

The State of Community Media and Community Radio in Solomon Islands

General Country Introduction

Solomon Islands lies northeast of Australia and southwest of Hawaii and comprises 992 islands of which 147 are inhabited. The archipelago covers an area of 461,000 sq km (249,000 sq nautical miles) of which 28,446 sq km (10,938 sq miles) is landmass. The six biggest islands are Choiseul, New Georgia, Santa Isabel, Guadalcanal, Malaita and Makira.

The 2019 National Population and Household Census revealed that as of midnight (Census Night) of 24 November 2019, the country's provisional population count is approximately 721,455. The country's population has increased to over three times the size since independence in 1978. The population is predominantly Melanesian (about 95 per cent), although there are also small Polynesian, Micronesian, Chinese and European communities. There are 63 distinct languages in the country, with numerous local dialects. English is the official language but Solomons' Pijin is the lingua franca for the majority of people.

Solomon Islands follow the Westminster system of democracy with the British Monarch retained as head of state and represented in the country by a Governor-General. The Prime minister, elected by parliament, is the head of government and leads a group of cabinet ministers. The country's 50-seat parliament is perched on a ridge overlooking Honiara city. Parliamentary representation is based on single-member constituencies. For local government purposes, the country is divided into 10 administrative areas of which nine are provinces, administered by elected provincial members and the 10th is the city of Honiara, administered by a city council, headed by a mayor.¹

Solomon Islands is one of the Pacific's poorest countries, with high costs of service delivery due to a small and geographically dispersed population. Today, between 70 to 80 percent of the population live a subsistence form of life in their small villages, settlements and islands away from the main urban centres. This number is expected to erode as people move from rural to urban areas for higher education and employment. The majority of the population (growing at about three per cent per annum) is involved in subsistence/cash crop agriculture, with less than a quarter involved in paid work. Agriculture and raw materials (including logging) accounted for 92 per cent of exports.

Solomon Islands experienced severe economic contraction and stagnation over the period of the ethnic conflict (1998-2003). During the deployment of RAMSI (2003-2017) Solomon Islands had relatively consistent economic growth. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on Solomon Islands economy with GDP growth estimated by International Monetary Fund (5 March, 2021) to have declined to -4.3 per cent, with a pickup in growth to 1.5 per cent projected for 2021. Major constraints to growth and private sector investment remain, including poor infrastructure, under-developed labour skills, high utility costs, land tenure issues, and limited public administration and financial management capacity, which have been exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19.

¹ <https://solomons.gov.sb/government/>

Solomon Islands gained independence from Britain on July 7, 1978. Twenty years later, in 1998, tribal rivalries erupted into armed hostilities on Guadalcanal which prompted Australia and its Pacific Islands neighbours to launch RAMSI, the regional assistance mission to Solomon Islands, in July 2003. Hostilities have ended and the nation is back on track with an elected government in power.

The country's location within the earthquake belt or "Ring of Fire" makes earthquakes a normal occurrence and makes the country extremely vulnerable to the effects and impacts of earthquakes. A major earthquake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale occurred in the Western Province in 2007 causing a major tsunami that affected the Western and Choiseul provinces and causing 52 deaths and scores missing. About 40,000 people were affected.

There are six main islands, Choiseul, New Georgia, Santa Isabel, Malaita, Guadalcanal and Makira, which are characterized by a rugged and mountainous landscape of volcanic origin. Between and beyond the bigger islands are hundreds of smaller volcanic islands and low-lying coral atolls. All of the mountainous islands of volcanic origin are forested with many coastal areas surrounded by fringing reefs and lagoons. More than 300 of the 994 islands are inhabited.

The Solomon Islands are facing increasing poverty and the economic performance of the country is lagging behind other Pacific countries. Together with the lack of environmental sustainability and the vulnerability to climate change and disaster risks, these are key challenges within the islands. The Solomon Islands is considered to be one of the world's fastest urbanizing countries, with an annual urban growth rate of 4.7 percent. This is leading to increased urban poverty and informal settlements with a lack of sanitation and infrastructure. Furthermore, employment rates are low and significant gender inequalities exist in all spheres.

About 95% of the population are Christians. The principal religions are the Church of Melanesia (Anglican) about 25%; Roman Catholic 19%; South Seas Evangelical 17% United Church (Methodist) 11% and Seventh Day Adventist 10%. Other religions have made an impact notably the Baha'I faith, Jehovah's Witness, Assemblies of God and Baptist.²

Status of Human Rights and Freedom of Speech

Political rights and civil liberties are generally respected in the Solomon Islands. There are weaknesses in the rule of law, and corruption remains a serious concern, but recent governments have taken steps to address it.

The Constitution prohibits any laws which would have discriminatory effects, and provides that no person should be treated in a discriminatory manner by anyone acting in an official capacity. Despite constitutional and legal protections, women remain the victims of discrimination in this tradition-based society.

While actual statistical data are scarce, incidents of wife beating and wife abuse appear to be common. In the rare cases that are reported, charges are often dropped by the women before the court appearance or are settled out of court. Police are reluctant to interfere in what they perceive as domestic disputes. In addition, many of the laws benefiting women derive from the British tradition and are viewed by many Solomon Islanders as "foreign laws" not reflective of

² <https://solomons.gov.sb/about-solomon-islands/>

their own customs and traditions. The magistrates' courts deal with physical abuse of women as they would any other assault, although prosecutions are rare.

The law accords women equal legal rights. However, in this traditional society men are dominant, and women are limited to customary family roles. This situation has prevented women from taking more active roles in economic and political life. A shortage of employment opportunities throughout the country has inhibited the entry of women into the workforce.

Freedom of Speech and Freedom of the Press are guaranteed through the Solomon Islands Constitution's Article 12. Freedom of the press is usually respected. While politicians and elites sometimes use legal and extralegal means to intimidate journalists, such incidents have been relatively rare in recent years.

In 2018, the Solomon Islands adopted the Whistleblowers Protection Act, which was expected to facilitate journalistic efforts to report on political corruption. In 2019, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) criticized the use of defamation laws, warning that they intimidated journalists and encouraged self-censorship.³

The national government proposed a ban on Facebook in November, 2020 citing "abusive language" among other concerns. The Solomon Islands' Communication Minister Peter Shanel Agovaka on 17 November 2020 informed that the country's Cabinet had agreed to ban Facebook due to "abusive language against ministers and the prime minister" and "defamation of character".

The ban is yet to come into effect and Agovaka said the government was "in discussion with the operators to work out how this can be done".

Communications Landscape

The Solomon Islands' media industry is a fast-growing one. A unique feature of the media industry in Solomon Islands is youth employment. Solomon Islands has a population with 70 percent of people under the age of 29, and the media industry primarily comprises young people. While this is important for youth employment and contributes to a dynamic industry, 50 percent of media practitioners do not have a higher education qualification.⁴ The media industry often attracts people straight out of high school and the lack of formal education among most media practitioners in Solomon Islands is said to impact on the quality of media.

There are several print newspapers. The government operates a national radio station, and subnational and private radio stations are also available. Subscription television services offer some local content in addition to foreign broadcasts.

Solomon Islands has a number of public and private media broadcasters, and print outlets. The Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) is the state broadcaster and has a reach of over 90 percent of the population via radio. SIBC does not have a television station.

³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/solomon-islands/freedom-world/2020>

⁴ State of Media & Communication Report 2013 – Solomon Islands PACMAS

OneTelevision (One TV), a privately owned station that broadcasts local content, is the first and only TV station in Solomon Islands.

Television

Television is the most limited form of mass media in Solomon Islands in terms of reach. One Television, the country's single local television station, broadcasts a range of local programming, including news six days a week. Other television providers include the church-based Trinity Broadcasting Network that broadcasts in other countries in the region, Solomon Telikom Co. Ltd and a Digital Pay TV, Satsol.

Two main commercial television broadcasters currently operate in the Solomon Islands: Telekom Television Limited and SatSol Limited. One News Limited, has recently been granted a terrestrial television broadcasting license but has yet to commence broadcasting operations. The Seventh Day Adventist Church is licensed to provide free-to-air terrestrial television broadcasting nationally and currently is broadcasting to Honiara and its immediate environs. The Eternity Broadcasting Network is licensed to provide free-to-air and subscription terrestrial television broadcasting and has recently purchased transmitter equipment but is not yet in operation.

Radio

Radio is the medium with the largest reach in Solomon Islands. The vast majority of the people (95 per cent) surveyed in the 2010 Audience Survey commissioned by the Solomon Islands Media Assistance Scheme (SOLMAS) stated that they have access to at least one radio station in their area, with SIBC having the greatest reach. SIBC runs Radio Hapi Isles, Wantok FM (commercial music station) and provincial stations, Radio HapiLagun and Radio Temotu. Paoa FM is the leading commercial radio station run by Solomon Star. ZFM 100, another commercial station, is owned by Commercial XJ6 Co Ltd. Gud Nius Redio, a semi-commercial station, broadcasts religious music and content but produces no local news.



© SIBC

The radio stations in the country include:

Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation – Government

Radio Hapi Isles – Government

Wantok FM – Government

Radio Hapi Lagun (Provincial public broadcaster station) – Government

ZFM – Commercial

Gud Nius FM – Church

Paoa FM – Commercial

Gold Ridge FM – Community

Newspapers

Newspapers are available predominantly in Honiara, and most of the reporting is from around that area. The Solomon Star, published six days per week, is the most established and widely read paper. The Island Sun and the National Express publish five times and three times a week, respectively, and both have a lower print run than the Solomon Star. There is also a Sunday paper, the Sunday Isles, and two monthly papers.

John Lamani and Associates owns the country's largest newspaper, the Solomon Star, and the most popular commercial radio station, Paoa FM. A number of civil society and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) produce content including, for example, Vois Blong Mere Solomons, a women's rights group, and Catholic Communications, which produces regular radio dramas and newsletters.

Some of the newspapers include:

Solomon Star – Commercial

The National Express – Commercial

Island Sun – Commercial

Sunday Isles – Commercial

AgrikalsaNius – Commercial

Voice Katolika – Church

Online and Mobile Media

Mobile phone penetration in 2011 was relatively high at 49.8 subscriptions per 100 people. Internet user rates however are low at 6 per 100 people. Facebook has gained moderate popularity, with women being the majority users. The Solomon Star runs a news website which is updated daily, and SIBC has an online subscription news service. The use of online service is limited due to the high costs involved.⁵

The Solomon Islands media sector is dominated by radio and print. The relative absence of online and mobile media use is notable compared to other Pacific Island countries.

The Media Association of Solomon Islands (MASI), Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) and SOLMAS have been invaluable in capacity building for all media organisations. SOLMAS's short-term up-skilling in specialised areas such as investigative reporting has been valued by the industry.

Media Law and Regulation

The Media legislation is guided by the Broadcasting Act 1976, the Television (Amendment) Act 1996, the Telecommunications Act 2009, and the draft Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation Bill 2003. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are guaranteed through the Solomon Islands Constitution (Article 12).

Telecoms are governed under the Telecommunications Act 1972, and the Ministry of Post and Communications is the regulatory authority. Solomon Telekom Company Limited had an exclusive license as a sole provider, although in 2009 a settlement was made to terminate this monopoly. In 2009, a new Telecommunications Act was introduced which established an independent regulator and allowed competition. The Telecommunications Commission Solomon Islands (TCS) is the regulating body that is responsible for the economic and technical regulation of telecommunications, including the allocation of radio spectrum. SIBC is one of nine State-Owned Enterprises (SOE), and through its governing board is required to complete obligations under the SOE Act, reporting to the Minister for Finance and the Prime Minister.

The Media Association of Solomon Islands (MASI), founded in 1980 aims to provide strong leadership and support to the media industry, stakeholders, and community to empower the media industry to provide up-to-date quality news and information to all Solomon Islanders. The Media Association of Solomon Islands (MASI) has been developing a code of conduct for journalists and media practitioners.

⁵ State of Media & Communication Report 2013 – Solomon Islands PACMAS

Community Broadcasting

The development of community media in the Solomon Islands can be traced back to 2004. There was growing appreciation of the potential role of radio stations in supporting local governance and facilitating greater community participation and accountability. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Isabel Provincial Government (IPG) established eight low-power FM radio stations around the province as part of the Isabel Provincial Development Programme (IPDP).⁶ The aim was to support the growing role of governance institutions in provincial development planning and to improve communication between these institutions and the islanders.

Poor infrastructure has been one of the main factors inhibiting effective two-way communication in the Solomon Islands. The problem is particularly acute in remote and mountainous areas such as Isabel. For that reason, the radio stations were set up in remote villages to allow greater sharing of information and the development of local content by host communities. The People First Network (PFnet) provided high-frequency radio email stations, co-located with the radio stations installed and managed by the IPDP. These facilities became known as community information centres. PFnet was involved in the operation of the email stations until the IPDP initiative ended in December 2007, after which the stations were operated by their local communities.⁷

Ownership of the stations is shared between communities and the provincial government. Village-based committees provide guidance, oversight and support to each community station. Network staff receive professional training from the Regional Media Centre and the Commonwealth of Learning, as well as from the Solomon Islands Development Trust. Local volunteers are trained to record, edit and broadcast digital audio.

The Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC), the national public service radio broadcaster, is a statutory body owned by the Solomon Islands government. It was established in 1976 by the Broadcasting Act. The Broadcasting Act contemplates SIBC engaging in television broadcasting but does not require it to use any specific medium or technology. SIBC's statutory mandate is to broadcast news and current affairs.

The SIBC operates a public service broadcasting station via AM and shortwave frequencies, and a commercial music station, Wantok FM. The AM service carries some commercial content and raises most of the revenue for the Corporation. SIBC operates national station Radio Happy Isles, Wantok FM and provincial station Radio Happy Lagoon.

In the Solomon Islands, Vois Blong Mere ('Women's Voices') is a non-profit community radio organisation broadcasting for the past ten years, focusing on women's voices in all aspects of life. They are social media-based and transcend geographical boundaries.⁸

⁶ <https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/community-based-radio-network-development-and>

⁷ <https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/community-based-radio-network-development-and>

⁸ https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/me/meb/meb03a/meb03a05/mobile_browsing/onePag

Six FM radio broadcasters currently operate in the Solomon Islands including two commercial radio stations – Paoa FM, a commercial radio station owned and operated by Solomon Star Co Ltd. and ZFM 100, a commercial station owned by XJ6 Co Ltd, which also owns ZFM in Fiji.

Gud Nius Redio is a semi-commercial Christian FM station that began operations in May 2004. It is owned by the Honiara Central Church of the South Seas Evangelical Church, Rhema Family Church and the Church of the Living Word. They have formed the Pacific Partners Solomon Islands Association (PPSIA). It broadcasts Christian music, devotions, and religious content has no local news.

Radio Bosco, a youth oriented and educational community FM radio station is operated by the Salesians of Don Bosco in Solomon Islands, Honiara. It was started on the initiative of Fr. Ambrose Pereira when in 1999 he wanted to start a radio service for his parish.⁹

Challenges Faced by Community Radio

One of the major challenges faced by the media is the prevalence of direct government threats. In the Solomon Islands, the then Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare used his parliamentary address to warn of stronger media legislation, stating that without checks on bad reporting, the country risked creating a society with no respect for authority. He vowed to root out government whistleblowers (Singh, 2017). Sogavare's concerns about media breaches aside, the motives behind punitive legislation and their impacts are always questionable from censorship and good governance perspectives.¹⁰

Besides threats from their own government, the media also faces emerging external challenges from beyond their borders, which has come into greater prominence in recent years. This relates to the apparent attempts by some foreign countries and foreign commercial interests to influence local media coverage of certain issues.

In addition to these issues are the other technical issues that hamper the smooth operation of radio stations such as slowness of response from government and budgetary constraints on maintaining and repairing broadcasting facilities. The humid and salty weather on the islands can corrode broadcasting facilities, creating challenges for the network in maintaining its infrastructure in a sustainable way. The provincial government is not strongly committed to maintaining the equipment. When repairs are needed the response can be very slow.

Unstable electricity supply restricts active communication among stations. The unstable supply of electricity and internet connection make it difficult for the stations to connect with each other and share information, particularly in internet-restricted environments. Seven of the eight stations are based in remote rural areas which have no grid power – the stations are solar-powered and can broadcast for only two or three hours each evening. There is little internet access in Isabel and most villages do not have phone coverage.

Lack of local participation and ownership poses another challenge. With the absence of local buy-in or leadership, communities lacked motivation to get the network functioning. Also,

⁹ <https://communitymediasolomons.wordpress.com/about-radio-bosco-2/>

¹⁰ Pacific Journalism Review 26 (1) 2020

volunteering competes with the need of farmers to generate income. The network relies on villagers to volunteer their time. This is a big commitment for subsistence farmers, as volunteering takes them away from activities that generate income for their household. Running the stations solely on the basis of volunteer activity can be challenging.

Furthermore, different local language groups make it difficult to ensure widespread reach. Some of the languages are only spoken in small pockets and by the older generations but most of them are widely spoken in different parts of the island.

Another issue faced by the networks is to remain sustainable in an era in which technologies continually change and develop. This means that, in addition to the costs of maintenance and repair, the network must find the resources to constantly upgrade its equipment. Good mobile connection and the fact that most islanders own a cell phone, suggests that mobile phones could, in future, be utilized as another medium of instruction.

The UN Development Programme (UNDP) is fulfilling an important role in collaborating with the Solomon Islands government in its digital transformation. In 2020, a pilot project was launched to build limitless access to information and communication technologies in Solomon Islands.

“Our fieldwork learned that the biggest challenge people face in provinces is access to information and communication technologies and tools. Often citizens would need to travel long hours to the provincials' capital to request a service,” said Vardon Hoca, UNDP Project Manager, while emphasizing the close collaboration with the Solomon Islands Government.

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