



# Vaka Pasifika Solomon Islands Fellowship Scheme

## Action Research Report

SEPTEMBER 2025

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*Photo: Youth collecting sea cucumbers in Solomon Islands.*

*Credit: Hampus Eriksson.*



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# Introduction

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Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) are a financing mechanism available to Members of the Solomon Islands National Parliament (MP). The funds are dispersed from the national budget and are spent at the discretion of sitting MPs (Baker 2022). The intent behind CDFs is that local politicians are best able to recognise needs and opportunities within their constituencies and, so, providing direct funding through MPs allows for efficient provision of goods, services and/or projects that benefit their communities (Baskin 2014; Barbara 2019; Gordon & Cheeseman 2024).

In Solomon Islands, CDFs have often been in the spotlight and are one of the most well-known public finance mechanisms in the country. Although CDFs are intended to promote positive development that benefits local populations, the funds are commonly seen by citizens and those in the broader Solomon Islands development ecosystem as being a poorly governed form of expedient funding for sitting MPs. The combination of large amounts of money and limited practical oversight have led to a perception of CDFs as putting enormous pressure on both the parliamentary functions and the Ministry of Rural development, even leading to perceptions that CDFs can contribute to corruption (Futaiasi 2023). Changes to legislation in 2023 paved a pathway to greater transparency and accountability between MPs, their local constituents and the broader development community regarding CDF spending.

This report details findings from an action research project that has accompanied local efforts that have been supported by the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Pacific Office' *Vaka Pasifika* project into strengthening public financial management in the Pacific. As is discussed below, these efforts have evolved to focus on CDFs as a site for potential reform with broadscale impact, as identified by local accountability ecosystem stakeholders. The action research has been a joint effort of staff from the Centre for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University and local researcher, Ali Tuhanuku,<sup>1</sup> since mid-2024. Prior to the action research taking place, we undertook a scoping exercise for UNDP through a political economic analysis of the Solomon Islands accountability ecosystem (Craney & Tuhanuku 2023). This report contextualises the focal issue of CDF reform in Solomon Islands in the broader landscape of strengthening public financial management, outlines the processes followed in determining the approach and intervention decided upon by local stakeholders to address CDF reform, and offers lessons for how complex adaptive developmental change can be supported.

The report is presented in seven sections. The first section provides an overview of Constituency Development Funds and the Solomon Islands context. The second section outlines the fellowship initiatives that have been proposed and undertaken to address CDF reform in Solomon Islands through the *Vaka Pasifika* project. The third and fourth sections detail the political and operational realities, respectively, that have shaped how the intervention has evolved and adapted over time. The fifth section discusses the early signs of impact of the intervention, while recognising that it is still in its infancy and so strong claims of impact cannot yet be made. The sixth section details lessons for UNDP and other development partners looking to support politically sensitive reform efforts. The final

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Tuhanuku has played a joint role in the Solomon Islands chapter of the *Vaka Pasifika* project. Originally recruited as part of the accountability research team, and later the action research team, Ali's technical and cultural knowledge, as well as experience working for development organisations including UNDP, saw him recruited at the local UNDP adviser and facilitator to the Solomon Islands intervention. He has continued in both roles simultaneously throughout the process.

section offers some reflections from the action research process on the importance of clear purpose and the role of formal and informal power in addressing complex social change.

# The issue: Constituency Development Funds

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Primarily occurring in Commonwealth countries, CDFs are or have been a component of national budgets in more than 20 countries (Futaiasi 2023; van Zyl 2010). The scale of CDF investment in Solomon Islands, however, far exceeds that of most other settings. Estimates range from CDFs accounting for between one-fifth to one-third of the total national development budget – a far greater proportion of spending than in other countries (Gordon & Cheeseman 2024; SBM 2023; Wiltshire et al 2020). Between 2021 and 2025, CDFs averaged 26% of the total development budget, peaking at 36% in 2021 and never being lower than 18%, in 2024.

Constituency Development Funds in Solomon Islands have been a source of tension across politics, development and civil society for decades. They have been criticised both for a lack of transparency (Wiltshire & Batley 2018), as well as perceptions that they distort the democratic process through patronage and clientelism practices (Cox 2009; Futaiasi 2023; Gordon & Cheeseman 2024; Keke & Ride 2023; Moore 2004). As one interlocutor described in our accountability ecosystems analysis, CDFs have focused politics such that a ‘handout mentality is the name of the game’ (Craney & Tuhanuku, 2023:9). Despite long-held perceptions from across Solomon Islands society of CDFs corrupting proper democratic processes and a multitude of development agency workshops, trainings and projects focused on accountability, anti-corruption and transparency, the scope and influence of CDFs has only increased.

The passage of the Constituency Development Act 2023 by the National Parliament of Solomon Islands, which explicitly provides for the auditing of CDF, created an opportunity to both enact stronger, locally relevant forms of accountability as well as foster community demand for enhanced accountability regarding public funds. The Act provides a legal foundation for reform of CDFs to promote accountability. Key features of the Act include the removal of discretionary powers that MPs have over CDF spending, a requirement that CDF expenditure provides fair representation of diverse communities (such as traditional leaders, women and youth), and that CDF spending be inclusive of planning and budgeting with priority setting involving members of local communities (SIG 2023). A further requirement is that CDFs be audited. Although well intentioned, this requirement poses an institutional challenge to the Office of the Auditor-General, which only has capacity to audit roughly 10% of communities each election cycle.

Concurrent to the passage of the Constituency Development Act 2023, UNDP was supporting research into how accountability is understood and practiced in Solomon Islands (Craney & Tuhanuku 2023). One intended aim of this research was to support the identification of local actors who could be convened as a ‘Fellowship Scheme’ and be supported by UNDP to identify and strengthen a specific area of public financial management. This research specifically included representation from the formal accountability institutions that provide oversight on the spending of public finances, recognising their key roles in implementing programmatic changes necessitated by the new Act of Parliament. Key stakeholders that we spoke to articulated that the timing of the Act made attractive the prospect of focusing the fellowship on CDF reform. Given the centrality of CDFs to public financial

management in Solomon Islands, UNDP supported this focus following further consultation with local communities and civil society beyond Honiara.

## The approach: locally led collective action

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UNDP, under the auspices of their *Vaka Pasifika* program, offered to support a locally identified and designed initiative to strengthen public financial management and accountability practices. The precise form of the intervention was not prescribed, although there was an intention to include a component that brought together actors within the Solomon Islands accountability ecosystem to be able to work collaboratively. This approach of supporting a coalition of partners rather than one or two standalone actors is recognised as being a particularly effective approach for addressing developmental issues that are politically sensitive (Sidel & Faustino 2020). Coalition building allows for key stakeholders to utilise their knowledge of how change happens in local settings to influence policy and practice. This can be explained as using 'small p' politics to influence 'big P politics,' (Craney et al 2023) or as shaping the 'rules of the game' through knowledge of the 'games within the rules' (Leftwich 2006) that lead to the often-unrecognised forms of immanent processes that drive social change (Cowen & Shenton 1996). Examples from within the Pacific have demonstrated the suitability of a coalition approach to driving positive social change in the region (Craney & Hudson 2020; Denney & McLaren 2016; Roche et al 2020). The *Vaka Pasifika* project team framed their support for a coalition approach in terms of building 'fellowships' where UNDP could utilise its convening power to assist members to engage in collaboration and peer support.

Focusing on CDFs was a straightforward decision for key stakeholders in the accountability ecosystem of Solomon Islands. CDFs have been a source of public and developmental contention for over a decade, with the centrality of the funding to national politics being connected to perceptions of poor governance (Batley 2015; Cox 2009; Craney & Tuhanuku 2023). Two further factors influenced the decision to focus on CDFs. The first was the aforementioned passage of the Constituency Development Act 2023. The second was a symmetry with work already being undertaken by UNDP and accountability institutions that included a focus on CDFs, although it must be noted that the *Vaka Pasifika* project team did not direct the decision by local stakeholders to centre their activities on CDF reform.

Information presented in this report comes from an action research project designed from the outset of the *Vaka Pasifika* project to accompany the effort to support locally led collective action to positively influence CDF reform in Solomon Islands. This research included a local researcher, Ali Tuhanuku, partnered with an Australian-based researcher, Aidan Craney, supported by colleagues from the Centre for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University. As noted above, the research process commenced with a political economic analysis of the local accountability ecosystem, following which Tuhanuku was recruited by the *Vaka Pasifika* project team to also act as the local adviser to the intended fellowship intervention. Throughout the intervention process, Tuhanuku has had regular informal conversations and occasional formal interviews with key stakeholders in Honiara and the two sites of the pilot project (discussed below), East Areare and North Guadalcanal, holding monthly meetings with Craney to discuss progress and reflect on lessons being learned. Tuhanuku has also occupied the two positions of action researcher and local UNDP adviser throughout this period,

meaning he has been both central to the implementation of the intervention and reflecting on the challenges and opportunities that have arisen. This report draws on a combination of academic literature, insights from interviews that contributed to our aforementioned political economic analysis, participant observations from the accompaniment of a scoping mission to East Areare constituency and events emanating from said mission, interviews with key stakeholders, and observations from a July 2025 regional workshop for *Vaka Pasifika* attended by five of the local stakeholders.

# **The intervention: global precedents, coalition-building and performance auditing**

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## **ESTABLISHING A COALITION (JUNE 2024)**

The initial intention of the Solomon Islands intervention was to build a fellowship of national-level accountability stakeholders. The *Vaka Pasifika* project team, alongside the local UNDP adviser, assembled a list of seven figures – drawn from parliament, civil society and the public service – to potentially act as an ‘anchor’ member of the fellowship. The Auditor-General, David Dennis, was one of these figures and emerged as a key stakeholder due to his willingness to brainstorm ideas for improved public financial management and intimate knowledge of how CDFs operate. He was an interviewee for the accountability ecosystems analysis undertaken for UNDP, where he expressed a willingness to be involved in efforts to work alongside UNDP to improve accountability (Craney & Tuhanuku 2023). David has strong networks across politics, business and the civil service – importantly, these networks include the UNDP *Vaka Pasifika* project manager as well as the local adviser.

The UNDP adviser collaborated closely with the Auditor-General to identify a diverse group of influential individuals capable of working together to design and execute a pilot project aimed at enhancing the accountability of the Constituency Development Fund. The initial fellowship members identified included the heads of the mandated independent oversight bodies – specifically, the Leadership Code Commission, the Office of the Ombudsman and the Solomon Islands Independent Commission Against Corruption – as they have the best contemporary knowledge of formal and informal accountability practices (and malpractices). It was decided that the Ministry of Rural Development (MRD), which oversees the disbursement and monitoring of CDF acquittals, should also be included. Additionally, the MRD is spearheading ongoing reforms to enhance CDF accountability following the passage of the Constituency Development Act 2023 by Parliament. To ensure representation of civil society, it was also decided to involve the peak body for civil society in Solomon Islands, Development Services Exchange (DSE). Communities in the two pilot constituencies selected three representatives each to represent chiefs and elders, women, and youth. Each of these organisations was identified as housing at least one suitable coalition member who would be willing to collaborate on working towards shared goals. The selected organisations were seen as representing a cross-section of jurisdictions and sociolegal knowledge pertaining to CDFs, thus representing a more comprehensive body for planning and action to achieve positive reform.

Despite the identification of key members of the coalition in 2024, persistent political and bureaucratic challenges mean the originally intended fellowship group has yet to meet. Because of this, although all identified stakeholders have expressed interest in being involved in a fellowship exercise, their commitment to the process remains unknown. The primary challenge faced by the identified stakeholders to participate in the fellowship is that Cabinet has not expressed support for any UNDP-supported CDF initiatives. It was recognised by all involved that the politically sensitive nature of CDF reform required transparency. Further, although all of the identified stakeholders hold positions which are, at least on paper, independent of the government, significant scope exists for the government to frustrate processes and projects that it does not approve of (Craney & Tuhanuku 2023). As such, and until such time as Cabinet approval has been secured, this is a theoretical coalition only – one in waiting, not in action. Despite this nation-level fellowship not yet meeting, another fellowship has emerged centred on intervention at the constituency level. As is discussed below, this group has emerged through key stakeholders such as the Auditor General and the UNDP adviser taking an adaptive approach to CDF reform and its implementation may open a pathway to gaining Cabinet approval for the originally intended fellowship to meet in due course. Lessons drawn from the activities of the constituency-level fellowship may prove useful in promoting support for further activities in what is a politically sensitive space. This sensitivity is evident in the removal, by Cabinet, of two permanent secretaries for the Ministry of Rural Development in a space of six months because they were perceived to sideline Cabinet in decisions on implementing the CDF reform under the CDF Act 2023.

## **UNDERSTANDING GLOBAL PRECEDENTS (JUNE 2024)**

At the same time that the local UNDP adviser was identifying potential coalition members, the *Vaka Pasifika* project team in Fiji commissioned a consultant to provide a report that benchmarked the use of CDFs and participatory auditing globally. Multiple drafts of this document were produced over a period of three months. Unfortunately, on receipt of the report it was determined to be of limited value as it presented information with little context and was not clearly connected with the political realities of CDF distribution in Solomon Islands.

## **DESIGNING A PARTICIPATORY AUDIT (AUGUST 2024)**

Following initial discussions between the UNDP adviser and Auditor-General in the first half of 2024, drawing on his knowledge of operational and accountability capacity of local constituencies, it was determined that a pilot project should be designed that engages local community members in oversight of CDFs. This approach aligns with research from Solomon Islands that shows that collective action responses to problems are particularly relevant in remote locations (McLoughlin et al 2023). Concurrent to these conversations, staff from UNDP Pacific's head office in Fiji and the Auditor-General were discussing the possibility of piloting a participatory audit initiative. Such an initiative would provide for greater community ownership over the acquittal of CDF spending and also provide a potential resolution to the issue of limited capacity within the Office of the Auditor-General to conduct audits throughout the country. If communities are able to track and audit spending under their own CDFs, each constituency can undergo at least a base level audit, while also providing the Auditor-General with data for validation or use in their own audits. An additional benefit of the participatory audit approach is that it offers the potential to drive upwards accountability from communities to MPs on how CDFs are distributed and acquitted, improving practices and expectations of accountability.

As these discussions were occurring, there was a personnel shift within the *Vaka Pasifika* team as the project manager took extended leave. The acting project manager was convinced by the local UNDP adviser and the Auditor-General that a local coalition should be explored in addition to the coalition

work at the national level. It was agreed that constituency-level initiatives should be explored that could coalesce local level accountability stakeholders, including representatives from the community, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and accountability institutions, in a manner complementary to the national fellowship effort. The Auditor-General proposed that the constituency-level coalition could be aligned with the planned participatory auditing pilot being designed by his office with assistance from UNDP.

Cognisant of the sensitivity of the topic, the focus was to identify a sample of constituencies represented by members of Parliaments both from the government and opposition. As a noted critic of CDF misuse, the Hon. Peter Kenilorea Jr., MP was identified as an ideal candidate for involvement and he quickly agreed to the participation of his constituency of East Areare in Malaita. Discussing the prospect of hosting a pilot project in his constituency, Kenilorea Jr, alongside the Auditor-General and UNDP adviser, recognised the risk of perceived political bias if only one site was selected and agreed that it was necessary that two sites should host the pilot project – one with an MP in government and one with an MP outside of government. In March 2025, the Hon. Paul Bosawai, MP for North Guadalcanal, Minister for Health and current Cabinet member agreed to his constituency as the second site for the pilot.

## **SHIFTING FOCUS TO THE LOCAL LEVEL (OCTOBER 2024)**

In October 2024, a scoping mission was conducted in East Areare, including the Auditor-General, MP Kenilorea Jnr, the UNDP adviser, the UNDP project manager, a representative from Development Services Exchange, as well as two officials from the local constituency office.<sup>2</sup> Kenilorea Jr, MP expressed during this mission his desire for the urgent establishment of a monitoring and evaluation system for CDF spending in his constituency. As he told us, ‘CDFs are public funds and anything to improve transparency and accountability should be encouraged and supported.’ Community consultations conducted during the visit suggested that this desire was reflected by citizens in his constituency. During this period, the Auditor-General agreed to expanding the participatory audit approach following extensive discussions about its structure and intended outputs that occurred between members of the scoping team. The team determined that the best approach would be to train local constituency development officers in a participatory auditing methodology designed specifically for the Solomon Islands context. If successful, this model could then be scaled for trial in other constituencies and, possibly, mandated nationwide. Following a scoping mission to the North Guadalcanal constituency in September 2025, the Hon. Paul Bosawai, MP stated, ‘Audits point us to where we’ve gone wrong.’ He emphasised that the process should be seen as aiding appropriate spending and not as punitive.

It must be noted here that the intended pilot project has drawn positive reactions from those within the Solomon Islands accountability ecosystem, including MPs. As information about the scoping mission to East Areare and the possibility of a participatory audit project became known to people in Honiara – through the gossip system known in the Pacific as the ‘coconut wireless’ (Cass 1999; Varea et al 2020) – the local UNDP adviser was informed by the PS for Ministry of Rural Development about a growing number of MPs contacting his office to enquire about possible participation in the fellowship, all of whom expressed interest in hosting a pilot in their own constituency. Although MPs have been seen to wield CDF spending for their own personal gain (Barbara 2019; Futaiasi 2023), these MPs expressed that it was this very perception of CDFs within their constituencies that created conditions where MPs felt the need to engage in acts of patronage. They informed the UNDP adviser that a public

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<sup>2</sup> A scoping mission to North Guadalcanal province was being undertaken at time of writing this report in September 2025.

participatory audit and community-based tracking of CDF project implementation would assist them to ensure that CDFs would be spent effectively and appropriately, in turn reducing pressure on them to allocate funding seen to have strings attached.

## **DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY-BASED CDF MONITORING SYSTEM (OCTOBER 2024)**

Since October 2024, work has taken place on the design of a community-based monitoring system that would contribute to participatory audit of CDF. The basis for setting up community-based monitoring of CDFs was through recognition by the Auditor-General, MPs of pilot constituencies, and the local UNDP advisor that the CDF Act 2023 made provisions for audit of CDF, as well as facilitating community participation in planning and monitoring of CDF by rural communities. Further, the Auditor-General clarified that his office does not have the capacity to conduct annual audit for all constituencies; at best the Auditor-General's office could audit four or five constituencies within the four-year election cycle. The recognition that audit is the tail end of accountability for CDF strengthens the request by MPs and communities to establish a mechanism that would enable communities to generate demand for improvement to accountability for CDF implementation on an ongoing basis.

Once finalised – which was originally anticipated to occur in the first half of 2025 – training will be given to community-based data collectors. A total of eighteen community-based data collectors will be tasked with the responsibility of gathering data and transmitting it to both the Constituency Office and the Ministry of Rural Development. These data collectors will also play a crucial role in disseminating information regarding the CDF allocation, distribution, and disbursement within the constituencies. Additionally, they will be responsible for collecting data related to the implementation and operation of CDF-funded projects within rural communities, ensuring that this information is relayed to the Constituency Office and the Ministry of Rural Development. To enhance the capabilities of community-based data collectors in fulfilling their duties effectively, initial training will concentrate on the following areas:

- An overview of the management and administration of CDF from the Ministry of Rural Development to the Constituency Office and polling stations.
- Accountability requirements as stipulated in the CDF Act of 2023.
- The accountability obligations of the Constituency Office, including the role of the Constituency Development Committee in planning, budgeting, and disbursing CDF.
- Information dissemination from the Constituency Office regarding CDF allocation and disbursement.
- Data collection pertaining to CDF disbursement to communities and households, as well as the implementation and operation of CDF-funded projects.
- The reporting structure that data collectors will follow, which extends from polling station committees to the Constituency Office.

In practice, the finalisation of the community-based monitoring system and training has been delayed due to a combination of factors. These include difficulties coordinating the calendars of key stakeholders based in Honiara with those at the constituency level, limited availability of staff from the *Vaka Pasifika* project team to accompany training missions to the two constituencies and challenges

associated with the provision of funding from *Vaka Pasifika* to local actors in Solomon Islands. The rigidity of UNDP acquittal procedures, in particular, has proven to be a poor fit for undertaking adaptive, locally led reform efforts in Solomon Islands. Firstly, few suitable individuals and organisations can receive and disperse large sums of money in accordance with UNDP standards. Secondly, opportunities to coalesce disparate groups of people can sometimes occur at short notice but are unable to be acted upon due to lengthy disbursement approval leads required within the UNDP system.

## **DEVELOPING A TWIN TRACK APPROACH AND ESTABLISHING A NEW FELLOWSHIP (MAY 2025)**

Through the processes of visiting the East Areare constituency and meeting with key stakeholders identified as suitable for the coalition, a picture emerged that reforming CDFs in policy and practice would require a combination of advocacy and evidence. The decision to create constituency-level coalitions that would align with a participatory audit pilot project in multiple constituencies did not align with UNDP's initial intentions of supporting a fellowship to drive reform at the institutional level but gathered strong support from the community in East Areare, as well as among key stakeholders, including MPs. This also spoke to different ideas within UNDP about the best way to support accountability in Solomon Islands. In conversations between the local UNDP adviser and the *Vaka Pasifika* project team, a twin track approach was agreed to.

The twin track approach was deemed necessary due to the delay in Cabinet endorsement of the fellowship to allow the heads of accountability institutions and staff from the Ministry of Rural Development to actively engage in fellowship implementation. Thus, instead of waiting for Cabinet approval and convening of fellows to move the work forward it was decided to split the activities into two tracks. Track One was envisaged to involve support and engagement with institutional reform in the audit space by developing a participatory audit methodology for CDF. Track Two allows activities and engagement with pilot constituencies to proceed without waiting for Cabinet approval.

Track One of the approach built on the initial intention to organise and support a fellowship at the national level to drive reform efforts through the knowledge and networks of key stakeholders working together as a coalition. Track Two followed through on the support for a constituency-level coalition that would partner with the pilot participatory auditing project in East Areare. Rather than operate in isolation, the two tracks were designed to complement one another. While designing and implementing the participatory audit pilot in East Areare, the UNDP adviser would also work with the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Rural Development to develop a paper for Cabinet approving support for the coalition to support the pilots and create a methodology that could be replicated in other constituencies if the government desired. Importantly, Track Two also involved bringing together a coalition of actors who may otherwise not work together on CDF reform, allowing a new fellowship to emerge at the constituency level.

## **A FELLOWSHIP BY ANY OTHER NAME (JULY 2025)**

In July 2025, UNDP hosted a regional meeting in Port Vila, Vanuatu to introduce the fellowship schemes from Solomon Islands and Tuvalu to one another, and to train them in adaptive leadership. The delegation from Solomon Islands consisted of the constituency-level fellowship scheme from the pilot project in East Areare. This included two electoral officers, a local chief and a representative from DSE. Some members of the group had never met before but they each expressed that they were long-term advocates of CDF reform and that they viewed the pilot project and broader support provided by *Vaka Pasifika* as a potentially prosperous avenue for achieving real change.

Notably, the group were asked to reflect on discussions of their role as a ‘fellowship’ and the role of UNDP in supporting their efforts to reform CDFs. The group did not identify with the terminology of a fellowship but recognised a shared purpose among themselves. Rather than a fellowship, they labelled themselves as ‘pioneers.’ They also identified that to achieve sustainable change, they should have further representation from the local communities that the pilot project will work with, as well as from representatives of the accountability institutions that were intended to represent the original fellowship. Regarding the involvement of UNDP, the group expressed that the name recognition of UNDP provided legitimacy that cuts through from village level through to Cabinet. A further benefit of the standing of UNDP in Solomon Islands that was recognised by the group was its ability to convene initiatives involving non-traditional stakeholders.

Following the regional meeting, the pioneers from East Areare and Honiara held review and planning meetings on next steps for both the East Areare and North Guadalcanal constituencies. The key activities agreed on to be implemented by the pioneers group in East Areare were:

- For the pioneers group to facilitate discussions and agreement among communities on how to allocate current funding to the community through CDF to ensure fairness, equity and transparency. The decision by the MP for East Areare in late August to delegate decision-making on what to use CDF for to communities has created challenges for the stakeholders in determining parameters for funding eligibility and award.
- Support the roll out of community-based monitoring of CDF starting with 2024 CDF allocation.

## **PLANS FOR THE SECOND PILOT CONSTITUENCY (SEPTEMBER 2025)**

The pioneers group also participated in the community consultations on CDF in North Guadalcanal that occurred in September 2025. Added to the team were two officials from the Ministry of Rural Development, and two officials from the Office of the Auditor-General, who participated as observers. At the conclusion of the community consultations in the constituency, three community representatives were elected by communities to join the pioneers group. Feedback from communities in North Guadalcanal identified the need to facilitate discussions and agreement by communities on the role they play in prioritising programmes and projects for CDF. These communities also made clear their strong desire to have a community-based monitoring project to allow them to put downwards pressure on ensuring transparency and accountability among the citizens of the constituency, as well as upwards pressure on their elected representative.

# **The political realities: changing context and the need to adapt**

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The evolution of the CDF reform effort in Solomon Islands demonstrates that planning and implementation of interventions addressing politically sensitive issues is rarely, if ever, linear. Although UNDP always intended for the specific nature of the initiative to be determined by key local stakeholders, their working assumption was that the locus of their support would be a fellowship working at the national level. Instead, the originally intended coalition is yet to formally meet, but a

fellowship has emerged in a wholly different form in a remote location spearheaded by potentially a new, local-level coalition – either complementary to or discrete from the originally intended national coalition involving actors from the country's formal accountability institutions. There have been a multitude of factors that have influenced the iterative progression of the Solomon Islands CDF reform effort. These include political realities that demonstrate the sensitivities related to CDFs as well as how personal and professional relationships need to be managed in societies marked by social closeness (Corbett 2015; Won et al 2018).

## CABINET APPROVAL

The primary political reality that has impacted the shape of the CDF reform effort supported by *Vaka Pasifika* is the need for Cabinet approval that was expressed by some members of formal accountability institutions who were identified for inclusion in the original fellowship. It is worth noting that each of these institutions is legislated to be independent of the government. However, the social distance between MPs and senior public servants in Solomon Islands is very small. Public servants are careful not to agitate MPs as doing so can not only harm their personal career prospects but also lead to the government using powers at its disposal to impede the work of these institutions, such as by delaying funding or by redirecting high performing personnel away from an institution led by someone seen as causing friction to another government organisation.

## AVOIDING PERCEPTIONS OF BIAS

The political sensitivities regarding CDFs also mean that any reform initiative in this area must be regarded as even-handed by all sides of politics. Any perceptions of bias towards a particular political group risks delegitimising the endeavour and, thus, undermining the sustainability of changes such as in instances of a change in government. To attend to this challenge, the local UNDP adviser and the Auditor-General agreed that any constituency-based intervention should involve a member of the government and a member of one of the opposition groups.

As previously noted, the Hon. Peter Kenilorea, Jr., MP for East Areare and Leader of the Independent Group, was an obvious and immediate first-choice candidate for involvement in the pilot project. When he agreed to participate, a member of Cabinet was identified and also agreed to involve their constituency and support the project. The balance provided by having MPs from opposing sides of the parliament was eroded, though, during a proposed vote of no confidence in the government in December 2024, which the Cabinet MP supported. Although the vote was abandoned, the MP was forced to resign from the government. Although this represents just one incident in what can be seen as regular changes to the make-up of the government in Solomon Islands – including times where anti-corruption enforcement measures have been offered as rationale for regime change (Walton & Hushang 2020) – it demonstrates how difficult navigating politically sensitive reforms can be in the country. Rather than having two constituencies for the pilot project that were each represented by non-government MPs, the former Cabinet member agreed to withdraw their participation.

Following the withdrawal of the previous Cabinet member, the UNDP adviser and Auditor-General held conversations in early 2025 with the Hon. Paul Bosawai, MP for North Guadalcanal and Minister for Health. Bosawai was elected to the national parliament in 2024 partly in recognition of work he has undertaken in his community, particularly on health-related matters as a medical doctor and founder of Solomon Islands' first locally-opened and operated medical clinic in Honiara. He agreed to hosting the pilot project in North Guadalcanal as a counterpart to East Areare. The scoping mission for implementing the North Guadalcanal component of the pilot was completed in September 2025, with decisions on the future implementation to follow.

## ALIGNING WITH NATIONAL PRIORITIES

To support the implementation of the new Constituency Development Act 2023, the Ministry of Rural Development is designing protocols for monitoring and evaluating projects in each constituency as the lead agency responsible for CDF implementation. The decision to connect the constituency-level coalitions with the pilot participatory auditing project in two constituencies has provided an opportunity for the Solomon Islands intervention under the auspice of *Vaka Pasifika* to align with the work occurring through the MRD. Through conversations with the Permanent Secretary on the need to (and strategies for acquiring) Cabinet approval for the fellowship scheme, the UNDP adviser has also discussed how the implementation, monitoring and evaluation plan for the participatory audits can inform the protocols being developed by the MRD. As a complementary, no-cost venture, the Permanent Secretary of the MRD has expressed strong interest in supporting the pilots and utilising materials and lessons learned, if appropriate.

Working alongside the MRD presents multiple opportunities for the local stakeholders engaged in the intervention – and potentially the *Vaka Pasifika* team and UNDP, more broadly – to positively influence CDF reform in a sustainable manner. Firstly, direct support to protocols for monitoring and evaluation offer the chance for UNDP to provide technical assistance to the development of national guidelines without imposing these as a discrete, top-down donor intervention. Secondly, if the participatory audits are viewed as worthwhile by MRD upon evaluation, there is significantly increased likelihood of their implementation nationally. As the ministry responsible for implementing CDFs, participatory audits as standard practice can only be sustainable if administered through the MRD.

## The operational realities: bureaucratic delays and everyday priorities

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As well as political realities that have forced adaptation within the CDF reform effort under *Vaka Pasifika* in Solomon Islands, operational realities have also necessitated changes to the intervention. These operational realities include navigating bureaucratic processes, conflicting timelines and the acknowledgement that key stakeholders have multiple competing personal and professional priorities alongside and beyond public financial management reforms.

### UNDP PROCESSES

A challenge facing the timely operation of events related to the fellowships meeting at the constituency level were delays resulting from the bureaucracies of UNDP and the Solomon Islands government. Although the local UNDP adviser was given freedom to pursue relationships with key stakeholders, formalising support was difficult. This was particularly the case in negotiating partnership between *Vaka Pasifika* and the Ministry of Rural Development. Formalising an agreement between UNDP and MRD would require navigating complicated bureaucratic processes. As a result, the UNDP adviser and the Permanent Secretary of MRD have agreed to share information and support one another's work without formalising a partnership on CDF reform at this stage.

Alongside bureaucratic hurdles, UNDP's funding protocols have caused consternation and delays. UNDP can only provide direct funding to individuals and organisations that meet strict oversight requirements. In Solomon Islands, eligible funding intermediaries are limited and so freeing up funding requires creative workarounds. One such adaptive strategy occurred when the acting project manager visited Solomon Islands for the scoping mission to East Areare and brought with her the necessary finances to fund the trip. Restrictions on funding intermediaries has also caused difficulties in hosting a training workshop for stakeholders identified for involvement in the constituency-level coalitions in East Areare and North Guadalcanal, including local constituent officers. To date, no suitable workaround has been identified and so the training has not yet occurred. The local UNDP adviser has shared concerns on multiple occasions that the intervention may fail if activities cannot occur due to funding issues when stakeholders are ready. This speaks to the capacity of external actors like UNDP to effectively support local collective action, even when they recognise the value of doing so, given their own internal rules and processes.

## **TIMELINES AND CONFLICTING SCHEDULES**

Working with numerous and diverse stakeholders can create scheduling difficulties. Actors from accountability institutions, Development Services Exchange and, of course, the politicians involved regularly need to travel to island and remote communities as part of their everyday activities. Such travel can make individuals unavailable for weeks at a time as they take the opportunity to visit multiple remote locations close to one another, face delays waiting for boats and ferries with often unreliable schedules, and have limited phone and internet connectivity. Trying to find times that all key stakeholders are available is a complex task that has so far only proven difficult in planning, with the primary delays in activities being caused by the wait on Cabinet approval and need to find a financing pipeline. This poses challenges, too, for external development partners with funding and project timelines that are in tension with these local realities. In practice, supporting collective action on accountability in Solomon Islands will take much longer than the one-year timeframe initially envisaged.

## **PRIORITIES OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS**

Corollary to timeline issues, all stakeholders involved in both the original intended fellowship and the constituency-level coalition have multiple personal and professional obligations beyond involvement with *Vaka Pasifika*. As the CDF reform initiative is not a source of direct employment for any of the stakeholders, it can be difficult to prioritise participation in this space. Difficulties in prioritising CDF reform through the intervention supported by *Vaka Pasifika* are further compounded by the multiple personal, kin and community obligations all Solomon Islanders experience. As one participant at the regional workshop noted, it can be difficult to focus on any long-term projects when you are housing large numbers of *wantok* at any given time.

# The impacts: political interest and building coalitions

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At just one year into this intervention, it is difficult to evaluate the impacts of the twin track CDF reform effort occurring in Solomon Islands. The constituency-level coalitions and attending pilot project is underway in two sites but has yet to be fully implemented and the originally intended fellowship is yet to meet. Further, evaluating social change reform efforts is almost impossible to achieve in short time frames (Boston 2000; Roche & Kelly 2012). Nonetheless, there are some emerging themes that suggest the intervention can have a positive influencing in driving CDF reform in line with changes prompted by the passing of the Constituency Development Fund Act 2023.

The first area of emerging impact relates to the interest that the CDF reform effort has garnered from parts of Solomon Islands society. It is perhaps not surprising that accountability institutions and the peak body for civil society are willing participants in improving public financial management. What is more encouraging is the level of interest and support from MPs to increased accountability of CDFs. Three MPs agreed to hosting participatory audits of CDF spending in their constituencies and although one of these had to withdraw their constituency, this was for the benefit of the intervention as their continued involvement risked politicising the process. Expressions of interest from other MPs indicate a widespread and genuine appetite for CDF reform that UNDP and other development partners can support. The project has provided a practical case study on which to test improved CDF accountability and to build further momentum for change within Solomon Islands' political class. Catalysing mindset shifts holds significant promise for sustainable reform in ways that time-bound interventions cannot match (Hudson et al 2023; McLoughlin et al 2023)

A second area of emerging impact concerns the convening power of UNDP in bridging the national accountability ecosystem that is centred in Honiara and local, constituency level accountability ecosystems. Although connections exist between local constituency officers and the MRD, and accountability institutions have established lines of communication with constituency offices, the broadened scope of stakeholders involved in the constituency-level coalitions and, by extension, participatory auditing pilot projects expands and strengthens the network of local and national actors. The intervention includes a broad swathe of participants to provide legitimacy and ownership to CDF reform that includes government, accountability institutions, constituency offices, civil society and customary chiefs, among others. The convening power of UNDP means that multiple stakeholders can engage with one another. This is particularly valuable for civil society representatives, with one Solomon Islands participant at the regional workshop stating that without such intervention 'government in Solomon Islands just ignores civil society.'

A third area of emerging impact centres on the support that UNDP can informally provide to the Ministry of Rural Development. The task for the MRD in designing, monitoring and evaluating effective implementation of CDFs following passage of the Constituency Development Fund Act 2023 is grand in scope and potential impact. The local UNDP adviser has agreed to assist the ministry in this work based on lessons from the engagement of the constituency-level coalitions and the pilot project. Connecting MRD with the local and national schemes operating under *Vaka Pasifika* presents an aligned pilot project that can provide an evidence base for participatory auditing that includes a broad stakeholder base and also opens channels for MRD to seek expert input into their operations.

# The insights: focus on purpose, think and work politically

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## WORKING WITH THE GRAIN OF LOCAL SUPPORT

Although UNDP had initially intended for the *Vaka Pasifika* intervention in Solomon Islands to be based on a national-level fellowship that utilised professional networks and peer mentoring to influence reforms related to good public financial management, the process that UNDP followed to build a coalition of key stakeholders provided flexibility for an initiative conceived at the local level. While there have been challenges related to establishing the formal, national-level coalition that includes leaders of the country's accountability institutions, a new initiative designed to support participatory auditing at the local level emerged more organically. UNDP, at times, struggled to deliver the flexibility to support this evolving intervention. Forcing a national-level fellowship to be created on a fixed timeline would have meant that Cabinet support would have been disregarded and likely failed to positively influence CDF reform. By recognising local interest in creating a participatory audit project, UNDP has opened new potential pathways to achieving its overall goal, even though the means were not anticipated at the beginning of the *Vaka Pasifika* project.

## FOCUS ON PURPOSE OVER PROCESS

The *Vaka Pasifika* focus on improving public financial management has provided a strong reference point throughout planning and design of the intervention. Being able to align planning to national CDF reform has similarly meant that there are clear objectives for all stakeholders involved. By having a clear purpose, the key actors in the local intervention in Solomon Islands – notably the local UNDP adviser and the Auditor-General – have been able to adapt to local context, including political and operational realities.

A rigid approach to working on CDF reform in Solomon Islands would be flawed from the outset. Planning and monitoring tools like logframes or even rigid workplans may work for straightforward, technical challenges but they do not allow for the adaptability required in politically sensitive interventions (Hudson & Marquette 2015; Powers 2014; Roche & Kelly 2012). Instead, UNDP has supported an iterative approach to CDF reform that has responded to real time feedback in line with Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation principles (Andrews et al 2013). This approach means that the work of the *Vaka Pasifika* project team, local UNDP adviser, Auditor-General and other key stakeholders has been able to focus on how to address the purpose of their intervention rather than being stuck adhering to fixed processes.

Focusing on the purpose of the intended intervention rather than a predetermined process has not been without its challenges, though. Most evident is that the originally intended fellowship of national-level actors – itself an approach designed to be adaptive – has been unable to meet in the projected timeline and so demonstrating impact has proven difficult. The upshot of the initiative's adaptability has been that another coalition has emerged, but this raises questions of what a donor-supported, locally led fellowship can and should look like. Perhaps more challenging for UNDP has been that the everyday realities of working within the United Nations system makes adaptability and delegation of tasks to the local level difficult. Progress has been delayed not just because of the need

for Cabinet approval and difficulties in aligning the calendars of key stakeholders, but also because UNDP has not been able to facilitate regular engagement with prospective participants in-country, has not been able to provide funding at short notice and has even struggled to confirm contracts in a timely manner.

## **TIMING IS EVERYTHING**

The passage of the Constituency Development Fund Act 2023 was a fortunate coincidence of timing with the *Vaka Pasifika* project's interest in supporting improved public finance management in Solomon Islands. The Act opened new pathways for designing and implementing accountability measures related to CDFs. Crucially, the widespread parliamentary support for the legislative changes dampened some of the political sensitivities that would have been apparent had UNDP initiated a coalition-building exercise with key stakeholders in the accountability ecosystem in isolation. Engaging in the CDF reform effort at the same time as accountability institutions are being tasked with designing and implementing planning, monitoring and evaluation measures aligned with the Constituency Development Fund Act 2023 has provided an opportunity for UNDP and the individual stakeholders engaged in the Solomon Islands intervention to inform policy and programming decisions within the Ministry of Rural Development and Solomon Islands government more broadly.

The inverse impact of the importance of good timing occurs when opportunities for action exist but are not seized in a timely manner. Community support for the performance audit in East Areare was high at the time of a site visit in October 2024 but is feared to wane as time draws on without action. By contrast, fellowship members note that rushing the pilot into operation without Cabinet support would make the success of the initiative nigh impossible. As such, we can see that good planning must meet, to an extent, good fortune for the initiative not only to be enacted but to have genuine prospects for success or failure on its own terms.

Key for UNDP to consider regarding timing is the extent to which they can respond to developments on the ground and expedite their own systems. Training of data collectors in East Areare has been delayed at least partially because of challenges in acquiring funding in a timely manner, with UNDP structures requiring significant notice while in Solomon Islands windows of opportunity for action can open and close in a matter of days. Reports from key actors in the fellowship state that UNDP needs to be prepared to follow their lead and recognise their localised knowledge and expertise. Although members of the *Vaka Pasifika* project team are supportive of partnering with the fellowship rather than driving it, it remains to be seen the extent to which this is institutionally possible.

## **REFORM EFFORTS MUST ENGAGE BOTH 'BIG P' AND 'LITTLE P' POLITICS**

Passage of the Constituency Development Act 2023 provides a formal, 'big P' avenue to positively influencing public financial management in Solomon Islands. As noted above, the timing of the legislative change coinciding with the implementation of the local intervention offers a chance for UNDP to work with the Ministry of Rural Development in designing new guidelines for CDFs. To engage MRD directly without gaining support from key actors – most notably, Cabinet – would risk undermining the reform effort, however, by disrupting the 'small p' politics that facilitates sustainable change.

The feasibility of the project being associated with Cabinet approval is threefold. Firstly, although all of the intended members other than the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Rural Development occupy roles that are independent of the government, these individuals recognise that their work is most likely to be effective if they do not create an adversarial relationship with the government – particularly on an initiative that is additional to their core work. Secondly, the approval of Cabinet

provides a clear pathway for the reporting of findings from the pilot and fellowship that will be considered by the government with greater generosity than if the pilot operated fully autonomously. Thirdly, research from Solomon Islands demonstrates that initiatives that have support from trusted leaders are more likely to gain broader community support (McLoughlin 2023).

Securing the frank advice of the intended members of the fellowship has also required the navigation of everyday politics. Key to acquiring this feedback is that key members of the fellowship – such as local UNDP adviser Ali Tuhanuku and the Auditor-General David Dennis – are trusted by those they are engaging. Politically tricky projects can fail when feedback is non-existent or tailored to what intended members believe members wish to hear.

## **UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATIONS IMPROVES PROSPECTS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION**

Further to being provided frank information, understanding the multiscale motivations of individuals and/or organisations to be involved in a coalition is fundamental to securing their support. For some members of the fellowship, such motivation is straightforward – heads of key accountability institutions, for example, have a direct interest in ensuring not only proper accountability but also community confidence in government processes. Other members may have competing interests that need to be understood and addressed for full engagement. For example, variable interest from Development Services Exchange suggests that even though the topic of CDF accountability is one that is appealing to the organisation, they do not have the security of funding to be able to commit to involvement in the constituency-level coalitions without being remunerated. While some MPs are supportive of the project to assist them in dealing with pressures for patronage on their own CDFs, there are also incentives for the status quo.

## **IDEAS GAIN LEGITIMACY THROUGH ENDORSEMENT FROM TRUSTED SOURCES**

Similar to there being different motivations of individuals and organisations, so too can we see different levels of influence and power relationships across the fellowship, pilot and broader intervention. This is evident in the Auditor-General's initial hesitance to engage in performance auditing as a key component of the pilot, despite the proposition being put forward by the *Vaka Pasifika* project team at UNDP. However, when the MP for East Areare endorsed performance auditing in the context of a site visit to the constituency, the Auditor-General was more able to recognise the benefits and relevance of this approach.

It must also be reflected on that the relationships between key stakeholders involved in the fellowship and pilot project are layered. The relationships between the fellowship members involve combinations of family ties, community links, shared schooling and histories as professional colleagues, among others. For example, the Auditor-General is the nephew of the local UNDP advisor. They have a long history of professional engagement with one another, but this family connection also means that they have in-built trust and confidence in one another's opinions, as well as the ability to communicate openly. Similarly, dialogue between the UNDP advisor and PS of the MRD has been aided by previous experience as colleagues and a long-term friendship between the two. Even some of the East Areare 'pioneers' are distant relatives of the UNDP advisor, again meaning trust and confidence between these parties is high and has helped to ease their professional engagements with one another in this initiative.

## IMPROVED ACCOUNTABILITY CAN BE VIEWED POSITIVELY BY MPS

An interesting development to emerge through the second half of 2024 is that multiple MPs expressed their curiosity about the project and potential to involve their constituencies if it is successful. These MPs noted that the perception of CDFs by many citizens throughout Solomon Islands aligns with criticisms of the scheme as contributing to patronage. Rather than being a top-down clientelist arrangement, however, these MPs shared that constituents expect to be able to access funding or resources with negligible oversight as a form of business-as-usual engagement with their political representatives. The MPs that expressed interest in future involvement stated that they would like to see improved auditing as they perceive CDFs in their current usage as not contributing to positive developmental outcomes and processes. As we found across the six Pacific states where we conducted political economic analysis of accountability ecosystems (Denney et al 2025), utilising social norms and values to embed ideas to drive reform efforts holds great promise for driving accountability through a relational, social accountability approach that resonates with individual stakeholders much more strongly than formal rules and policies.

## RECOGNITION AND CONVENING POWER OF UNDP

Attendees at the regional workshop held in Port Vila clearly articulated the value that UNDP brings to enacting politically sensitive reforms in Solomon Islands. They reflected that UNDP is well recognised throughout the country and is trusted as a fair and legitimate organisation by people in villages through to the halls of parliament. This reputation provides UNDP with significant convening power to bring together a diverse set of actors, including people from remote communities as well as busy heads of large organisations. It also means that local level initiatives being supported by UNDP are well-received as genuinely locally driven initiatives. This is not the case with all external development partners who are, at times, seen as bringing external motivations that can be viewed with suspicion or mistrust.

# Final reflections: purpose, power and participation

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The progression of the intervention in Solomon Islands under the auspice of *Vaka Pasifika* has not been linear but it has followed good principles for supporting complex social change. Rather than being prescriptive about how CDF reforms should be influenced, UNDP has allowed the local actors with the greatest social and political knowledge – as well as the most skin in the game regarding long-term sustainable change – to shape the initiatives being undertaken. This has not always been easy – differences of view on what constitutes a ‘fellowship’ and at what level, as well as bureaucratic delays and rules have had to be routinely navigated. A clear purpose for improving public financial management has aligned with a shared vision of a broad cross-section of stakeholders to reform CDFs so that they genuinely support development needs, values and interests at the local level.

An encouraging outcome of the regional workshop is the sense of shared leadership and responsibility across the stakeholders directly involved in the Solomon Islands intervention. That the implementing actors from East Areare have positioned themselves as ‘pioneers’ speaks to the social cachet of addressing CDF reform, the buy-in from the local community and the sense of pride that the particular participants have in their involvement. Tracking the pilot project and the experiences of those involved holds potential to unearth further insights about how leadership is conceptualised and processed at multiple levels.

Perhaps the most surprising discovery during the action research process has been the willingness of MPs to reform CDFs in ways that make them fairer and more effective. The perception of the financing as slush funds for politicians is deeply held and widespread. Passage of the Constituency Development Fund Act 2023 provided insight that parliamentarians had interest in CDF reform but this could have been superficial. The fact of multiple MPs expressing interest in the outcomes of, and volunteering the engagement of their constituencies to, the participatory audit project holds great promise.

The CDF reform effort in Solomon Islands highlights the importance of power in influencing politically sensitive reforms. The importance of power can be seen at the formal level through the necessity of Cabinet approval for the fellowship initiative despite the majority of members holding roles formally independent of government influence. It can also be seen within the operations of the twin track initiatives being undertaken. This is particularly evident in the centrality of the Auditor-General and local UNDP adviser to the process and how they are using the respect and status that they have built within the Solomon Islands accountability ecosystem to navigate the interests of various stakeholders, including the government, UNDP, pilot project MPs, civil society and local constituency actors. At the constituency level, the role of the MPs in supporting their constituency officers to work on the pilot project is crucial. We can see in these examples that power is not held in one location but also it is key to secure the support and coordination services of key figures.

Although all of the key stakeholders that have been engaged in the CDF reform effort are based in Solomon Islands and can be recognised as actors in the broader accountability ecosystem of the country, it is noteworthy that it is the convening power of UNDP that has brought them together. Rather than being a neutral outsider to the politics of change in Solomon Islands, UNDP holds an important position in being able to forge connections and dissolve concerns of unfair benefit to particular parties involved in the intervention. UNDP can utilise its ability to broker relationships between both natural and uncommon allies in future initiatives that require complex, adaptive and political approaches, although this requires astute staffing who can help navigate the organisation’s internal political economy to make it work for the context.

It remains to be seen if the originally intended fellowship will formally assemble. Cabinet approval is proving to be a more sensitive task than had first been anticipated and the identified members will not commit to the fellowship without the government’s imprimatur. Failure of the fellowship concept would not necessarily mean failure in the process of the *Vaka Pasifika* intervention in Solomon Islands, though. Although some of the intended members are natural allies, such as the heads of the accountability institutions, the attempts to formalise the fellowship has also opened pathways of communication between actors that do not have regular contact with one another, perhaps most notably local and national accountability representatives. Whilst it remains to be seen whether coalitions can facilitate substantive CDF reforms in Solomon Islands, there is certainly increased belief among the actors involved that change in this space is now possible.

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