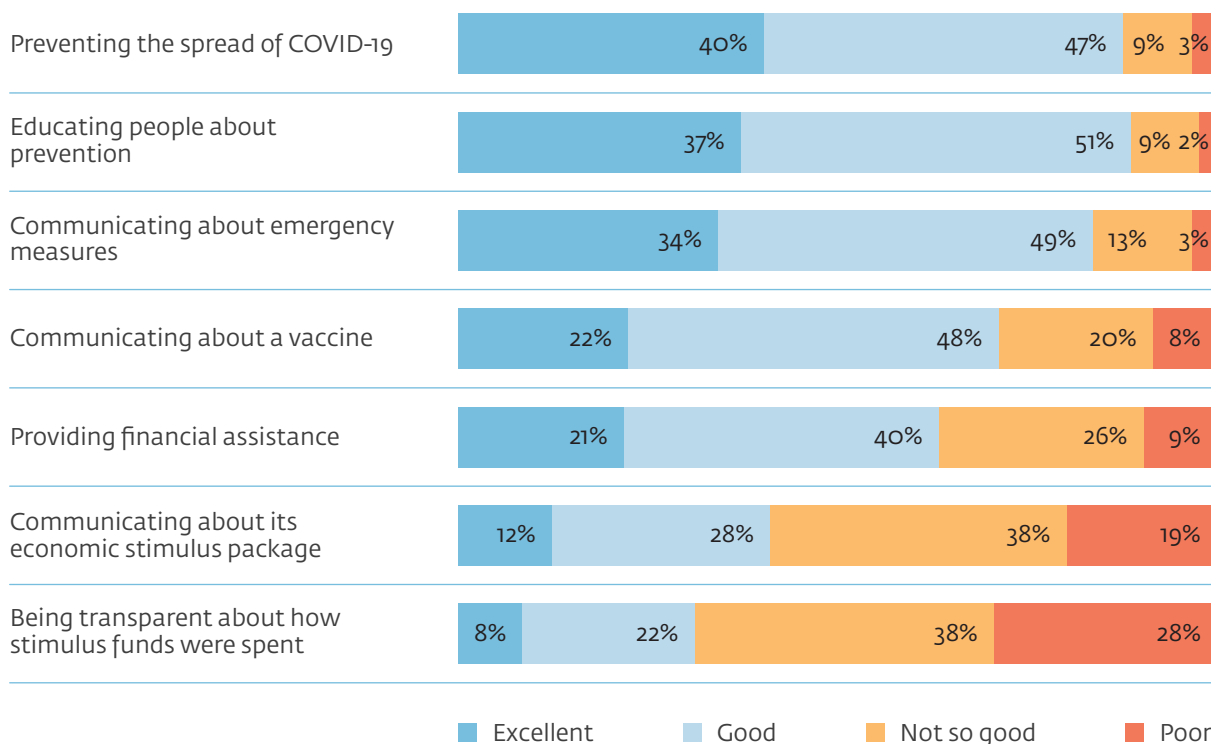
Location	Gender	Number of Participants	Date
Honiara	Women	8	May 25
Honiara	Men	7	May 31
Malaita—Auki	Women	7	May 21
Malaita—Auki	Men	7	May 22
Western—Gizo	Women	7	May 26
Western—Gizo	Men	8	May 27

# III. Key Research Findings

## III.1. The Government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic is viewed positively overall, but vaccine hesitancy remains high

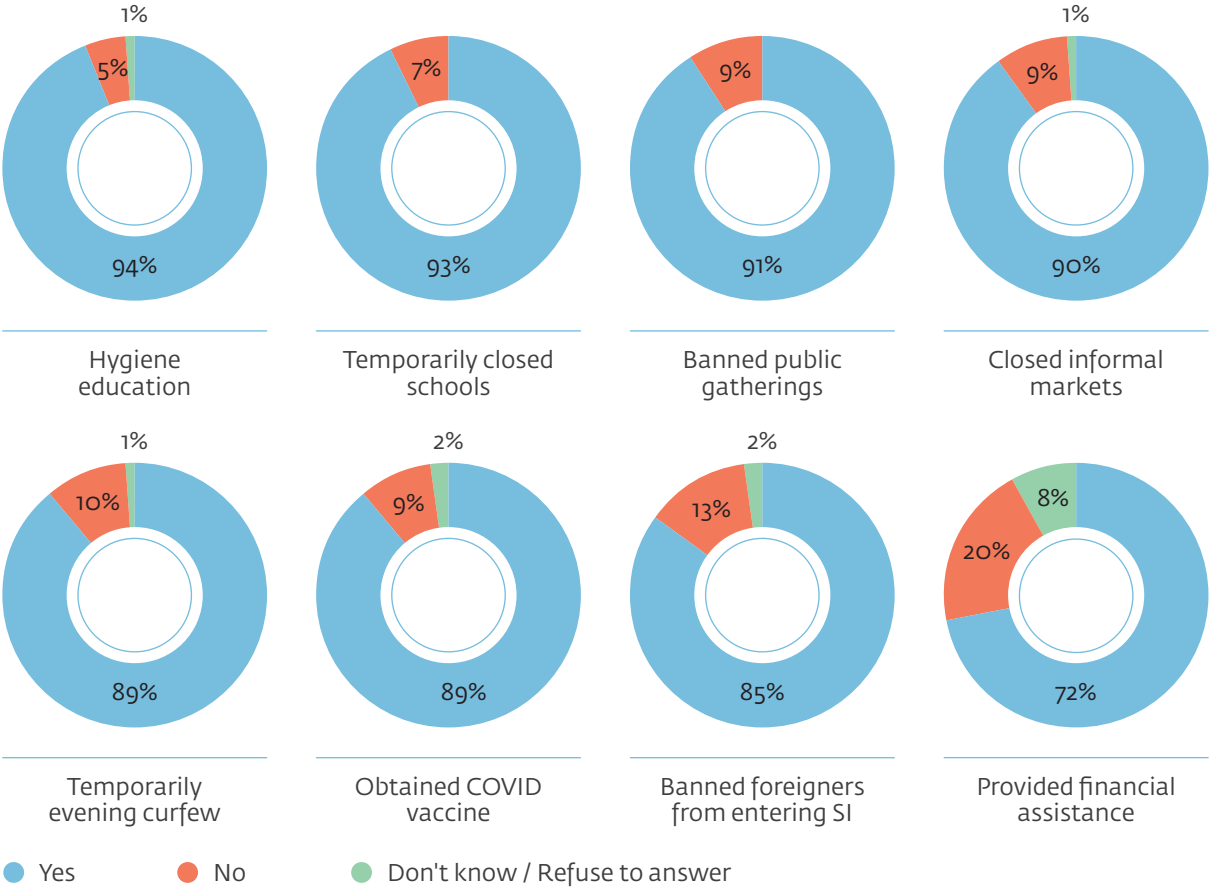
Large majorities approve of the government’s measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, as they have contributed to keeping the country safe. Nationally, only 15 percent of survey respondents see COVID-19 as one of the top issues that the government should prioritize. The highest level of concern is in the Western province, particularly among women (28 percent). The province shares a border with Papua New Guinea (PNG), a country that registered a surge of COVID-19 cases starting at the end of February 2021. While they acknowledge that government-imposed restrictions—including social distancing, limitations of movement, and closing borders—affected livelihoods and lifestyle, focus group participants accept these measures and appreciate that the government did a good job in preventing the spread of COVID-19 in the country. A man from Honiara noted, “for me, the prevention measure put by the government is not unnecessary. I fully support it, but I will not deny that it has affected me. For instance, some of us who are supposed to go back and continue our studies outside of the country will not be able to do so because of the restriction of international flights coming in and going out. So yes, it has affected me and my studies.”

**Figure 1: “How would you rate the job the government of the Solomon Islands is doing in each of the following areas related to COVID-19—excellent, good, not so good, or poor?”**



Solomon Islanders profess familiarity with most COVID-19 related government measures, although survey respondents are less aware of the COVID-19 relief package, especially those in Honiara and Malaita. Radio is the main source of information about COVID-19, with 77 percent of survey respondents saying that this is where they get most of their news, including information about how to stay healthy and emergency measures put in place to prevent the spread of the virus. Social media (31 percent), health-care workers (31 percent), and newspapers (24 percent) are also go-to sources on information about the pandemic. A smaller percentage of survey respondents (17 percent) say that they get their information from family, friends and neighbors.

**Figure 2: “I am going to read you a list of things countries have done in response to COVID-19. After each item I read, please tell me, to your knowledge, whether the government of the Solomon Islands has taken that action. If you do not know, please say so and we will move on.”**



However, some focus group participants reported dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the government’s COVID-19 policy response. Some participants, especially women, noted that it was difficult to provide for their families when the markets were closed and they could not sell their produce. Additionally, as access to public buildings was conditioned by wearing face masks, those who could not afford them were not able to obtain official documents. Finally, a woman in Malaita referred to a government’s decision in September 2020 when it allowed a repatriation flight from China—where the majority of the passengers were Chinese workers, not Solomon Islanders—which reignited tensions between the

national government and Malaita leaders, culminating with a call for an independence referendum. The participant noted, “one of my concerns is during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a measure taken for foreigners not to enter our country or any other country for that matter. But I have heard of flights coming into our country with many Chinese people in them. We are putting our country at risk.”

**A lack of government transparency and accountability around the COVID-19 economic stimulus package drives calls for more efficient monitoring.** In contrast with the strong approval of the government’s anti-COVID-19 health measures, there is near universal agreement that there is a lack of transparency in government when it comes to communicating about the Economic Stimulus Package (ESP). Survey results show that men in general and Honiara residents in particular are more critical of the government’s communication about economic stimulus funds. Negative impressions increase with age and are highest among men aged 30 to 44 years, who are the most likely to participate in paid employment. The same gender and regional trends can be seen with regards to views of government transparency in the *distribution* of stimulus funds, from the ESP to other funding mechanisms. In focus groups, complaints about how decisions are made start with the national level and trickle down to the provincial government, and range from implementing foreign policy and development projects to how the ESP and the Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) have been allocated.

A widespread lack of awareness about the ESP in particular has led to unrealistic expectations across provinces which, unmet, channel people’s frustration toward the government and those groups or individuals suspected of benefiting unfairly from this program. A key source of confusion is related to who qualifies to apply for funding and under what conditions. Some focus group participants have been under the impression that this funding is intended to keep established companies afloat during the pandemic, while others anticipated that informal trade, subsistence farming, and fishing activities—sectors that were also hit hard by the pandemic—could register as businesses and apply for support. In other cases, people hoped that they could access this funding as compensation for losing their jobs or as an entitlement for working essential jobs. As one man from Honiara explained, “I remember that month when the stimulus package was announced. A lot of my uncles asked me to help them register their businesses and I can tell not only they were doing this; a lot of people were registering their businesses just to apply for this stimulus package. Even some people living in town claimed they were farmers doing business in the village. And at that time, I assumed, and my assumption was true, that there would be confusion to who are the real farmers and who are the fake ones and it ended up like that, those that really needed it did not receive the package and those frauds are the ones who received it and misused it.”

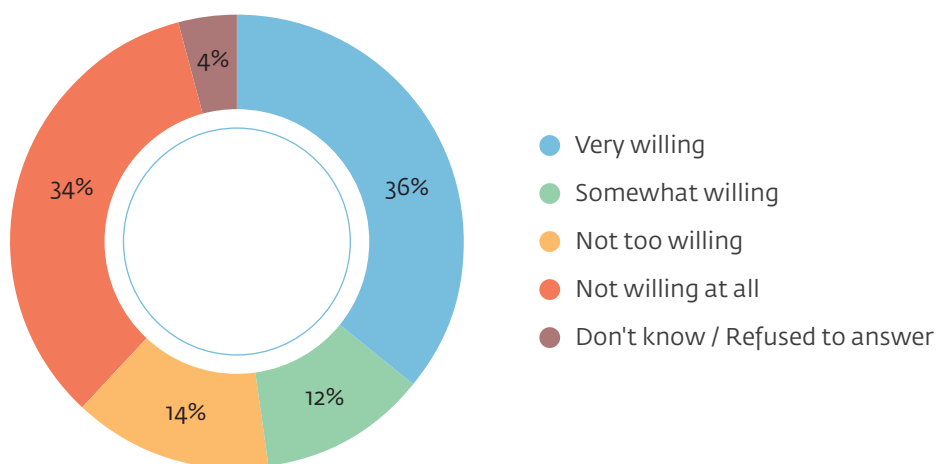
In the absence of clear qualification criteria and verification mechanisms, research participants were concerned that the ESP has opened opportunities for preferential allocation and misuse of money, and called on the government to assess allowability of expenditures. In some instances, because participants don’t know of anyone around them receiving ESP, they assume that the money has been channeled to other provinces to the detriment of their own, further solidifying a widespread perception that the government has failed to act fairly and transparently about the scope and distribution of ESP. The discussion among women in the Western province illustrates this aspect:

"We have heard of it, and see how unfairly these funds are distributed. We expect these ESP funds to reach provinces that are far away from civilization, to be prioritized, because COVID-19 also affects them in the sense there is no market for them to sell their produce and catch. Take, for example, farmers and fishermen from Shortland and Choiseul; they are affected when borders are closed, because Bougainville is their market outlet, so today they are struggling as ships only go there once in every month. If ESP funds are targeted to these people, I think we all Solomon Islanders will benefit from our government. Only businesses that are well established are still getting bonuses in the ESP funds, facilitated to them."

"One of my uncles received it, but through our member of Parliament. He did not use this money wisely and for the intended purpose, he drank with the money, the next day the money was gone. The government should do research like this to follow up on the recipient, follow up on the progress and how the funds are utilized. I see an unfair distribution of ESP funds."

**Solomon Islanders have strong views on vaccines—public opinion is sharply divided about accepting the vaccine if available.** Participants' trust in the government to keep the country virus-free does not extend to its efforts to vaccinate the population against COVID-19. Despite the government's awareness campaign, including the Prime Minister himself taking the vaccine, most say they do not know enough to make an informed decision, or don't feel it is justified to get vaccinated as the country is COVID-19 free. Less than half of Solomon Islanders are willing to get a vaccine when it becomes available. An equal number are not willing to get a vaccine at all, including 34 percent who feel very strongly about this. Men, particularly men aged 45 years or older, are more willing to vaccinate than their female counterparts, as are residents of smaller provinces. Population groups most resistant to getting a COVID-19 vaccine include respondents under the age of 45, Malaitan men, Western Province respondents under the age of 45, and current students. Relatively few are on the fence—adults are either "very willing" or "not willing at all."

**Figure 3:** "How willing are you to get a COVID-19 vaccine when it is made available in your area? Are you very willing, somewhat willing, not too willing, or not willing at all?"



**“I do not trust this information, yet this information is frightening for me”—widespread rumors drive COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy.** Misinformation is prevalent, and many people are still not convinced that it is in their best interest to get vaccinated even if it becomes available. Social media and word of mouth seem equally prolific in spreading misinformation. Rumors about conspiracies and medical side effects of vaccines are generally constructed around an authority figure—an official or someone working in the medical system—and the information is passed through social media or word-of-mouth by *wantoks*.

Rumors generally mention side effects that lead to serious illness or death. Other stories talk about somebody taking the vaccine and blood running down their nose, or a nurse who collapsed in hospital after receiving the vaccine. As a man from Honiara described, fake news spread on social media included a video allegedly “taken by a government officer from Finance who took the vaccine, he put a coin onto where the injection was, and the coin stuck to it like a magnet. Just a crazy thought that from the liquid going in, then it somehow forms a device or chip, something like that.” Other rumors revolve around religion, especially imagery pertaining to the New Testament’s Book of Revelation, and spread fear that the vaccine contains “the mark of the beast” or its number “666.” Although biblical scholars maintain that the “beast” was a reference to first-century Roman Emperors who persecuted Christians, the metaphor has been used throughout history, in times of crises or new phenomena; its resurfacing in relation to the COVID-19 vaccine is the latest example of such misunderstanding.

Discussion among Honiara men:

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*“What I heard on the radio yesterday, Seventh Day-Adventist church decided they will not take this vaccine based on their religious belief saying it is a form of 666.”*

*“Members in my house also say that it is form of 666. So, I questioned them saying if this was a vaccine for Malaria, would you also say that it is 666? It is kind of funny to me, I am not criticizing their belief but, in a sense, that it is just another virus gone wrong. But I respect their belief, so for me, I will not force my way to get the vaccine. I know it is there, but if they were to hand it to me personally for good reasons, I will take it. All vaccines have side effects, one is because our immune system is not able to withstand the vaccine, and a lot of us has already taken this vaccine and no one has died from it yet, I do not see it as a big deal.”*

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Even when conspiracies like this are not believed, others based on pseudo-scientific reasoning can sway Solomon Islanders. In Malaita, for example, a man explained, “I will not take the vaccine because as a Christian I believe that it will not enter into our country, even if we do have a case, I believe that the virus will not survive our weather, we have some cases from our students studying abroad, but as soon as they entered into our country, the virus was not stable, negative, positive and then negative again.”

Despite saying that they don’t trust these rumor sources, some focus group participants remain concerned about the potential negative side effects of the vaccine that they predict will happen. These con-

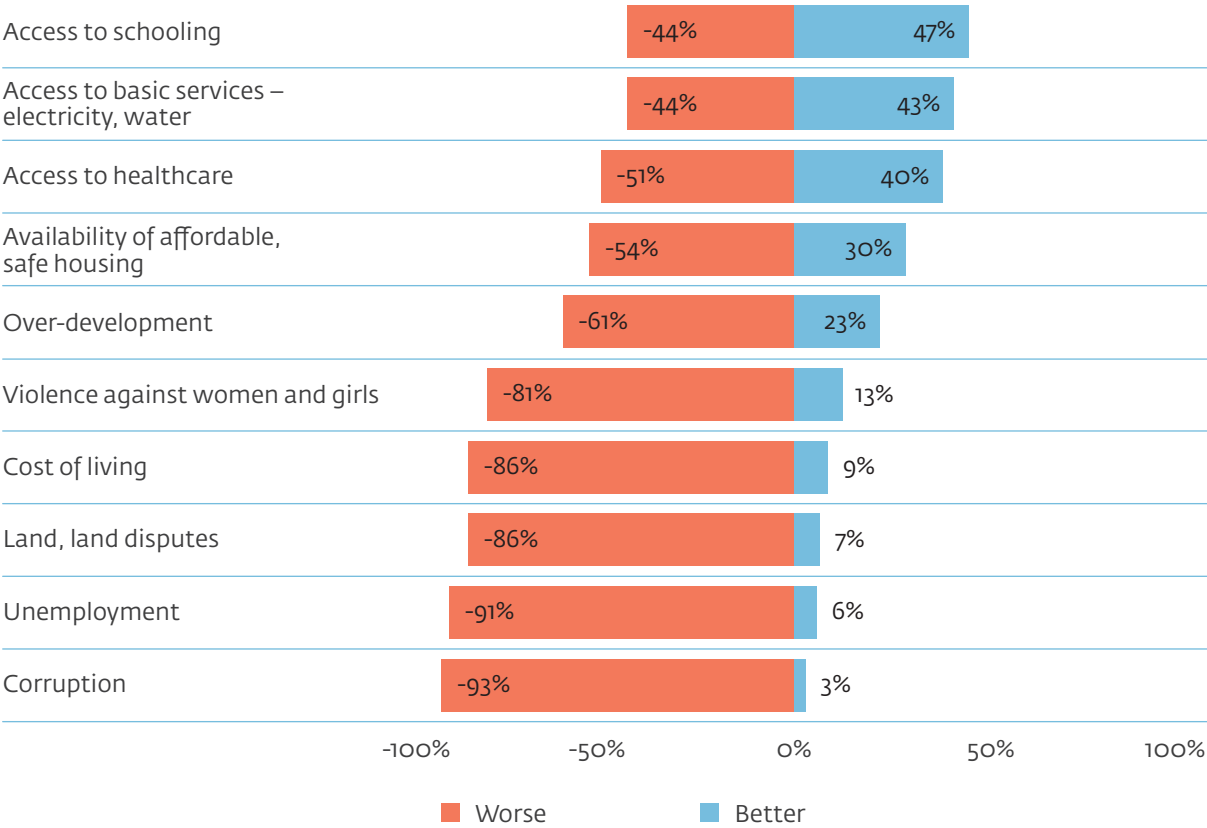


cerns—however exaggerated or irrational—need to be addressed in order to effectively reduce vaccine hesitancy. There is a need for a comprehensive awareness campaign using clear messages and credible spokespersons, such as WHO representatives, the Ministry of Health, and medical personnel, to provide information and reassurance. However, medical explanations will not convince those who hold strong religious beliefs that the vaccine is harmful. Religious leaders—some of the most trusted individuals in the country—need to dismiss rumors and endorse pro-vaccination messages, including by personal example. Those focus group participants who have taken or are planning to take the vaccine say that they are doing so to protect their families or to be able to work.

### III.2. Public services improve, but economic concerns drive pessimistic views about direction of the country

**Access to public services is seen as satisfactory in the context of the pandemic.** This is driven mainly by respondents in the capital, Honiara. Solomon Islanders living outside the capital, and respondents aged 45 years or older, have significantly more pessimistic views of access to services. In terms of positive perceptions, the national government is seen as performing well when it comes to ensuring access to public services such as free healthcare and education, as well as improving key infrastructure. As a woman from the Western Province noted in a focus group, “the government keeps the law and order, peaceful, supports us in school, builds schools, clinics.”

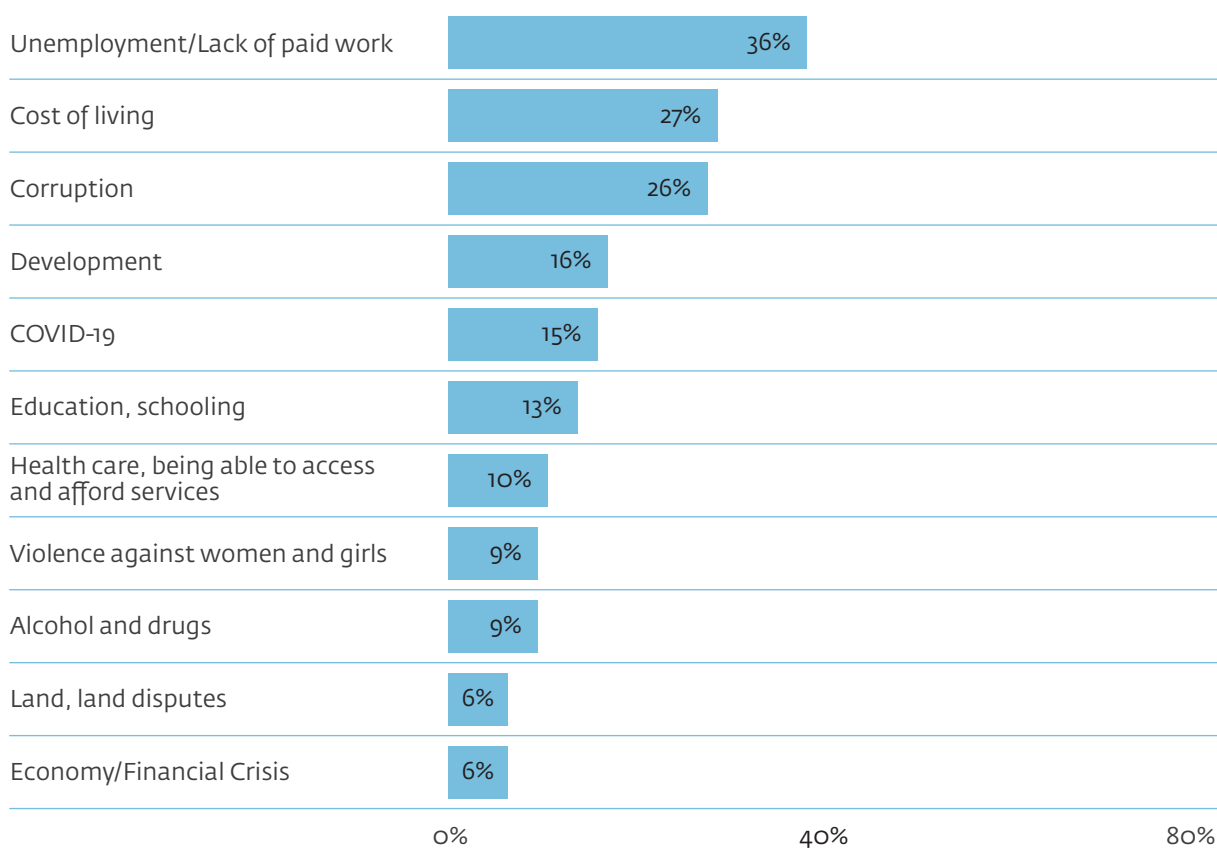
**Figure 4: “Now I am going to read you a list of issues facing the Solomon Islands. Please tell me if you think the issue is getting better or worse in the Solomon Islands.”**



However, people surveyed outside the capital, especially men from Malaita (29 percent), demand more development. Frustrations with the lack of development are illustrated by a man who complained in his focus group: “millions of dollars have [been] poured into the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development. Look at the roads here in Auki town, which have never been repaired for so long now, and it is [rough] like driving inside an open sea. And, for example, my uncle, he’s been working for the government for the last 40 years.”

**Unemployment and the increased cost of living drive pessimism in the future of the country.** Solomon Islanders across provinces and socio-demographic groups call on the government to address the lack of paid work opportunities and the cost of everyday life. Demands for paid work opportunities are highest in the capital, Honiara. Men and those over 45 years old are significantly more concerned about the cost of living.

**Figure 5: “What are the TWO most important issues or problems facing the Solomon Islands today you would like government to address?” [OPEN-ENDED]**

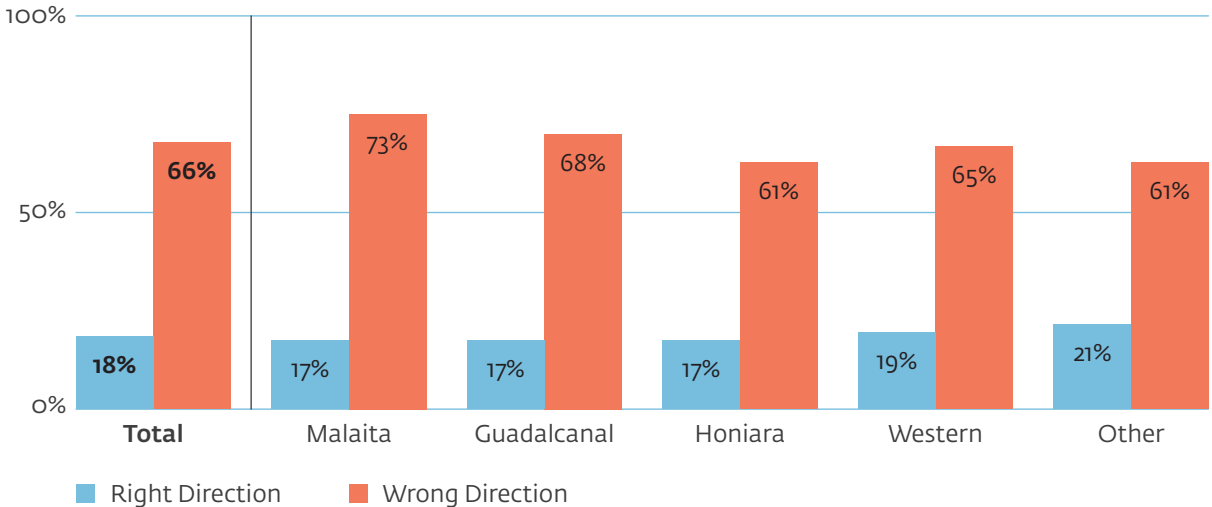


*\*Only responses garnering > 5% are shown*

Similarly, across focus groups, participants discussed deep-seated economic concerns as well as a culture of corruption that seems to pervade all levels of society and public life. According to participants, a rapid population growth over the past decade has further stressed limited community resources and job opportunities, especially for younger adults. As a result, the country’s public service and a modest-size private sector

are unable to absorb the ever-growing demand for jobs from new graduates and more mature citizens alike. This problem is compounded by costs of housing, food, and school fees, which pushes people to undertake desperate measures such as moving in with their relatives, taking children out of school, or paying bribes to get a job. Strains are evident with regards to increasing food scarcity and overcrowding in villages. Focus group participants also explained how their inability to get paid work has ramifications in every aspect of people’s lives, and impacts their views on a range of issues, from their views on the direction of the country to their trust in government to perceptions of other socio-demographic groups and foreign influence.

**Figure 6: “Overall, do you think things in the Solomon Islands are going in the right direction or do you think things are going in the wrong direction?”**



Solomon Islands, like many countries in the region, has also felt the worsening impacts of COVID-19 on the local economy. Despite an absence of cases in Solomon Islands since mid-April 2021, border closures and emergency measures intended to prevent its spread have deepened economic distress. Shipping routes and border closures have heavily disrupted trade, particularly in areas of the Western province that share a border with Bougainville, as well as tourism in the region. But while COVID-19 may have affected people’s livelihoods, the pandemic has aggravated rather than created hardships in Solomon Islands. Outside of the Western province, relatively few participants mention the role of COVID-19 in contributing to or worsening their economic situation. Solomon Islanders speak of present and ongoing financial hardships that have worsened over time, stemming from a lack of development—including infrastructure necessary to bring products to market or improve trade—and paid work opportunities, particularly in rural areas, rather than the virus itself.

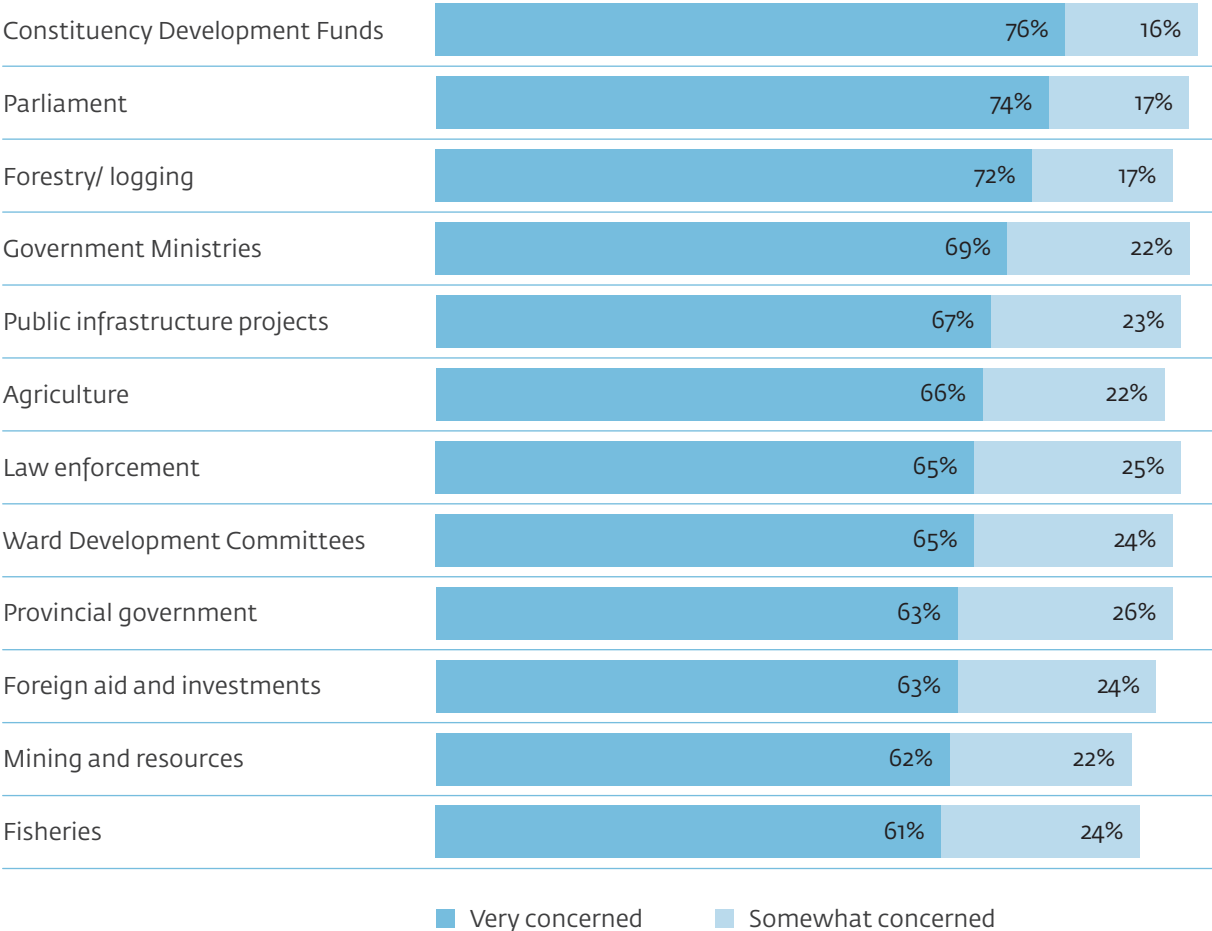
This research not only shows a high level of reliance on the government to provide jobs, but also that people often feel locked out of opportunities to obtain employment on foreign investment projects in sectors like infrastructure and natural resource extraction, because investors tend to hire foreign workers to complete projects. The influx of foreign workers has ripple effects in society—from driving up prices of housing and goods to triggering tensions through behavior seen as disrespectful to the local community. Not only newcomers are seen negatively; businesses owned by members of the local Chinese community—some

of whom have been living in the country for decades—are seen as becoming stronger by expanding into economic sectors traditionally supplied by Solomon Islanders and taking over prime real estate.

### III. 3. Corruption is perceived as getting worse, but there is support for anti-corruption efforts

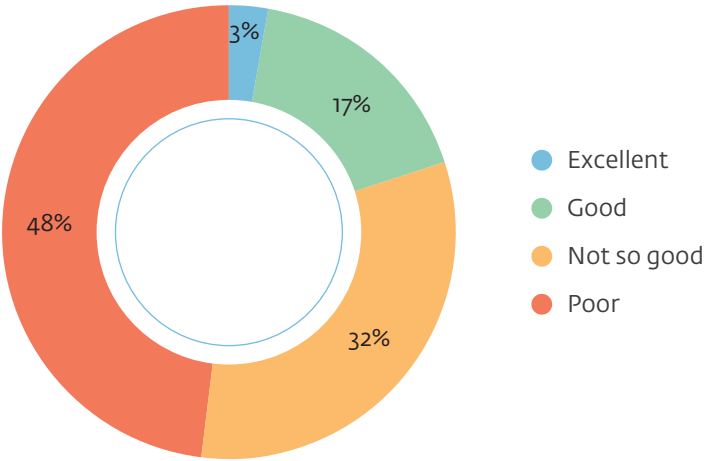
Upwards of roughly nine in ten survey respondents across demographic and geographic subgroups believe corruption has gotten worse in the Solomon Islands, and concerns are significantly higher in Guadalcanal and Honiara. Corruption—defined as bribery or a misuse of public funds—is viewed as pervasive and affecting every area of public life, but views are split when it comes to the origins of corruption. Some focus group participants say that corruption starts at the bottom, and it is everyone’s responsibility to fight it, while for others, corruption starts at the top with the country’s political elite, and trickles down to all levels of government and in all places where influence can be sold for an advantage. Individuals worry that a lack of accountability and checks and balances in governance systems is undermining their democracy. They argue that at its highest levels, corruption impedes the will of the people and the ability of the government to make decisions in the best interests of its citizens. Views of corruption are also gendered, speaking to men and women’s traditional social roles in Solomon Islands.

**Figure 7: “Now I am going to read you a list of different industries and areas of public life in the Solomon Islands. Please tell me how concerned you are about corruption in each sector I read—very concerned, somewhat concerned, a little bit concerned, or not at all concerned...”**



The qualitative research shows that the political elite is viewed as manipulating the system and taking advantage of leadership positions to serve their own interests and those who support them. Some participants say that big political corruption stems from politicians' greed and lack of integrity, as a man from Honiara pointed out: "when we speak of [corruption related to] funding, not only our national government, but other organizations, ministries, or offices that make up our government are to blame." Corruption seems to embed all aspects of public life—across industry sectors, levels of government, and village life. Participants acknowledge a certain social tolerance to "small corruption" and a discrepancy between professed Christian values and the everyday behavior of some individuals, but say that it is the government that brought people into a state of disempowerment so they do whatever they need to in order to feed their families. Some participants seemed resigned to corruption in public life, whose structural and cultural roots seem too deep to address, and describe the phenomenon as being intrinsic to social and political interactions for as long as they can remember. However,

**Figure 8: "How would you rate the job the government of the Solomon Islands is doing fighting corruption?"**



while some say that corruption is "bigger than us" and hard to take on, many across the different focus groups admit that society at large should be blamed for enabling and benefiting from such practices. Finally, some participants—men and women—show a distinct sense of agency and consider that it is everyone's responsibility to address it.

Though points of consensus exist, there are also observable gender differences in how men and women view corruption. Men in this research tend to focus on big, political corruption, which they see as the main obstacle holding back the country. A few participants consider that some international partners—namely China—are exploiting the weaknesses of the government for their own interests; but even so, national politicians should take responsibility to protect their country's interests. In contrast, women participants seem more sensitive to "small," everyday corruption that happens in schools, in the workplace, in hospitals, and at the marketplace, where people "bribe" each other. This suggests that men may be more preoccupied by high-level politics and women are more aware of issues in sectors with which they interact directly, such as education, healthcare, or informal trade, as part of their caretaker roles. A discussion among the women in Honiara illustrates this point:

*"... we are born with corruption. Corruption is practiced by everyone, starting from our home, our communities, provincial level and to the national level. But the scariest one is corruption when it involves money, and nation, people."*

*“...we all know the wantok system, whether a child is performing well or not so well in school, when you have somebody in that system it is a free ticket for them, easy access to obtain scholarship to further study.”*

*“... for example, our hospital, if you wanted to access a quick service you would go through a relative, wantok or a friend. And another example is our public transportation, our buses. The Ministry of Infrastructure and Development (MID) passes all our transport whether private or public. But some of our public transports are paid to be passed even though they do not meet the requirements, that is why some of our public buses look old, seats are broken, and you can tell that it is old by the sound of their engines.”*

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Regardless of gender, participants feel citizens should do more about corruption, so that the next generation can have a better future in Solomon Islands. Women in particular talk about their role in changing the situation by educating their kids so that they grow up “straight,” following the right values.

**Constituency Development Funds (CDFs)—“they only support their voters and not the constituency.”**

Population groups most likely to be “very concerned” about corruption in CDFs include men aged 45 years or older (84 percent) and Honiara residents aged 45 years or older (83 percent); additionally, participants describing themselves as “very concerned” about corruption related to the allocation of CDFs increase with educational attainment: less than primary school (64 percent), primary school (71 percent), secondary school (75 percent), technical or college education (85 percent), university and higher (83 percent).

Solomon Islands’ CDF system is one of the largest in the world and has been criticized for being used as a way to maintain incumbents in power. While there is some recognition of MPs contributing to projects that serve the entire community, such as local transportation, housing, and roads, participants are largely concerned with a lack of fairness and transparency when it comes to how these funds are allocated and spent. Seen as a blaring example of corruption in government, participants believe these funds are spent almost exclusively on candidates’ election supporters rather than all constituents.

Additionally, focus groups participants complain that only a small portion of funding actually reaches the intended beneficiaries. They share stories of MPs using the funds to purchase assets for their own use, such as boats and houses. Also, some MPs are only to be seen in their constituencies around elections—sometimes starting ambitious projects that are never finished—in an effort to obtain votes. In fact, across focus groups, participants mentioned that MPs distribute financial aid, solar panels, and copper to their supporters or church in exchange for votes. There is little public awareness of how these funds should be distributed. Beyond accusations of corruption, people worry their voices are not heard by elected officials (MPs) who fail to engage with local communities and represent their interests in the country’s highest decision-making bodies.

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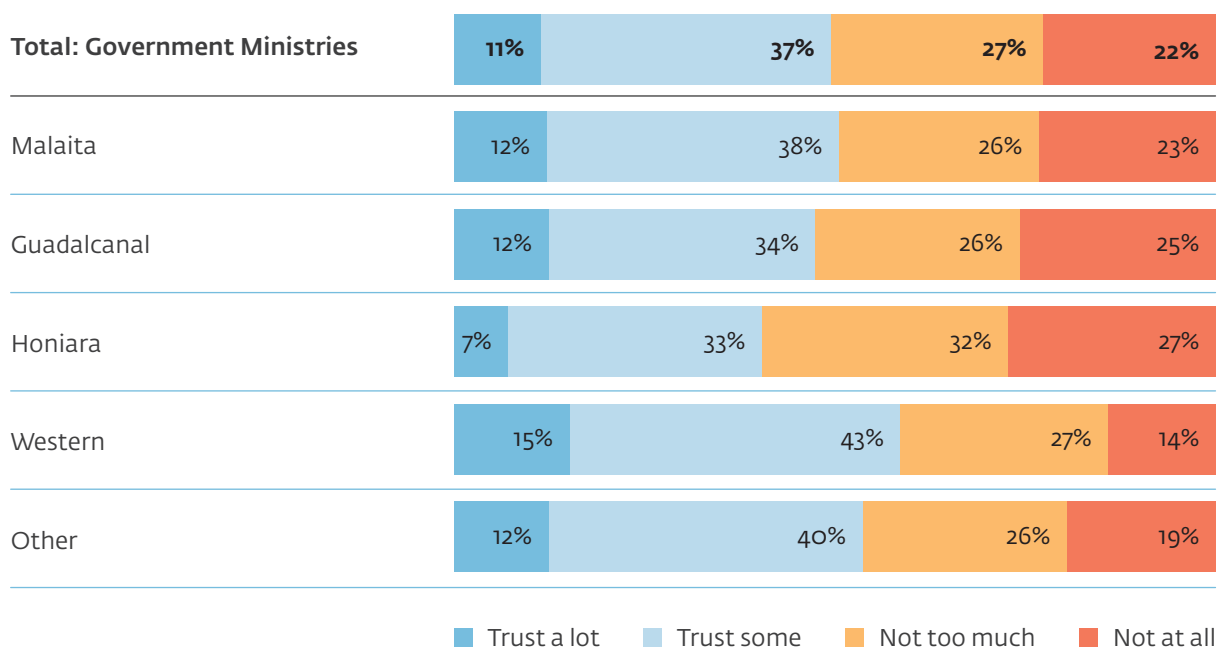
*“I do not know of other constituencies, but our member has provided houses under the housing scheme. I do not want to sound rude but he is a new member, this is his first term, and once you get caught up in the system then there is no going back, as the saying goes. They are also doing maintenance for our roads, so far,*



he is doing well. But—there is always a 'but'—this housing scheme is only given to his voters, I do not know what the problem is, maybe the funding is not enough for the total population and resulting from this there have been complaints made. So, the positive side is he used it on the right things, but on the other hand the distribution is not fair. And it is evident because if we visit his village, all houses built are permanent, and in other villages only two or three houses are permanent and the rest semi-permanent. And another rumor spreading in our constituency is that not the full funding of the housing scheme is spent, only a quarter of it and the rest he used it for his personal assets, namely purchasing a bus. To add on, my mothers' side, the MP only uses these funding's when it is close to elections. Before his term ends, he uses the housing scheme to draw people for his number of voters to increase, this is bribery.”—man from Honiara

**Confidence in government is tenuous, but some hesitate to voice their discontent.** Eleven percent of survey respondents say they trust government ministries “a lot” and 37 percent “trust some,” while a large majority do not trust the Parliament to act in their best interests. Respondents profess familiarity with Ward Development Committees, but opinions of these committees are split down the middle. Freedom of expression and other democratic values are held in high regard by Solomon Islanders, but not all feel they can speak their mind freely and publicly about issues that concern them the most. While many say that they feel free to criticize the government’s performance and lack of progress on addressing corruption, as these are concerns largely shared by those around them, others express concerns that speak to the heart of civic engagement and participatory democracy. Some worry about reprisals in voicing their concerns and would prefer to do so in safe, organized settings, such as with a CSO or within a personal network.

**Figure 9: “I am going to read you a list of institutions and individuals in the Solomon Islands... I would like you to tell me how much you trust each to make decisions about the Solomon Islands that are in the best interests of Solomon Islanders like you.” [Government ministries]**



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*"[W]hen wanting to express or give our concerns to the National or provincial government [...]it will not be us facing the government, but through procedure, it will be an NGO facing the government on our behalf. So, to protect us from the fear of getting arrested or offending the government in a way, one must know the right place to address these issues so we can channel these complaints to the government. And, as women, we must keep our reputation as a mother and a good citizen of Solomon Islands."*

— Woman from Malaita

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Participants also admit that they sometimes mute their criticism against the government out of fear of facing legal consequences or losing their jobs, even for the most benign negative comments made in the workplace or on social media. A man from Honiara shared his experience: "I came across this kind of situation last year; just a post I made on Facebook and it turned out the police came to my house for questioning. We have the freedom to speak, but the only problem is the government knows they have the power and they can manipulate the system." In general, participants also worry that public servants, including law enforcement and whistleblowers, are constrained from speaking out against the government for fear of personal reprisal, which dissuades officials from engaging with anti-corruption measures.

Additionally, reticence to speak up can stem from a fear of a backlash from members of the extended family who might benefit directly from corruption, including illegitimate access to public services or resources. A woman from Honiara noted, "[the] *wantok* system especially in the government [is an issue] because we are indulged by this system. We cannot correct it. If you want to raise something, but he or she is your *wantok*, then you are afraid to raise concerns to responsible authorities, because he is your relative and he will kill you or hate you for doing so."

Finally, a paternalistic culture and a certain reverence to hierarchy, and a sense that one might not have the right or the skills to adequately question the government, led some participants to soften criticism toward their leaders. The government—while it may be corrupt and untrustworthy—is still viewed as a "father" or "a shield" for the nation. A man from Malaita explained, "A house with a family consists of a father, a mother and children, and with the absence of the father, then who will look after the family? And to our country, who will look after us, the citizens, who will sustain our services to help us? But, I will not disagree with what [another participant] said—yes our government is corrupt, but despite corruption we still see the government as our decision maker."

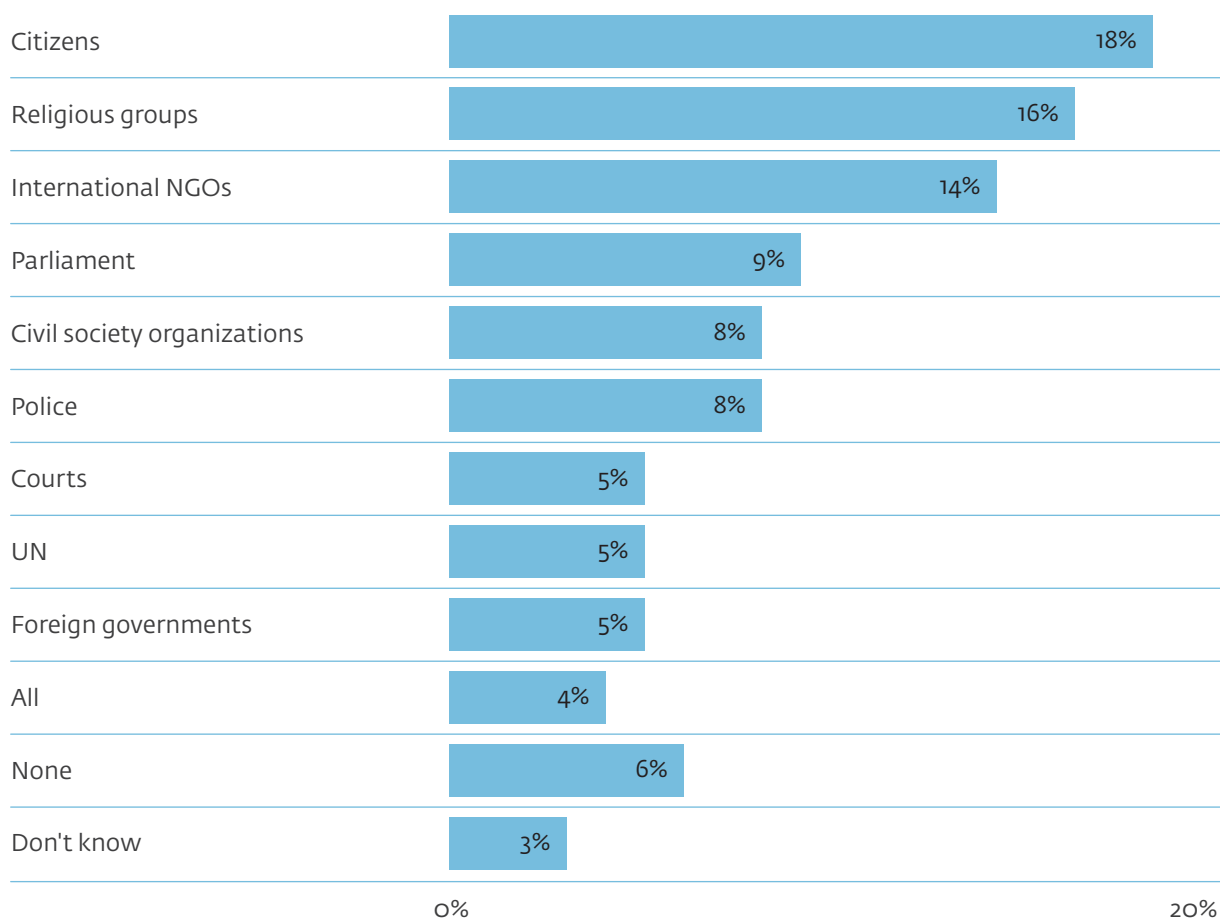
**Strong institutions, independent monitoring, and civic education are needed to effectively fight corruption.** A lack of public policy awareness shows that more work is needed in the context of government transparency and accountability. For instance, focus group discussions revealed that the manner in which natural resources are managed is seen as opaque and detrimental to the interests of Solomon Islanders who, in participants' views, are often left with little monetary benefits and a destroyed environment.

*“Not only does funding have the issue with transparency, our policies are also not transparent. Why I say this is because our country’s policies are made to govern our country and the citizens. Just a thought... Maybe if they were to make a new policy, they should consult a public body, not only in the capital Honiara but also other members from the provinces to comment and agree on the policy intended to be made. Because if a policy is to be made that would affect the people, then the people too should have a say in this.”*

— Man from Honiara

Solomon Islanders speak to some measures instituted to address corruption, including the Anti-Corruption Bill, but describe these measures as in their infancy or as having had little to no effect to date. Some describe the Anti-Corruption Bill as having not been passed yet, which in their view indicates a lack of political will to address the issue. Some participants in Honiara and the Western Province also mention the newly created Independent Commission Against Corruption. There is some question, however, as to how independent and, therefore, effective the commission will be in investigating leaders for wrong-doing or whether politicians will bend the rules to their own benefit. Men in the Honiara focus group also show fa-

**Figure 10: “Who would you trust MOST to monitor government and industries, like logging and fisheries, for corruption or the misuse of public funds?”**



miliarity with and praise the work of the JANUS Task Force, a joint task force between the Royal Solomon Islands Police and the Ministry of Finance and Treasury, in monitoring corruption and bringing high-level officials to justice. Similarly, there is a mix of resignation with the state of affairs, but also calls for more integrity in public office and responsiveness to people's demands. Nevertheless, a strong vein of distrust and disappointment with the government runs through group discussions in relation to perceptions of a lack of transparency and corruption in government, as well as a failure to invest in local communities.

Although there is some recognition that citizens have enabled a corrupt political system, participants across groups feel it is their personal responsibility to "straighten" the country, which aligns with the general affinity Solomon Islanders have with democratic values, particularly around the role the public can play to ensure good governance. This sense of agency should be harnessed and supported by creating opportunities for citizens to engage with the government and anti-corruption institutions, including by increasing public awareness of the mandate of the anti-corruption commission, JANUS, the Ombudsman, and law enforcement institutions. Additionally, establishing mechanisms for citizens to report acts of corruption anonymously and without fear of retribution from the state would create an avenue for effective government oversight. With adequate support, elders, religious leaders, civil society organizations, and an independent media can also act as watchdogs for all levels of the government.

### III.4. Confidence in religious leaders and civil society is high, but economic concerns threaten the social fabric

**Almost unanimous trust in religious leaders and high confidence in CSOs' ability to deliver at the grassroots level drive wide support.** Confronted by a lack of government investment in local communities and/or an inability to address their most pressing concerns, focus group participants reported turning inwards—relying on themselves, their families, and local communities (other villagers, tribal leaders, and church groups) to address issues facing families, with some help from CSOs. Local and international non-governmental organizations play an important role in local communities, stepping in to provide services in the absence of government interventions.

CSOs are generally trusted for their long-term engagement and respected for their efforts across a range of sectors: providing humanitarian assistance; convening the community around different issues; collecting people's grievances; serving as a conduit between citizens and government; and advocating to the government on policy issues and fighting corruption. Assistance to marginalized populations, including children in need, people with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, and at-risk youth, are areas where CSOs have been successful and built a strong reputation. Among humanitarian international organizations, the Red Cross, Save the Children, and World Vision are the most well-known. There is a demand for an increased presence of CSOs on the ground, more awareness, and more sustainable funding, as this discussion among men in Honiara shows:

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*"Red Cross (...) have done many good things in terms of helping the disabilities, taking in those who cannot live the normal life at home, teach them to be literate and many more but then on the other hand there is a*

*weakness I have seen in this organization, and that is lack of awareness around the country. Some families and especially the parents of the family are illiterate and have many excuses when it comes to taking the disabled to the Red Cross. Like in my community I can count that there are three people with disability living amongst us, and every time we tell the parents to take them to Red Cross there will always be an excuse of them having not enough time to take them to Red Cross or afraid that Red Cross will not know how to keep them and I think this is because they are not well educated or not aware of how Red Cross operates. So, to this I think that the Red Cross should do more awareness in communities, near and far. Why I am addressing this is because in my house we have one disabled and whenever we try to convince our mother to take this child to the Red Cross, she will reply saying that Red Cross will not know how to look after her, or treat her and it is best he stays at home because members of house know how to take care of him. So, for the Red Cross to do more awareness is a must."*

*"... awareness is a powerful tool especially when wanting to pass actual information to the public. Because sometimes there is an issue, the only problem is people or individuals will not know what the issue is or what is going on, so this leads to people just living clueless in the communities. So, that is why I say awareness is a good tool to educate people and especially the illiterate."*

*"World Vision has done a lot of great things in our country, for their targeted areas, though in my community I have not seen any of their work, but that is not the point. They have dealt and supported humanitarian issues like disaster, people with disability, and many more. One good example is, recently they funded a program that I attended, they did disaster training and put together response plans for communities to know what to do if there are any natural disasters. It is indeed a good idea, but one problem I see is that, after some time if these training sessions are not done regularly, people will tend to forget what has been taught. That is why they need to put a plan to do visits to the communities every once a month just to remind them again."*

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In Malaita, in particular, women volunteer past examples of large, international NGOs that have operated in their communities in discussions around community service organizations, rather than citing the work of locally run charities. Save the Children and World Vision were mentioned as having been active in these communities post-RAMSI under the auspices of the UNDP and World Bank, in addition to the Red Cross. While many say that international organizations are demonstrating significant, palpable results on the ground, sustainability is an issue for time-bound projects; when these organizations finish their budgets, activities stop, beneficiaries go idle, and good practices, such as maintaining preparedness for disasters, are forgotten.

Church groups and community-based organizations, such as Family Support Organization (Western province) and Safe Place Honiara, are held in high regard for their direct assistance to those who need it most. A woman from Honiara said, "Safe Place is where families or women who have experienced domestic violence at home, can go and seek help, it is where they seek refuge from their partner. A lot of women in my community are safe from their husbands because of this place. The only negative side is some women are still afraid to go there, because they do not want to be judged by society, or the culture barrier that men are superior, but this can be stopped if awareness and society stop judging women that seek help from these places."

A portion of participants call for independent, third-party organizations, including civil society or religious organizations, to monitor corruption in government and hold guilty parties accountable. At least a few participants in every group mentioned Transparency Solomon Islands (TSI) as the leading civil society organization working to hold the government of Solomon Islands accountable. TSI is seen as being instrumental in shedding light on government corruption. TSI benefits from broad name recognition and credibility, but a few participants are disappointed that TSI can't *solve* corruption cases or that appropriate institutions don't act on its findings. A woman in Honiara stressed: "[TSI] is a watchdog for Solomon Islands, they represent us, Solomon Islands, carry our voices, come down to grass root level. As we can see on the talkback show TTV Solomon Island, they create a platform where the voices of citizens are being heard. But yet all these have to reach people that are implementing actions especially on the national level, including the opposition, the backbenchers they are the one to overturn plans, they are the ones representing us all 50 constituencies. Therefore, for TSI, I have so much trust and confidence that it plays a good role for us citizens."

Despite overall positive impressions of CSOs, some don't grasp the importance and impact of advocacy-focused organizations, preferring instead that they deliver services. A few participants also raised concerns that the CSOs' agendas clash with more conservative, traditional gender norms. As one man from Honiara said, "One [organization] I have come across is Save the Children. They go around communities doing awareness and advocacy on teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse and support disability children etc., but on the other hand, one of the negative sides is when they introduce condoms in communities and try to show how to use one. It is not a bad thing but as a country whose cultures are still maintained, it may be offensive or break some cultural beliefs."

**Solomon Islanders praise diversity and harmony, but competition for resources and changing social behaviors threaten the social fabric.** Solomon Islands' economic and development needs are as diverse as they are pressing, and there is broad understanding that foreign investment should be an avenue for the government to receive revenue that can be used to address unmet economic and social needs and ultimately improve people's lives. Focus group participants identify, however, a host of issues related to how some projects are allocated and implemented, and how revenue is then distributed across geographies and demographic groups.

First, there is concern about a lack of transparency and consultation when making decisions on large infrastructure projects, such as the Honiara stadium. These projects are seen as expensive, not aligned with the people's priorities, and potentially requiring expensive maintenance in the future. Additionally, revenues from tuna, timber, and other exports benefit Solomon Islanders comparatively little to the international holding companies and overseas entities that own or are involved in their production. At the same time, the impact of foreign investment projects on communities and the environment drives tensions, as local communities feel taken advantage of.

Some projects are largely seen as disrespecting local laws, people, and nature. In particular, the logging industry is highlighted as an example where the investors' carelessness and the government's corruption meet, angering locals who complain that "deforestation caused by logging and mining are caus-



ing floods, spoiling rivers and the ground itself for gardening. These are the areas and issues which our government should be protecting, our land and trees. But because of the under-the-table deals with loggers, our government has turned a blind eye to this issue." Some complain specifically about logging companies harvesting protected species or under-reporting the volume of harvested trees to avoid paying tax on the full quantity, corrupt practices for which they blame the government and the foreign investors alike.

Some participants are also concerned about the ramifications of foreign investors' increased encroachment on the country's economy, as a man in Honiara said, "they have cut our trees and now they want to dig our grounds; maybe after that they will do sea mining." Sexual harassment, marrying young girls for citizenship, or enabling a market for prostitution are additional side effects of a little regulated industry that fuel tension between foreign companies and the local population.

Discussion among women in the Western province:

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*"Hospitality of people of Western Province, when foreigners visit, we make friends with them easily which is a good thing, but we do not know... A few foreigners have a different mindset toward us, they want to set up businesses. For example, Chinese people marry our girls, so they can have some kind of privilege to set up business, this is all because of our hospitality and friendliness."*

*"We have plenty of resorts that are owned by foreigners as well, they are interested in our islands."*

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Complaints of unfairness in the distribution of foreign investment revenue were present across groups; participants expressed suspicions of inequity stemming from misconduct in the national and local government alike. A man from Honiara explained: "when it comes to sharing, the landowners get just a small portion of the share, the rest goes to the government. I do not see any reason why the government should get the big share, it is not government land, it is customary land. But, then again, the landowners too are corrupt, only the person signing the agreement will benefit from the share, the rest are brushed aside."

Additionally, because people see little benefits in their communities, they assume that other provinces are receiving more than their fair share. For instance, participants from the Western Province think that Guadalcanal benefits more from foreign investments while "only leftovers reach us provinces."

Broken trust between the government and citizens and increased economic difficulties can lead to a loss of confidence in the political system and can affect the social environment, fostering conflict between citizens and the political elite. As the government fails to deliver on everyday needs, people withdraw from the social contract and turn in-group for support when they need it. A sense of unfair distribution of resources can create tension not only between citizens and their government, but also between provinces, within the community, and in the family.

Across provinces and by gender, the *wantok* system is seen ambivalently. On the surface there is appreciation for this informal reciprocity system that can be an effective safety net in the absence of appropriate protection measures provided by the government. But increased economic pressure is putting this traditional system to the test both at the family and society level. For instance, members of the extended family expecting support from a relative who has a stable income may be seen as having little regard to the hardship they might cause the family unit by putting strain on housing, access to food, and ability to pay for children's education. A discussion between Honiara men highlights these pressure points, as shown below.

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*"One of Solomon Islands' bad and common practices (...) is living with extended families. It is also part of our culture, but then, on the other hand, it also does not let a family grow in wealth, standard of living and opportunity."*

*"... yes, it becomes a burden to the family when extended families are living with you because they will rely, depend and survive under you as an employed worker."*

*"... with this fast-growing population, we have limited space for everyone to live in our village. The number of people is bigger than the space in our village, so we live crowded."*

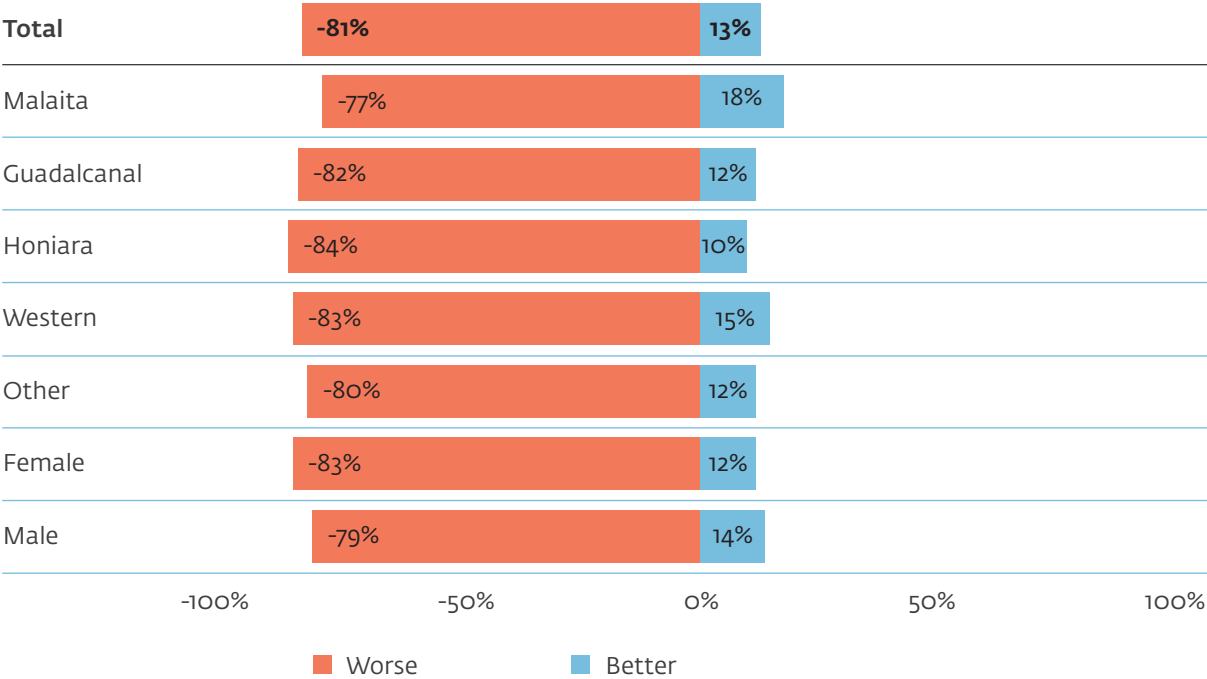
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*Wantok* is seen as even more detrimental when linked to politics, because leaders feel obliged to support their *wantoks*, in exchange for votes and support to maintain power.

**Women and youth are experiencing increased vulnerability.** The research uncovers particular ways in which women and youth are disproportionately affected by the nexus of poverty, violence, and crime. In the context of discussing corruption, some participants adopt a broad definition of the term and explain how moral values are declining in today's Solomon Islands society, against a backdrop of increased poverty and a lack of role models of ethical behavior. Participants of both genders are concerned about the future of the young generation. Increased school fees and the lack of a protection system to keep children in school if families go through social or economic hardship leads to increased drop-out rates. Additionally, even after graduating, youth have few prospects to get a job, and might turn to using drugs or engaging in criminal activity.

To prevent further social decline, some participants speak of the need to educate—read "discipline"—women and youth to get them to conform with social norms. A woman from Malaita explained: "one corruption that can disturb our community is drinking; teenagers nowadays in my community do not have respect for the elders, when they drink alcohol, they get into fights and shoot church buildings. And smoking marijuana in the village is not an issue, because all young boys are practicing this. Because in our village we have a police officer, instead to be a role model to the community, the police show bad examples for the youths, instead for him to act as a leader in the community, he shows bad example, that uniform is to be respected and looked up to, but he is the one drinking and shouting in our community."

**Figure 11:** “Now I am going to read you a list of issues facing the Solomon Islands. Please tell me if you think the issue is getting better or worse in the Solomon Islands.” [Violence against women and girls]



While participants are concerned about boys joining gangs to escape poverty, youth from both genders are vulnerable to turning to prostitution to support their families. According to one man participant from Malaita: “Here in Auki some females turn to prostitution for money, or rely on sex for money, not only in Malaita Auki, but I know all our provinces including our central Honiara have this issue. The age group most affected are young teenagers both girls and boys, and this issue also includes the use of drugs.” In particular, participants in the Malaita and Western Province focus groups expressed concerns with regards to women being forced into marriage or prostitution with foreign workers working in the logging sector.

The research also finds that there is a clash between more progressive and more conservative Solomon Islanders, who lament that some CSOs and increased access to technology, especially social media, promote “Western,” liberal values and behaviors. This is compounded by the stress that some men feel to provide for their families—and their increased demands—in the context of difficulties to find paid work. Evolving social gender roles and women’s aspirations for more rights and freedoms are also viewed by a few men as being in contradiction with local traditions.

*“[I am] coming from a strong cultural background, and I know that each province has their own. Some CSOs advocate women’s rights, which contradicts our culture of how women should be seen. I am not saying it is a bad thing, but this women’s right is making women take advantage of who they are. For example, where I come from, girls are not allowed to consume alcohol within the village area, but if this is seen, our boys have to take into action by having the responsibility to teach them, and by teach, I mean smack them. For us it*

*is alright, but for a CSO this is wrong or illegal. And this suffocates our cultural norms or beliefs which in therefore will be taught and understood by younger generations and our custom will be lost."*

— Man from Malaita

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In contrast, a woman from the Western province noted, "family violence or domestic violence is also a problem in Solomon Island today, many women and children are victims of this act, and it is sad to see this in our communities."

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# IV. Recommendations

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**Recommendations for the international community.** To increase stability and resilience against internal and external pressures, international actors can prioritize projects that lead to increasing the integrity and the performance of the public sector, and diminish internal socio-economic disparities among geographies and ethnicities. To avoid exacerbating geopolitical and pandemic-induced insecurities and conflict dynamics, international partners can conduct a conflict-sensitivity assessment of current and future technical and financial assistance.

- **Support inclusive and effective governance** by encouraging constructive national/subnational government dialogue and cooperation on adopting job-creating measures and strengthening good practices of natural resources management. Leverage trust in the judicial system and law enforcement institutions, as well as the strong public demand to curb corruption, to support programs that strengthen rule of law, including technical and financial assistance to the anti-corruption commission. As the pandemic has exacerbated debt distress levels globally, parliaments have been sidelined during loan approval processes and loans have been disbursed with inadequate anti-corruption provisions.
- **Support inclusion of Solomon Islands in the Open Government Partnership (OGP).** OGP is a unique partnership of governments and civil society organizations that promotes accountable, responsive, and inclusive governance. To qualify for membership, the Solomon Islands Government would have to reform or implement specific accountability and transparency mechanisms around transparency, access to information legislation, public officials' asset disclosure and citizen engagement.
- **Build on the strong trust in religious leaders and civil society** to increase democratic resilience, by improving citizens' understanding of the role of the civil society in overseeing the government and the independent media in investigative reporting. Support and strengthen the capacity of civil society to conduct research and analysis on the use of public resources, advocate for transparency and accountability measures, and inform and support government accountability and reform efforts.
- **Support programs to address violence against women and girls** and other marginalized groups that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Interventions should be multi-pronged in order to address immediate protection needs for victims, such as providing shelters and legal clinics, as well as strengthening advocacy efforts and addressing the effects of harmful masculinity, which perpetuate a culture of discrimination and gender-based violence. This multi-pronged approach is necessary for women to fully participate as equal citizens in all aspects of private and public life, without fear of violence and exclusion.

**Recommendations for the national and subnational governments.** The government is responsible for driving efficient and inclusive development, and ensuring resources are distributed fairly across provinces to build trust and consolidate national identity. All institutions should provide equitable governance and improve social cohesion by engaging the furthest behind through participatory and inclusive decision making.

- **Implement policies and programs that create jobs** for Solomon Islanders first and facilitate equitable development and service provision across provinces. Steps to take in this direction include prioritizing job creation and upskilling the local workforce in foreign investment contracts, as well as engaging local governments to implement better-informed and enhanced service provision. A review of school curricula to align with market needs and increase the employment rates of young people can complement these efforts.
- **Address corruption concerns by increasing transparency and implementing integrity measures** in the use of pandemic relief (including the Economic Stimulus Package and vaccine acquisition), as well as topics such as the foreign debt, infrastructure and natural resources extraction contracts, and procedures for the next general elections. Support the independence and efficacy of the new anti-corruption agency and increase transparency in public contracting. This includes the timely publication of contract-related data in an open format and their publication in centralized platforms, as well as designing explicit rules and protocols for emergencies and ensuring they are enforced. It is also crucial to adequately document public contracting procedures during the crisis and beyond.
- **Increase trust in leaders and institutions, and engage local governments and legislatures** in decision making and implementation. Legislatures are critical for ensuring that policy making reflects public needs, while local governments' responsibility for service delivery makes them essential players in policy decisions. Rebuilding the social contract between state and citizens after it has been disrupted by the pandemic and exploited by violent groups is also key to strengthening social cohesion and preventing renewed violence. Finally, revisiting CDF policies to avoid perpetuating divisive and clientelist practices that maintain the population in a state of dependency on handouts from their MPs should be a priority.
- **Create safe avenues for the public to report corruption anonymously** as part of broader government initiatives to prevent and address cases of corruption. This includes protecting the freedom of expression in public, especially in online settings, to allow the public to serve as an additional layer of oversight without fear of retribution.
- **Strengthen information integrity** through effective communication to reduce vaccine hesitancy due to misinformation. Support efforts to counter misinformation through inclusive and evidence-based trust building and communications strategies. Assistance and vaccine distribution should be structured to support social cohesion by reintroducing a constructive, community-level state presence in combination with strong elements of civil society oversight and citizen feedback to activate the social contract.



**Recommendations for civil society.** Ensuring that government actually works for the public good requires informed, organized, active and peaceful citizen participation. Citizens must, therefore, understand ideas about citizenship, politics and government. They need knowledge to make decisions about policy choices and the proper use of authority, along with the skills to voice their concerns, act collectively and hold public officials. CSOs are a vehicle through which citizens can aggregate their interests, voice their preference and exercise the power necessary to affect sustained change. However, this requires that CSOs learn to work together and play a variety of complementary political roles that include acting as watchdogs, advocates, mobilizers, educators, researchers, infomediaries, and policy analysts.

- **Protect civic space and advocate for freedom of speech.** Civil society organizations and journalists can be an additional check on corruption by speaking on behalf of the public, especially when Solomon Islanders frequently self-censor for fear of retribution. Particularly during emergencies, these groups can help monitor how funds are disbursed and whether aid reaches its intended beneficiaries.
- **Continue to build capacity and engage in political process monitoring.** CSOs interested in government accountability issues should seek support to develop tools to monitor and report on government planning, decision making, and policy implementation. Specifically, developing an increased ability to implement political process monitoring will allow Solomon Islands CSOs to collect, compile and conduct evidence-based analysis on political processes, develop and disseminate findings, and use findings to advocate for and influence reform.
- **Support public education initiatives on transparency and accountability.** CSOs have a crucial role in helping the public understand the substantial personal and societal cost of corruption. In turn, increased knowledge and awareness can help citizens take ownership in the fight against corruption and demand greater government integrity, which can create a virtuous cycle that widens and protects civic space and free expression.
- **Consolidate social cohesion.** Through inter-province cultural and educational exchanges, community work, and volunteering, CSOs can contribute to fostering social trust and a strong national identity by designing programs that aim to increase willingness to cooperate with and help other citizens, develop a sense of belonging to the community and identify as Solomon Islanders. Additionally, civic and political education are key for a broad participation in public and political life, as they can increase the already-present public demand for human rights, government responsiveness, and rule of law, in line with democratic values. At the same time, a new generation of citizens that are aware of their rights and motivated to strengthen democracy and good governance can become tomorrow's reform-minded political leaders.

