

Chapter 9

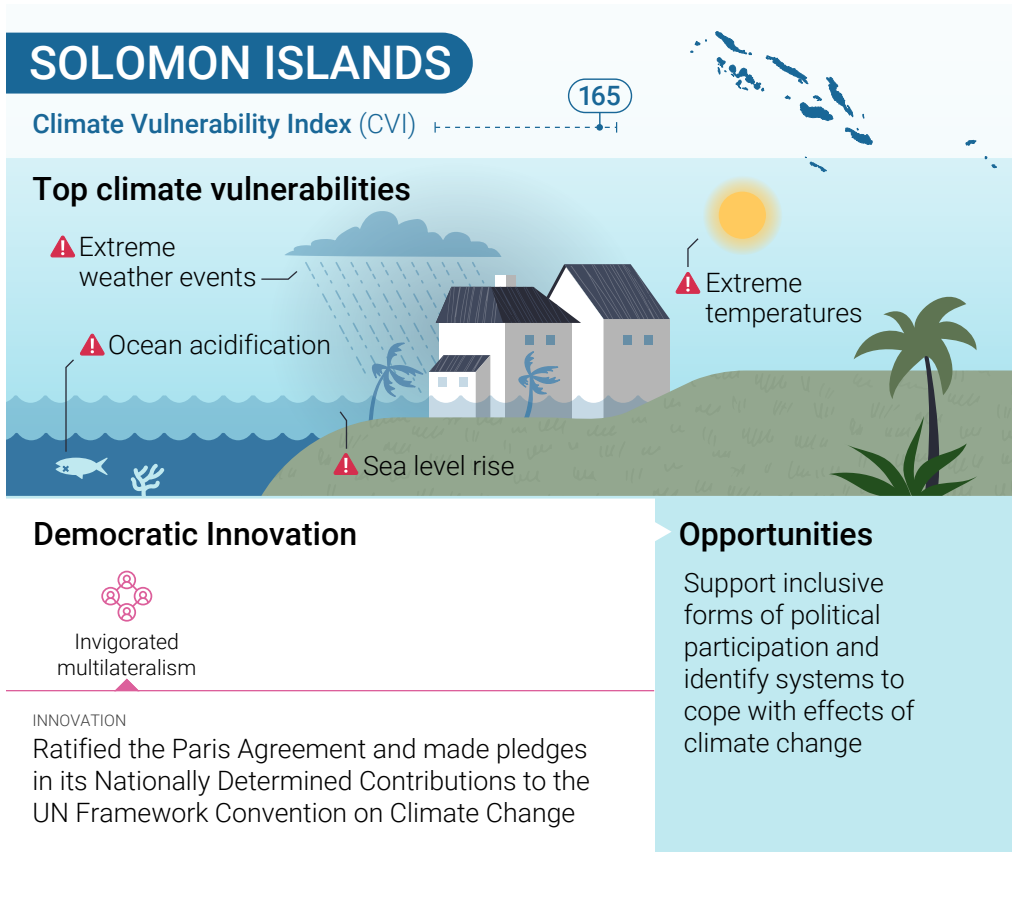
SOLOMON ISLANDS

9.1. INTRODUCTION

Solomon Islands is an archipelagic nation comprising over 900 islands in the South Pacific. It could be characterized as having a resilient democracy. It holds regular democratic elections—its 10th general election since independence took place in 2019 (Wiltshire et al. 2020)—that facilitate orderly changes in government. Electoral participation and voter turnout are strong, and local media outlets, while small in number, are active. Suffrage is theoretically inclusive (International IDEA 2021), but women are under-represented in parliament. Only six women have been elected to the Solomon Islands Parliament since independence in 1978. Solomon Islands has previously achieved a CIVICUS rating of ‘open’, which indicates the degree to which citizens are able to express their views and exercise their rights in the civic space, but this was downgraded to ‘narrowed’ in December 2021 (CIVICUS Monitor 2021).

Solomon Islands is a parliamentary democracy with a Westminster system of government. It has two formal levels of government—the national government and nine provincial governments. Area councils once provided a further reach of the state, but these were suspended in 1998 as a cost-saving measure and the municipal council in Honiara is the only remaining operational local council (Allen et al. 2013). The influence and profile of provincial governments has increased in recent years. Representatives of the Malaita Provincial Government have been particularly outspoken about the recent

Figure 9.1. Solomon Islands



changes in diplomatic ties with Taiwan and China (Ride 2021). On independence, Solomon Islands inherited a weak state apparatus that has faced long-term capability challenges. This has hampered its capacity to deliver inclusive development to its highly diverse and widely dispersed population (Allen et al. 2013).

While democracy has proved resilient in a formal sense, it faces a number of challenges in practice. Developing a sense of national identity has been difficult, in part due to its dispersed and mostly rural population (80 per cent), which relies on subsistence food production; and in part due to the level of cultural, language and social diversity. There are approximately 75 different language groups

in a population of 670,000 people (Allen et al. 2013). Independence arose largely from the withdrawal of colonial powers rather than the struggle of a united citizenry, effectively creating a 'state without a nation' and resulting in a weak sense of national identity or political cohesiveness (Dinnen 2008).

Recent riots and protests in Solomon Islands as a result of tensions linked to the diplomatic switch from Taiwan to China, which led to the deployment of security personnel from Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Australia, were widely reported in the media. Commentators noted that protest and disruption were not entirely unexpected, due to longstanding unresolved grievances such as uneven and inadequate development, an unresponsive state and social issues, some of which are related to ethnic tensions (see e.g. Australian National University 2021).

Solomon Islands has weak state–society relationships.

Solomon Islands has weak state–society relationships. Structural factors such as high levels of social and cultural diversity, geographic dispersal and low levels of industrial development have hindered the development of effective political parties and broad-based social movements, further limiting the prospects for inclusive political participation. The localized nature of politics means that citizens engage with government in personalized ways. Local sources of connection and income generation are important and governance, social arrangements and hierarchies are constituted through a combination of local custom and religion. Kinship, shared language, and religious and customary land connections take precedence over abstract notions of citizenship or nation (Dinnen 2008). This complicates how government is understood and social contracts are constituted, which in turn complicates processes of policy development and the role of government as a responsive development actor.

9.2. CLIMATE VULNERABILITY AND ACTION

Climate predictions indicate that Solomon Islands will experience more intense cyclones, increasing land and ocean temperatures, greater variability in rainfall and more extreme rainfall events, larger than global average sea level rise, and coral bleaching and

ocean acidification (Solomon Islands Meteorological Service et al. 2015). In recent times, Solomon Islands has experienced frequent extreme flooding events affecting housing, water supply and sanitation. Although Cyclone Harold was only a Category 1 storm when it hit Solomon Islands, it led to the loss of a number of lives at sea and caused widespread damage to food crops (Australian Government n.d.).

On the University of Notre Dame's Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) Index, Solomon Islands is ranked 123rd of 182 countries. It is the 17th most vulnerable country and the 94th most ready country, in terms of its capacity to respond to climate change (University of Notre Dame 2022). These rankings are based on the intersection of climate change impacts, which are expected to result in a decline in cereal yields and medical staff capacity, as well as critical infrastructure such as roads (University of Notre Dame 2022). Solomon Islands also ranks very high globally in terms of the risk of natural disasters (Behlert et al. 2020).

Urbanization in Solomon Islands is increasing rapidly, mostly through the movement of young people who lack access to educational and economic opportunities. The municipal government in Honiara currently lacks the capability and resources to develop and implement policy directed at managing urbanization and the increase in informal settlements in climate vulnerable locations. In addition, the erosion of traditional dispute resolution systems in urban centres, due to the concentration and mix of ethnicities, is a key concern for maintaining stability (Keen et al. 2017). Community displacement linked to sea level rise will present challenges for social stability and require localized negotiations between traditional owners, given customary systems of land ownership.

Solomon Islands has committed to reaching net zero emissions by 2050 and is an active player in climate negotiations and regional forums designed to respond to climate change. Solomon Islands has ratified the Paris Agreement, made pledges in its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and recently joined forces with other Pacific Island nations to campaign for zero carbon shipping (Lo 2021). Solomon Islands is heavily reliant on using

Solomon Islands has committed to reaching net zero emissions by 2050.

its forests as a carbon sink and as a means of transitioning to renewable energy, in order to reduce emissions and ensure greater energy security. At the same time, however, it recognizes that it faces significant challenges with regard to mitigation and adaptation, most notably due to lack of personnel, particularly at senior levels (Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, Disaster Management and Meteorology 2021). Funding for climate change mitigation and adaptation is largely from donor sources, particularly the Global Environment Facility, Japan and the European Union. Most funding is directed to adaptation, with a focus on disaster prevention and preparedness, as well as water and food security (Atteridge and Canales 2017).

The Solomon Islands delegation to COP 26 was led by Chanel Iroi, the Deputy Secretary of the Solomon Islands Ministry of Environment, Disaster Management and Meteorology. He actively participated in preparations for COP 26 in civil society forums such as the Pacific Climate Justice Summit, and in collaboration with other Pacific Island nations through the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), to ensure that the region had a 'united voice' at the negotiations.

Solomon Islands has a vibrant civil society and a number of advocates attended COP 26.

Solomon Islands has a vibrant civil society and a number of advocates also attended COP 26, representing Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change, Solomon Islands National University, Solomon Islands Climate Action Network (SICAN) and People with Disability Solomon Islands. SICAN was formed in 2019 as the main forum for community mobilization on climate change. The network aims to raise awareness of climate change, develop more inclusive mitigation and adaptation action, coordinate civil society groups and mobilize more community members to demand action on climate change from leaders (see e.g. Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change 2021).

Following COP 26, civil society and government representatives collaborated to host 'Yumi After Glasgow Tok Stori blo Solomon Islands: The wins and losses of COP26'. This event was broadcast live on Facebook and included a session explaining UNFCCC processes in a mixture of English and Solomon Islands Pidgin. In a country where Internet access is limited and media access is mostly

through radio stations, explaining the relevance of global forums to local communities faces significant challenges.

While Solomon Islands government representatives and civil society advocates share the same goals in seeking climate justice on the international stage, significant gaps remain domestically over implementation of the outcomes of global and regional forums. The disconnect between government statements and the resourcing of and budgeting for policy implementation, as well as inefficiencies and a lack of capacity for service delivery (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2018), are not unique to climate change policy and should be considered in the broader context of fragile state systems in Solomon Islands.

9.3. HOW WILL THE CLIMATE CRISIS INTERSECT WITH THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN SOLOMON ISLANDS?

Climate change is expected to magnify stresses that will intersect with a nation already characterized by 'localism and division' (Dinnen 2008: 58), and faced with a range of democratic challenges. The political economy of Solomon Islands promotes short-termism and privileges vested interests. Elections are influenced by self-referred decision making in the form of money politics and patronage, while political culture is shaped by strong cultural and gendered norms that favour 'big-men' (Dinnen 2008; Wiltshire et al. 2020). Gifting or vote buying plays a significant role in cultivating a support base. The first-past-the-post voting system enables candidates to win with a small share of the vote, often on the basis of personality and kinship networks rather than ideology (Dinnen 2008) or policies aimed at the national interest. In the absence of political parties, a government is formed by a loose coalition of parliamentarians with an interest in accessing and dispersing material benefits in the form of constituency development funds (CDFs) to their constituents. On occasion, significant personally directed financial inducements have been reported as playing a large role in shaping the development of majority coalitions (Dinnen 2008).

Climate change is expected to magnify stresses that will intersect with a nation already characterized by 'localism and division'.

That government in Solomon Islands is susceptible to the influence of vested interests is most evident with regard to the logging sector, which is the largest source of export earnings. The sector is weakly regulated and prey to the influence of foreign logging companies that use logging revenues to secure political support for the protection of unsustainable logging practices (Dinnen 2008; Hameiri 2012). The influence of logging interests on domestic politics adds to political instability within Solomon Islands and undermines the prospects for significant reform, including in areas relevant to climate adaptation. Given that resource extraction is one of the few forms of major income generation, vested interests are likely to prevent wide-scale systemic reform in this area (Porter and Allen 2015).

The funds generated from logging have also provided common ground for alliances in national politics, which is significant because the Solomon Islands prime minister is chosen by members of parliament rather than the citizenry (Dinnen 2008). The weak regulation of logging exports has deprived the Solomon Islands government of a reasonable share in logging revenues, contributing to state weakness and damaging the prospects for building a 'planning state'.

Poor regulation has also resulted in unsustainable logging practices and weakened the role of forests as an adaptive resource in Solomon Islands, including as a carbon sink and as a basis for livelihoods. The continuing nexus between logging interests and political elites undermines stable government and allows logging interests to block adaptive initiatives that impinge on resource extraction. Poorly regulated logging has also generated local-level conflict within communities dependent on logging resources, thereby further undermining the social solidarity required to underpin sustained collective action in support of adaptation (Hameiri 2012).

State weakness in the Solomon Islands undermines the prospects for state-led adaptation to and mitigation of the impacts of climate change.

State weakness, and in some cases absence, in the Solomon Islands undermines the prospects for state-led adaptation to and mitigation of the impacts of climate change. The climate crisis reveals that the concept of a 'planning state' is less relevant to Solomon Islands, as state systems tend to operate according to traditional kinship ties and systems of obligation and reciprocity rather than through the neutral and detached public service model developed in other

cultural contexts (Dinnen 2008). Communities rely on customary governance systems, such as ‘chiefly systems’, and subsistence livelihoods. These systems have come under increasing pressure due to the lack of support from and connection with state systems in some cases, and due to chiefly or local leader involvement and self-interest in resource extraction projects, particularly logging, in others (Allen et al. 2013). Local systems of authority will come under increasing stress as climate change puts pressure on water and food security, and other natural resources, particularly in locations where customary systems of land ownership lead, at times, to contestation over land boundaries.

While Solomon Islands has plans and policies in place on adapting to climate change and access to significant sources of international finance, the limited capacity of bureaucratic systems and state fragility mean that implementation will be a real issue. One notable example concerns communities being required to organize their own relocations, due to the lack of legitimacy and authority of government agencies over land tenure and management (Monson and Fitzpatrick 2016). While key climate policy documents foreshadow a role for the government in organizing these relocations, in practice they are being negotiated by communities themselves (Monson and Fitzpatrick 2016). Communities have managed successful relocations without state assistance through extended kin networks, marriage or historical relationships of trade and exchange. Communities that lack these networks have been marginalized and have no power to organize relocations. They must rely instead on largely ineffective state actors. As climate change results in more wide-scale displacement, the role of the state in organizing relocations will become more important. At present, however, the state lacks capacity and legitimacy in this area (Monson and Fitzpatrick 2016).

The political marginalization of many communities—particularly those which lack a direct kinship or other form of connection with a national parliamentarian—limits avenues for political participation, as well as the prospects for nationally united and inclusive adaptive action (see e.g. Baker and Barbara 2020). The prospects for the emergence of a solidaristic ethos are reduced by the unfinished business of nation-building, as local identity remains more relevant than a sense of nationalism, and given the limited capacity of civil

society and the media to hold governments accountable (Barbara 2014). Such prospects are further limited by the weak nature of political parties and broad-based social movements.

Climate change may be driving new forms of political participation that could begin to address the collective action deficits that have plagued Solomon Islands. For example, there has been some mobilization among young people in relation to climate action at Solomon Islands National University and through SICAN, but the numbers are small. Understanding what constitutes a political community is still a challenge where state–society bonds are weak. There is also evidence of communities mobilizing to implement adaptive strategies at the local level, such as local infrastructure development. Whether these forms of bottom-up mobilization will connect and revitalize national democratic systems in solidaristic ways is an important unanswered question.

Fair and inclusive political processes in Solomon Islands are impeded by the ‘big-men’ culture and gendered social norms, which tend to preclude women from decision making and restrict their ability to cast free votes (Wiltshire et al. 2020). The combination of a limited tradition of social movements and social hierarchies that privilege age over enthusiasm means that young people are also often excluded from politics. Similarly, the combination of a limited social contract—where parliamentarians owe obligations to their backers rather than their constituents—and a lack of transparency inhibits the potential for inclusive adaptive processes, at both the local level within local communities and nationally.

Finally, while Solomon Islands is an active player in regional and global forums, multilateral frameworks on climate change adaptation lack implementation. The notion of the state has more relevance internationally than domestically. It has enabled membership of global forums but policy implementation remains an issue as multilateral agreements lack legitimacy in the domestic realm.

9.4. THREATS TO DEMOCRACY FROM THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES

While resilient and enduring, democracy in Solomon Islands has faced significant challenges with connecting communities with government and underpinning inclusive forms of development. The significant weakness of the post-colonial state in Solomon Islands means that democracy has been adapted to support a personalized form of politics characterized by patronage and clientelistic forms of political exchange, where connections between state and society are weak and the state apparatus is limited in its capacity to respond to community needs.

While there is no question that the Solomon Islands Government is a key supporter of global initiatives to reduce carbon emissions, the domestic challenge is not one of developing voter support for climate action, but rather to identify systems to cope with the overwhelming impacts heralded by climate change. The nature of the domestic political economy in Solomon Islands means that the practice of democracy favours self-interested policy processes and limits the prospects for solidaristic responses to development challenges.

As an existential challenge, climate change is expected to place additional burdens on democratic institutions and their ability to mediate peaceful and equitable responses to emerging adaptive challenges. The flexible nature of democracy in Solomon Islands means that formal democratic systems could be well placed to adjust to climate-related stress. However, such stresses are expected to exacerbate the long-term challenges for democracy to strengthen state–society relations and provide more responsive forms of state-based development. Climate change is likely to exacerbate existing fragilities within the state and existing democratic deficits, due to the poor connections between democracy and development. There is also the potential for climate change to exacerbate local conflicts and if these are not effectively managed, experience shows that local conflicts can spill over into national tensions. Managing the risks associated with inequitable development and uneven flows from resource extraction, together with contested land boundaries, community relocations and urbanization, will be critical to maintaining peace in a time of climate change. While communities

The flexible nature of democracy in Solomon Islands means that formal democratic systems could be well placed to adjust to climate-related stress.

have demonstrated resilience and local forms of adaptation, their capacity to adapt should not be overemphasized, as the effects of climate change will accelerate and potentially become overwhelming.

As an existential threat to Solomon Islands, climate change may, however, give rise to regenerative forces with the potential to help address democratic deficits. For example, adaptation will require forms of subnational state building to help communities prepare disaster responses. Similarly, climate change anxiety is driving new forms of political participation, as young people in particular engage with global climate movements. Support for more inclusive forms of political participation that enable marginalized communities to better connect with government and develop locally relevant adaptive solutions might be a good way to revitalize a meaningful form of democracy.

References

- Allen, M., Dinnen, S., Evans, D. and Monson, R., 'Justice Delivered Locally: Systems, Challenges, and Innovations in Solomon Islands', Research Report, World Bank, August 2013, <<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/16678>>, accessed 16 September 2021
- Atteridge, A. and Canales, N., 'Climate finance in the Pacific: An overview of flows to the region's Small Island Developing States', Stockholm Environment Institute Working Paper No. 2017-04, 25 January 2017, <<https://www.sei.org/publications/pacific-climate-finance>>, accessed 1 September 2021
- Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Tropical Cyclone Harold, [n.d.], <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/crisis-hub/tropical-cyclone-harold>>, accessed 10 May 2022
- Australian National University, ANU College of Asia & the Pacific, 'Solomon Islands riots reflect deeper unrest', 26 November 2021, <<https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/solomon-islands-riots-reflect-deeper-unrest>>, accessed 7 January 2023
- Baker, K. and Barbara, J., 'Revisiting the concept of political participation in the Pacific', *Pacific Affairs*, 93/1 (2020), pp. 135–55, <<https://doi.org/10.5509/2020931135>>
- Barbara, J., 'From intervention to partnership: Prospects for development partnership in Solomon Islands after RAMSI', *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies*, 1/2 (2014), pp. 395–408, <<https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.33>>
- Behlert, B., Diekjobst, R., Felgentreff, C., Manandhar, T., Mucke, P., Pries, L., Radtke, K. and Slusarenka, H., *World Risk Report 2020—Focus: Forced Displacement and Migration* (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft and the Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict, Ruhr University Bochum, 2020), <<https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/world-risk-report-2020-focus-forced-displacement-and-migration>>, accessed 29 September 2021
- CIVICUS Monitor, 'Pacific's positive rights record blighted by downgrade of Solomon Islands and restrictive laws', Press release, 8 December 2021, <<https://findings2021.monitor.civicus.org/country-ratings/solomon-islands.html>>, accessed 12 April 2022
- Dinnen, S., 'State-building in a post-colonial society: The case of Solomon Islands', *Chicago Journal of International Law*, 9/1 (2008), pp. 51–78, <<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cjil/vol9/iss1/4>>, accessed 2 May 2023
- Hameiri, S., 'Mitigating the risk to primitive accumulation: State-building and the logging boom in Solomon Islands', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 42/3 (2012), pp. 405–26, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2012.687629>>
- International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices: Solomon Islands, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/democracy-indices>>, accessed 1 September 2021
- Keen, M., Barbara, J., Carpenter, J., Evans, D. and Foukona, J. D., *Urban Development in Honiara: Harnessing Opportunities, Embracing Change* (Canberra: Australian National University

- and State, Society and Governance in Melanesia, May 2017), <<https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/196593>>, accessed 20 September 2021
- Lo, J., 'Pacific Islands call for zero carbon shipping by 2050, citing IPCC report', Climate Home News, 23 August 2021, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2021/08/23/pacific-islands-call-zero-carbon-shipping-2050-citing-ipcc-report/?fbclid=IwAR1uchPwGr2OIEeE55tcAxDi7rdgDi_zDiyY8mu_aQG7Xu4o4b2MD4fKSL8>, accessed 7 September 2021
- Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, Disaster Management and Meteorology, 'Solomon Islands 2021: Nationally Determined Contribution', 19 July 2021, <<https://unfccc.int/NDCREG>>, accessed 15 August 2021
- Monson, R. and Fitzpatrick, D., 'Negotiating relocation in a weak state: Land tenure and adaptation to sea-level rise in Solomon Islands', in S. Price and J. Singer (eds), *Global Implications of Development, Disasters and Climate Change: Responses to Displacement from Asia Pacific* (New York: Routledge, 2016)
- Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *Pacific Experiences with Options Relevant to Climate Change and Disaster Risk Finance*, vol. 3, December 2018, <<https://apo.org.au/node/227966>>, accessed 16 April 2022
- Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change, 'Tok Stori and live performance of The Islands are Calling', 5 July 2021, <<https://www.pisfcc.org/news/tok-stori-and-live-performance-of-the-islands-are-calling>>, accessed 7 September 2021
- Porter, D. and Allen, M., 'The political economy of the transition from logging to mining in Solomon Islands', SSGM Discussion Paper No. 2015/12, Australian National University, <<https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/4154/political-economy-transition-logging-mining-solomon-islands>>, accessed 1 September 2021
- Ride, A., 'Solomon Islands' long summer of discontent: Security challenges', *Development Bulletin*, 82 (2021), pp. 156–58, <https://pacificsecurity.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/DB82_Part32.pdf>, accessed 10 April 2023
- Solomon Islands Meteorological Service, Australian Bureau of Meteorology and Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, *Pacific-Australia Climate Change Science and Adaptation Planning Program: Current and Future Climate of the Solomon Islands* (Pacific-Australia Climate Change Science and Adaptation Planning Program Partners, 2015) <https://www.pacificclimatechangescience.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/13_PACCSAP-Solomon-Islands-11pp_WEB.pdf>, accessed 1 September 2021
- University of Notre Dame, Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN), 'Solomon Islands', University of Notre Dame, 2022, <<https://gain-new.crc.nd.edu/country/solomon-islands>>, accessed 23 November 2022
- Wiltshire, C., Batley, J., Ridolfi, J. and Rogers, A., *2019 Solomon Islands National General Elections: Observation Report* (Canberra: Australian National University, Department of Pacific Affairs, October 2020), <<https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/7435/2019-solomon-islands-national-general-elections-observation>>, accessed 1 September 2021