

# Accountability ecosystems political economy analysis

Solomon Islands country study

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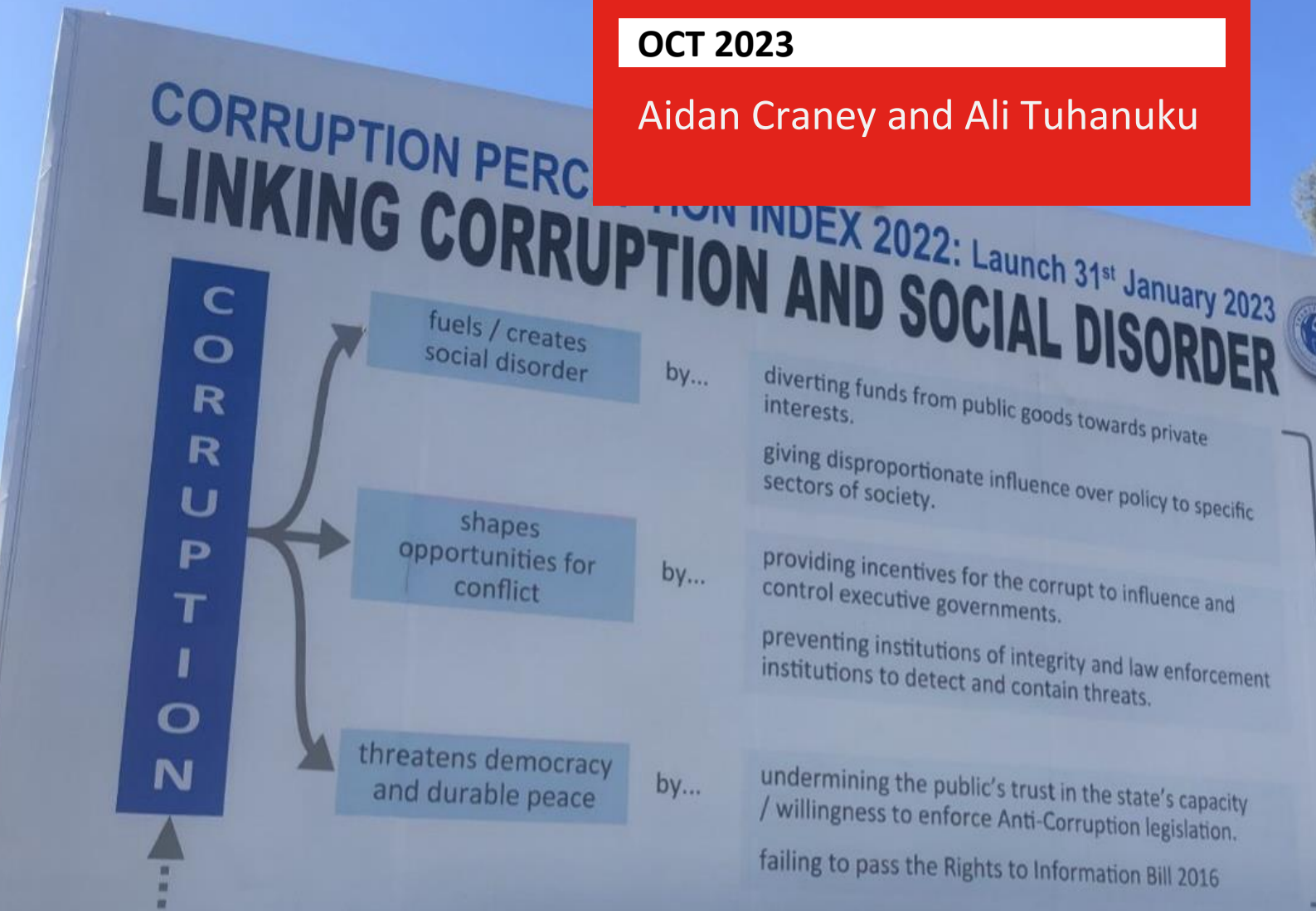


Photo: Prominently displayed outside the National Art Gallery on Honiara's main road, this billboard demonstrates the ubiquity and focus of development discourse, programming and policy making on issues of accountability and anti-corruption in Solomon Islands.



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# Acronyms

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ADB	Asian Development Bank
CDF	Constituency Development Fund
CROP	Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific
DCGA	Democratic Coalition Government for Advancement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HCC	Honiara City Council
IFI	International Financial Institution
LCC	Leadership Code Commission
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OAG	Office of the Auditor General
ODPP	Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions
OoO	Office of the Ombudsman
OPMC	Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet
PRC	People's Republic of China
SICCI	Solomon Islands Chamber of Commerce and Industry
SIICAC	Solomon Islands Independent Commission Against Corruption
TSI	Transparency Solomon Islands
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WB	World Bank

# Executive Summary

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Accountable governance that delivers benefits to the people is a challenge in the Solomon Islands, owing to a highly geographically dispersed population with strong ethnic identities, who have little awareness of and access to centralised and poorly financed accountability institutions. The nature of the political settlement in Solomon Islands means that citizens hold their political leaders to account (through the ballot box) for delivering projects and resources to communities through constituency development funds (CDFs), but not for their wider conduct.

Accountability in Solomon Islands operates at formal and informal levels and, importantly, in spaces where the formal and informal overlap. The formal systems and mechanisms of accountability put in place by the national government are paper strong but practice weak. In part this is due to the consolidation of power within a small group at the apex of politics, limited awareness of accountability institutions and highly constrained budgets for accountability institutions. A further key reason for the weakness of formal accountability is the influence of *kastom* governance – which is often described as an informal institution but in practice also influences the way formal governance operates. *Kastom* systems favour the reinforcement and support of existing relationships over the creation of new ones. For accountability, this means that relationality can play an important role, with everyone understood to be connected to each other through intersecting networks that reinforce interdependence and thus deter malpractice. Conversely, relationality can also work against accountability with that same interconnectedness leading to favourable treatment based on close social connections, which can inhibit people from calling out malpractice for fear of social reprisal.

*Kastom* and the state make up two of the three pillars of Solomon Islands governance, with the Church (broadly conceived) being the third. Where governance clashes exist between the state and *kastom*, people will typically default to *kastom* or a form of Church-based teaching that complements *kastom*. In this sense, the formal state plays a weaker role in the day-to-day lives of Solomon Islanders and the impact of formal accountability mechanisms tied to the state is thus limited. Despite widespread understandings of accountability in a formal, Western-developmental sense amongst government and Honiara-based elites – largely due to the influence of development efforts on public discourse – efforts to address corruption and strengthen accountability and public financial management that do not engage with *kastom* are destined to fail. More clearly, in the provinces, concepts of accountability are more focused on the behaviour of immediate leaders – customary and religious. Accountability of political leaders is not well understood and available accountability mechanisms of the state are almost entirely unknown.

Members of parliament (MPs) are seen to act with impunity in the face of accountability initiatives, often driven by donor organisations. A near-perfect environment exists for such impunity due to:

- Social closeness dissuading citizens from allegations of improper behaviour from local and provincial politicians.
- Physical distance limiting citizens' personal oversight over national politicians, who spend the majority of their time in Honiara away from their constituents, as well as a lack of awareness of formal oversight bodies.
- Poor resourcing of oversight institutions, which have their finances indirectly managed by the MPs that they are intended to provide oversight of.

- MPs having access to large sums of money to establish and maintain patronage networks through legitimate means via CDFs and suspected kickbacks from illegitimate business dealings.

These matters are complicated further still due to Solomon Islands being a large archipelagic country with a widely dispersed, low density population with limited sense of shared national identity. Combined, these factors contribute to a practical distancing of citizens from a sense of civic engagement.

Donor agencies have been supporting accountability efforts in Solomon Islands for decades with little to show for it. With the accountability mechanisms of the country being strong on paper, it is clear that efforts to improve accountability should focus on local understandings of accountability and then work within existing social norms and systems to assist locally relevant and driven accountability systems and processes.

The following recommendations are proposed for those seeking to support stronger accountability in Solomon Islands:

- Support the strengthening of domestic accountability networks. This includes working with integrity institutions and other key figures in the accountability ecosystem, such as Churches, traditional leaders and NGOs, to secure appropriate funding and increase collaboration.
- Increase public engagement aimed at understanding local conceptions of accountability. This includes promoting the work and successes of integrity institutions, particularly outside Honiara. Collaboration on public engagement from integrity institutions offers an opportunity for increased closeness in working relationships between the agencies and cost effectiveness in reaching communities.
- Support local staff to lead initiatives, and train foreign advisors on local ways of being, knowing and doing. This includes giving control to local staff to design and lead accountability initiatives, as well as supporting foreign staff to continually build on their context-specific knowledge of how accountability is understood and operationalised in Solomon Islands.
- Work in the spaces between formal and informal accountability. This includes committing to ongoing reflection on the political economy of the Solomon Islands accountability ecosystem in ways that highlight why initiatives succeed or fail in the presence or absence of strong policies and processes. In this way, informal blockages may be addressed but so, too, can examples of positive initiatives be highlighted, better understood and perhaps expanded.
- Work with the grain when politically necessary. To be politically possible, reform efforts may need to be adjusted to avoid being derailed by the interests of powerful individuals. Such reforms may be more incremental but still deliver accountability benefits.
- Recognise the benefits of supporting more accountable and responsive governance for both donors and recipients. More accountable governance enables better service delivery and stronger social cohesion for Solomon Islanders. For donors, it offers a more stable and prosperous region, influence within the accountability ecosystem and a longer term reputation as a supporter of developmental outcomes for Solomon Islanders, in comparison to more transactional-short term investments. This should not be undervalued.
- Walk the talk on accountability. This includes the creation of two-way accountability mechanisms, where donors openly discuss and report on their own successes, failings and lessons, particularly with integrity institutions and civil society.
- Extend focus beyond Honiara. This includes recognising the great diversity within Solomon Islands and working to ensure accountability efforts are targeted to local needs in ways that are locally relevant across the country.

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# Introduction and methods

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This country report is part of a wider research project looking at Pacific understandings and practices of accountability across the North and South Pacific and how these are shaped by particular contextual histories and current political-economy realities.<sup>1</sup> The aim is to start with how accountability is thought about and practiced locally, by Pacific Islanders, and to identify constraints and opportunities for strengthening accountability from this basis. This is in contrast to externally imposed ideas of accountability and how it should be progressed, which have gained little traction despite many years of often well-intended efforts.

The study uses a political economy analysis methodology to examine how structures, institutions (formal and informal rules) and the power, agency and interests of individuals combine to create both constraints and opportunities for change in accountability practices. Accountability is thought about as an inherently political concept – as privileging particular interests and excluding others. It is also thought about as an ecosystem. That is, there are a wide range of actors that play varying accountability roles – both those formal actors we tend to think about first, such as ombudsmen and anti-corruption commissions, but also others such as the Church, customary governance actors, civil society and the media. It is this entire network (or ‘ecosystem’) that shapes what accountability looks like in a given place and thinking more expansively about who is relevant to accountability opens up potentially new avenues for strengthening accountability (see Denney, Nimbtik and Ford 2023).

In the Solomon Islands case, research was undertaken through a review of relevant academic and grey literature, alongside interviews with accountability ecosystem actors in Honiara (nine interviews and one focus group) in June 2023. Three of these interviewees spoke on the condition of anonymity. In addition, focus group discussions were conducted with eleven rural communities in five provinces – Central, Guadalcanal, Malaita, Makira and Western – with the assistance of the Ministry of Provincial Government and Institutional Strengthening from May – July 2023. While it was not possible to undertake research in all nine provinces, getting beyond the capital of Honiara provides important glimpses of how accountability is thought about and experienced by the majority of Solomon Islanders, as well as documenting differences in perceptions in the capital as compared to the regions.

It is clear from consultations that understandings of state accountability are extremely weak – although there are stronger understandings of accountability of customary and religious leaders that might be drawn upon. Any efforts to support greater accountability in Solomon Islands must therefore consider first and foremost local understandings of accountability and how existing social norms can be drawn on to develop locally relevant accountability practices. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 1 summarises understandings of accountability in Solomon Islands. Section 2 details some of the contextual features that shape how accountability is thought about and practiced. Section 3 considers the formal and informal rules that inform how accountability functions (or does not). Section 4 maps the actors, power and interests of Solomon Islands’ accountability

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<sup>1</sup> Six country studies are taking place in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Tuvalu, with three remaining countries to be selected.

ecosystem. Finally, section 5 synthesises these political economy elements to identify potential constraints and opportunities for change and sets out recommendations. Throughout, images are used to assist in conveying key points of analysis.

# How accountability is understood and practiced in Solomon Islands

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Accountability, in particular financial accountability (relating to use of public funds), is a widely understood concept in Honiara. The widespread understanding of accountability owes considerably to political and developmental discourse on anti-corruption – a prominent theme in political campaigns and development programs. Notably, this awareness of accountability does not extend more broadly throughout Solomon Islands, with interlocutors from rural communities in the provinces sharing that they had little, if any, knowledge of existing formal accountability measures at a national level. In contrast, rural interlocutors had a strong understanding of how accountability can be practiced with local customary and religious leaders, as well as limitations to such accountability.

When discussing accountability in Solomon Islands, particularly in Honiara, people are quick to discuss formal processes and institutions of regulation, oversight and enforcement. They are broadly aware of legislation and the judicial system that should support accountability. Likewise, they know of development initiatives from multilateral organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme, bilateral partners such as Australia and local civil society organisations such as Transparency Solomon Islands. In fact, many people have been participants in workshops and projects run by these organisations (Undisclosed Interview; Focus Group 3). Yet despite high levels of knowledge about formal efforts to support accountability amongst some respondents, few people connected accountability efforts to local practices and ways of being and knowing.

There is widespread belief in Solomon Islands that corruption is endemic. Stories of corrupt practices between politicians, landowners, local businesspeople and the Chinese state and its citizens – who are the targets of the most vicious opprobrium – are commonplace (Craney 2021; Wainwright 2003). This fits with the observations of one interviewee that, ‘There’s a lot of coconut wireless [gossip] rumours’ when it comes to public and private finance decision making (Interview 5). The business community – particularly those with Chinese ties – are often singled out for scorn, but there is a common sentiment that: ‘Everything in the public service is corrupt by nature, that’s the perception’ (Interview 4).

Formal systems of accountability in Solomon Islands are considered to be weak in practice. Multiple explanations are offered that likely compound one another. The first is that the systems of governance in modern-day Solomon Islands continue to mirror those established by colonial forces that do not match with local practices and worldviews (Interview 5). Flowing from this is that upon independence, minimal effort was made by the newly independent government to retain staff who knew and could operate accountability systems, partly through not being able to maintain appropriate financing levels (Interviews 2, 3). Where local and foreign accountability systems collide, preference is given to acts of patronage that echo Big Man leadership systems (Cox 2009; Martin 2007). This parlays with economic



opportunism and uncertainty, centralised bureaucracy with limited outreach capacity and the entrenchment of Constituency Development Funds, which blur the lines between legitimate and illegitimate financial practices from logging practices through to political patronage. Futaiasi (2023) identifies a circularity regarding the effectiveness of formal accountability institutions, whereby the bodies charged with improving accountability are often the same ones seen to be ineffective.

Locally recognised forms of accountability lie outside formal state systems. *Kastom* and the *wantok* system, in particular, are largely unwritten, locally conceptualised and understood social norms and mores that underpin everyday behaviours, including with relation to grievance procedures such as reparations (Vella 2014). The Church, broadly defined, and the teachings of the Bible also have significant influence over people's moral codes, although this is typically in ways that align with *kastom* (McDougall 2009). Consultations in the provinces revealed that while people knew of mechanisms for complaint and redress if their customary or religious leaders did not meet expected behaviours, people did not know of complaint or redress mechanisms for poor behaviour on the part of their political leaders (Multiple Focus Groups). This distinction speaks to the fact that even though state accountability is poorly understood, this does not mean that there are no understandings of or mechanisms for accountability, but that these may exist outside of the formal state system.

## Contextual features shaping accountability

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### GEOGRAPHIC DISTANCE AND ISOLATION

Solomon Islands is a country of over 900 islands, most of which are uninhabited, spread across nine provinces, comprising a multiplicity of language and ethnic groups. The 2019 census projected a population of 721,455 people, dispersed mostly across 6 main island groups (SINSO 2020). The vast majority of the population live in rural communities, with Honiara the only large city, expected to be home to roughly 100,000 by 2025 (SINSO nd). This geography makes delivering government services difficult and poses challenges for social cohesion and developing a shared civic sense of accountability.

The small size and wide distribution of the Solomon Islands population make service delivery administratively and logistically challenging. The vast majority of administrative functions operate from Honiara, even though only approximately 20 per cent of the national population live in the city and its surrounds (SINSO nd). The concentration of services is evident in the placement of public prosecutors, with the Deputy Director of Public Prosecutions noting there are two based in each of Auki and Gizo and over 20 based in Honiara, with no others throughout Solomon Islands. This is contrasted with the decentralisation of health and education services, which are largely the purview of provincial governments. Distributing public servants from other sectors equitably through the country and providing each with the necessary technical and administrative support is not feasible due largely to the costs associated with employing a sufficient number of staff and placing them throughout the low-density populations outside Honiara (Haque et al 2013). Efforts have been made to decentralise some governance and service delivery functions to provincial capitals but this remains a work in progress (Kelly, Woods and Tuhonuku 2015).

## COLONIAL HISTORY

Colonised by the British, Solomon Islands gained independence in 1978. Following independence, Solomon Islands has maintained a Westminster parliamentary and common law system (Corrin Care and Zorn 2005). Pre-colonisation systems that maintained strength through the colonial period and continue today include customary land ownership by indigenous peoples (Kabui 1997) and the Big Man system, where individuals display high levels of influence at local levels through their wealth and social connections (see Sahlins 1963; Martin 2007). The colonial administration imposed forms of accountability based on the British system, meaning that even following independence, Solomon Islands has not organically developed and synthesised formal and informal measures of accountability in ways that have social resonance and local legitimacy. As a result, notions of accountability are highly localised and the relationality and inequitable power dynamics of Big Man politics means that local leaders can often act with little regard for formalised accountability measures.

## LACK OF SHARED NATIONAL IDENTITY

Prior to colonisation, the island, ethnic and language groups that comprise contemporary Solomon Islands had no shared identity. As former prime minister, Solomon Mamaloni (1992:14), famously commented, '[Solomon Islands is a] nation conceived but never born'. To this day, identity for most Solomon Islanders remains firmly attached to their ancestral home islands and villages, with minimal shared civic nationalism (Oakeshott and Allen 2015; Walton 2021), despite a national education system, common *lingua franca* and shared global and popular culture experiences among youth (Jourdan 1995). This makes it difficult to identify national sentiments of accountability that span the country – most respondents think about accountability in relation to their immediate community and leaders, rather than connected to the wider national good. Interestingly, however, these localised views of accountability were strikingly similar across research locations in Solomon Islands.

Rather than holding a shared national identity, the majority of people of Solomon Islands identify with their internal ethnic and linguistic kin through the *wantok* system. The *wantok* system is steeped in notions of reciprocity, cooperation and care for those within your extended kin network shaped by behavioural norms known as *kastom* (Nanau 2018). The focus on within-community help inherent in *wantok* networks can appear as cronyism or even corruption, however is better understood as operating alongside *kastom* as a set of checks and balances widely understood and practiced that does not align neatly with correlates in Western liberal democratic thinking (Brigg 2009).

## RECENT HISTORY OF CIVIL CONFLICT

The social gaps between ethnic and linguistic groups most prominently displayed themselves in the civil conflict that marred Solomon Islands from 1998-2003, known as The Tensions. Largely limited to Honiara and nearby regions, the conflict was ostensibly caused by demands of greater agency from the indigenous Guale people in response to a sense of disenfranchisement vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, particularly those from the neighbouring island of Malaita (Kabutaulaka 2001). The conflict is more accurately described as relating to a prevailing sense of inequality and widespread community dissatisfaction at the distribution of benefits from development than being rooted in deep seated ethnic antagonism (Craney 2021; Wainwright 2003). The law and order-focused Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands quelled the conflict (Dinnen 2012) and everyday peace has returned as the norm, with the exception of occasional small-scale disturbances which have resulted in repeated arson of Honiara's Chinatown. The spectre of conflict influences accountability, particularly in the provinces, with fears of repercussions on personal relationships and even risks to personal safety should people speak up about perceived impropriety (Focus Groups 1, 2, 4, 5, 6). The threats of social disruption and

interpersonal violence are seen to be worse than the threat of poor leadership, so accountability is deprioritised.

## ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY

Although Solomon Islands is a resource-rich country and many of its people successfully supplement their lifestyles through subsistence practices, high levels of poverty. Fewer than one-quarter of the population are in paid employment (DFAT nd) and almost one-quarter of that employed population exist on less than USD1.90 purchasing power parity/day (ADB nd). With logging accounting for 70 percent of the export market (DFAT nd) and contributing 11 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) (ADB 2023), the country is vulnerable to economic shocks. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in GDP declining year on year from 2020-2022 (DFAT nd). Although the pandemic precipitated an exodus of the population from Honiara to home islands and villages, return migration has been visibly increasing since mid-2022. In the wake of the economic downturn associated with Covid-19, the government significantly reigned in spending across all parts of government (Boe 2020), including accountability agencies and thus impacting their ability to play an active role.

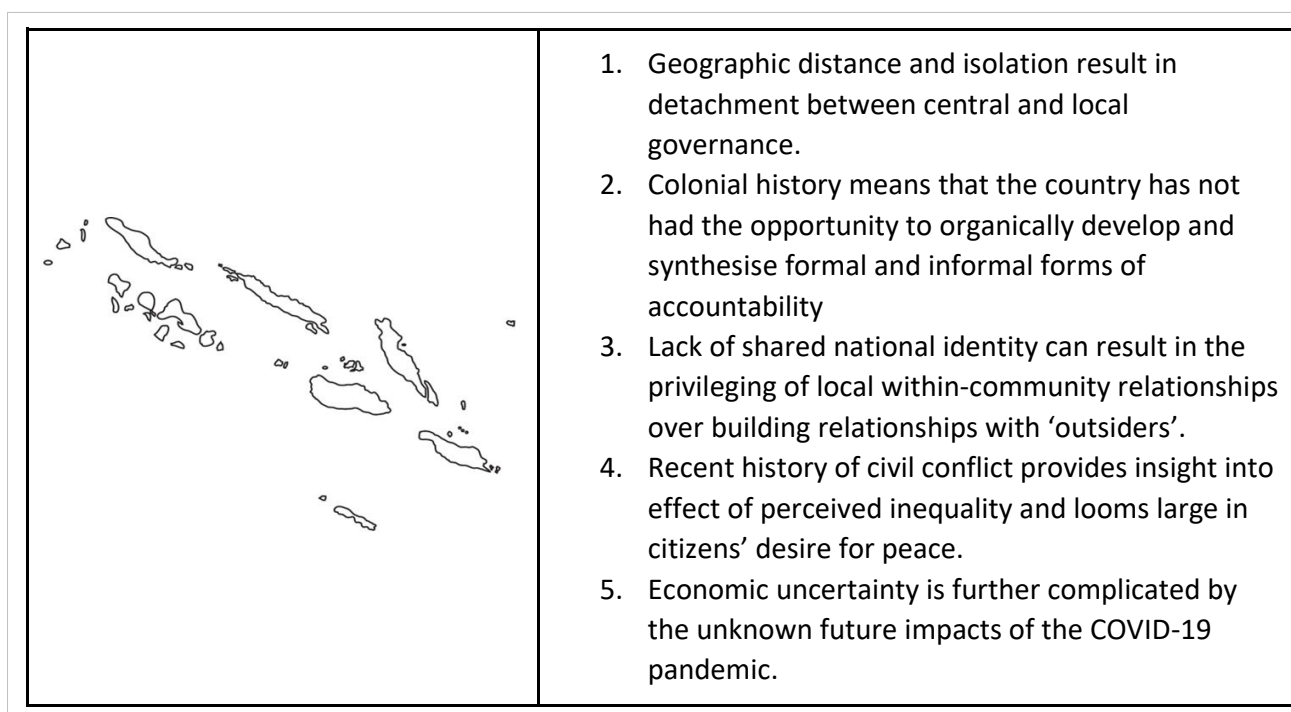


Figure 1 Contextual features shaping accountability in Solomon Islands

## Rules and norms shaping accountability

Understanding how formal and informal rules shape accountability in Solomon Islands requires knowledge of how the nation state was formed. Here, the formal rules refer to the laws, policies and procedures that are often codified or written and publicly agreed that are intended to guide accountability practices, while the informal rules refer to the institutions and ways of working that

shape everyday interactions regarding accountability and are either not codified or not formally responsible for influencing accountability practice. As Leftwich (2007) writes, these can be understood as the ‘rules of the game’ and the ‘games within the rules’, respectively. It should be noted that informal rules can include illegal and unethical activities but this is not to suggest that informal rules are always illegal or unethical – informal norms can both support and deter stronger accountability.

Colonised under British rule, the distinct ethnic, language and cultural groups of Solomon Islands were lumped together with minimal effort to invoke a sense of shared national identity. This has led to political fragmentation, distrust and conflict (see Oakeshott and Allen 2015). Further, the frameworks and institutions of governance that were created during the colonial period have remained or informed new frameworks and institutions, such that they do not always reflect local realities and ways of being, knowing and doing. That is, formal accountability institutions do not reflect the indigenous values, knowledges and customs that regulate everyday norms and behaviours in Solomon Islands. Demonstrating the complex nature of accountability in Solomon Islands is that governance and social influence is shaped by a combination of the state, *kastom* and Christian beliefs and institutions. Complicating matters further is the circular challenge identified by Futaiasi (2023) that addressing challenges to effective state regulation is dependent on the very state bureaucratic capacity that can often be the cause of challenges, whether due to underinvestment, poor fit for context or other reasons.

## **FORMAL RULES AND NORMS SHAPING ACCOUNTABILITY**

### **THE CONSTITUTION**

The Constitution articulates a number of accountability measures relating to the discharge of functions of those holding public office, either as parliamentarians or civil servants. The Constitution strongly discourages conflicts of interest, outlines the leadership code for all public office holders, stipulates the independence of oversight roles such as the Ombudsman and the Auditor General, and defines the role of the Public Service Commission in ensuring due process in appointments of public officers. Some of the provisions have minimal detail regarding their implementation, such as those related to conflicts of interest, whereas others are quite detailed, such as that the Auditor General will audit and publicly table the public accounts ‘of all Ministries, offices, courts and authorities of the Government, of the government of Honiara City and of all provincial governments’ (SI Const. 108:3).

### **LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS ON ACCOUNTABILITY**

Despite the directions of the Constitution, formal accountability is lax in Solomon Islands. This is despite the best efforts of multiple actors across civil society, the public sector and within politics. For example, the Auditor General’s public opinion of 2022 remained yet to be tabled in parliament at time of writing midway through 2023 (multiple interviews), despite having been provided. Further demonstrating the lack of formal oversight and adherence to the Constitution, the Public Expenditure Committee has not met in more than a decade (Interview 3). Thus, while there is a significant accountability architecture elaborated on paper in Solomon Islands – it remains nascent in practice. In part, this is due to a recurrent lack of financing and (both financial and wider) independence (Hayward-Jones 2008; Walton 2020; multiple Interviews). Economic constraints have been compounded by GDP decline caused by COVID-19, which has resulted in a recruitment freeze across the public sector except for in the Productive and Resource Sectors (SIG 2022). Respondents were quick to highlight, however, that financial flows are currently a problem across all parts of government – not just accountability institutions. An historical perspective would thus be important to understand whether accountability

institutions have *always* been starved of funds (when other agencies were not) or whether this is particular to the current economic times.

### Leadership Code Commission

The Leadership Code Commission (LCC) is guided by provisions laid out in the Leadership Code (Further Provisions) Act 1999 and Chapter VIII of the Constitution. Its mandate is to ‘compel members of parliament to provide financial disclosure documents related to their personal and familial financial affairs’ (Hayward-Jones 2008:8). The intention is to increase transparency of elected leaders and public officers, as well as create a system by which transgressions can be investigated and potentially prosecuted. Multiple legislative weaknesses of the LCC have been noted in relation to its ability to achieve its objectives, particularly that the LCC has ‘no capacity to enforce the Commission’s orders against misconduct; it has no power to compel attendance; and it has no power to compel a person to give evidence’ (Clark and Levy 2012:58). Recurrent issues of insufficient funding (Hayward-Jones 2008; Undisclosed Interview), micromanagement from OPMC and the Ministry of Finance (Undisclosed Interview), and lack of social resonance with communities outside Honiara (multiple Focus Groups) have further limited the effectiveness of the LCC.

### Office of the Auditor General

The Office of the Auditor General (OAG) is required to ‘examine, audit and report to Parliament once every year on the public accounts of the State, the control of public money and public property of the State and all transactions with or concerning the public money or public property of the State’ (OAG nd). The OAG does not have specific powers to compel evidence provision, however the Constitution states that ‘nothing... should prevent’ the OAG from undertaking its functions (Clark and Levy 2012:56). Clark and Levy (2012) note that the OAG has historically been under-resourced – an issue that continues (Undisclosed Interview) – and that when it does provide appropriate auditing it is stymied by a lack of follow up regarding recommendations made to auditee agencies, the Public Accounts Committee or the Parliament (2012:57). Similar to the LCC, the OAG is also hampered in its duties by micromanagement from OPMC and the Ministry of Finance (Undisclosed Interview), and lack of social resonance with communities outside Honiara (multiple Focus Groups). On reviewing the role of the OAG, Clark and Levy (2012:58) noted common concerns ‘about the ongoing corruption of public servants and ministers and the absence of law to prevent it’. Again, these issues appear to persist.

### Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions

The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP) has three primary responsibilities: criminal prosecution (including of fraud and corruption), provision of legal advice and community awareness and education. Limiting the effectiveness of the ODPP is its heavy centralisation in Honiara, where more than 20 public prosecutors are located, in contrast with only 2 in each of Auki and Gizo servicing the remainder of the population (Undisclosed Interview). The ODPP regularly prosecutes public figures, with more than five such cases commencing in the first half of 2023 (Undisclosed Interview). Although pressure to expedite cases can be made from the public or to close cases from people of power – through phone calls, ‘incidental’ meetings or third parties – a rigorous process of internal checks and balances, with all work being peer reviewed, assists the office in maintaining integrity (Undisclosed interview). In a sign of accountability, the ODPP has a publicly available Prosecution Process (ODPP 2022), which outlines broad standards for investigating and prosecuting cases, as well as information regarding sentencing, appeals and advise to external agencies. The internal and public-facing accountability measures that the ODPP demonstrate how processes for accountability can be built into integrity institutions. As with other agencies, issues of insufficient funding,

micromanagement from OPMC and the Ministry of Finance (Undisclosed Interview), and lack of social resonance with communities outside Honiara (multiple Focus Groups) are reported to constrain its effectiveness.

### Office of the Ombudsman

The Office of the Ombudsman (OoO) provides oversight and arranges investigation regarding the administrative conduct of public bodies. The Ombudsman Act has significant provisions to assist in the work of the OoO, most notably the ability for citizens to make complaints orally – making the process accessible to those who are illiterate – and threats of fines and imprisonment for refusal to cooperate with OoO investigations (Matthews and Walton 2018). As with other agencies, recurrent issues of insufficient funding (Hayward-Jones 2008; Walton 2020; Undisclosed Interview), micromanagement from OPMC and the Ministry of Finance (Undisclosed Interview), and lack of social resonance with communities outside Honiara (multiple Focus Groups) have limited the effectiveness of the OoO.

### Solomon Islands Independent Commission Against Corruption

The newest accountability agency, the Solomon Islands Independent Commission Against Corruption (SIICAC) was established through the passing of the Anti-Corruption Act 2018. SIICAC is tasked with preventing, investigating and prosecuting corruption, with prosecution facilitated by the ODPP (Walton 2020). Although it has only been operational for a short period of time, like other accountability agencies, issues of insufficient funding, micromanagement from OPMC and the Ministry of Finance (Undisclosed Interview), and lack of social resonance with communities outside Honiara (multiple Focus Groups) are reported to constrain its effectiveness.

Walton's (2020) research on the establishment of SIICAC highlights the ways that those involved were able to build support from MPs and other key figures by redrafting the bill so it would not apply retroactively and not be focused on addressing corruption associated with CDFs. This approach to thinking and working politically to build collective support for the implementation of a new body and bill of oversight suggests that working with key actors, including those who may be perceived as possible impeders to or transgressors of accountability functions, is pivotal to altering the legislative and practical accountability ecosystem in Solomon Islands. Policy and programming settings can be improved by coopting the political will of stakeholders who may otherwise feel threatened by change by identifying strategies to remove specific areas of threat. It does, however, also suggest that working 'with the grain' of political interests can reinforce existing power structures in ways that make them difficult to hold to account.

### CONSTITUENCY DEVELOPMENT FUNDS

The most definitive feature of the Solomon Islands state in comparison with regional counterparts relates to the size and influence of its CDFs. CDFs are discretionary funds provided to individual MPs on the supposition that the money will be more directly spent on local community needs (Aman and Murti 2022). CDFs constitute somewhere between 10 and 15 per cent of the Solomon Islands annual budget (Wiltshire and Batley 2018). This amount is magnitudes larger than most other Pacific countries that include CDFs in their budgets, such as Tonga, where CDFs constitute a much smaller fraction of the national budget (OLA 2019) and Vanuatu.<sup>2</sup> CDFs have been criticised for allowing MPs to practice patronage and engage in small- and large-scale funding with no oversight (Batley 2015; Cox 2009). This

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<sup>2</sup> Although it should be noted that the proportion of budget dedicated to CDFs in Solomon Islands is comparable with Papua New Guinea (Wiltshire and Batley 2018).

view was shared by one of our interlocutors, who felt that CDFs contribute to a political culture marked by ‘a vote-buying approach’ where ‘handout mentality is the name of the game’ (Interview 1). Nonetheless, CDFs are popular in Solomon Islands because they deliver funds directly to communities and community projects. Political economic analyses suggest that they are likely to remain an enduring feature and so efforts should focus on working within the system they operate in, rather than naively attempting to remove them (Abt Associates 2020; see also Haque, Knight and Jayasuriya 2015; Haque 2018). Early research on positive examples of CDFs in Solomon Islands points to some potential avenues for working with the reality of CDFs but in ways that help deliver improved outcomes for Solomon Islanders (Mcloughlin et al forthcoming). In some ways, CDFs promote a strong degree of accountability between communities and MPs – if communities feel their MPs do not deliver for them through use of CDFs for community priorities, they can be voted out. But outside the electoral system, there are few accountability mechanisms for CDFs or other public finance or governance practices. Reflecting on research undertaken across multiple elections in Solomon Islands, Wood (2020) finds that CDFs both promote positive direct engagement between MPs and their constituents *and* legitimise patronage. CDFs can thus be seen to play an ambivalent role in the promotion of accountability in Solomon Islands – with both positive and negative examples apparent.

## **INFORMAL RULES AND NORMS SHAPING ACCOUNTABILITY**

### **RENT SEEKING AND POLITICAL-BUSINESS TIES**

A key feature of the accountability ecosystem of Solomon Islands is the logging industry and how its profits are shared. Logging dwarves all other export industries in the country, accounting for 70 percent of export income (DFAT nd) and 11 percent of GDP in 2021 (ADB 2023) – which, notably, is significantly lower than in previous years due to Covid-19. The logging industry is poorly regulated and recognised to have historically been privy to high levels of illegal activity and corruption through a lack of regulation and enforcement that remain unresolved (Dauvergne 1998; Global Witness 2018). Adding to the seeming intractability of better regulation are the challenges associated with economic uncertainty meaning that local landowners are often willing to sign agreements with logging companies due to the royalties they stand to receive, even if they are concerned about longer term social and economic impacts (Katovai et al 2015). As Allen et al (2013) report, locations where logging has occurred or is occurring are also more likely to experience localised civil tensions. Through their financial might, logging companies are suspected of providing direct, ‘under the table’ payments to politicians and key bureaucrats to bypass or override regulatory checks and balances. Further, by creating financial dependency from local landowner groups, they minimise the likelihood of nefarious activity being reported (Interview 2; Focus Group 2).

It should be noted that such influence is not limited to logging companies. Mining operations, such as Gold Ridge, have been plagued by numerous corruption scandals (Porter and Allen 2015) and Transparency Solomon Islands CEO, Ruth Liloqula, has stated the “Ministry of Mines is corrupt. I know because I have worked with it” (cited in Allen 2018:107). Allegations of corruption through illicit political donations to senior ministers, including the prime minister, have also been levelled against Huawei regarding the construction of an undersea internet cable even though these have been denied (Foukona 2018). These ties between business and politicians further erode accountable governance and the lack of action from accountability institutions on these matters is telling, as is the political disinterest in stronger regulation.

## THE WANTOK SYSTEM AND KASTOM

The *wantok* and *kastom* systems favour the reinforcement and support of existing relationships over the creation of new ones. For accountability, this means that a sense of obligation exists whereby individuals support the elevation of their own *wantok* to positions of authority – political, bureaucratic or otherwise – and, inversely, that when individuals reach these positions they are expected to create opportunities and bestow benefits for their *wantok* individually and collectively (Nanau 2018). When this results in material benefits or circumventing processes for individuals to gain employment, for example, the line between social obligation and corruption is blurred (see Walton 2020). Where governance clashes exist between state, Church and *kastom*, people will typically default to *kastom* or a form of Church-based teaching that complements *kastom*. This is particularly evident in dispute resolution, where citizens favour symbolic reparations that repair relationships to engaging in judicial proceedings (Vella 2014). Challengingly, the social closeness that the *wantok* system creates can hamper accountability by discouraging people from calling out illegal behaviour if it does not contravene social norms so as not to negatively impact their kin, while the same social closeness can act to limit socially improper behaviour that offends community sensibilities in regard to social norms such as those covered by *kastom*.

## INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY AND CHURCHES

Christian faith is widespread throughout Solomon Islands.<sup>3</sup> Although other religions are followed, Christianity and Christian churches – from small village buildings to large city-based cathedrals – are a core feature of governance systems in Solomon Islands (Cox and Morrison 2004; Moore 2008). As Joseph and Beu (2008:1) note, with particular reference to Solomon Islands: ‘the Western separation of religion and daily life, and subsequently the separation of Church and State, are not features of Melanesian culture’. This was reinforced in our interviews, with citizens often seeing their Church as the most legitimate form of organised governance as they are the ‘only institution on the ground for them’ (Interview 1). This is buttressed by the Churches having strong and close network ties to communities across the country, unlike institutions of state, which are disconnected and where the MP is seen as the (almost) sole representative (Interview 1). The prevalence of Christianity influences people’s everyday lives by providing a moral code by which people are theoretically expected to live that aligns with customary systems, such as *kastom* and *wantok*, such as to ‘love thy neighbour’. In reality, the influence of Christianity is more discursive than practical, although Church leaders and communities have legitimacy to question and provoke reflection from individuals around behaviours that are seen to be antisocial, negative and/or not in alignment with the teachings of the Bible.

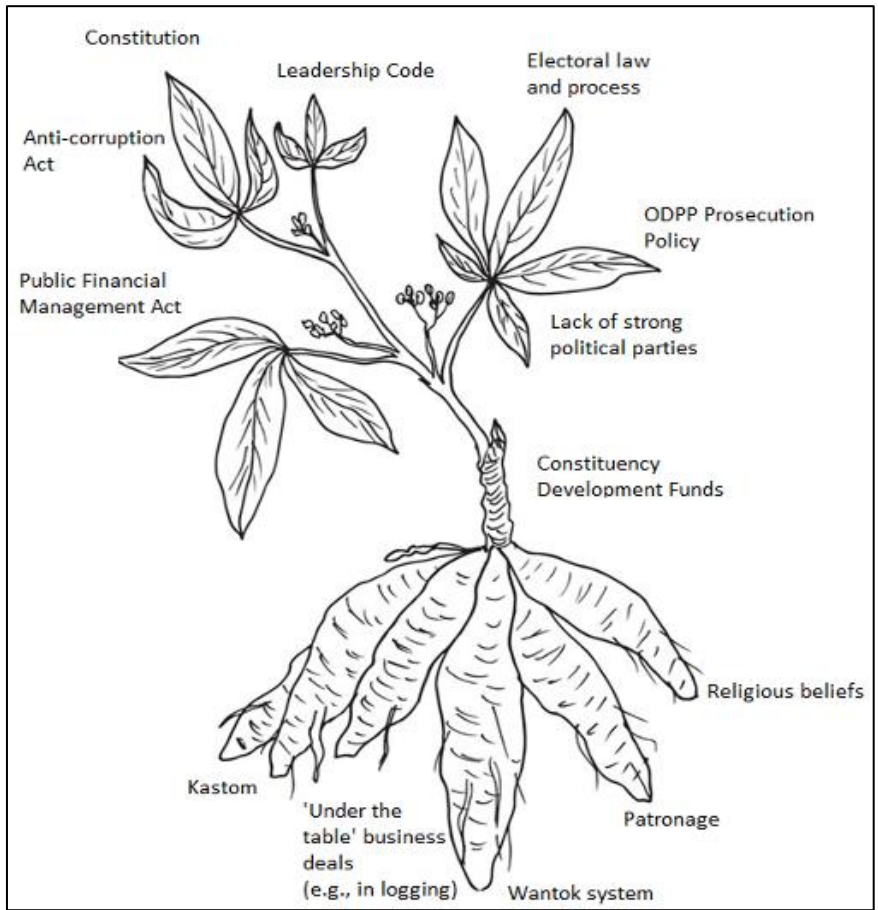
## HIGHLY PERSONALISED POLITICS WITH WEAK PARTY SYSTEM

It should also be noted that Solomon Islands politics operates in the practical absence of political parties, with independent politicians changing allegiances rapidly (Wood 2020), removing the possibility of political party machinery providing any accountability checks and balances. The existence of such ‘thinness’ in political allegiances (Gregg 2003) indicates that efforts at reform need to identify and work within other factors and characteristics that people of influence are more committed to.

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<sup>3</sup> Figures from the 2019 Census are yet to be released, but previous estimates of the prevalence of Christianity have been as high as 98 percent (McDougall 2009).





**Figure 2 Solomon Islands' formal and informal 'accountability casava plant'**

# People, power, interests and relationships shaping accountability

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Seven broad groups of actors were identified as contributing directly or indirectly to the Solomon Islands accountability ecosystem. These are: parliament and government bodies<sup>4</sup> (including key sector ministries),<sup>5</sup> government-established accountability entities and committees,<sup>6</sup> customary systems, civil society, bilateral and multilateral institutions, business and the citizenry. Theoretically, the accountability links are quite straightforward, with MPs answerable to the citizenry while being independently overseen by the integrity institutions, key sector ministries reporting to the parliament, with business and civil society providing outside influence on parliament and the citizenry, while donors offer technical and financial resources to various actors to support accountability processes and outcomes. Unsurprisingly, there is significant diversity within these actor groups, as well as complexity in the relationships between them. The range of actors in Solomon Islands that play accountability functions at various levels are summarised in the table below.

Interviews with actors within the accountability ecosystem revealed that there is little pressure on people holding public office to improve accountability from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Despite decades of donor interventions from multilateral and bilateral partners in the accountability space, minimal positive change has been witnessed (Interviews 2 and 4). Meanwhile, there is minimal pressure applied from the citizenry despite widespread perceptions of inequality and corruption (Craney 2021; Roughan 2004; Transparency International 2020; nd). The lack of bottom-up pressure can be attributed to a combination of some citizens seeing accountability in localised forms of *wantok* and *kastom* and/or through narrow terms favourable to them through provision of favours via CDFs (Abt Associates 2020; Cox 2009; Wiltshire and Batley 2018; Wood 2020), as well as a lack of awareness and knowledge about the existence of centralised accountability functions.

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<sup>4</sup> Comprising of the Government (separately including cabinet) and Opposition.

<sup>5</sup> Most notably, the Office of Prime Minister and cabinet, and the Ministry of Finance.

<sup>6</sup> Comprising the Solomon Islands Independent Commission Against Corruption (SIICAC), the Leadership Code Commission, and the Offices of the Auditor General, Department of Public Prosecutions and Ombudsman.

**Table 1: Accountability actors in Solomon Islands**

	Actors	Roles	Power Relationships
<b>Parliament and government bodies</b>	OPMC/Cabinet	The lead Office and coordinating Ministry of Government in the Solomon Islands.  In addition to the Constitutional functions and roles, the Office of the Prime Minister forms the apex of the Public Service in terms of coordinating, managing and monitoring the implementation of Government policies and programmes.	Wields strong influence over ministries, permanent secretaries, integrity institutions and policy decision making.  Weakly influenced by constituents and integrity institutions. Reported to be strongly influenced by business interests and the PRC.
	Government	Majority coalition of individual MPs supporting individuals in key parliamentary roles and sharing a broad vision of public policy and programming priorities.	
	Ministry of Finance	Key ministry responsible for providing strategic advice, leadership and reporting on economic reforms, monetary, budget and fiscal policy to the Solomon Islands Government. Across the public service, the Ministry is responsible for financial reporting, and preparing and managing the annual recurrent budget.	Strongly influenced by OPMC and government.  Holds strong influence over government bodies, including integrity institutions, through provision of financial and technical resources.
	Opposition	Collective of individual MPs providing oversight of and alternatives to government initiatives through the parliament and public engagement.	Wields minimal influence over decision making and institutions. Influenced to varying degrees by constituents and business interests, largely reflective of individual MPs' interests. Weak party agendas.
<b>Government-Established Entities of Solomon Islands</b>	Ombudsman	Constitutionally enshrined body responsible for enquiring into any conduct on the part of any Government agency and into any defects in any law or administrative practice, its leaders and companies wholly or partially owned by the Solomon Islands Government.	Strongly influenced by OPMC and Ministry of Finance through micro-management, including control over finances and human resources. Paper influence over Parliament and Cabinet.
	Auditor General	Constitutionally enshrined body responsible for providing audit service to the government and the people of Solomon Islands.	Weak actual influence over Parliament and Cabinet.
	Public Prosecutor	Responsible to maintain a safe and just Solomon Islands supported by a constitutionally independent public	

		prosecutions service under the rule of law to deliver an independent, fair and effective prosecution service.	
	Public Service Commission	Constitutionally enshrined body responsible to appoint, confirm appointments, remove and discipline public officers.	
<b>Government – Committee</b>	Solomon Islands Independent Commission Against Corruption	Independent body tasked with preventing, investigating and prosecuting cases of corruption.	Strongly influenced by OPMC and Ministry of Finance. Paper influence over Parliament and Cabinet. Weak actual influence over Parliament and Cabinet.
	Leadership Code Commission Solomon Islands	Independent body responsible for investigating allegations of misconduct in office by Leaders, managing and maintaining a register of Leaders’ interest (Financial and Non-financial interest), and assisting Leaders to comply with their duties under the Leadership Code and promote good governance, accountability and transparency.	
<b>Traditional systems</b>	Chiefs <sup>7</sup>	Locally recognised leaders established through ancestry and service provision.	Strong influence over everyday actions of citizens, traditional institutions, formal institutions. Some influence over everyday functioning of MPs and within ministries but on a personalised basis.
	Big Men	Locally recognised leaders established through service provision and patronage.	
	Christian churches	Cross-denominational parishes ranging from local village churches to Honiara-based cathedrals.	

<sup>7</sup> NB: In different communities through Solomon Islands, traditional leaders such as chiefs and big men are established and wield authority in different ways.

<b>Civil Society</b>	Transparency Solomon Islands	Local chapter formed in 2003. TSI is a not-for-profit organisation committed to fighting corruption and promoting transparency, accountability and good governance in Solomon Islands.	Some influence over MPs and key sector ministries through personal relationships of CEO.
	Development Services Exchange	National NGO umbrella body in the Solomon Islands established in 1984 to facilitate and coordinate development services for NGOs and their partners.	Minimal influence over MPs and ministries.  Strategy and ambition strongly influenced by members.  Many member NGOs reliant on donor funding but unclear to what extent organisations are influenced by donors.
	Solomon Islands Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Peak representative organisation for the private sector in Solomon Islands.	Some influence over MPs and key sector ministries.  Strategy and ambition strongly influenced by members.
<b>Bilateral and multilateral relationships</b>	United Nations agencies	Provide funding and technical assistance to the government in support of developmental objectives.	Wield limited influence over decision making and policy planning from parliament, government, OPMC and other key ministries.  Perceived to be minimally influenced by or accountable to citizens and parliament.
	International financial institutions	Provide funding and technical assistance to the government in support of developmental objectives.	
	CROP agencies	Provide technical, administrative, legal, logistical, policy and programming support and oversight to member states through various bodies.	
	Bilateral donors (excluding PRC)	Bilateral development, defence, diplomatic and trade relationship.	
	PRC	Bilateral development, defence, diplomatic and trade relationships.	Wields strong influence over some MPs and key sector ministries on discrete issues.
<b>Business</b>	Small, medium and large business	Income generation from informal betelnut vendors through to large businesses.	Wield strong influence over MPs through social connections, support base and/or finance necessary for re-election.
	Logging and mining companies	Large scale income generation and direct engagement with MPs, bureaucrats and local landowners.	Wield strong influence over MPs and key sector ministries on economic and trade-related policies.
<b>Citizens</b>	All citizens	Direct accountability through electoral representation but few other levers to demand more accountable governance.	Weak influence over MPs and key sector ministries.  Some discrete mutual influence through patronage, including CDF provision.

## PARLIAMENT AND GOVERNMENT BODIES

### MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT (NATIONAL)

A consensus among accountability actors that we spoke with was that MPs have both the greatest decision making and accountability powers in Solomon Islands. The authority that MPs wield in the accountability ecosystem is multifaceted. MPs control large sums of funding through CDFs, enabling them to allocate funding to projects, organisations and individuals as they see fit in their constituencies (Batley 2015; Walton 2020; Wiltshire and Batley 2018). They also have privileged access to stakeholders who can offer financing, such as business leaders and donors – either legitimately through formal procurement or funding goods and services, or illegitimately through skirting formal procurement or engaging in ‘under the table’ dealings. This is in direct contrast to the majority of citizens, who typically only have access to their local representative at the provincial level, with multiple focus group participants stating that they do not even know how to report improper behaviour by their local member (in contrast to known pathways for reporting improper behaviour of religious or customary leaders). Notably, some members of the parliamentary opposition – particularly leader, Matthew Wale – were noted in focus groups as trusted and strongly supportive of accountability. However, the power and influence of Wale and other such politicians is severely constrained by their not being in government.

The prevailing view of those we spoke with was that the interests that most influence MP behaviours relates to re-election and maintaining their power base. For this reason, MPs have been accused of redistributing money and material benefits from positively impacting national development to be highly localised and siloed (Walton 2020; Wood 2018). Having access to funding through CDFs or benefactors (whether legitimate or illegitimate) plays a crucial role in MPs establishing and maintaining patronage networks, thus making their interests best served by stakeholders directly involved in supplying them with funding. Such interests apply across the national parliament to members of government and opposition.

National MPs were reported as being minimally influenced by citizens (beyond delivering on CDFs), integrity institutions and relevant legislation, receiving some influence from donor bodies and stronger influence from the business community and people with links to the People’s Republic of China – either state representatives or Chinese businesspeople.

Questions hang heavily from non-politicians about the commitment of the political class to accountability. Significant cynicism was expressed about a perceived gap between rhetoric and action regarding accountability (Interviews 4, 5). Actors with formal and informal roles in the accountability ecosystem remarked that MPs regularly make statements in support of accountability and anti-corruption measures, particularly in the lead up to elections, but do not follow up these statements with actions that strengthen checks and balances from integrity institutions, civil society organisations or the general public (Interview 1, Focus Group 3). Accountability is further challenged by politicians from outside Guadalcanal moving to Honiara upon election, distancing themselves from their constituents and enjoying lavish lifestyles (Interview 2). This makes it even more difficult for people to hold their leaders to account – or even know what they are doing to be able to demand accountability.

Interestingly, the centrality of CDFs can be seen to both strengthen and weaken accountability of MPs. CDFs mean that MPs have a much more direct line of accountability with constituents than politicians in many other democracies – and the public judge the quality of their MPs by the extent to which they deliver projects and resources back to the community (this may be through developmental projects, or through direct cash injections that could be considered vote buying). Conversely, this accountability is

to a narrow minority of each particular MP's constituent base due to low voter turnout, is largely impervious to oversight institutions and has been argued to represent patronage rather than representative politics (see Cox 2009, Morgan 2005, Wood 2020). Notably, legislation passed in 2013 to provide greater guidance and accountability in relation to CDFs has proven unenforceable due to the discretionary nature of CDFs (McCloughlin et al 2022).

### PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET

The prevailing wisdom from our interlocutors was that national MPs in government and Cabinet are significantly more influential than those in Opposition (Multiple interviews and focus groups). This smaller group of MPs dictate policy decisions which, in turn, determine use of public finance. Perhaps most importantly, the recruitment and retention of heads of key sector ministries and integrity institutions is largely at their discretion (Interviews 3, 6). In this way, the Prime Minister and Cabinet wield accountability powers over other stakeholders and avoid being held accountable for their own decisions and actions by the formal institutions and rules of accountability that exist on paper but are poorly enforced – matters complicated further through the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet being directly responsible for budget lines for integrity institutions and hosting the secretariat of the Solomon Islands Independent Commission Against Corruption. More so, a concentration of power and influence within the upper echelons of the government was repeatedly raised in interviews and focus groups. In particular, the Prime Minister and a select handful of close confidantes were reported as shaping national priorities in terms of policy, programming, public finance and engagement with bilateral and multilateral partners (Undisclosed interview).

Prime Minister, Manasseh Sogavare, is particularly intriguing. A political survivor, he has held the role of Prime Minister on four separate occasions. Sogavare has been described as a 'commanding charismatic figure' (Moore 2022: 1) who is expertly adept at reading the political winds within his country and negotiating the sometimes competing priorities of the constituency, local business interests and foreign actors (2022: 3-4). Moore suggests Sogavare's domestic and foreign politics is shaped by a prioritisation of his own political survival above the interests of Solomon Islands citizens (2022: 4). No fewer than seven current members of the Cabinet have had formal allegations or charges of corruption and other criminality brought against them (RNZ 2019, SIBC 2015, Solomon Star 2016, 2020, 2022, Tamsitt 2014).

### LOCAL AND PROVINCIAL POLITICIANS

Elected members of local councils and provincial assemblies were generally regarded by those in Honiara as being more accountable to citizens and legislation than national MPs. This was explained as relating to proximity, with these politicians mostly living in their constituents' communities where 'everyone knows what you do' (Interview 2) and thus there is less room for impropriety. One interviewee expressed that real or perceived impropriety from national MPs could be seen as encouraging impropriety from local and regional politicians, with poor accountability at higher levels encouraging poor accountability at lower levels (Interview 3).

Interestingly, however, focus groups in the provinces directly and repeatedly contradicted the view of Honiara-based interlocutors. Focus groups in all of the consulted provinces shared that local and regional politicians display minimal commitment to accountability, engage in patronage behaviour and are more committed to shoring up their own interests than working for their communities. This perception may be influenced by social closeness, as citizens see their local representatives on a regular basis, as opposed to their national MPs, who often only spend time with their communities in the lead up to elections (Interview 2). Capturing the vastly different understandings of how local and

provincial politicians are perceived by local constituents in situ and in Honiara demonstrates the value of seeking the voices and opinions beyond Honiara's accountability ecosystem.

As per national MPs, local political interests are also influenced by the maintenance of power and status. For elected politicians at local and provincial levels, funding remains a powerful source of support, however the social closeness of local communities means that politicians at this level must invest in relationship building with constituents in a way that combines patronage and non-patronage.

## KEY SECTOR MINISTRIES

A level down regarding power and influence in the accountability ecosystem are key sector ministries, in particular the Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet (OPMC) and the Ministry of Finance. These ministries are framed as being the nerve centres for decision-making and resourcing, respectively. The influence of OPMC was captured by one interviewee who explained, 'When the Office of Prime Minister and cabinet call, you drop everything' (Interview 6). It was also reported that OPMC exercises its ability to second staff from government institutions, sometimes internally recruiting the most capable staff away from institutions, including integrity institutions.

The Ministry of Finance holds significant power as the distributor of funding to government institutions, including integrity institutions (Interviews 4, 5). Although integrity institutions are legislated to be independent and have control over their own budgets, in reality their resourcing is determined and largely controlled by the Ministry of Finance, with all integrity institutions disclosing that their resourcing needs are not met. There are very real constraints to the ability of the Ministry of Finance to provide sufficient technical and financial support to all actors within the accountability ecosystem. Not least among these is the limitations within the national budget, much of which is dedicated to recurrent spending (IMF 2022:8) compounded by a reported decision made by cabinet in 2016 to aim for cost-neutral budgets (Interview 4). These financing constraints mean that many integrity institutions do not have budget to do any more than pay their staff, so program implementation, including outreach, are not possible.

The interests of executives within key sector ministries are seen to relate to maintaining their positions and/or moving into positions of greater influence. As such, key sector ministries were reported as being strongly influenced by Ministers, in particular those from government and Cabinet. They were also reported as exercising strong influence over integrity institutions. In off-record conversations specific examples of such behaviour were shared but remain undocumented given sensitivities.

## GOVERNMENT-ESTABLISHED ACCOUNTABILITY ENTITIES

Operating within the Westminster system, integrity institutions in Solomon Islands should be independent from, while reporting to, parliament and the executive (Staphenhurst and Titsworth 2002). However, the extent to which integrity institutions can be independent in practice was questioned by multiple actors that we spoke with working inside these institutions. As mentioned above, integrity institutions in Solomon Islands are strongly influenced by key sector ministries regarding matters such as financing and personnel. Multiple interlocutors stated that integrity institutions are not sufficiently resourced to carry out their work fully, with one stating that a particular integrity institution's 'independence doesn't reflect how the office operates' (Interview 6) and another outlining that integrity institutions in Solomon Islands are still in a stage of 'building foundations' (Interview 3). These interlocutors all pointed to their under-resourcing and reporting chains to key sector ministries as undermining their offices' capacity, adding, 'if the audit substance is not there, that's your breeding ground for corruption' (Interview 3). Cynicism should be tempered somewhat, however, by research indicating that the financial support provided to integrity institutions



in Solomon Islands is comparatively strong for a post-conflict state and demonstrably greater than that provided in neighbouring Papua New Guinea, for instance (Walton and Hushang 2022).

The heads of integrity institutions were viewed as having greater commitment to public service than elected officials and executive members of key ministries. A key challenge they face, however, is a lack of coordination and links across their agencies, which means they have few practical opportunities to share resources or strategies (Interviews 4, 6). Their interests lie in sourcing and maintaining support and resourcing for their individual institutions. Despite this, there is little sense of competition between integrity institutions, with interviewees expressing strong personal and professional relationships with one another. Assisting these agencies to synthesise their efforts and efficiently share resources may result in mutual benefits. Integrity institutions were reported as being strongly influenced directly by key sector ministries and indirectly by MPs, particularly those in government, mainly through control of financial and technical support.

## **CUSTOMARY AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

As previously discussed, the role of *kastom*, *wantok*, chiefs, big men and Church networks and systems have significant influence over the everyday politics of the general populace – making religious and customary leaders particularly powerful (Nanau 2018; Porter and Allen 2015). These traditional systems of governance exist alongside formal accountability influences and are viewed as relatively self-enforcing (Porter and Allen 2015). Interestingly, only the Church was actively discussed by interviewees (particularly Interview 1) and focus group participants (Focus Group 1 and 2) as shaping accountability in Solomon Islands. This appears to most likely reflect perspectives that *kastom*, *wantok* and Big Men exist outside formal accountability systems.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY**

Local civil society was reported as having minimal influence over decision makers. There are multiple reasons for this, but the greatest among these is the limited reach and organisation of organised, advocacy-focused and critical civil society (Craney 2022). Many civil society organisations are focused on service delivery given the absence of the state in many parts of the country. Nonetheless, there are certain individuals and organisations who command authority, often through personal relationships and reputation, such as Transparency Solomon Islands (multiple interviews). The influence of Transparency Solomon Islands was particularly attributed to the leadership of its CEO, Ruth Liloqula, who has a decades-long history of public service and a formidable reputation for integrity. Her personal leadership qualities have thus meant that Transparency Solomon Islands wields stronger influence than other civil society organisations.

## **BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL RELATIONSHIPS**

### **BILATERAL, MULTILATERAL, IFI AND CROP AGENCIES**

A range of donor institutions, including bilateral partners, multilateral organisations and international financial institutions, play a role in the accountability ecosystem of Solomon Islands, including most notably Australia, UNDP, the Asian Development Bank and World Bank. Respondents commonly remarked that donors have an important role to play in strengthening local accountability, but that these same donors often undermine accountability and do not have strong local accountability processes themselves.

Donors were seen to play a pivotal role in strengthening accountability by providing support to non-government accountability actors and pressuring government to adhere to accountability measures.

integrity institutions have received financial and technical support from donors that, respondents felt, has increased their capacity to undertake their work effectively. Importantly, this support was noted as helping to mitigate the direct dependence that integrity institutions have on MPs and key sector ministries for funding and technical assistance, with one integrity institution actor noting that through such support ‘donors in some way support our independence’ (Interview 3). Donors also support accountability through direct engagement with the government requiring reporting on donor-determined accountability indicators, due to the state’s financial dependence on donor funding (see Sahin and Shahin 2020).

However, donors were also criticised for undermining accountability by acting as proxies to government, providing services that government fails to deliver. While such service provision is welcomed, this creates an environment where ‘donors are a double-edged sword’ (Interview 3) as citizens both do not expect the government to provide services but will also judge the donor community for service absence. Donor interventions were also criticised for failing to have an impact on the ground, other than to create more work for donor staffs and their consultants. Donors were also described as being unaccountable themselves to either citizens or government.

Donor interests were viewed as simultaneously driven by public service and the maintenance of influence of individual donor organisations. Traditional donors were reported to have some influence over government but be minimally influenced from government or citizens.

## THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) – which became a formal partner of Solomon Islands in 2019 following a dramatic switch of allegiance from Taiwan (Powles 2023) – was singled out by respondents as operating differently from other donors. While other donors were seen to at times undermine local accountability, this was viewed as unintentional. By contrast, the PRC was seen to actively undermine accountability efforts and to directly engage MPs in relationships that can result in real or perceived corrupt behaviours that get in the way of governance that is responsive to citizens (Focus Groups 2, 6). The formal diplomatic relationship between Solomon Islands and China is marked by opacity – most evident in the 2022 security agreement between the two countries that remains unpublished and with details unknown even to some Cabinet members (Powles 2023). Unlike other donors whose work with and in country is publicly reported on and thus open to criticism, much of the detail of the PRC’s engagements in Solomon Islands remain unknown. Sentiments of nefarious Chinese influence in Solomon Islands are widely held, with repeated arson attacks in Chinatown (see Dobell 2007, Ride 2019, Wood 2020) seen as displays of frustration at the secrecy of decision-making in Solomon Islands in relation to ethnically Chinese people in both bilateral roles and as businesspeople (Craney 2021).

Interviewees and focus group participants represented the Chinese state’s interests as relating to the creation, maintenance and exertion of power over the Solomon Islands state for geopolitical and business benefits. The PRC was reported as having strong influence over the government but not being influenced in its actions by government or citizens.

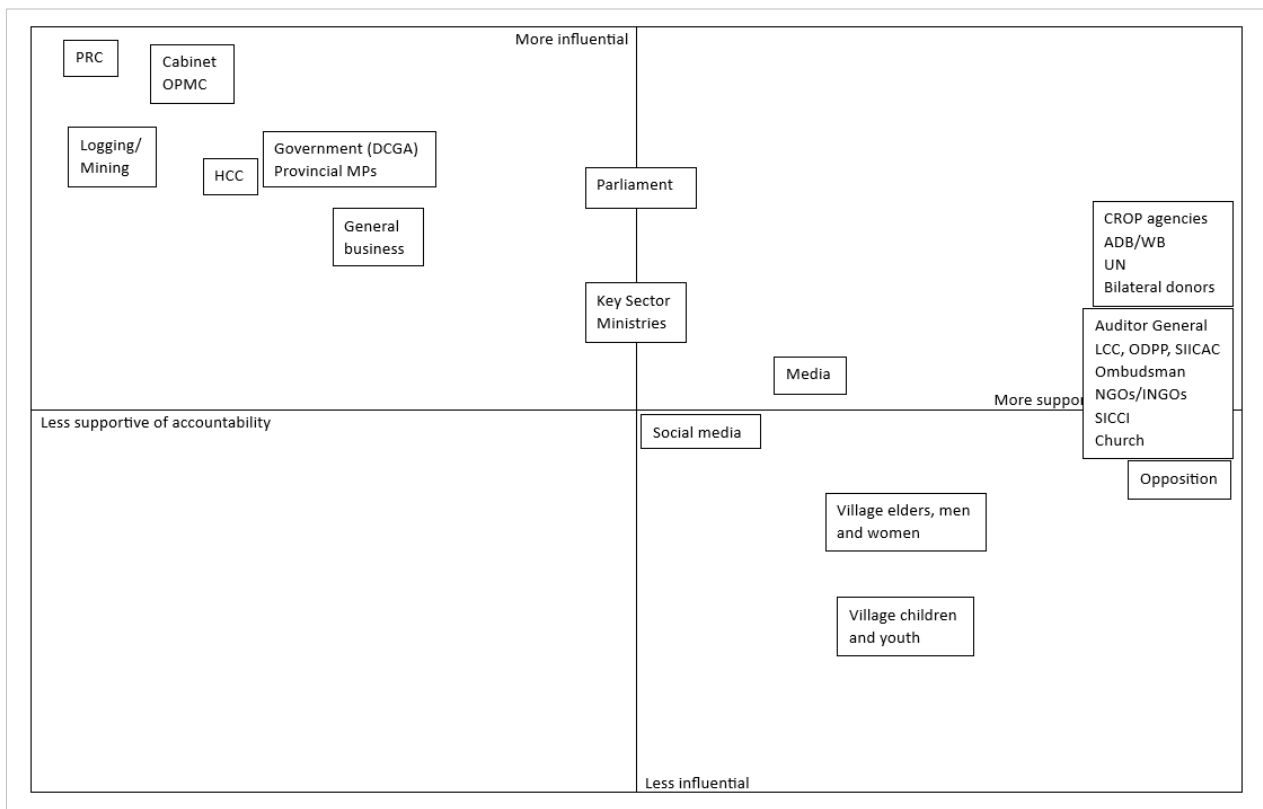
## BUSINESS

There was minimal discussion of the role of the business community in the accountability ecosystem by interviewees, however, participants in all focus groups reported that businesses have strong influence over decision makers. This was noted as applicable from informal betel nut vendors through to retail and large-scale logging and mining operations (all Focus Groups). Strong perceptions were held that the relationship between business and national MPs was one that undermined accountability and regularly engaged in transactionalism, cronyism and, at times, corruption. These perceptions are

founded in a long history of real and perceived impropriety between business interests, such as logging and mining, and politicians and senior bureaucrats (Allen 2018; Clark and Levy 2012; Dauvergne 1998; Foukona 2018; Global Witness 2018; Kabutaulaka 2006; Porter and Allen 2015; Walton 2020). Focus group participants regularly stated that both MPs and representatives from the logging and mining industries are completely unaccountable and engage in ‘under the table’ financial dealings to their own benefit.

## CITIZENRY

Although a democracy, citizens were reported as wielding minimal influence within the Solomon Islands accountability ecosystem, including over national and provincial politicians (all Focus Groups). The lack of influence over national politicians was partly explained by a lack of social closeness, while the opposite was true of provincial politicians, where social closeness was seen to increase the risk of social disruption and even physical violence from people of influence and their *wantok*. A thin veil of accountability through the ballot box is undermined by a patronage political system where individual MPs can make promises to select individuals for their political support (Cox 2009, Mcloughlin et al 2022), rather than working towards community development. This is the ‘handout mentality’ referred to earlier by one interlocutor. Citizens were seen as having strong influence over local and provincial politicians by those based in Honiara but this was contradicted in the provinces. Youth, in particular, were considered to have limited influence. Robust two-way accountability relationships between citizens and the Church were widely reported in focus groups and interviews.



**Figure 3 Solomon Islands accountability ecosystem stakeholder map**

When producing the initial accountability stakeholder map, focus group participants did not see any significant difference in commitment to accountability and influence over decision making from the two groups on the right of the image: CROP agencies, ADB, World Bank, UN agencies and bilateral donors; and integrity institutions, I/NGOs, SICCI and the Church. The positioning of the former group

caused much discussion regarding influence, with some participants suggesting this set of external actors had more influence as donor bodies and others suggesting they had no greater influence over decision makers than local accountability agencies.

It is further worth noting that the trend from high commitment to accountability with lower influence, to lower commitment to accountability with higher influence was described as causal by focus group participants.

## Synthesis: Opportunities and constraints for change

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Accountability in Solomon Islands is constrained by weak citizen knowledge of formal accountability standards and processes for government staff and MPs, particularly outside of Honiara. It is also hampered by poorly funded integrity institutions that have little political room for manoeuvre in a centralised political system where the government and Prime Minister have limited accountability beyond the ballot box and secure their roles through ties with business elites. Moreover, understandings of accountability are informed by a blend of formal state accountability standards, *kastom* influences and religious teachings. Working to better understand how society operates, how accountability actors are motivated (or otherwise) and how a plurality of voices beyond Honiara can be included in considerations of accountability will provide significant insights into how external actors can support sustainable, locally relevant accountability measures and processes.

### **THREE PILLARS OF GOVERNANCE (STATE, CHURCH AND *KASTOM*)**

Solomon Islands' formal measures of accountability, replicating similar forms as other Westminster systems, is refracted through the lens of important informal measures of accountability, producing a kind of hybrid. The influence of the Church as well as traditional systems of *kastom* and *wantok* provide the foundations for people's everyday behaviours and notions of what is and is not acceptable from leaders. Further strengthening of formal accountability measures holds little prospect of advancing notions such as public financial management without *also* engaging with these informal measures. Working with customary systems holds some promise and the example of how Christianity in the country has been shaped to be complementary of *kastom* suggests that further opportunities exist to utilise local ways of being and knowing to progress public accountability. This may involve working with local communities to not only make them aware of formal accountability mechanisms but also to identify ways that these processes reflect customary norms. Complementary approaches could include supporting religious leaders to indigenise (see Jolly 1996) concepts of accountability and actively promote these with their parishioners, and engaging politicians in discussions about how future accountability measures can be put in place that will not negatively impact their immediate interests in a similar fashion to the creation of SIICAC (see Walton 2020).

## **MPS ARE LARGELY UNACCOUNTABLE EXCEPT WHEN IT COMES TO THEIR OWN INTERESTS**

Parliamentarians largely act with impunity in relation to public accountability. They exist in a web that favours those already in power and disempowers formal oversight bodies. The gap between the rhetoric and actions of MPs demonstrates incentives and disincentives to their behaviour that provide insight into opportunities and challenges for improving their role in the accountability ecosystem of Solomon Islands. The greatest incentive for MPs currently resides in the maintenance and furthering of their status and material benefits, most commonly prolonged through continued re-election. Disincentives lie in the loss of such status, whether through electoral defeat, loss of face in their local community or criminal prosecution for wrongdoing.

It must be noted, however, that there are multiple protective elements that assist MPs in maintaining their power and influence. Support from *wantok* and the propagation of patronage through CDFs and possible funnelling of ‘under the table’ finances provide stable bases for seeking re-election and creating favourable relationships with other people of influence (Walton 2020; Wood 2020). In rural areas, social closeness also results in citizens being wary of rocking the boat and creating civil disruption or potentially leading to their own personal harm (multiple Focus Groups).

## **CDFS ARE HERE TO STAY**

CDFs have – for better or worse – become an entrenched part of Solomon Islands politics. As a key feature of patronage in the political system, they can be seen as contributing to an environment that aids opacity and that require controls and oversight. Alternatively, they can be studied further to identify opportunities for how they can promote more accountable governance. Taking a positive deviance approach to explore where CDFs have been used in more accountable ways is one opportunity to explore here.

## **DONORS HAVE A ROLE BUT REPEATED INTERVENTIONS HAVE FAILED**

Interventions from bilateral and multilateral donors have provided a foundation for wide social understanding of terms such as ‘accountability’ from a Western perspective in Solomon Islands. The impacts of this broad understanding are negligible, though. This is evident in the continued proliferation of programs focused on anti-corruption and related measures – as well as responses from multiple interlocutors about this report adding to the long list of reports on accountability in Solomon Islands that have come before and are seen simply as collecting dust. This does not mean there is no role for donors, however. Multiple people across interviews and focus groups spoke of the value that funding, technical assistance and diplomatic pressure can provide to assist local efforts to hold leaders to account.

## **HONIARA IS NOT SOLOMON ISLANDS**

Multiple interviewees in Honiara spoke of the gap between Honiara and the provinces in terms of service delivery, local identity and lifestyles. A common refrain was that 80 percent of the work on accountability is focused on the city where only 20 percent of the population resides. It was noted repeatedly that rural citizens are disconnected from politicians and actors in accountability and oversight, and vice versa.

Focus group discussions with those outside Honiara revealed the gap between the capital and the rest of the country. Perceptions amongst Honiara interviewees of higher levels of accountability between

provincial politicians and their constituents was directly and repeatedly contradicted by people in the provincial focus groups. There, focus group participants felt that no political leaders were able to be held to account, in contrast from religious and customary leaders.

Solomon Islands is a large country with low population density, making it difficult to capture the views and provide services to the majority of its citizens. Opportunities exist, however, to better understand the challenges that they face and, in turn, identify how local populations can be supported to improve accountability.

## Recommendations

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The following recommendations are proposed to inform ways forward to address binding constraints that inhibits understanding and practices of accountability at all levels of society in Solomon Islands.

### **SUPPORT THE STRENGTHENING OF DOMESTIC ACCOUNTABILITY NETWORKS (INCLUDING INTEGRITY INSTITUTIONS)**

Despite limitations to the effectiveness of formal accountability measures, including integrity institutions, they have an important role to play. Inquiries, investigations and even prosecution of corruption and misconduct can help to create and maintain public trust across government and public agencies, strengthening the social contract and supporting more responsive governance. With appropriate resourcing, integrity institutions can better strategise, allocate human resources, undertake programs and communicate with the public about their work and its findings.

Efforts should also be made to assist integrity institutions to foster collaboration amongst themselves and with other key oversight actors, such as civil society organisations like Transparency Solomon Islands. This may include hosting semi-regular workshops with key integrity institution personnel to discuss resourcing and administrative priorities or a broader network of accountability actors, including civil society and Church figures, to discuss challenges and strategies in emboldening formal and informal accountability measures. Unfortunately, recent developments such as budgetary cuts to the Solomon Islands Governance program from the Australian government demonstrate further the precarious environments that integrity institutions exist within, being influenced by both domestic and donor political machinations and priorities. Any efforts made to improve links and relationships between oversight actors should focus on sustainability by being designed by people within the accountability ecosystem, rather than by an external actor with key figures invited without prior consultation. If possible, any such initiatives should be designed to be handed over to and managed by local actors involved, recognising that those actors may prefer an external actor to take on the 'secretarial' duties of administration due to their already limited capacity (see Gibert 2021).

### **INCREASE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AIMED AT UNDERSTANDING LOCAL CONCEPTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY**

Building public trust in accountability actors requires public knowledge of their actions. Integrity institutions should be supported to increase outreach and awareness of their aims, how they work, how citizens can engage with them, as well as to promote successes. Such efforts can include engagement with mainstream and social media, as well as community outreach visits. In particular,

efforts to build awareness of integrity institutions and their work amongst citizens outside Honiara would help to bridge the gap that currently prevents people from holding leaders to account. The form of public engagement outside Honiara should be designed by integrity institutions in conjunction with civil society actors, in recognition of workshop fatigue. Assisting integrity institutions to work together on such public engagement would not only serve to increase knowledge of integrity institution workings, it would be cost effective and also offer a practical measure by which to bring integrity institutions together on a regular basis, forming and strengthening ties that may assist in closer cooperation.

## **SUPPORT LOCAL STAFF TO LEAD INITIATIVES, AND TRAIN FOREIGN ADVISORS ON LOCAL WAYS OF BEING, KNOWING AND DOING**

Donor agencies should support local staff to take the lead in designing, implementing, managing and monitoring accountability-focused interventions, given that they are steeped in and regularly cross the boundaries between formal and customary knowledge and practices. Complementary to this, a focus for foreign staff working in these areas should be on building local knowledge through direct person-to-person engagement and relationship building, including in areas outside of Honiara. By engaging directly with members of the public, increased understanding of the processes of formal accountability mechanisms can be acquired by the citizenry and a deeper knowledge of the informal norms that influence the accountability ecosystem in practice can be acquired by foreign staff. Drawing on existing hybrid approaches and further synthesising 'local' and 'foreign' knowledge of how accountability is understood and practiced will provide insights into how formal and informal measures of accountability can be strengthened.

## **WORK IN THE SPACES BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

Deeper localised knowledge of foreign staff and more leadership opportunities vested in local staff will allow for better understanding of how to craft initiatives and interventions that support local conceptions of accountability rather than operate in parallel to them. The formal accountability measures in place in Solomon Islands are strong on paper, indicating that they do not need significant reform. However, it should be noted that agencies such as the Leadership Code Commission and Auditor General have no power to compel cooperation with investigations (Clark and Levy 2012), unlike the Ombudsman's office, which has regulations that support inquiries such as the ability to hear complaints orally and compel cooperation (Matthews and Walton 2018). External actors should both work with integrity institutions to identify and address such regulatory gaps that constrain their effectiveness, as well as with civil society, Churches and local communities to identify how hybrid conceptions of accountability can be built upon. This includes identifying and learning from examples of positive deviance (Oliver et al 2021), where positive processes and/or outcomes are occurring that can be considered outliers to the norm. The checks and balances embedded in the ODPP provides one such example for further learning. Through better understanding, hybridised models and further regulatory changes can be identified and supported.

## **WORK WITH THE GRAIN WHEN POLITICALLY NECESSARY**

When pursuing reforms that may threaten the interests of influential persons, it is imperative to assess the risk that such figures may impede progress. If it is assessed that the risk of interference derailing reform efforts is high, consideration should be given to finding ways to coopt the political will of such stakeholders. As Walton's (2020) research on the establishment of SIICAC being supported by key figures through not having its powers made retroactive demonstrates, minimising risk to powerful individuals to improve policy and programming settings that will benefit the broader community can

be a politically savvy, more incremental approach to change. Of course, such a strategy must be weighed against the risk that working with the grain will in fact reinforce the status quo. Careful political economy analysis is required to make informed judgments.

## **RECOGNISE THE BENEFITS OF SUPPORTING MORE ACCOUNTABLE AND RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE FOR BOTH DONORS AND RECIPIENTS**

Donors should recognise the distinct (and long-term) two-way benefits of development assistance focused on promoting and supporting good enough governance and accountability, and strengthening state-society relations. Benefits for local populations include improved accountability and transparency, contributing to improved social cohesion and service delivery. Benefits to donors include improved faith in the functioning of local governments and accountability stakeholders and diminished risk of having to address unrest caused by social rupture. Improved governance also contributes to a more peaceful and prosperous region. Further soft power benefits include the increased influence that is concurrent both with building strong interpersonal relations with key stakeholders, such as heads of integrity institutions, and being recognised as a supporter of improved governance by members of the broader accountability ecosystem. In a period of increased geopolitical contestation for access and influence, the benefits of promoting long-term positive social change should not be undervalued even if outcomes are longer term.

## **WALK THE TALK ON ACCOUNTABILITY**

‘Who is UNDP accountable to?’ was a common refrain during data collection, indicating a widespread perception from people within the Solomon Islands ecosystem that while they have to demonstrate accountability upwards to donors, donors do not demonstrate reciprocal accountability to the local population. All donors working in the accountability space should discuss openly with actors in the accountability ecosystem how they can better improve their own reporting and practices. At the very least, accessible, user-friendly annual reporting on all accountability initiatives should be made public and shared with actors in the accountability ecosystem.

## **EXTEND FOCUS BEYOND HONIARA**

If Solomon Islands remains a country conceived but never born – on the basis that there is little shared identity – then it is imperative that development interventions aim to be as locally-relevant as possible. Efforts should be made to understand how accountability is understood and practiced in each of the nine provinces, with tailored responses that help support a robust accountability ecosystem in each of these areas. Linking support to national-level integrity institutions with provincial-level work to build or strengthen accountability ecosystems at those levels, closer to citizens, can help to bring meaning to this and ensure that accountability does not remain purely Honiara-based.



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# Interviews

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## LIST OF INTERVIEWS

<b>Names</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Organization</b>
David Dennis	Auditor General	Office of the Auditor General
Fred Fakarii	Ombudsman	Ombudsman Office
Andrew Kelesi	Deputy Director	Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions
John Kouni	Director General	Solomon Islands Independent Commission Against Corruption
Ruth Liloqula	CEO	Transparency Solomon Islands
Jack Maebuta	Pro-Vice Chancellor Academic	Solomon Islands National University
Undisclosed		Ministry of Finance
Undisclosed		Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade
Undisclosed		Royal Solomon Islands Police Force

## LIST OF FOCUS GROUP LOCATIONS

<b>Location</b>	<b>Group</b>
Central Province	Provincial focus groups
Guadalcanal Province	Provincial focus group
Honiara	Development Services Exchange
Makira Province	Provincial focus groups
Malaita Province	Provincial focus groups
Western Province	Provincial focus groups

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY**

La Trobe University acknowledges that our campuses are located on the lands of many traditional custodians in Australia.

We recognise their ongoing connection to the land and value their unique contribution to the University and wider Australian society.

We are committed to providing opportunities for Indigenous Australians, both as individuals and communities through teaching and learning, research and community partnerships across all of our campuses.

La Trobe University pays our respect to Indigenous Elders, past, present and emerging and will continue to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems and protocols as part of our ongoing strategic and operational business.

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