

Strategic Analysis Paper

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International Assistance to the Solomon Islands: Is Food and Water Security the Highest Priority?

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Key Points

- While ethnic tensions have calmed, perceptions of unfair and unequal development are still strong in some parts of the country. The fragmented social and political order poses the greatest security threat.
- Food and water security is weak in the Solomon Islands, but due to the history of state breakdown and ethnic violence most development assistance seeks to address a wider range of issues.
- Taiwan engaged in efforts to promote agricultural development in the Solomon Islands for more than 30 years, with only limited success. Those programmes will be discontinued now that Honiara has recognised the People's Republic of China.
- For those reasons, Australia focusses most of its overseas development assistance to the Solomon Islands on programmes that support effective governance, the maintenance of law and order, and economic and human development.

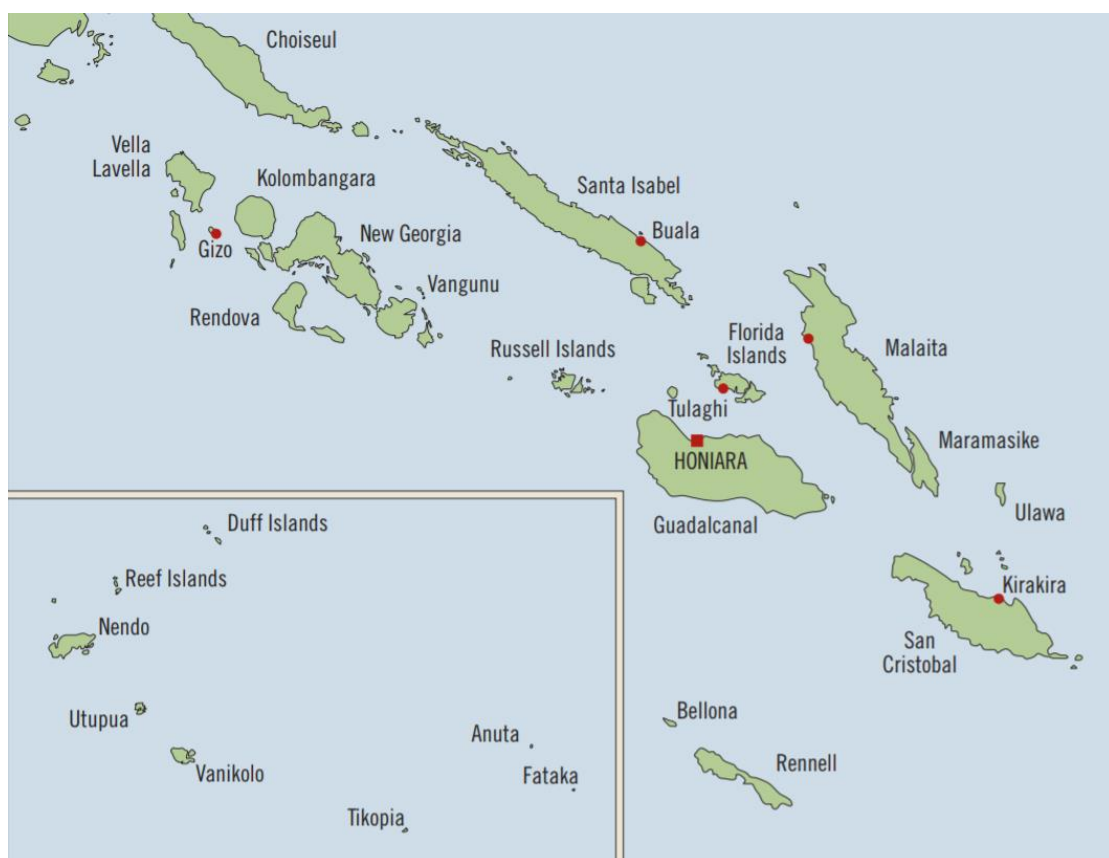
Summary

Food security in the Solomon Islands is supported by subsistence agriculture and food imports. Some foreign donors, such as Taiwan, encouraged the development of a domestic food industry that would reduce the country's reliance on imported food. Despite operating for more than 30 years, however, the Taiwanese Technical Mission failed to establish a strong domestic livestock or cash crop sector. As the Solomon Islands faces numerous

developmental challenges associated with limited economic opportunity, fragile state institutions and widespread inequality, Australia needs to ensure that its developmental assistance is used as effectively and as equitably as possible.

Analysis

The Solomon Islands is the third-largest archipelago in the South Pacific and consists of six large and about 1,000 small islands. The islands are mostly rugged mountains with some low coral atolls. While the larger islands are generally suitable for agriculture, most of the food supply is imported. That reliance on international trade increases food costs and most Solomon Islanders are subsistence farmers who rely on the food grown by themselves or their wider community.



The food supply consists mainly of fish, sweet potato, cassava, yam, taro and other vegetables. It is supplemented with foraged food such as leafy vegetables, nuts, honey and fruit. Most of the population, about [70 per cent](#), is under the age of 34. Formal employment opportunities are sparse and unemployment, particularly among the youth, is high. Almost 80 per cent of the country's export revenue was generated by logging and foreign aid accounts for [12 per cent](#) of foreign reserves.

For the most part, agricultural production is poorly quantified. The Food and Agriculture Organization [states](#) that:

... food production is facing threats from pests and disease, whilst intensification of land use in several areas is leading to soil degradation which now challenges subsistence viability ... [but] the general lack of data on agriculture production and particularly smallholder food production means that a definitive statement on food security is currently not possible.

The Solomon Islands Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAL) [claims](#) that the agricultural sector accounts for 16 per cent of the Solomon Islands gross domestic product and agricultural products account for almost a quarter of export earnings. Palm oil was the [most successful agricultural industry](#) prior to the closure of the Solomon Islands Plantation Limited factory in 2000, as a result of ethnic tension. In 1998, almost 40,000 tonnes of palm oil products were exported. The factory re-opened in 2006 under the ownership of Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil Limited and production has since returned to 30,000 tonnes. Unprocessed timber logs and fish are the main exports.

Timber exports are not sustainable in the long term, however, and agricultural development could provide a better long-term economic strategy for the country. Attempts to develop the agriculture sector have not been successful in the past and, given the other challenges the country faces, it is probably not the best use of development assistance funds.

Imported rice is the main food product consumed in the country and the average Solomon Islander consumes [100 kilograms of rice per year](#), the second-highest amount per capita among the Pacific Islands. Food imports cost about US\$34 million (\$50 million), with rice imports alone accounting for about [60 per cent of food imports](#). Attempts were made to grow rice on large-scale plantations between the 1960s and 1980s, mainly to reduce the cost of imports, but without success.

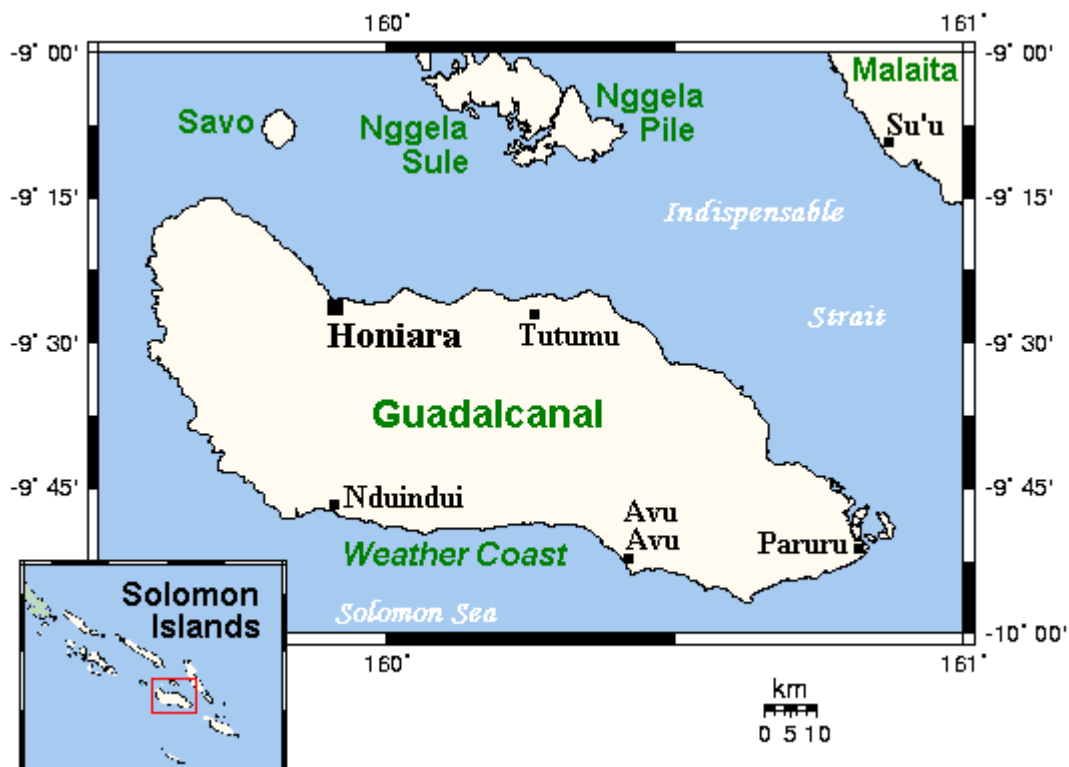
Livestock production is not large enough to meet local demand and meat is imported from Australia, New Zealand and Vanuatu. MAL [suggests](#) that the 'Solomon Islands have the potential to increase its meat production through better animal husbandry and feeding practices, and improved breeds.' Getting access to an affordable and reliable source of livestock feed is one of the main impediments to the further development of the livestock sector.

Taiwan attempted to foster a stronger agricultural sector in the Solomon Islands for most of the 36 years that it shared diplomatic relations with the country. The Taiwanese Technical Mission provided farming materials, livestock and training to Solomon Islanders. The mission, located outside Honiara, served as a base for fruit, rice, vegetable and pig farming experts from Taiwan. The mission aimed to develop the domestic agricultural sector to a point where it could produce enough food to meet demand and, possibly, create new opportunities for food exports. While the mission introduced some new fruit and vegetable varieties, it failed to develop the agricultural sector to the level it had originally planned.

Due to a history of weak governance and ethnic division in the Solomon Islands, development assistance needs to focus on far more than just food and water security. That

diversity has occasionally contributed to significant political instability, most notably from 1998 to 2003.

After the Second World War thousands of people from the island province of Malaita moved to the island of Guadalcanal, where the capital had been established. Malaitans purchased land and gained employment in government institutions, including the police force. The native Guales felt that the Malaitans had no right to their land and formed a militia to force them off it. Those sentiments were particularly present among Guales residing in the less developed southern part of Guadalcanal, known as the Weather Coast. Between 1998 and 2000, [35,000 people](#), mostly Malaitan, were violently evicted from their homes on Guadalcanal. Those sentiments led to a period of escalating civil unrest, known as the Tensions.



By 2000 the country was on the verge of civil war. Malaitans had formed their own militia, the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF), to defend their interests. With the [backing of para-military elements](#) in the police force, the MEF staged a coup d'état against the Solomon Islands Government. The police force was divided and not operating effectively. It was under-resourced and not widely respected. Foreign investment declined, export industries faltered and the government had difficulty funding basic services. The country was [described](#) as 'a failing state ... [that] has virtually ceased to function as a sovereign state, and on its present trajectory there is a high risk that its land and people will become effectively ungoverned.'

At the most fundamental level, the Tensions were driven by rival groups seeking greater access to land, but perceptions of resource scarcity do not fully explain the violence. A lack of effective governance, unequal development, the total disintegration of law and order and ethnic divisions also played a role. There were [significant and deeply entrenched disparities](#)

in development and wealth between north Guadalcanal and the western islands on the one hand, and the Weather Coast, Malaita and the eastern islands on the other. Between 2003 and 2017 more than 7,000 members of the Australian Defence Force, alongside police and military personnel from New Zealand and other Pacific states, were involved in political stabilisation efforts through the Regional Assistance Mission, Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

RAMSI effectively restored the rule of law and concluded in 2017. While the inter-ethnic tensions that led to the social unrest [have calmed](#), the factors that contributed to that unrest remain. A lack of economic opportunity and jobs, perceptions of widespread corruption and limited basic services such as health and education remain major concerns. Members of the Guale community continue to [express views](#) that suggest that:

... it is unfair that their province provides a significant amount of revenue to the national economy from resource developments but receives proportionately much less from the national government in terms of grants and disbursements ... [there is a] perception amongst Guales that their land and resources are being used to develop and benefit “other” people, whilst Guadalcanal and its people are being neglected and forgotten. These sentiments are expressed particularly strongly by Weather Coast people.

Malaitans express [similar concerns](#) about unequal development and an absence of national unity. They ‘bemoan the deliberate neglect and under-development of their island by colonial and postcolonial governments.’ Many Malaitan ex-militants believe that they ‘saved the nation ... [by removing] an incompetent government, a hamstrung police force and the Guale militants.’ Perceptions of unfair and inequitable development are clearly still strong in some communities.

The Solomon Islands was one of 17 countries to officially recognise the Republic of China (Taiwan) instead of the People’s Republic of China. On 16 September 2019, the Solomon Islands parliament voted to [recognise Beijing](#). (Several days later, Kiribati also elected to recognise the PRC instead of Taiwan, leaving Taipei with 15 countries that recognise it as a sovereign state). Taipei immediately closed its embassy, severing the diplomatic relationship that had been sustained for 36 years. China promised to provide US\$500 million (\$730 million) in financial aid. That far surpasses the amount of financial assistance that Taipei provided; between 2011 and 2017, it spent about US\$105 million (\$150 million) in the Solomon Islands. Beijing often under-delivers on its aid promises in the Pacific, however; [between 2011 and 2018](#), for instance, it only dispersed about one-fifth of the aid funds that it had promised.

The Taiwanese aid programme directed its development assistance towards agriculture and health programmes. Those programmes have been terminated. A student scholarship scheme, which allowed Solomon Islanders to study in Taiwan, will also be withdrawn.

China has [reportedly](#) promised to provide funds for constituency development funds (CDFs), which were partially funded by Taiwan. Those funds provide cash to local members of parliament to spend in their electorates and are recognised as having a [low level of](#)

[government oversight](#), compared to similar programmes in other developing countries. The CDF system has been [described](#) as a huge vote-buying scheme. It has been [suggested](#) that about 70 per cent of Taiwanese assistance funds are dispersed through CDFs (although the Taiwanese Deputy Head of Mission in the Solomon Islands has [stated](#) that only one-fifth of those funds are directed to CDFs). It is debatable whether giving cash to local MPs to spend in their electorate is the best use of financial aid, as [there is significant potential for misuse](#). Understandably, ‘MPs and their supporters are often considered to be the strongest advocates, while donors and civil society groups have by and large viewed CDFs as political slush funds that can be detrimental to development. In Solomon Islands, CDFs now make up around [one-third of the development budget](#), or between 10 and 15 per cent of total budget outlays.’ Supporters of the CDF scheme suggest that it is the best way to ensure that the development needs of ordinary Solomon Islanders are met and that funds are equitably dispersed throughout the country.

Most of Beijing’s foreign aid comes in the form of [concessional loans](#) that accrue interest (albeit at low rates) and must be paid back. That has raised concerns that China is using its foreign aid programme as a tool to entrap developing countries in levels of debt that they have no hope of repaying. It is argued that Beijing will then offer to forgive that debt in return for it taking ownership of infrastructure, land or other resources. While the level of debt distress in Pacific Island countries has [increased over the last five years](#), there is no reason to believe that is the result of lending by China (except, perhaps, in the case of Tonga).

It is possible that the level of debt owed to China has been under-reported in the Pacific, as it has been elsewhere. A [report](#) in the *South China Morning Post* suggests that the Maldives agreed to secret loan terms that were not officially reported. If that report is accurate, the Maldives owe the Chinese Government US\$3 billion (\$4.4 billion), not the US\$1.5 billion (\$2.2 billion) that had been widely estimated. As the Solomon Islands did not have a diplomatic relationship with Beijing, it is unlikely that it currently carries a lot of Chinese debt, but the full terms of the agreement that it has made with its new benefactor are not publicly available.

While development assistance could be used to establish a more robust and valuable agriculture industry, it is difficult to justify that when the governance and security situation remains weak. Ethnic tensions have calmed since the early 2000s, but divisions still remain. Most of those divisions are caused by a perception of inequitable development across the country, something that China is unlikely to be aware of or even concerned about. Australia, therefore, must continue to ensure that its developmental assistance to the Solomon Islands is dispersed as equitably and fairly as possible.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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