

World Vision projects



Early childhood education: A solid foundation

In the Solomon Islands, The Girl Child Reading and Rescue Project



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“Literacy helps to bind together different aspects of life. With the building blocks of words, which translate into ideas, people and communities can build a “bigger picture” for their future.”

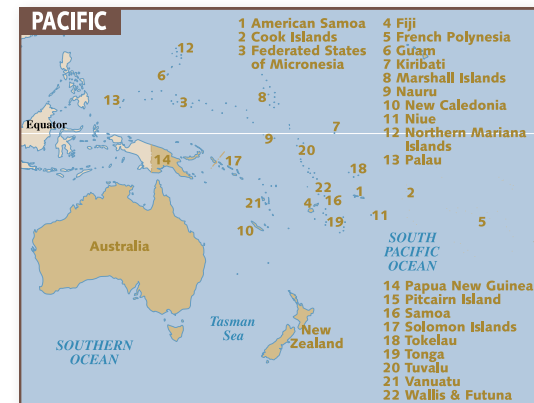


About Solomon Islands

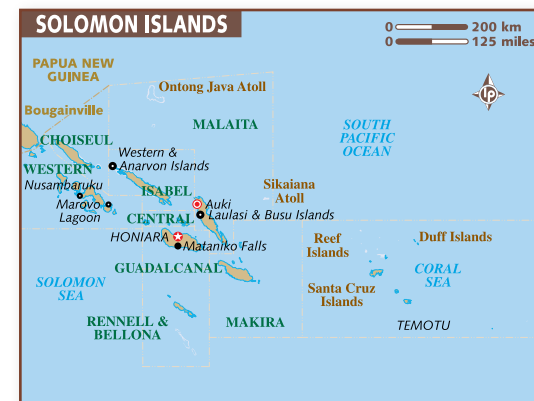
Solomon Islands is an archipelago of volcanic islands and coral atolls in the South-West Pacific. Named after fabled “King Solomon’s mine” in 1586 by Spanish explorer, Alvaro de Mendana, these islands have been more widely known as the Hepi (Happy) Isles because of the inhabitants’ nature and the islands’ natural beauty.

Since gaining independence from Britain in 1978, and with a rapid transition to modernity, these islands have been in constant political turmoil. Civil unrest (which has been intensifying since 1990), ethnic violence and subsequent economic collapse have made life difficult for the people of Solomon Islands.

Now, with the country’s infrastructure still unstable, early education is just one sector under severe strain – especially in rural areas.



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Early education in Solomon Islands

Fifty percent of all five-to-nine year olds in Solomon Islands do not attend school. Census results (1999) also show that the adult literacy rate is only 64 percent, which means Solomon Islanders are the most illiterate in the Pacific.

United Nations Millennium Development Goal Two aims to achieve universal primary education for all children by the year 2015. However current data indicates that Solomon Islands will not meet this goal.

In Solomon Islands it is quite common for children in rural areas to start school when they are already eight or nine years of age. The majority of these children have no exposure to any early education like pre-school or kindergarten. This lack of exposure to a formal learning environment can make it difficult for a child to settle into a disciplined classroom. Many of these children have also experienced poor nutrition (or under nutrition) which contributes to poor cognitive development, and has a profound effect on their health and their ability to learn, communicate, socialise, reason and adapt to their environment. Any of these situations can mean that children are ill prepared for the formal education system if and when they do enrol.

Government initiatives

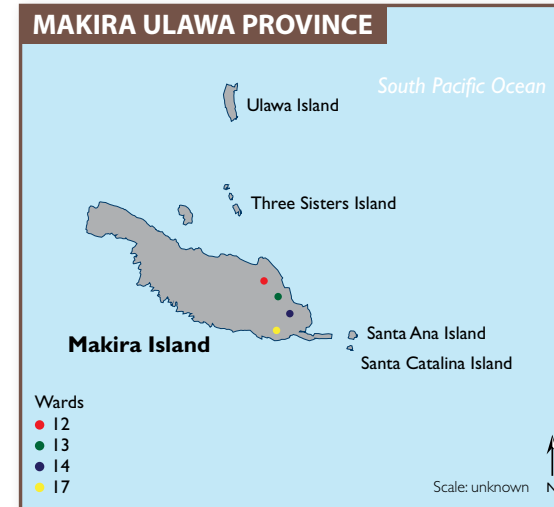
The Government of Solomon Islands has attempted to address poor literacy levels and retention rates in the early years of primary school by replacing the former Papua New Guinean primary school curriculum with a locally-developed and more culturally appropriate curriculum. Taught in English, Pidgin or other local languages, this new curriculum and approach is called the Nguzunguzu system and is named after a spirit from Solomon Islands' mythology that was traditionally carved on the bows of canoes. The Nguzunguzu spirit originated from the island of Makira.

As part of the Nguzunguzu system, the Ministry of Education has also developed an Early Childhood Education (ECE) policy aimed at three-to-five year olds. This policy requires children to have three years of ECE or "kindy" before enrolling in primary school. While the Makira-Ulawa Provincial Ministry of Education (PMoE) attempts to enforce this policy, the responsibility for implementing it lies with local communities. Unfortunately, these communities receive no material or financial support from any level of government to help them in this task.



Focus on Makira

Makira is the largest island in the Makira-Ulawa Province. Illiteracy is particularly high here, as are the drop-out rates during early primary school. According to Henry Ratah, Chief Education Officer for the Provincial Ministry of Education, literacy rates of Makira-Ulawa children are the lowest in Solomon Islands. Girls perform better than boys, however there are fewer girls at school than boys.



Urban and even peri-urban areas are likely to have some of the available personnel and skills to implement government education policies, however rural communities find it much more difficult. Villagers on Makira are mostly fishermen and gardening women. Most of them live in remote communities and they are usually a long canoe ride or several hours walk from the scarce health and education services that are available. Access to coastal communities on the eastern side of the island is only by boat, and there are often rough seas and steep, black-sand beaches to cross.

Most rural and remote communities, where 85% of the country's population live, are dominated by young people under 15, their parents (who themselves may have limited or no literacy skills) and the elderly. While the desire to implement the ECE policy may exist in these regions, the skills required for implementation, such as well-developed literacy and teaching skills, are mostly not available. For rural communities the ECE policy, for the most part, is just a policy without action.



The Girl Child Reading and Rescue Project

About the project

The Girl Child Reading and Rescue Project (GCRRP) is based in some of the most remote communities of East Makira, and aims to equip children with the basic literacy and numeracy level that is appropriate for rural life and that allows them entry into the formal school system.

The project title of “Girl Child Reading and Rescue Project” often prompts the question, “Why girl child rescue?”.

The GCRRP was never intended to target only girls. All children aged between three and five years (the target age group of the ECE policy) are included. It would be counter productive to only focus on girls because adult males and, in particular, the fathers of boys, may not be supportive of such a project.

The project title is powerful, however, because it points out the importance of including girls in the education system so that they can be “rescued” from a limited, pre-determined village life of childbearing and domestic work as their only life option.

The goal

The project’s goal is for 1,000 children from 20 communities in East Makira to achieve the basic development level for primary school entrance. The project aims to:

- Provide training for 20 community trainers from 20 villages in East Makira
- Conduct community ECE classes for 1,000 children in 20 communities
- Strengthen the capacity of the Makira-Ulawa Provincial Government so they can deliver appropriate ECE.

Project management

The GCRRP is run by World Vision Solomon Islands (WVSI). Based in Kirakira, the administrative centre for Makira-Ulawa Province, WVSI has managed numerous projects over the years. Recently, several of these projects have included a literacy component. Margaret Ngauha’a, who has an understanding of local language and culture as well as language training skills, is responsible for this literacy input.

Partnerships: Training and health

In partnership with the PMoE, the GCRRP began by talking with communities about the ECE policy. Communities then formed “kindy committees” and nominated two community members to be trained as formal “trainers”. To be eligible, the trainers required a minimum of form three secondary schooling (which is ten years of formal education) and preferably form five secondary



schooling. The nominated community trainers then participated in a Field-Based Training project for ECE trainers, which was facilitated by WVSI and delivered by the PMoE's ECE coordinator. The PMoE also assessed the trainers on completion of the training project.

The trainers learnt to develop resources using local materials, thus keeping the kindy project relevant and local. They also learnt to develop children's skills in six prescribed areas of child development: physical, social, cognitive, language, emotional and moral.

To support the community trainers once they were teaching classes, the project developed "model" classrooms and facilities in three strategic locations. These model classrooms aim to provide access and support to the surrounding kindys and also provide facilities for trainers and parents to receive ongoing training.

The Health Promotion Unit from the hospital in Kirakira also contributes to training. The importance of nutrition and hygiene to child development is central to the training project, and this Unit provides nutrition and hygiene resources for the trainers to use in the classroom.

Ongoing project support is also provided by WVSI's project team, which visits each of the communities within the project area at least once each month. Because of the remoteness of many of the communities the WVSI project team plays a vital role in providing encouragement and support for the trainers, and providing an opportunity to exchange ideas. And, more importantly, the PMoE's ECE coordinator accompanies them on these visits, which ensures the PMoE take a greater responsibility for the implementation of their policy.

Community response

The Markira community's support for the GCRRP has been overwhelmingly positive. Trainers are reimbursed either in-kind or with a combination of money and in-kind support, thanks to local community contributions.

In communities where cash is very scarce, and people rely on their gardens and fishing for their livelihood, the time needed to prepare and deliver quality kindy projects is not easily found. However, thanks to community support for the kindy trainers, the planned two-to-three-day week, with morning classes from 8am to 11am, has become a five-day week with classes from 8am to noon in most kindys.

"Many of our children have missed out on going to school because of limited access to education facilities such as inadequate schools. World Vision has done tremendous work by giving our children a good start to education."

Gabriel Murray, Church Pastor in Toraa village



Project results

After only 18 months the GCRRP has already noted significant changes – some planned and others not.

Enrolments

Clearly as a result of this project, an increase in primary school enrolment has occurred. Because the age for kindy is three-to-five years, and the pre-requisite for entry into primary school is the completion of three years of kindy, the project's goal of 1,000 children gaining sufficient level of literacy to enrol in primary school has not yet been achieved. However, after only 18 months of the project, 183 five-year-olds (92 boys and 91 girls) from GCRRP kindys have been accepted for enrolment into primary school.

“Since the introduction of the Girl Child Reading and Rescue Project, I have witnessed a lot of changes not only in my child but in other children who are also enrolled in the kindergarten.

“I have seen a big difference which this project has brought to my child. When I compared my child who went to primary school with the one now in kindergarten class, I found that the one in kindy is brighter than the one in primary school. The child in kindergarten can easily say his alphabet and count from one to 20 while the one doing his first year in primary school, and has never been to kindergarten, struggles to do the same.

“This shows that the kindergarten concept is a very good one and is well designed to help develop a child’s mind so the child is mentally prepared when he enters primary school.”

Susan Samuel, a mother from Toroa village

Trainers

After 18 months, with 15 months remaining of the three-year funding period, 88 trainers are conducting classes in 28 community kindys for 1,023 students. The project had an initial target of training 20 kindy trainers in 20 communities. This over achievement is due to non-target communities observing the project's results and requesting to participate.



Banana and fish and pawpaw
Hemi gutfala kaikai
Loli and twisti and chewing gum
Hemi no gutfala kaikai

A song sung by children in a kindy

Gender equality

Another project result is that 26 of the 88 trainers are male. For Solomon Islands this is very significant because men are not normally involved in the role of instructing and caring for such young children.

It is testament to the success of the project that, within beneficiary communities, both men and women refer to the GCRRP without any mention of the absence of boys in the project title. Community ownership and the above results also demonstrate gender equality at both the trainer and student level. The strong impact of the project on these communities has, to a large degree, 'mainstreamed' gender, at least within the kindys in the project area.

"This is not an easy role for men – working with such young children. It involves wiping the noses of children and cleaning up after them."

Woman in Toroa village

Nutrition

Each child who attends kindy is required to bring a snack. This practice has had a dramatic impact on the nutritional levels of not only the kindy children, but the whole community. Thanks to the combination of the kindy committee's request to bring a snack, and peer pressure, whole families have taken on the kindy project's nutritional messages and applied them to all age groups.

For visitors returning to the communities within the project area, the noticeable difference in the physical health and wellbeing of the young children is startling. Where running noses, eye and ear infections, and skin diseases, such as ringworm, scabies and grille, were once common, they are now noticeably absent.

"My child can now easily say a prayer, something which he didn't do before he enrolled for the class. My child is also demanding a good breakfast every morning before she goes to school and this has made us, the parents, get up early each morning to prepare her breakfast. And because they are eating well every day, our children's health has improved tremendously. God is using World Vision as a channel to reach out to his people".

Evelyne Anseto, a mother

"Two years ago many of the five-year-old children looked like three-year-olds. Now three-year-olds look like three-year-olds and five-year-olds look like five-year-olds".

A visitor to the project area communities who has returned after an absence of two years



Hygiene

Along with nutrition, good hygiene is also a strong message within the project. To attend kindy, children must not only bring a snack, they and their clothes must be clean.

**Dadi hemi save wasim kaleko blong Pikinini. (Daddy can wash children's clothes.)
A poster in a kindy**

**“My girl makes us all get up early and eat breakfast and prepare her a snack for kindy. She also tells me to wash her clothes because they have to be clean.”
Samuel Waitara, a father**

Community engagement

One unplanned outcome from the project is that kindys have provided a way for different generations to interact and engage. Interaction with parents, particularly mothers, was a fairly predictable outcome, however the focus on the six aspects of child development – physical, social, cognitive, language, emotional and moral – has meant that members from most groups within the community are actively involved one way or another.

Men and older boys have built playground equipment, such as swings, climbing frames and see-saws. Climbing and swinging was previously done in trees, without supervision, and often resulted in injury.

Older people are engaged in imparting local cultural traditions, history and stories, which form an integral part of the kindy project. This also helps maintain history and identity through the oral tradition and, now, in written form. People regularly comment on the return of story telling and local rhymes that had been forgotten. For communities caught between tradition and modernity it is important that the two are compatible.

“I have noticed that the children are beginning to learn more about our local items and knowledge. The children have become more aware of the use of the local items, such as shells, and their interest for custom and traditional stories has increased.”

Eddie Nunua of Naharahau village



Government recognition

According to Henry Ratah, the PMoE's Chief Education Officer, the project has achieved recognition well beyond the project area, and throughout both the primary and secondary education sectors in Makira-Ulawa Province. The Provincial Minister for Education, David Horesi, is so impressed with the project that he involves himself personally at all relevant stakeholder meetings. According to the minister, Makira-Ulawa is the only province in Solomon Islands to have implemented the ECE policy to any significant degree and, "this is entirely a result of World Vision's GCRR Project."

The PMoE has even approached the WVSI project team with a proposal to work with the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education to deliver its Certificate in Early Childhood Education in Kirakira. Such a decentralised, part-time delivery mode would be a first for higher education in Solomon Islands. The PMoE is keen for the ECE trainers, who have successfully completed the Field-Based Training through the GCRRP, to become formally qualified and is endeavouring to secure an ongoing budget for the employment of the graduates of the certificate course, organised in partnership with WVSI. A project like this would build on the capacity of the province to deliver ECE, and would contribute significantly to the sustainability of this work.



The future: Achieving literacy in the Solomon Islands

After 18 months the GCRRP is already a very successful project. It has clearly shown that community ownership is the key for success, which may seem obvious but it is often overlooked in the eagerness to implement time-bound projects.

Encouraged by these early achievements, the GCRRP is now planning to extend the project to include all of the Makira-Ulawa Province and hopes to engage with the PMoE in the delivery of the Certificate of Early Childhood Education. They also plan to provide further training and professional development for the trainers who are currently teaching but are not included in the ECE certificate course.

The GCRRP has provided a model for other provinces that have not been able to implement the ECE policy effectively and the Makira-Ulawa Provincial Government has gained recognition in this field, thanks largely to its willingness to engage with WVSI in implementing the GCRRP.

From a wider perspective, this project has shown how positive and broad-reaching the impact of literacy can be. The GCRRP manager, Margaret Ngauha'a, would like literacy to be a component of all WVSI projects. Practical literacy helps to make any project more effective, simply because when participants are literate they can better understand the project objectives and how beneficial they can be for their life.

Literacy helps to bind together different aspects of life. With the building blocks of words, which translate into ideas, people and communities can build a "bigger picture" for their future.



Written by Dr John Donnelly
Photography by Gary Fagan and Tanya Radosavjevic

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World Vision Australia
GPO Box 9944
Melbourne 3001

worldvision.com.au
13 32 40



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