SOLOMON ISLANDS

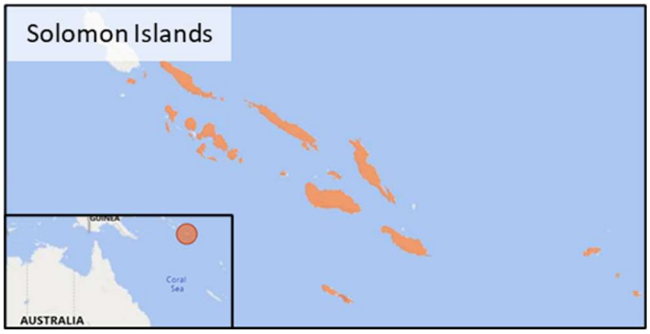
COVID-19 Water Security Risk Index

Case study brief

Updated: 1 Jan 2021

This case study brief provides a snapshot of a country's water-related risks from COVID-19 to better understand and prioritise water investments. Results are based on the findings of the COVID-19 Water Security Risk Index for the Indo-Pacific region, an initiative of the Australian Water Partnership in support of the Australian Government's Partnerships for Recovery policy.

The Solomon Islands is a small island country in the South Pacific, with a population of almost 700,000 people distributed across six major islands and over 900 smaller islands. The country does not have land borders with any other country, and has one international airport in the capital, Honiara.



MAP OF THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

Results

Ability to delay

Low risk

Solomon Islands has no land borders, it is not heavily dependent on tourism, and as already demonstrated, the country successfully delayed the virus entering the country for seven months after the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020.

Ability to contain

Extremely high risk

Largely due to water-related factors

Although Solomon Islands has a low urban population and low population density, it has poor access to WASH services, high poverty rates, low ICT coverage, and low education levels. The increases in in-country testing capacity and quarantine facilities have improved their ability to contain the spread. There were no data available on legislative capacity and public health metrics.

Ability to treat

Very high risk

Somewhat due to water-related factors

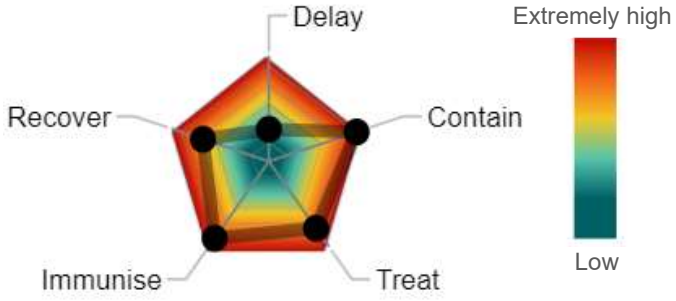
The prevalence of comorbidities associated with COVID-19 mortality is extremely high in elderly people, the country has a low level of medical care expenditure, workforce and infrastructure, and high vulnerability to natural disasters, which would make it more difficult to respond to a pandemic, should a natural disaster occur. Note that cyclone season occurs between November to April.

Ability to recover

High risk

Solomon Islands has low economic strength, high dependence on aid, vulnerability to natural disasters, moderate reliance on tourism, and low agricultural and energy self-sufficiency. The country's strengths in their ability to recover include water utility income generation (although it only serves the capital and three provincial urban centres) and economic water security. The government's economic stimulus package is a positive step towards the country's recovery.

The COVID-19 Water Security Risk Index shows that the Solomon Islands is at **very high risk** of COVID-19. While there have only been 17 cases due to the government's ability to delay the spark, the most critical elements leading to the very high risk score in the Solomon Islands are (i) the **poor ability to contain the spread** of the virus, which would result in severe consequences should it spark in significant numbers; and (ii) the limited healthcare facilities and resources resulting in a **limited ability to treat those in need.**[1]
As vaccines have not yet been rolled out, the ability to immunise the population is not yet considered in the assessment.



SOLOMON ISLANDS' COUNTRY RISK PROFILE

Health response

The Solomon Islands has had 17 cases of COVID-19, all recorded in October and November. All cases are travellers who arrived in repatriation flights, despite testing negative three times before travelling to the Solomon Islands.[1]

So far, more than 1,100 Solomon Islanders have been repatriated, with repatriations starting in May 2020,[2] and some repatriation flights being cancelled due to lack of quarantine facilities.[3] More repatriation flights are planned, and passengers need to test negative three times before they can travel back to the country.

Before October, the Solomon Islands had remained free of the virus by taking several measures, such as requiring medical certificates to allow entry to international passengers, 14-day quarantine for those coming from infected countries, closing the borders to non-citizens (22 Mar 2020), declaring a National State of Emergency (24 Mar 2020), temporarily closing schools and universities, prohibiting public gatherings, and encouraging the return of Honiara residents to their provinces and villages.

Testing has been very limited. As of June (before any cases were confirmed), only 4,500 tests had been conducted (locally and overseas).[4] In May, with the support of the World Health Organisation, the country established a testing facility, before which all tests were sent overseas.

There have been numerous breaches to border restrictions (via sea) and quarantine, which are being investigated and dealt with by government authorities.

Solomon Islands authorities on the border with Bougainville (Papua New Guinea), where there has only been one confirmed case, have said they will no longer be detaining border crossers due to a lack of quarantine facilities on the western border (8 Sep 2020).[3]

Economic response

The Solomon Islands is heading towards recession due to COVID-19, with an expected -5% GDP growth, primarily due to disruptions in export markets, supply chains and travel restrictions.[5]
The country has received approximately USD100 million in aid – 7% of the country's GDP from several donors including Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, UNICEF, and the International Monetary Fund.[6, 7, 8]

In May, the government announced a SBD309 million (USD37.9 million) economic stimulus package to address the impacts of the pandemic.[5] The stimulus package includes a five-year tax holiday for tourism operators in the country and USD8.5 million worth of subsidies for copra and cocoa export products,[9] but it does not include unemployment or cash benefits. Importantly, the package also includes SBD5 million (USD 613,000) of capital and equity injection in Solomon Water, the national water utility, to stimulate domestic economic activities and implement tariff relief measures.[5]

Recommendations

To strengthen the country's ability to contain:

1. **Invest in improving access to WASH services** – Solomon Islanders have poor access to WASH at home, especially in informal settlements and in rural areas. Improving the access to WASH would significantly reduce the risk posed by COVID-19 by reducing overcrowding at water access points, facilitating hygiene practices in the home, and allowing for better physical distancing.
2. **Implement wastewater monitoring in high-risk areas** – Wastewater epidemiology in high-risk areas would be an effective way of identifying new cases and controlling the potential spread. Given that the virus has entered the country and that Solomon Islands has low capacity to test potentially infected individuals, wastewater epidemiology could be used to identify new infections. High risk sites would include quarantine accommodation, the national hospital, and airport facilities.

To strengthen the country's ability to recover:

3. **Focus on rural and village-level development** – Solomon Islands is a society of villages. Rural development will improve the country's ability to delay, recover and mitigate the effects of the pandemic. When the government encouraged people in Honiara to return to their villages, it underlined the importance of the village as the focal point for development.[10]

Acknowledgements

To learn more about the COVID-19 Water Security Risk Index and access the data, visit: www.watercentre.org/research/research-impacts/covid-19-water-security-risk-index

This work was funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Water Partnership and implemented by the International WaterCentre and the School of Medicine at Griffith University. The Risk Index builds upon the Asian Development Bank's Asian Water Development Outlook as well as public health risk frameworks and indicators. For more information, visit: www.adb.org

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