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Gordon Leua Nanau
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The Solomon Islands'
Social Policy Response
to Covid-19:
Between Wantok
and Economic
Stimulus Package



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THE SOLOMON ISLANDS' SOCIAL POLICY RESPONSE TO COVID-19: BETWEEN WANTOK AND ECONOMIC STIMULUS PACKAGE

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ABSTRACT

Solomon Islands was caught off guard when Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic. Most of its initial efforts were to ensure that the deadly virus did not venture beyond its borders into the community. As a result, it has only recorded 18 border cases to date (8 February 2021). In Solomon Islands, the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was mitigated by two main sources: the community and the state. People's survival and livelihood were primarily supported by a set of relational networks made possible by customary land tenure and social capital at the local level, known as the wantok system. In addition, a plan called the Economic Stimulus Package was at the core of the government's formal social policy response.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, news about a new virus discovered in Wuhan Province of China emerged. At that point in time, Pacific island countries were dealing with a measles outbreak that affected parts of the region, especially New Zealand and Samoa (Nanau, 2020). Solomon Islands, although not directly affected, did its best to keep the measles virus outside of its borders. Overseas residents returning home for the Christmas and New Year's break and visitors were required to get a measles vaccination and carry with them proof of vaccination from their countries of residence when entering Solomon Islands. It was around this time that news from Wuhan was becoming the focus of media outlets around the Pacific. By the end of December that year, it was obvious that apart from measles, a much more serious threat in the form of a new virus was looming. Although there were internal warnings in government circles, especially among the medical professionals, nothing substantive was in place even as late as January 2020. The government and people were nevertheless closely observing possible reactions to the Covid-19 virus from nearby island countries since all are similarly vulnerable.

Marshall Islands was the first Pacific country to declare a state of emergency on 7 February followed by Samoa on 24 February when it imposed compulsory screening for all passengers arriving into the country and a mandatory 14 days self-quarantine in the country they were travelling from (Nanau, 2020). Fiji reported its first case on 19 March 2020 and that led to shutting its borders to international air and sea transport. Solomon Islands remained Covid-19 free until 3 October 2020 when the first border-quarantine case was recorded, the carrier being a repatriated student from the Philippines. This paper focuses on Solomon Islands' initial responses to Covid-19, particularly its social policy response. As it is still too early to determine the impact of such social policy responses, we mostly highlight what the government stated it would do and some actions actually undertaken. The report draws on information from official statements and reports, including Hansard reports (the official minutes of parliament meetings in Solomon Islands), as well as citizens' responses and comments in the major daily newspapers, online forum discussions and websites.

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POLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Solomon Islands is an archipelago with six major island groups comprising more than 900 islands spanning an area 777,000 square kilometers, 96% of which is sea (Bennett 1987: 5).¹ It shares sea borders with Papua New Guinea in the west and Vanuatu in the east. It has a unicameral parliament with the cabinet as the executive arm of government. The policies, including laws of the country, are decided and developed in cabinet and taken up to parliament as the legislature to debate and pass as laws (Nanau, 2016). At the lower level, nine provincial governments are established through decentralization legislation. Honiara, the capital, also has a municipal authority governing it. Although provinces are closer to people, only certain functions are devolved to them and they are highly dependent on the national government, financially (Premdas and Steeves, 1985). Social sectors such as education and health are centralized functions although staff from central ministries are seconded to provinces to administer and deliver these social services. In the case of education, it is further complicated by the fact that apart from the central government, there are education authorities that control their own schools (Government of Solomon Islands, 1996). These authorities include provincial governments, churches and faith-based organizations as well as private education providers.

In Solomon Islands, around 74% of the population lived in rural and maritime communities while close to 26% lived in urban areas in 2019 (Government of Solomon Islands, 2020). Most engage in semi-subsistence lifestyles although the cash economy had also impacted that lifestyle over the years. While they live semi-subsistence lifestyles, many also produce goods, mostly agricultural and marine produce for sale in urban markets. This semi-subsistence lifestyle is possible because of the maintenance of the customary land tenure system. Customary land comprise around 87% of land in the country, while 13% of mostly productive land is alienated (McDonnell, Foukona and Pollard, 2017: 13), meaning that it had changed from customary tenure to one with registered paper titles and clearly demarcated boundaries with monetary value attached to it. Under the customary tenure, almost all Solomon Islanders have rights to use customary land in their own respective villages and islands providing a social buffer in times of trouble and when people are forced to return to their island communities, as was the case during civil uprisings, natural disasters or pandemics. It may be important to mention here that the lives and views of Solomon Islanders are often influenced by three important domains/institutions: culture and tradition, religion (mostly Christianity), and state institutions. Social issues and therefore policies when developed are very much influenced by these three domains.

The biggest employer in the country is the public sector. Social policies are the responsibility of the state. Important services such as health and education are highly supported and funded by foreign donors and the government. However, other social domains and their corresponding policies are not very well developed nor financially supported by government. Some of them, especially those protecting women, youth, children, the disabled, the elderly and the marginalized are mostly supported by donors, non-government organizations and to an extent, churches. Social policies are not fully developed nor are they really prioritized. Culture and religion have always been the reasons given for governments not prioritizing human rights issues and social policies. Nevertheless, the scarcity of resources, weak financial support and a lack of institutional capacity in the country to deal with these important social policies must also be acknowledged. This is the context and situation in which Covid-19 entered and also the context in which the Solomon Islands' social policy response is situated. Let us now turn to a discussion on the government's immediate responses to Covid-19.

SOLOMON ISLANDS' POLICY RESPONSE

Solomon Islands' immediate response to the pandemic was to shut its borders and restrict the movement of people in and out of the country. Indeed, this response was in line with many other countries in the region as the first line of defense. It suspended all flights into the country on 22 March and on 27 March 2020, the last flight into the country was announced. There were a few immediate challenges to citizens when borders were abruptly closed, for example organizing repatriation flights for nationals who were stranded overseas, such as the parents and relatives of graduating students who were in Suva when the borders were abruptly closed because of the first

1 The 2019 national census recorded a total population of 721,455 people with a GDP per capita of around USD 1,612 (Government of Solomon Islands, 2020).

Covid-19 case (Fijian Government, 2020). The government met and agreed to support these stranded nationals overseas with the payment of SBD 5,000 per head while waiting for a possible repatriation flight home (Koli, 2020).² In addition to the support given to stranded nationals and students overseas, the government approved and paid an additional SBD 5,000 each to its sponsored students and private sponsored students studying overseas (Koli, 2020; Gwao, 2020). This additional funding support was purposely to assist students mitigate expenses associated with Covid-19 restrictions. Repatriation flights for overseas students and stranded nationals were secured and ultimately, flights were made possible commencing on 21 July (Solomon Airlines, 2020).

While this was happening on the international front, the government was also responding to local demands. Fully conscious of the fact that the most likely entry point for Covid-19 would be Honiara international airport and seaport, the government encouraged people to return to their local villages, communities, islands and provinces away from Honiara. The push to assist people to return to the provinces and their villages is with the understanding that most people living in Honiara and other urban areas have homes to return to in the villages. It was also realized that if Covid-19 does spread into the community, the likely places that would quickly spread the virus would be the roadside markets around Honiara. The Honiara City Council asked market vendors operating from markets such as “Custom Garden Market, Panatina Area, Fishing Village Market, Kobito, Border area, Kukum area, Fijian Quarter Market, Talise, Lengakiki/Mbuburu area, Rove Market, White River 01 and 02 Market” to voluntarily close down (Kekea, 2020b). Part of the reason for this was the genuine realization that these informal market spots sell betel nut and people buy, chew and spit betel-nut liquid there; a clear place to spread Covid-19 if it does enter the community. It was extremely difficult for market vendors, most of whom were women. Even the proposed temporary closure of the central market during that period was met with great concern by market vendors, especially women (OFASIA, 2020). Fortunately, the central market was never closed and informal markets were reopened soon after the said requests for voluntary market closure because of non-community transmission of Covid-19.

Responding to the move to assist people move away from Honiara, the Solomon Islands National Provident Fund Board met and agreed to allow members the opportunity to make a one-off early withdrawal from their savings.³ The maximum withdrawal allowed per member was SBD 5,000 (SINPF, 2020a). It should be noted however that in the Solomon Islands, only those who are formally employed are members of the national provident fund and they and their employers contribute to the fund on a regular basis. There were only about 55,000 members of the provident fund. Recently, a new scheme was developed to allow those in the informal sector and small businesses to save with the provident fund. It is called the NPF *youSave* and is available to those who work as market vendors, taxi drivers, farmers, contractors, domestic workers and others (SINPF, 2020b). With Covid-19 and the lockdown that came with it, the national provident fund allowed members to withdraw SBD 5,000 to support themselves, especially when returning home to their villages as a direct response to Covid-19.

Solomon Islands, like many other Melanesian countries have limited social policies and services for citizens and are therefore heavily dependent on social capital, especially at the local community level. The major safety net that ensured people’s survival in times of extreme hardship is their social capital at the local level, commonly referred to as a the *wantok* system, supported by customary land tenure (Nanau, 2011). This is not peculiar to Solomon Islands as other Pacific island countries have called on this relational connection in times of distress. For example, there were cases of laid-off workers from the tourism industry in Fiji that returned to their village communities to rebuild their lives by tilling the land and other local adaptation strategies (Nasokia, 2020). Likewise, during the Covid-19 pandemic and earlier during the tsunami disaster, Samoa depended on the Fa’a Samoa system to move into the interior of the islands to ensure their livelihood (Murphy, 2013). Most Pacific societies maintain their customary land tenure systems and communal ways of living even when they had left their rural communities over long periods of time. Murray Chapman’s (1974; 1976) studies of Tasimaui societies of Guadalcanal in the 1960s on circulation and movements very much capture such in-depth understandings in the Solomon Islands.

In a move to encourage the repatriation of people to their villages and islands away from Honiara mentioned above, the government transferred SBD 250,000 to each member of parliament on behalf of their constituents (Kekea and Ride, 2020). The assumption was that the constituents would escape from an area that was likely to

2 Exchange rate: SBD1.00 – USD 0.12.

3 The Solomon Islands National Provident Fund is a retirement fund set up for people employed in both the public and the private sector. It is a fund with compulsory membership and employer contributions. The funds are invested in business undertakings and interest is paid on members’ contributions annually depending on profits made from investments.

record the first case of Covid-19. They would return to their rural and remote communities to the embrace of their families and *wantoks* who would accommodate them and help them restart their lives in the subsistence economy. In the case of Covid-19, the support provided by the government to the parliamentarians was only for transportation (i.e. vessel hire/charter) with no additional support for sustenance in the villages. This is not to say that local villages receiving relatives relocated from urban areas could easily accommodate their family members. There would be pressures on accommodation, food gardens and supplies, and other social issues as were reported by researchers like Eriksson et al. (2020). As always in times of disasters and crises, the relational networks at the local level would see the families through extremely difficult times. Bear in mind that many of those families relocating would have their own houses in their islands and villages as it is normal to maintain two homes, one in the urban workplace and another in one's own local village.

We will now look more at specific aspects of the response to Covid-19. In mid-March 2020 the Solomon Islands cabinet established the Covid-19 Oversight Committee that oversees activities and communicates information on the new virus. The Oversight Committee comprises all relevant government agencies, including the National Disaster Management Office; the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, Disaster Management and Meteorology; the Ministry of Health and Medical Services; the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development; the Ministry of Finance and Treasury; the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (Solomon Islands Government, 26 September 2020). This is an important committee as far as containment is concerned. The committee meets regularly and participates in radio talk back shows to inform citizens of developments surrounding Covid-19. Moreover, this is in addition to the weekly press statements and updates made by the Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Hon. Manasseh Sogavare.

— The Economic Stimulus Package (ESP)

A critical response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the country was marked by the declaration of the state of emergency on 26 March 2020 (Solomon Islands Government, 26 March 2020). The first declaration was further extended from 25 July to 25 November 2020 (Radio New Zealand, 30 July 2020; Kekea and Ride, 2020). This state of emergency declaration by the Governor General opened the way for the implementation of a number of social policy responses, part of which are already highlighted above. Solomon Islands, in a sense, responded to Covid-19 in a more encompassing way.

Fundamentally, Solomon Islands responded to Covid-19 by invoking provisions of the Emergency Act and worked within it to develop an encompassing response called the Economic Stimulus Package (ESP). The name of this national response may be ambiguous because of the term 'economic' but the package provides for social, political and economic responses to Covid-19. The government's response was premised on two principles: to respond to the immediate impact of Covid-19, and to build the capacity of the economy to be able to recover over the short to medium term (Sogavare, 2020). We will now discuss this ESP as the state's national social policy response to Covid-19. It should be noted that this stimulus package was initially funded under the Supplementary Appropriation Act of 2020.

The initial focus of the stimulus package is labelled *soft measures*. These are policy responses designed to ensure that the immediate negative effects of Covid-19 are minimized to allow the economy to continue to function to support people's basic livelihoods. Under these measures, the company that provides electric power to Solomon Islanders in urban areas, Solomon Power Limited, reduced electricity tariffs by 16% in May 2020 and was considering further reductions. That reduction was in addition to an SBD 0.44 reduction in electricity tariffs implemented earlier (Sogavare, 2020). Similarly, the Solomon Islands Ports Authority eliminated domestic port charges for two months in April and May 2020 with provisions for a monthly review. During the uncertain Covid-19 period, the Solomon Islands Submarine Cable Company Limited offered an additional 50% free bandwidth to retail telecommunications operators with the expectation that it benefits users and government. The ultimate aim of these relief packages was to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 on families and individual households.

There were also serious concerns that public servants may be asked to go on leave without salaries, a reminder of what happened during the ethnic tensions a little more than 22 years earlier. During the period of civil tensions from 1998 to 2003, public servants went without pay for months and most had to return to their home villages as well as because of security risks and the inability of the economy to keep them employed (Hameiri, 2007). Indeed, there were earlier indications that a good number of public servants were to experience a 50%

salary cut. The stimulus package ensured the continued employment and salaries of public servants. Those who were initially on a 50% salary cut had their full salary reinstated within a fortnight. Moreover, the banks, with the support of the government, also provided loan repayment holidays to those with loans to repay, including many public servants. At the same time, the Solomon Islands National Provident Fund Board allowed members, a majority of whom are public servants, to withdraw SBD 5,000 each from their savings if they are still below 50 years old, the eligibility age to withdraw funds in the country. It also allowed those above the age of 50 to withdraw 20% or all of their funds (SICCI, 2020). About SBD 200 million dollars was released to the economy through this process and it provided some support for provident fund members during this difficult time. Again, the effort was to relieve individuals and households from the effects of Covid-19.

To ensure that businesses continued to operate so that citizens had paid jobs to support their families, the government provided tax relief to affected businesses, especially in the travel and tourism industries. Under the soft measures, rental relief packages were offered to small and medium enterprises within the emergency zone. A total of SBD 5 million was set aside to support such businesses in Honiara. Even the national provident fund provided relief on surcharges to companies on their compulsory contribution commitments. To support businesses that bring revenue into the country, as part of the soft measures, the government developed an export credit facility through the Central Bank of Solomon Islands. At the same time, Solomon Islands provided support to churches to assist them promote messages and correct information about Covid-19 to church members. The government also provided an additional SBD 10 million to the nine provincial health authorities for awareness efforts and preparatory work on Covid-19.

The second area of focus is called the *immediate recovery measure 1*. Again, this is an attempt to prevent loss of income and employment, a social reaction to the pandemic. This set of responses have a budgetary allocation of SBD 75 million (Sogavare, 2020). With the immediate response by government to provide transportation costs to politicians to meet the cost of constituents escaping the virus to their villages (Kabutaulaka, 2020), it also tried to induce citizens to be economically productive when they are back in their villages. The government provided support in the form of special prices or freight subsidies for copra and cocoa buyers for a six month period. It is anticipated that those returning to the villages will be encouraged to produce copra and cocoa to support their families and the economy more generally.

Apart from encouraging people to engage in copra and cocoa production, the stimulus package also set aside SBD 44 million to support and promote value added products in the forestry, fisheries and tourism sector. The government is hopeful that with this kind of support, individuals and businesses will be more innovative and proactive in producing value added products from available resources and opportunities. To further expand this space, the government through the Development Bank of Solomon Islands (reopened in 2018 after years of inactivity) developed what is called the Covid-19 lending product for small and medium-sized businesses. It made SBD 10 million available to them in response to Covid-19 (Solomon Islands Government, 2020). The opportunities offered under the stimulus package's 'immediate recovery measure 1' are governed by a formal cabinet approved framework to ensure transparent and accountable disbursement and also effective monitoring.

The third area of response is called the *immediate recovery measure 2*. These are measures that are designed to keep government-owned or partially-owned companies afloat to support the economy and ultimately jobs and livelihoods by injecting financial support. For larger privately-owned companies, government support is through the banking system, especially the export credit facility developed by the Central Bank mentioned above. A total of SBD 75 million was set aside for this initiative, which has both direct grant and concessional finance components (Sogavare, 2020). The Table below summarizes the support to government-owned and partly-owned businesses under Covid-19.

Government-Owned/Partially Owned Company	Grant / Concessional loan	Amount (SBD million)
Solomon Airlines	Grant and Concessional loan	20
Solomon Water	Grant	5
Soltuna	Grant	5
Kolombangara Forest Products Limited (KFPL)	Grant	5
Development Bank of Solomon Islands (DBSI)	Capital Grant	20
Commodities Exports Marketing Authority (CEMA)	Grant	2
DBSI (additional support)	Capital Grant	18
Total		75

The fourth component of the stimulus package focuses on *medium-term support to stimulate growth and enhance the capacity of the economy to develop and grow*. The types of support provided in this area focus mostly on infrastructure projects with the ultimate aim to assist farmers and rural dwellers easily transport their produce to nearby markets. This support for infrastructure investment in the form of bridges, wharves, roads and airstrips is important in response to Covid-19 but is generally important for the development and growth of the country. Under the stimulus package, SBD 39 million was allocated to identified infrastructure that will connect people and markets to agriculture hubs. In addition, SBD 30 million was allocated for major bridges in provinces and SBD 21 million earmarked for the upgrade of domestic airports (Solomon Islands Government, 2020). To assist farmers' and villagers' access to markets and quality services, the upgrade and construction of such infrastructure is critical for people's livelihoods.

Finally, the fifth area of the Covid-19 response package focuses on the *medium to long-term measures* concerned especially with major capital projects funded by development partners and multilateral programs and investments. The interest here is to ensure that current infrastructure projects by development partners are aligned to create employment opportunities and support economic activities, especially in the period of Covid-19. The government is negotiating with development partners to fast-track their projects and ensure that they commence operation to provide the necessary employment and business opportunities for Solomon Islanders. The reasoning is that the quicker the major projects start, the higher the chance for jobs and revenue for local suppliers of materials needed in such capital projects. Because of this focus, Solomon Islands is negotiating with donor partners to use labor-intensive systems, particularly in infrastructure projects. Moreover, as far as possible the government is also asking partners to source materials locally "... to reduce reliance on imports and ease pressures on balance of payment" (Sogavare, 2020). Again, the ultimate aim is to support individuals find employment to support their families and also for resource owners and businesses to benefit from infrastructure projects.

Initial Reactions to the Economic Stimulus Package

The Economic Stimulus Package is an endeavor by the Solomon Islands' government to address social challenges brought about by Covid-19 in an inclusive and holistic manner. It is an attempt because of the financial limitations of the country's economy but also with the support of donors. In this section, we provide a brief analysis on the government's social policy responses, particularly the initial reactions and experiences of ordinary Solomon Islanders with the stimulus package. These are preliminary analyses based on local debates and sentiments shared in the media and what transpired in parliament meetings because the stimulus package is yet to be fully implemented.

Looking at the economic stimulus package response areas described above, we could argue that the 'soft measures' and 'immediate recovery measures' not only eased economic hardships created by the global pandemic but they also kept people in paid jobs. Assistance to individuals, especially under the soft measures, mitigated the negative impacts of Covid-19 on families. Moreover, the support and response ensured that Solomon Islanders are in paid employment, particularly those working in the public sector and government-owned companies. Early indications of public servants working on a 50% pay cut mentioned above or early warnings of a declining supply of tuna exports to Italy that would result in the loss of employment for mostly females in the tuna industry in Noro (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2020a: 12) were avoided. Under the response, the Solomon Islands' government provided grants to Sol-tuna and other state-owned enterprises.

Aspects of the stimulus package that were barely discussed in the media and public forums include the medium and long-term measures in the area of infrastructure development. Part of the reason for this is because they are larger and abstract areas that many ordinary Solomon Islanders are not familiar with or are simply convinced that the government has plans in place and has already identified infrastructure projects to be built in places already identified. Since infrastructure development is something everybody desires, allocations for such developments are usually seen as a positive thing. The only problem is that the stimulus package does not clearly say where these infrastructure projects will be built. Likewise, infrastructure development projects supported by foreign donors is something that the government and its development partners deal with. It is not something that ordinary citizens have a say in nor are familiar with. For these reasons, provisions for infrastructure development as a policy response are rarely questioned by ordinary Solomon Islanders.

The highly contested and criticized component of the stimulus package was the allocation of funds to parliamentarians to transport their constituents to their islands and villages at the height of the pandemic. Funds controlled by members of parliament, such as Rural Constituency Development Funds allow people to accuse politicians of not utilizing such state funds for their intended purposes. Some constituencies did hire boats and ships to return their people to their rural and maritime villages. Others partially spent their allocation for the said purpose while other members of parliament were accused of diverting funds to other uses. An even more controversial component of this response area is to do with support to small and medium-sized businesses affected by the pandemic and applications to start up value added businesses in the areas of tourism, fisheries, forestry and agriculture. There have been criticisms associated with unclear communication on the part of government, the production and release of conflicting successful applicant lists and other discrepancies. For instance, one local fishing group that applied for a fisheries project worth more than SBD 330,000 claimed that while their project was approved, they were only paid SBD 5,000 to start the fisheries project (Sasako, 2021). Government officials insisted that information going out was incorrect since the process of appraisal and approval of projects is still being finalized. There are other complaints from citizens regarding this category that, if we may add, have no clear gendered provisions attached to project funding.

On education, apart from brief disruptions and school closures, the impact of Covid-19 on the ability of parents to meet school fees was and still is a big challenge. The fee-free education policy adopted by the Solomon Islands government in 2009/2010 has basically been ignored as schools charge full fees even with the impact of Covid-19. The lack of cash flow in local villages meant that many parents have called on members of parliament to assist them again (National Parliament of Solomon Islands, 2020b: 14). The Minister for Development Planning, Hon. Rexon Ramofafia, reported in the September 2020 parliament meeting that the social sector, which includes education and health, recorded the second highest expenditure (ibid). Interestingly, the highest recorded expenditure even during the Covid-19 pandemic was the rural development sector, the ministry responsible for administering the rural constituency development funds controlled by parliamentarians. In any case, in his 2020 Supplementary Appropriation Bill speech on 12 August 2020, the Minister for Finance Hon. Harry Kumar informed the nation that his ministry carried out a reprioritization exercise across the whole of government and secured SBD 156 million savings to fund Covid-19 preparedness and response plans (Kumar, 2020). From this alone, it is sufficient to say that the government tried its best within the limits of its resources to cater for Covid-19 responses, including social policy responses. The bilateral and multilateral donors also played a critical role in supporting the country's response to the effects of the pandemic. For instance, the European Union provided a grant of SBD 78 million dollars to the government in late 2020 to enable provinces to deliver services in education and health under improved institutional conditions (National Parliament of Solomon Islands, 2020b: 26).

The Ministry of Health understandably received greater resources to deal with Covid-19. As pointed out earlier, the government allocated SBD 10 million each to the nine provincial health authorities as part of its stimulus package. There are also increased allocations for other supportive ministries such as police and immigration as they joined nurses and doctors as frontline workers. The women and men employed at the borders and in clinics and hospitals were paid special rates. These payments did not always go smoothly. In October 2020, for instance, nurses staged a protest under the auspices of the Solomon Islands Nurses Association over nonpayment of Covid-19-related allowances during emergency operations (RNZ, 30 October 2020). This resulted in the suspension of the Nurses Association as a trade union. The government used emergency powers under Covid-19 regulations to suspend the Nurses Association (Solomon Islands Government, 2 November 2020). Another common criticism of the government's response to Covid-19 in the health sector is that the focus and concentration on Covid-19 led to the neglect of other services and diseases affecting more people in the country. Hon. John Maneniaru summarized it well when speaking in parliament on this exact concern. He said, "Whilst we focus on Covid-19, we must also be mindful that there are also other diseases around us as well. Our hospital has played that important role, but because of the limited human resources that we have, deployment has affected those functions. The resources are also diverted and reprioritized towards Covid-19, which has affected our services" (National Parliament of Solomon Islands, 2020b: 13).

It is also important to acknowledge and highlight other areas that must be better accommodated and addressed in future pandemics. These include support to women, children, the elderly and the marginalized in communities. They have often been neglected even in non-emergency situations. Under Covid-19 responses, there were no specific considerations to protect and support such groups who are usually negatively affected in crisis

situations. Social policies in the country have not been prioritized, partly because of the lack of resources and capacity locally but also because of the general perception by successive governments that they are not priority areas. Nevertheless, non-government organizations as well as bilateral and multilateral donors have been pushing for the recognition of these groups of people over the years and in recent times relevant policies and legislation have been developed in some of these areas. For example, the United Nations Women worked with Pacific partners, including Solomon Islands, to ensure increased access to services for women survivors in times of crises. They are conscious of the usual increases in cases of violence against women in such situations (UN Women, 2020). Apart from such support from external donors, the current social response by government within the stimulus package does not cater for the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. It is something to seriously consider in future responses.

CONCLUSION

As highlighted above, the Solomon Islands government reacted to Covid-19 in what may be regarded a multi-packaged endeavor. With the Governor General's declaration of the state of emergency on 26 March 2020, following the World Health Organization declaration of Covid-19 as a global pandemic, many regulations were made by the prime minister and ministers. Legislative activities in response to Covid-19 were mostly in the form of regulations. At the same time, the response was made in a form of what appears on paper to be inclusive, meaning attempting to address various areas of the economy and people's livelihoods. The so call Economic Stimulus Package is more than economics and includes social responses, including health and education services. The five sectors of the said stimulus package were covered in detail earlier and have been translated and accommodated in the *2020 Appropriation Act* to legitimize government spending on Covid-19 responses. In other words, the stimulus package is a plan that is funded by provisions in the 2020 national budget. Having said that, it is also important to note that while good plans and packages are written up and supported by funds, the implementation and how soon these programs and activities are rolled out is of immense importance in situations such as this. This is an abnormal situation and delays or gaps in implementation will affect people socially and economically.

There have already been initial commendations and criticisms of the government's social and economic responses to Covid-19 as we attempted to highlight in this paper. The use of emergency powers, for instance, can have negative effects if not properly applied in the spirit of the constitution (Foukona, 18 May 2020). As the current Leader of Opposition, Matthew Wale stated, "the State of Emergency legislation was not designed with a pandemic in mind and was not sustainable in the long-term." There is need for a new legislation focusing on Covid-19 and future pandemics to chart how Solomon Islands might respond better socially to pandemics in the future. As we write this report, the Solomon Islands government has commenced the consultation process on the draft *Public Health Emergency Bill 2021* to better respond to public emergency situations in the future.

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**APPENDIX 1: SOCIAL POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 BY POLICY AREA
(SOLOMON ISLANDS, JANUARY–SEPTEMBER 2020)**

	Policy Area	Pensions	Healthcare	Long-term care and disability	Labor market	Education
(1)	Have there been any significant legislative reforms in the indicated policy area during the indicated time period?	Yes	No	No	No	No
(2)	If (1) yes, have any of these reforms been explicit responses to the Covid-19 pandemic?	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
(3)	If (2) yes, has there been significant regional variation in the implementation of these reforms?	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
(4)	Have subnational governments enacted any significant legislative reforms in the indicated policy area during the indicated time period?	No	No	No	No	No
	Policy Area	Family benefits	Housing	Social assistance	Other*	
(1)	Have there been any significant legislative reforms in the indicated policy area during the indicated time period?	No	No	Yes	Yes	
(2)	If (1) yes, have any of these reforms been explicit responses to the Covid-19 pandemic?	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes	
(3)	If (2) yes, has there been significant regional variation in the implementation of these reforms?	N/A	N/A	No	No	
(4)	Have subnational governments enacted any significant legislative reforms in the indicated policy area during the indicated time period?	No	No	No	No	

* Legislative reforms in other policy areas explicitly aimed at social protection, e.g. food subsidies or tax cuts aimed at social protection.

APPENDIX 2: SOCIAL POLICY LEGISLATION IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 (SOLOMON ISLANDS, JANUARY–SEPTEMBER 2020)

Note: As explained in the report, in the Solomon Islands there is as yet no national social policy legislation related to Covid-19. Most legislative work done in this period came in the form of regulations made by government ministers. Below we provide the details of major regulations made during this period (and a complete list in Appendix 3).

Law 1 (Activation of existing law)		
(1)	Number of law	LN29
(2)	Name of law (original language)	NA
(3)	Name of law (English)	Emergency Powers (Covid-19) Regulations 2020
(4)	Date of first parliamentary motion	06 April 2020
(5)	Date of law's enactment	26 March 2020
(6)	Date of law's publication	26 March 2020
(7)	Is the Covid-19 pandemic explicitly mentioned as a motivation in the law or any accompanying text?	Yes
(8)	Was the Covid-19 pandemic a motivation for the initial parliamentary motion for this law?	Yes
(9)	Was the Covid-19 pandemic a motivation for a significant revision of the legislative project after the initial parliamentary motion?	Yes
(10)	Note on (7)-(9) (max. 300 words)	This was an activation of the existing Emergency Powers Act, CAP 11. The declaration of the state of emergency under the act opened the way for a number of regulations. The regulations that follow made way for containing the virus outside of the borders, the restriction of certain rights in that effort, and implementing social policies to support citizens during this period.
(11)	Was this law a legislative package that contained multiple social reform components?	Yes
(12)	If (11) yes, how many distinct social reform components did it contain?	Multiple, through the development of the Economic Stimulus Package discussed in the report.
Law 1: Component 1		
(13)	Policy Area	Other (Legislative reforms in other policy areas explicitly aimed at social protection (e.g. food subsidies or tax cuts aimed at social protection))
(14)	Brief description of reform component (max. 300 words)	As mentioned earlier, this State of Emergency Declaration opened the way for the development of other regulations by appropriate ministers, including specific social policy responses.
(15)	Change in coverage of existing benefits?	Expansion
(16)	Duration of coverage change?	Yes
(17)	If fix-term, duration in months	Started off with four months but has since been extended until 26 November 2020.
(18)	Note on (15)-(17) (max. 200 words)	The declaration of a state of emergency enabled the enactment of regulations that focus on the safety and security of citizens. At the same time, it allowed the enactment of certain regulations by the prime minister and ministers to make amendments using emergency powers during the period of 'crisis'.
(19)	Change in generosity of existing benefits?	Expansion
(20)	Duration of generosity change?	Fix-term
(21)	If fix-term, duration in months	Eight months and may still be extended.
(22)	Note on (19)-(21) (max. 200 words)	Declaration of the state of emergency was made by the Governor General on 26 March for four months. When it lapsed in July, parliament approved its extension as the country is still in a state of crisis.
(23)	Introduction of new benefits?	Not Applicable
(24)	Duration of new benefits?	Fix-term

Law 1: Component 1		
(25)	If fix-term, duration in months	Eight months
(26)	Note on (23)-(25) (max. 200 words)	The state of emergency was just a declaration to activate emergency powers. It is the enactment of regulations that restrict or expand benefits.
(27)	Cuts of existing benefits?	Not Applicable
(28)	Note on (27) (max. 200 words)	There are restrictions made as well, especially on some activities previously enjoyed by citizens such as those enjoyed by small informal businesses on the streets.
(29)	Estimated cost of reform in 2020 (national currency)	SBD 309 million
(30)	Estimated cost of reform in 2021 (national currency)	No idea (there are as yet no discussions about this or future projections as the government is still trying to implement the ESP)
(31)	National Currency Code (ISO 4217)	SBD 090
(32)	Source of cost estimation	News report
(33)	Note (29)-(31) (max. 200 words)	The estimates are taken from the actual government document and press releases from the Solomon Islands Government website/portal.
(34)	If the implementation of the reform should already have started, has the reform been implemented?	partially

Law 2 (Regulation)		
(1)	Number of law	LN30
(2)	Name of law (original language)	NA
(3)	Name of law (English)	Emergency Powers (Covid-19) (Release of Members Discretionary Fund) Order 2020
(4)	Date of first parliamentary motion	27 March 2020
(5)	Date of law's enactment	27 March 2020
(6)	Date of law's publication	27 March 2020
(7)	Is the Covid-19 pandemic explicitly mentioned as a motivation in the law or any accompanying text?	Yes
(8)	Was the Covid-19 pandemic a motivation for the initial parliamentary motion for this law?	Not Applicable
(9)	Was the Covid-19 pandemic a motivation for a significant revision of the legislative project after the initial parliamentary motion?	Yes
(10)	Note on (7)-(9) (max. 300 words)	This is an order made by the prime minister under the state of emergency declaration. It did not have to go through parliament.
(11)	Was this law a legislative package that contained multiple social reform components?	No
(12)	If (11) yes, how many distinct social reform components did it contain?	Not Applicable

Law 2: Component 1		
(13)	Policy Area	Social assistance
(14)	Brief description of reform component (max. 300 words)	The Solomon Islands government reacted to the looming threat of Covid-19 and wanted as far as possible to assist citizens to move out of Honiara, the international entrance to the country. As explained in the report, the government felt that supporting individuals and families to return to their home islands and villages would reduce the chances of them getting the virus when it reached the country. This is a benefit to citizens in the sense that it relieved them from the cost of transport to their own communities through support from their member of parliament.

Law 2: Component 1		
(15)	Change in coverage of existing benefits?	Not Applicable
(16)	Duration of coverage change?	Not Applicable
(17)	<i>If fix-term, duration in months</i>	It is a one-off payment and should be used in the period of the state of emergency.
(18)	Note on (15)-(17) (max. 200 words)	Although MP's discretionary funds or better known as Rural Constituency Development Funds (RCDF) have been a feature of Solomon Islands funding arrangement for many years, this particular support is new and specific as a reaction to Covid-19. That is why we use 'not applicable' above.
(19)	Change in generosity of existing benefits?	Expansion
(20)	Duration of generosity change?	Fix-term
(21)	<i>If fix-term, duration in months</i>	Within the Covid-19 crisis period. It started in March and will lapse in late November 2020.
(22)	Note on (19)-(21) (max. 200 words)	Discretionary funding support to MPs to enable them to hire boats to transport their constituents home is a one-off payment to MPs. However, it is not clear when they are expected to spend the money. However, it is reasonable to expect that the funds are used to transport people home in the period declared as the state of emergency period.
(23)	Introduction of new benefits?	Yes
(24)	Duration of new benefits?	Fix-term
(25)	<i>If fix-term, duration in months</i>	Within the eight months of the state of emergency
(26)	Note on (23)-(25) (max. 200 words)	See explanation above
(27)	Cuts of existing benefits?	No
(28)	Note on (27) (max. 200 words)	It is not an existing benefit, thus not a cut to existing benefits. It is a one-off payment and usage is at the discretion of the MPs representing specific constituencies.
(29)	Estimated cost of reform in 2020 (national currency)	SBD12.5
(30)	Estimated cost of reform in 2021 (national currency)	NA
(31)	National Currency Code (ISO 4217)	SBD 090
(32)	Source of cost estimation	News report
(33)	Note (29)-(31) (max. 200 words)	Each constituency is awarded SBD 250,000 for this undertaking.
(34)	If the implementation of the reform should already have started, has the reform been implemented?	to a large degree

Law 3 (Regulations)		
(1)	Number of law	LN44
(2)	Name of law (original language)	NA
(3)	Name of law (English)	Police Amendment Regulations 2020
(4)	Date of first parliamentary motion	Don't know
(5)	Date of law's enactment	Don't know
(6)	Date of law's publication	06 April 2020
(7)	Is the Covid-19 pandemic explicitly mentioned as a motivation in the law or any accompanying text?	Yes
(8)	Was the Covid-19 pandemic a motivation for the initial parliamentary motion for this law?	Not Applicable
(9)	Was the Covid-19 pandemic a motivation for a significant revision of the legislative project after the initial parliamentary motion?	Yes

Law 3 (Regulations)		
(10)	Note on (7)-(9) (max. 300 words)	Again, this is a regulation made under the Emergency Powers Act following the declaration of the state of emergency. Since police officers are instrumental in the fight against Covid-19 as frontline agents, the regulation was made to value and support their work.
(11)	Was this law a legislative package that contained multiple social reform components?	Yes
(12)	If (11) yes, how many distinct social reform components did it contain?	It is part of the regulations reacting to Covid-19. This particular regulation addresses two areas: (i) all ranks of the Police Force; (ii) Police officers on 12 hours operation schedule at a positive Covid-19 site.

Law 3: Component 1		
(13)	Policy Area	Labor market
(14)	Brief description of reform component (max. 300 words)	We are not really sure what category this component falls under but we feel that is related to the labor market as it focuses on the labor value of police officers during the pandemic. It is specifically to do with the allowances for police officers during the crisis.
(15)	Change in coverage of existing benefits?	Expansion
(16)	Duration of coverage change?	Yes
(17)	If fix-term, duration in months	Eight months period of the state of emergency
(18)	Note on (15)-(17) (max. 200 words)	This is an additional allowance or allowances to police officers during the state of emergency period. It is an expansion of the benefit to all ranks in the police force and specifically to those engaged in frontline tasks in the fight against Covid-19.
(19)	Change in generosity of existing benefits?	Expansion
(20)	Duration of generosity change?	Fix-term
(21)	If fix-term, duration in months	Eight months
(22)	Note on (19)-(21) (max. 200 words)	See explanation above
(23)	Introduction of new benefits?	Yes
(24)	Duration of new benefits?	Fix-term
(25)	If fix-term, duration in months	Eight months during the period of the state of emergency
(26)	Note on (23)-(25) (max. 200 words)	As explained earlier, this increase in allowances is for the period of Covid-19 as per the declaration made and extended.
(27)	Cuts of existing benefits?	No
(28)	Note on (27) (max. 200 words)	Additional support, so it is not a cut.
(29)	Estimated cost of reform in 2020 (national currency)	SBD 5,865,251
(30)	Estimated cost of reform in 2021 (national currency)	Don't know
(31)	National Currency Code (ISO 4217)	SBD 090
(32)	Source of cost estimation	Other
(33)	Note (29)-(31) (max. 200 words)	The estimated amount given is taken from the Appropriation Act 2020 allocation for the Ministry of Police, National Security and Correctional Services. The Appropriation Act was passed in response to the ESP.
(34)	If the implementation of the reform should already have started, has the reform been implemented?	partially

Law 4 (Regulation)		
(1)	Number of law	LN74
(2)	Name of law (original language)	NA
(3)	Name of law (English)	Price Control (Application to Additional Goods and Restriction of Prices (Honiarā) Order 2020
(4)	Date of first parliamentary motion	Don't know

Law 4 (Regulation)		
(5)	Date of law's enactment	Don't know
(6)	Date of law's publication	16 June 2020
(7)	Is the Covid-19 pandemic explicitly mentioned as a motivation in the law or any accompanying text?	No
(8)	Was the Covid-19 pandemic a motivation for the initial parliamentary motion for this law?	Yes
(9)	Was the Covid-19 pandemic a motivation for a significant revision of the legislative project after the initial parliamentary motion?	Yes
(10)	Note on (7)-(9) (max. 300 words)	There are several similar orders given in this area. Some are for other towns apart from Honiara. Others are additional orders adding new items on the list. Although Covid-19 is not specifically mentioned in this particular order, the others that follow did mention Covid-19 in their statements.
(11)	Was this law a legislative package that contained multiple social reform components?	Yes
(12)	If (11) yes, how many distinct social reform components did it contain?	Don't know

Law 4: Component 1		
(13)	Policy Area	Family benefits
(14)	Brief description of reform component (max. 300 words)	We are not really sure what policy area this is. However, it is an effort to control prices to support families and households during the period of the pandemic. People struggle to make ends meet and the government through this order ensures that retailers do not exploit vulnerable people and households by manipulating prices.
(15)	Change in coverage of existing benefits?	Not Applicable
(16)	Duration of coverage change?	Don't know
(17)	If fix-term, duration in months	NA
(18)	Note on (15)-(17) (max. 200 words)	It is to do with controlling the retail price of goods.
(19)	Change in generosity of existing benefits?	Not Applicable
(20)	Duration of generosity change?	Not Applicable
(21)	If fix-term, duration in months	NA
(22)	Note on (19)-(21) (max. 200 words)	NA
(23)	Introduction of new benefits?	Not Applicable
(24)	Duration of new benefits?	Not Applicable
(25)	If fix-term, duration in months	NA
(26)	Note on (23)-(25) (max. 200 words)	NA
(27)	Cuts of existing benefits?	No
(28)	Note on (27) (max. 200 words)	It is a normal process of controlling prices of essential food stuffs to safeguard the interests of families. This is especially critical during the Covid-19 pandemic.
(29)	Estimated cost of reform in 2020 (national currency)	NA
(30)	Estimated cost of reform in 2021 (national currency)	Don't know
(31)	National Currency Code (ISO 4217)	SBD
(32)	Source of cost estimation	Other
(33)	Note (29)-(31) (max. 200 words)	See earlier explanation
(34)	If the implementation of the reform should already have started, has the reform been implemented?	to a large degree

Law 5 (Regulation)		
(1)	Number of law	LN36
(2)	Name of law (original language)	NA
(3)	Name of law (English)	Solomon Islands National Provident Fund (Covid-19 Pandemic) Exemption Order 2020
(4)	Date of first parliamentary motion	Don't know
(5)	Date of law's enactment	Don't know
(6)	Date of law's publication	01 April 2020
(7)	Is the Covid-19 pandemic explicitly mentioned as a motivation in the law or any accompanying text?	Yes
(8)	Was the Covid-19 pandemic a motivation for the initial parliamentary motion for this law?	Not Applicable
(9)	Was the Covid-19 pandemic a motivation for a significant revision of the legislative project after the initial parliamentary motion?	Yes
(10)	Note on (7)-(9) (max. 300 words)	Covid-19 resulted in the unemployment of many while some went on unpaid leave, reduced employment days and other sorts of arrangements. Since formally employed people were struggling to make end meet with the government's insistence on them returning to their villages, the Solomon Islands National Provident Fund Board decided to exempt members from the restriction of the National Provident Fund Act to withdraw their savings. This order gave members the opportunity to withdraw part of their savings to support themselves during the Covid-19 pandemic.
(11)	Was this law a legislative package that contained multiple social reform components?	Yes
(12)	If (11) yes, how many distinct social reform components did it contain?	2

Law 5: Component 1		
(13)	Policy Area	Pensions
(14)	Brief description of reform component (max. 300 words)	The order allowed members to withdraw 50% of their total savings if the total stood at less than SBD 5,000. If their total savings in the NPF are more than SBD 5,000, the exemption order allowed members to withdraw not more than SBD 5,000 from their account.
(15)	Change in coverage of existing benefits?	Expansion
(16)	Duration of coverage change?	Yes
(17)	If fix-term, duration in months	Three months
(18)	Note on (15)-(17) (max. 200 words)	The order allowed members to withdraw the prescribed amounts under the order between 1 April to 30 June 2020.
(19)	Change in generosity of existing benefits?	Expansion
(20)	Duration of generosity change?	Fix-term
(21)	If fix-term, duration in months	Three months
(22)	Note on (19)-(21) (max. 200 words)	See explanation above
(23)	Introduction of new benefits?	Yes
(24)	Duration of new benefits?	Fix-term
(25)	If fix-term, duration in months	Three months
(26)	Note on (23)-(25) (max. 200 words)	The exemption order allowed members to withdraw part of their funds for a limited time only. It was the first time that such an opening was allowed for members to access their saving.
(27)	Cuts of existing benefits?	No
(28)	Note on (27) (max. 200 words)	No cuts as it was an opening for NPF members to access their savings for a limited period.

Law 5: Component 1		
(29)	Estimated cost of reform in 2020 (national currency)	SBD 200 million
(30)	Estimated cost of reform in 2021 (national currency)	NA
(31)	National Currency Code (ISO 4217)	SBD 090
(32)	Source of cost estimation	News report
(33)	Note (29)-(31) (max. 200 words)	It was estimated that if all members withdraw their savings under this order, around SBD 200 million would be withdrawn and pumped into the local economy.
(34)	If the implementation of the reform should already have started, has the reform been implemented?	completely

APPENDIX 3: ALL REGULATIONS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 (SOLOMON ISLANDS, JANUARY-SEPTEMBER 2020)

Here is the full list of Regulations issued during the period of reporting that were made in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and following the Proclamation by the Governor General of Solomon Islands on the State of Public Emergency.

- » Solomon Islands Independence Order 1978 - Proclamation Declaring State of Public Emergency - LN 28, 2020
- » Emergency Powers Act - Emergency Powers (COVID-19 (No. 2) Regulations 2020 - LN 47, 2020
- » Emergency Powers Act - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 - LN 47, 2020
- » Emergency Powers Act - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (No.2) (Amendment No.2) Regulations 2020 - LN 70, 2020
- » Emergency Powers Act - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (No.2) (Amendment No.3) Regulations 2020 - LN 92, 2020
- » Emergency Powers Act - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (No.2) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 - LN 57, 2020
- » Emergency Powers Act - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (No.2) Regulations 2020 - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (Declaration of Honiara as Emergency Zone) (Amendment) Order 2020 - LN 54, 2020
- » Emergency Powers Act - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (No.2) Regulations 2020 - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (Declaration of Quarantine Stations) (Amendment No.4) Order 2020 - LN 98, 2020
- » Emergency Powers Act - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (No.2) Regulations 2020 - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (Declaration of Quarantine Stations) (Amendment No.5) Order 2020 - LN 101, 2020
- » Emergency Powers Act - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (No.2) Regulations 2020 - Emergency Powers (COVID-19) (Declaration of Quarantine Stations) (Amendment) (No.3) Order 2020 - LN 77, 2020
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