



Employment of people with disabilities in the Solomon Islands infrastructure sector

Research into barriers and ways forward

June 2024



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Acronyms and Abbreviations

APTC	Australia Training Coalition
BDTSC	Bethesda Disability Training and Support Centre
CCDR	Climate Change and Disaster Resilience
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
DPASI	Disabled Peoples Association of Solomon Islands
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
ICN	Initiative Concept Note
OPD	Organisations for people with disabilities
RTC	Rural Training Centre
SDC	Special Development Centres
SIG	Solomon Islands Government
SIIP	Solomon Islands Infrastructure Program

Executive Summary

People with disabilities face many challenges when it comes to finding jobs in the Solomon Islands. The purpose of undertaking this study on the employability of people with disabilities specifically in Honiara was to explore and analyse the opportunities and barriers to employment of people with disabilities in the infrastructure sector. This research brings awareness to relevant lived experiences of people with disabilities and employment. Available evidence and findings provide opportunities and working knowledge for Solomon Islands Infrastructure Program (SIIP), programs, organisations, civil society organisation (CSOs) and the government to improve inclusive employment of people with disabilities.

Objectives of the study

The study was designed to identify:

- Physical, attitudinal and instrumental barriers and opportunities that exists in workplaces, family homes and generally that people may have towards a person with disabilities and employment.
- Opportunity for people with disabilities to share their experiences and perspectives on employment in the infrastructure sector.

Key findings

Key findings of the study include:

- **Employment of people with disabilities in the infrastructure sector:** People with disabilities do work within the infrastructure industry in Solomon Islands. People with disabilities do want to be employed as it is an opportunity to fulfil family obligations, participate fully and equally in society and to enjoy an adequate standard of living. However, barriers exist in recruitment, family, and the general perceptions of industry.
- **Education and training:** Accessing education can be challenging for people with disabilities in Solomon Islands. Often barriers include physical and social barriers in accessing education. There are only two special development schools (SDC) in Solomon Islands that offer education and training to people with disabilities. Courses offered are not accredited which means looking for employment is challenging. Transitioning into more advanced accredited courses requires more opportunities for people with disabilities to be trained to meet the requirements of accredited institutions and institutions to do adjustments that are inclusive.
- **Recruitment:** Job advertisements rarely are inclusive or encourage people with disabilities to apply. Industry responses mentioned the lack of qualification from people with disabilities as a barrier to employment, followed by the belief that it is risky employing people with disabilities.
- **Accommodations:** Industry shared the perception of employing people with disabilities to be costly and risky. The lack of accommodations in most companies has contributed to less opportunities to employ someone with a disability which is compounded by the lack of information on the types of accommodations for different disabilities.
- **Family and community:** Encouragement and empowerment of people with disabilities by family members is beneficial to boosting the morale and confidence of people with disabilities. Some families with people with disabilities discourage their family members with disabilities due to their own prejudice or fear of their family member getting hurt. Family are key advocates for people with disabilities finding potential work opportunities and explaining workplace needs (accommodations) to potential employers.
- **Organisations for people with disabilities:** Can play a vital role in supporting and advocating for people with disabilities. These organisations can offer services that strengthen areas of inclusivity for companies or can be partners in activities.

Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations for SIIP focusing on influencing change and areas for future research:

- Supporting stakeholders on accommodation awareness and job inclusivity.
- Advocate for inclusive trainings and educational pathway for people with disabilities in SDCs.

- Professional development for organisations for people with disabilities (OPD).
- Identify priority accommodations that are low cost.
- Trace the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.
- Consultations with SIG on the employment of people with disabilities and providing support on inclusivity.
- Trace experience of people with disabilities working for contractors that are being awarded SIIP contracts.
- Investigate family support and barriers to female and youths with disabilities accessing inclusive education.
- Trace the effects of independent income and its impacts on reciprocity and obligations for people with disabilities.

1 Introduction

This report presents findings and recommendations from a small study into the opportunities and barriers to employment of people with disabilities in the Solomon Islands infrastructure sector. It is based upon a desk-top literature review, interviews conducted with people with disabilities, and an industry survey of infrastructure sector companies in the Solomon Islands. The research was designed to inform a targeted inclusive intervention to be delivered by SIIP.

1.1 Background

Solomon Islands became a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on the 23rd of September 2008 and has recently ratified the Convention on 22 June 2023. Ratifying the CRPD indicates the commitment of the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) and its stakeholders in upholding the rights and dignity of people with disabilities, full participation in society and the rights to equality. In support of the ratification of the CRPD, the Solomon Islands National Disability Inclusive Development Policy 2023–2032 has been developed with 17 action areas for implementation. There is still urgent need for the advancement of inclusive practices and approaches within all context but more specific to this report within the areas of work and employment, education, accessibility, community, and attitudes / behaviours.

The Solomon Islands does not yet meet requirements under the UN CRPD that:

...[States] shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities (article 24.5) [and shall] ‘... recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities’ [and that there be effective access to technical and vocational guidance programmes, placement services and vocational and continuing training]g (article. 27).

2 Research Design and Approach

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this research is to undertake a study of the employability of people with disabilities specifically in the Solomon Islands infrastructure sector, focusing on Honiara. This study will contribute towards:

- Informing what SIIP, and other stakeholders can implement to improve the opportunities for people with disabilities in the infrastructure sector.
- Identifying barriers and challenges of people with disabilities in accessing opportunities for employment
- Identifying the support and reasonable accommodations and engagements that could be provided to improve employment of people with disabilities

2.2 Research methodology

The research employed a social model of disability. The social model:

... sees ‘disability’ is the result of the interaction between people living with impairments and an environment filled with physical, attitudinal, communication and social barriers. It therefore carries the implication that the physical, attitudinal, communication and social environment must change to enable people living with impairments to participate in society on an equal basis with others.

A social model perspective does not deny the reality of impairment nor its impact on the individual. However, it does challenge the physical, attitudinal, communication and social environment to accommodate impairment as an expected incident of human diversity.¹

Along with a desk-top review of relevant literature, the research design included the development and use of interviews, and discussions with the Principals of the two SDC. Sets of questions were developed and refined with the Solomon Islands national organisation for people with disabilities – the Disabled People’s Organisation Solomon Islands (DPASI) – for interviews to be conducted with:

- women and men with disabilities
- officials within infrastructure-relevant government ministries or state-owned enterprises, and
- incorporated into an SIIP industry baseline survey conducted with infrastructure companies in the Solomon Islands.

Please refer to Annex 2 for the Interview Questionnaire and Annex 3 for the Industry Baseline Survey.

Representatives of 20 Solomon Islands companies responded to a SIIP industry baseline survey.² Information here is drawn from the responses from 20 company representatives through the industry baseline surveys.

Aligning with the social model of disability, interview questions were framed around the respondents’ experiences and perspectives of barriers and opportunities in relation to:

- attitudes and behaviours
- physical environment
- institutional structures (how institutions function – systems and processes).

Selection of 45³ people with disabilities for interviews included the following considerations: only adults with disabilities, approximately 50:50 women and men, available to be interviewed in person, and, where possible, people with work experience or work-interest in the infrastructure sector.

Government ministries⁴ and state-owned enterprises to be selected were to be those that had mandated roles in infrastructure policy and or infrastructure implementation. Respondents would be selected from government officials with senior roles and decision-making authority and influence over policy development or implementation.

Private sector industries to participate in a SIIP Industry baseline survey that used a rubric assessing their level of industry compliance, organizational capability and capacity, skills supply, and local workforce development. There was a two-step process in the selection of participating construction companies participating in the Industry Baseline Survey. The first six companies who have participated in the pilot of the survey were preselected by SIIP. Review was done after the first pilot of the survey and then all companies registered with SIIP for professional training were sent an invitation email. Companies who registered their interest were then added to the list of participants to roll out the rest of the survey. Survey respondents were sent the survey to check their own data sources and partially respond to the written questions, and then all respondents were followed up with in-person interviews conducted by SIIP personnel.

SIIP engaged the Solomon Islands national organisation for people with disabilities, DPASI to conduct interviews with people with disabilities and to co-conduct interviews with government bodies (see Annex D for scope of works) DPASI identified three interviewers (2 men, 1 woman), as well as a sign-language translator (woman) to translate during interviews with people with hearing impairments, and a personal assistant (woman) for one of the interviewers with vision impairments. DPASI collaborated in the research design, implementation, and review of findings to guide the development of a SIIP Initiative Concept Note (ICN) for potential funding.

1 <https://peoplewithdisabilities.org.au/resources/models-of-disability/>

2 See Annex 3 for Industry Baseline Survey

3 Originally 36 interviews of people with disabilities were planned. Without Government interviews this number was increased to 45.

4 Tentatively to include Ministry of Infrastructure Development, Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, Ministry of National Planning and Development Coordination, Ministry of Mines Energy and Rural Electrification, Ministry of Commerce Industries and Labour and Immigration, Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, Ministry of Provincial Government and Institutional Strengthening, Ministry of Rural Development.

The SIIP GEDSI team provided a short familiarization session with the interviewers during which the interviewers role played asking and responding to the interview questions and made suggestions to change or add to some of the questions. Interview questions were then updated, including Pidgin translations. DPASI also used their own adapted version of the Washington Group (short set) questions⁵ to enquire about interviewee disabilities. Printed copies sufficient for all interviews of people with disabilities were provided to the interviewers. The first interview conducted by each interviewer was then observed by the SIIP GEDSI Coordinator to provide further coaching and feedback. Interviews were conducted from late August 2023 and through September 2023.

Due to changes in the implementation plans, there was limited time to pursue the opportunity to interview government bodies. However, it has been identified that interviews with government bodies could be a follow up activity to provide further depth to the research.

The SIIP private sector industry baseline, including interview questions regarding attitudes, policies, and practices in relation to people with disabilities, was conducted by SIIP personnel from October 2023 through February 2024.

A sense making workshop to examine data gaps and draw out preliminary findings from interviews with people with disabilities was held in October 2023. The same workshop drew on the preliminary findings and DPASI experience to develop a draft Initiative Concept Note: EmployAble: Improving Infrastructure Sector Employment Opportunities for People with disabilities in the Solomon Islands.

2.3 Limitations

To meet SIIP planning and budgeting deadlines, the ICN informed by the research needed to be completed by late October 2023. These timeframe limitations shortened opportunities for a more iterative process to build interviewer skills and follow up on data gaps. The resulting interview transcripts are sufficient but could be strengthened through more frequent coaching of interview techniques

The elimination of interviews intended for government bodies means that there remains a gap in understanding of government knowledge, attitudes, practices, and policy adherence regarding disability employment.

Timeframes for completion of analysis and this report were drawn out further as the industry baseline survey took longer to complete than originally envisaged. Some of the baseline survey responses also reveals opportunities for clarification and better understanding.

Interviews with people with hearing impairments may have been limited by respondents' fluency in sign language, and the need for refinement in fluency of communicating questions and responses.

Despite efforts to identify and select people with disabilities with any experience in infrastructure activities, the reality is that few people with disabilities have paid work or experience in the sector (or other sectors for that matter). A minority of people with disabilities interviewed have had experience of working in the infrastructure sector, and therefore responses are often necessarily general to the experience of employment rather than specific to the industry. The lack of interviewees with industry experience is reflective of the broader lack of people with disability employed in the industry.

No company formally collects data on whether employees have disabilities. It is likely that some companies are unaware that they employ people with disabilities. In part, local companies may not collect data because they are often quite small (family businesses), and so data collection like this is not seen as necessary, but also because companies do not know how they would collect or use such data to make adjustments or respond to adjustments that employees with disabilities may need or have made for themselves. In addition, the SIIP enumerators found that in some instances respondents did not understand what disability was, and so had not thought about inclusive employment options or about making accommodations.

⁵ The Washington Group questions cover six functional domains: seeing, hearing, walking, cognition, self-care, and communication. Each question has four response categories: (1) No, no difficulty, (2) Yes, some difficulty, (3) Yes, a lot of difficulty and (4) Cannot do it at all. Scaled responses begin to describe the continuum of functioning from mild to severe (see <https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/about/conceptual-framework/>).

3 Findings

This section discusses findings under the following subsections:

- Overview: Employment of people with disabilities in construction
- Education and training
- Recruitment
- Retention and accommodations
- Other factors.

3.1 Overview: employment of people with disabilities in construction

3.1.1 The importance of employment for people with disabilities

In the Solomon Islands, social research (Gartrell et al., 2016) found that disability contributes to the risk of poverty and poverty in turn adds to the risk of disability. Five social determinants were found to shape wellbeing and inequality in the Solomon Islands: a secure economic foundation, inclusive early life, being productive, supportive social networks and gender relations (Gartrell et al, 2016, p. 255). Opportunities for people with disabilities to gain necessary experience or qualifications, and access employment and support for employment, can enable people with disabilities, and their families, out of the disability-poverty-disability trap.

The ability for people with disabilities to reciprocate material assistance (very culturally / socially important) can be limited, and this, in turn, can limit the social and economic safety net provided by family and community:

The community practice is that you have to do something for others in order for them to do the same. I cannot do all things due to my impairments so they should understand that and be fair with me. Sometimes they did not help me, e.g. carrying timber for my house. Those family members told me to pay them before they can do what I want them to do for me.

The benefits of employment for people with disabilities internationally includes increased income, contributing to higher living standards and financial independence.⁶ Employment also contributes to a sense of identity and self-worth and can have positive health impacts. Improved employment outcomes for people with disability can also reduce demand on welfare systems which, in the Solomon Islands context, means reduced 'demand' on family and community support systems.

People with disabilities generally want to gain employment. A common theme from interviewees with disabilities was a desire to be seen as role models, make a good impression, and to be hard working and reliable, in the face of day-to-day stigma and prejudice. Earning an income has the potential to enable people with disabilities to fulfil social and economic obligations and reciprocate on a more equal basis with others in their families and communities.

Globally, the employment gap between persons with and without disabilities is large. According to the International Labour Organisation, 'about a third of working-age persons with disabilities are in employment, which is roughly half the corresponding share of persons without disabilities. The employment gap between persons with and without disabilities increases with age.'⁷

3.1.2 Employment of people with disabilities in the Solomon Islands infrastructure sector

There is some evidence of employment of people with disabilities in the infrastructure sector, which shows that some people with disabilities do work in construction. Seven of 20 (35%) industry survey respondents reported that they currently employ at least one person with disabilities. These employed people included

6 <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/6-economic-and-social-benefits-employing-people-disability#:~:text=Employment%20can%20provide%20people%20with,for%20some%20people%20with%20disability>
7 <https://ilostat.ilo.org/new-ilo-database-highlights-labour-market-challenges-of-persons-with-disabilities/>

three with hearing impairment, three physical impairment, and one amputee. These people were carpenters, drivers, security, welders, and one management staff.

The experience of interviewees verifies the claim that people with disabilities can work in construction. Eighteen of the 45 interviewees had paid worked in construction at some point in their adult life, including:

- 9 who worked in trades and machinery operation, including road cleaning, cement mixing, timber loading, carpentry, and painting
- five who helped build village homes
- three who worked in office jobs, including disability accessibility audits and inclusive design, and administration roles
- one who worked in security.

Of these interviewees, seven had attended SDC / Rural Training Centre (RTC) education, four had some level of tertiary education, three primary and three secondary school.

Table 1 Infrastructure experience by gender and level of schooling

Gender	Infrastructure experience	Level of schooling
M	Village home building, Furniture making	RTC
M	Inclusive Project Design, implementation and monitoring.	Tertiary
W	Road cleaning	Primary (grade 3)
W	Cement mixing, painting, building	Primary (grade 5)
W	Road cleaning	Tertiary
M	Helping in building village homes	None
M	Home building. Water supply construction	Tertiary
W	Disability accessibility audits	Secondary
M	Cement mixing, home building	Secondary
M	Builder, water supply	Secondary
M	Administration	Tertiary
M	Security	Primary
M	Timber company worker (Honiara)	SDC/RTC
M	Builder, carpenter	SDC
M	House building, timber loading, brick making	SDC
M	Stacking timber, organizing bricks for purchase	SDC
W	Timber company worker- timber grading, machinery operation	SDC
M	Painting	SDC

3.2 Education and training

In the Solomon Islands, children with disabilities face physical, financial, and social barriers in accessing formal education. Teaching in mainstream schools is not yet able to attend to the different learning needs of students with different impairments and abilities.⁸ Two SDC or RTCs in and near Honiara provide older children and young adults, with practical skills or livelihoods education (such as agriculture, home economics, construction). These schools primarily provide for students with hearing impairments.

⁸ Sharma 2012: <https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/fe38efba-34d6-410b-8fad-d07cef313453/resource/f4ba78ad-7c8d-4992-80f2-26d7fca3b857/download/solomon-islands-inclusive-and-special-education-.pdf> and Carrington et al 2017: <https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/fe38efba-34d6-410b-8fad-d07cef313453/resource/bf3f6a0b-2c1d-4eeb-ac39-db808de28390/download/solomon-islands-journal-on-inclusive-education.pdf>

From interviews with respondents with disabilities it is clear that disability specific teaching-institutions such as San Isidro, Bethesda and Red Cross are important in providing opportunities in education and in practical skills, particularly for people with hearing impairments and other disabilities.

However, these SDCs can be inaccessible for deaf children and do not cater for all types of disability. SIIP discussions with the Principals of the two SDCs (San Isidro Special Development Centre and Bethesda Disability Training and Support Centre), highlighted that although SDC fees are low (approximately SBD \$500.00 per annum at San Isidro), fees still prevent some children and young adults from being able to travel to, enrol, board or complete their courses.

DPASI and the Principals of the two SDCs noted that students with disabilities, even as graduates of SDCs or mainstream schools, also may not meet the basic literacy and numeracy requirements, or be able to access entry assessments, to enrol in training institutes such as RTCs or other further education.

3.2.1 Education and bridging

There are currently no inclusive bridging courses in the Solomon Islands to enable interested students with disabilities to transition from SDCs or mainstream schools and then successfully complete entry assessments for enrolment in courses that offer more advanced and marketable qualifications for entry level work in the infrastructure industry (e.g. Certificate II in Construction). This limits the potential size of the workforce pool.

DPASI and the Principals of the two SDCs noted that those students who graduate from SDCs do not have formally recognized qualifications or industry connections, and still often face challenges in accessing work opportunities.

Available entry level courses such as Certificate II in Construction are also not currently designed and delivered for inclusion of people with varying abilities and impairments. An approach like that documented in a useful case study from Samoa provides lessons that could inform a similar approach in the Solomon Islands context (see *Inclusive technical and vocational education and training in Samoa (2022)*).⁹ The case study from Samoa examined the iterative and responsive process of developing and implementing two vocational skills programs in Samoa for people with disabilities. The process responded to the gap people with disabilities often have in their language, literacy, and numeracy skills, work skills or life skills needed to succeed in further education and the workforce, to live independently, and to participate in their communities. Key messages from the case study included:

- Barriers to quality education at the primary and secondary level mean that many children with disabilities do not have the opportunity to develop the language, literacy and numeracy skills they need to succeed in further education and the workforce.
- Provision of foundational language, literacy and numeracy skills and work skills provides multiple benefits for persons with disabilities, including self-confidence, development of critical life skills, and greater employability.
- There are a range of ways that Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) and other post-secondary education and training providers can make vocational education and training more inclusive. These include adjustments to facilities and classroom layout, curricula, course materials and teaching approach.
- Partnerships with organisations of persons with disabilities that are based on equity, openness, trust, and respect can help make efforts to deliver inclusive technical and vocational education and training more impactful.

Interviews supported the notion of barriers to progressing in schooling and entering tertiary education. The highest level of schooling of respondents was tertiary level: nine (F5, M4) out of 45 people with disabilities interviewed have participated in diploma to degree courses. However, there is a low rate of completion of tertiary studies in part due to inaccessibility of training sites and poor access to resources.

Eighteen (F8, M10) out of the 45 respondents have attended special development schools. Eight (F7, M8) respondents achieved some level of primary school, eight (F1, M7) respondents achieved some level of secondary school and two respondents had not had any formal schooling.

9 https://www.aptc.edu.au/docs/default-source/reports/inclusive-tvet-in-samoa/inclusive-vocational-education-in-samoa.pdf?sfvrsn=9db5a3ab_2

Table 2 Level of formal education or schooling

	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Special Development Centre	None	Total
Women	7	1	5	8	1	22
Men	1	7	4	10	1	23
Total	8	8	9	18	2	

3.3 Recruitment

Infrastructure work opportunities by local companies rarely if ever explicitly or deliberately encourage people with disabilities (or women) to apply. A rapid survey was conducted for the month of March 2024 surveying local job advertisements from the Solomon Star and Island Sun Newspapers. A total sum of 95 job advertisements was assessed to determine how inclusive advertisements by organisations and Government Ministries are. Inclusive job adverts total up to 14 with 13 of those adverts had general inclusive statements such as ‘men and women are encouraged to apply’. Only one job advertisement had deliberate statements on encouraging people with disabilities, minority groups and indigenous persons to apply.

Those people with disabilities who do gain work in the industry may experience instances of social isolation in the workplace, physical and verbal abuse, inflexible and unaccommodating workplaces and work conditions, and little power to influence change.

The Industry survey reinforces the findings from SIIP’s review of job advertisements. Industry respondents were asked how if at all they encouraged people with disabilities to apply for work. Industry respondents didn’t have practices to deliberately encourage people with disability to apply but did state that they would employ people with disability if they applied and had the ability for the roles they applied for.

People with disabilities who were interviewed commonly noted the need for job descriptions that fit or recognise their abilities:

I would like recruitment to fit us with disabilities and the job descriptions should match this too.
 [Mi laikim recruitment mas fitim mifala pipol wetm disability and job description mas semsem tu]

3.4 Retention and accommodations

3.4.1 Focus on costs rather than benefits for employers

One key theme from all research was a focus on the perceived costs of employing people with disabilities and not enough focus on the benefits. Both industry survey respondents and interviewees focused on the accommodations required to employ people with disabilities, and there was limited discussion of the benefits to the business from employing people with disabilities. This aligns with international research literature on disability employment in the construction industry which found that:

... construction research needs to balance its current emphasis on barriers (seeing people with disability as a risk) with equivalent research on solutions (seeing people with disability as an opportunity in a constrained labour market and because of their ability).¹⁰

Internationally, research has also found that companies benefit from hiring, retaining, and accommodating individuals with disabilities. Research indicates that people with disability: are more reliable, taking fewer days off or sick leave; build strong relationships with clients and boost staff morale and loyalty by fostering a diverse workforce with reduced staff turn-over and associated costs; can enhance a company’s internal reputation among its staff, community and customers with positive benefits to the employer’s brand; and can help companies to better understand and serve the diverse needs of clients and community.¹¹

10 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366203724_A_Critical_Scoping_Review_of_Disability_Employment_Research_in_the_Construction_Industry_Driving_Social_Innovation_through_More_Inclusive_Pathways_to_Employment_Opportunity p11

11 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290712473_Employers'_perceptions_of_the_benefits_of_workplace_accommodations_Reasons_to_hire_retain_and_promote_people_with_disabilities

3.4.2 Industry perceptions

The key perceived barriers to employing people with disabilities for industry survey respondents is shown below.

Table 3 Perceived barriers to employing people with disabilities

Response	# respondents
Lack of accommodations (including site accessibility, suitable tools, and communications)	10
Lack of qualifications	8
Unsafe conditions for people with disabilities (including mandatory safety requirements)	6
Lack of information about employing people with disabilities	7
Stigma associated with people with disabilities	2

Industry employers acknowledged that their lack of accommodations was a key barrier to employing people with disabilities. Nine of 20 companies said that if they did employ a person with disabilities, they would make accommodations, yet there is also a common perception (10 of 20 companies) that a lack of existing accommodations prevents them from being able to hire people with disabilities in the first place. Accommodations are discussed later in this section.

Lack of qualifications was the second most perceived barrier. As discussed in section 3.1, people with disabilities do face barriers in accessing education at both a primary and tertiary level, and there is a lack of ‘bridges’ from SDCs to industry. The former is a systemic problem for people with disabilities and the second is potentially within SIIP’s sphere of influence. Furthermore, interviewees also demonstrated both that some people with disabilities do have tertiary qualifications and that people with disabilities have worked in construction without advanced qualifications.

Lack of information about employing people with disabilities was the third barrier. This is an area that SIIP could conduct awareness raising and providing materials for businesses. Only one of the 20 companies consulted with an OPD for advice or support around hiring and supporting people with disabilities. One respondent, which hasn’t consulted with OPDs, could see the value of doing so, saying:

... I am suggesting that organisations for people with disabilities should arrange for a workshop with Solomon Islands local construction industry and Solomon Islands Built Environment Professionals Association. This is to seek OPD’s regarding their disability advice and guidance on workplace accommodations, to identify, encourage and support potential people with disability applicants when positions are advertised.

While unsafe conditions were the fourth most perceived barrier, SIIP believes this response reflects lack of awareness about disabilities rather than the reality. The idea of employing someone with a disability poses the challenge to maintain safety on site may be relevant for some disabilities (i.e. blindness) but less so for disabilities like deafness and many physical disabilities.

Two businesses suggested that stigma was a barrier to employing people with disabilities. This reflects the lived experience of some interviewees who had worked in the infrastructure sector. People with disabilities interviewed commonly experience abuse from coworkers without disabilities. For example, one interviewee was a labourer on a project where he was given the lowest pay, and where coworkers bullied him, and where they stole tools in front of him knowing he couldn’t easily report them. Another interviewee found that coworkers would come to work late or leave early and expected that she would cover for them and complete their work. Another said:

I faced discrimination every day. They teased me and at times they called me by my disability instead of calling me by my name.

3.4.3 Which reasonable accommodations should be prioritised?

This research highlighted a key tension between the accommodations wanted by people with disabilities and employer concerns about the cost of these accommodations. This leads to a question – what are the reasonable, priority accommodations? That is, which accommodations would maximise the inflow of people with disabilities into construction at the lowest cost for employers?

This seems to be a question that employers do not know how to answer. The industry survey found that workplaces do not know what reasonable accommodations to prioritise, or what adjustments are available or possible. Furthermore, few people with disabilities (even those with industry experience) have experience of industry workplaces where adjustments have been made, except within DPASI office space (though DPASI too, due to lack of resources and limitations of tenancy, was limited in its provision of physical accessibility and workplace accommodations).

People with disabilities who were interviewed identified the following general accommodations, depending on disabilities, which would make workplaces more accommodating and conducive to work. These have not been prioritised in any way:

- Transport assistance to and from work, and easier access to transport (safety in crossing busy roads was sometimes an added barrier in getting to public transport).
- Flexible work hours (often needed because getting to and getting on timely transport was a barrier).
- Physical access to and within built spaces and facilities, including access to places to get lunch and water, and to the toilet. One respondent gave an example of how their office toilet lacked reliable water for hand washing and flushing, and so to use it workers would have to carry water to the toilet, and this was difficult for her as she uses crutches. Other respondents talked about the importance of work equipment being available at accessible heights (for wheelchair users and for people of short stature).
- Availability of assistive devices and technologies and provision of basic tools, some of which might include different or adjusted tools.

In regard to finding work, workers discriminate against people with disabilities. I would find work through advertisements and then go ask for work, and then I would face the problem in the workplace of the bosses and coworkers not understanding people with disabilities in the context of the workplace. And also, they would give the wrong tools, materials and equipment to use. [Lo side fo findim waka oketa wakaman save discriminatim mifala pipol disability. Mi findim disfala waka lo advertisement den mi go ask fo mi waka. Mi savve facim nao problem lo wakaples osem oketa boss and wakaman no savve understandim mifala pipol wetm disability lo wakaples and nara samting nao oketa savve givim wrong tools, materials and equipment fo usim].

- Security of employment for people with disabilities such as equal remuneration and working conditions. Many people with disabilities have unpaid and volunteer roles. Some take up formal volunteer roles or internships but do not have a pathway to progress into paid roles.
- Clear and tailored communications for instructions and advice, but also for labelling and signage of tools, equipment, facilities – important for access but also for health and safety.
- Respectful, friendly and approachable managers and coworkers. Coworkers without disabilities to socially include those with disabilities (cases of people without disability turning away, not eating together, displaying negative body language). People want to feel that they are accepted and belong because work sites are not just for work but also socially significant. As one interviewee explained:

Respect us and be kind to us every day so we know that we are part of society.

- Bosses or supervisors to provide oversight and accountability so that people with disabilities have recourse when treated badly by coworkers, and there is some accountability for coworkers that discriminate against people with disabilities.
- Empowerment for people with disabilities to participate in decision making and some agency over their tasks; not simply being directed. People with disabilities, just like people without disabilities, need to have their voice recognised and valued. As one respondent said:

Workplaces can be discouraging and... discriminating and ignorant – such as leaving us behind in all decisions in the workplace. Protect and respect our rights by prioritizing our needs and include us in policy and procedures.

- Sign interpreters or personal assistance such as work-place buddies.
- Disability training for managers and employees of companies that employ people with disabilities.

The literature review did not provide suggestions for which accommodations should be prioritised over others in a Solomon Islands context. The analysis of international research literature on disability employment in the construction industry found that:

... there is a paucity of research in construction on relationship-building and cross-sector collaboration with support agencies, the role of social procurement and social enterprises and disability organisations in supporting disability employment, the provision of information to support employers to reduce ingrained stigmas and insights in to how to reduce biases and inequalities in highly traditional construction recruitment practices ...

3.5 Other factors that affect employment of people with disabilities

Interviewees said that having family encouragement and their belief in the capabilities of family members with disabilities, and simple things such as kind words, make a real difference to the opportunities and confidence of people with disabilities. Practical support from family such as preparing meals before and after work reduces the constraints on formally employed people with disabilities. Family are key advocates for people with disabilities – finding potential work opportunities and explaining workplace needs (accommodations) to potential employers.

However, some families or family members prevent or discourage those with disabilities from seeking work due to their own prejudices or shame. Interviewees commonly reported that families fear the hurt or harm that family members with disabilities might encounter if they seek or find work. For some people with disabilities, the consequence is that family members don't provide encouragement or support for gaining or accessing work.

Sometimes family members felt ashamed that they have me as disability and that also affected me to feel ashamed.

OPDs can play a key role both in supporting and advocating for people with disabilities, and in providing services designed to shift attitudes and practices in sectors such as infrastructure. A case study of OPDs in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands highlighted practices that support OPDs' meaningful participation and engagement, including provision of targeted capacity building and technical support.¹² In the case of DPASI, targeted capacity building would help it to meet one of its stated key outcome areas for 2020–2025: '... undertake specific targeted systemic advocacy work in the public and private sectors in terms of infrastructure, inclusive education and social engagement of young people with disabilities' (ibid).

4 Conclusion

One key theme from all research was a focus on the perceived costs of employing people with disabilities and not enough focus on the benefits to the employers. This was the case for the interviews and surveys and reflects the literature.

Infrastructure sector companies have limited understanding of what low-cost accommodations they could (or should) make, or the tangible benefits that are possible through investing in a more diverse workforce. This research highlighted a key tension between the accommodations wanted by people with disabilities and employer concerns about the cost of these accommodations. There is a gap for SIIP to recommend help employers identify the priority accommodations.

12 <https://cbm-global.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/OPD-making-difference-vanuatu-solomon-islands.pdf>

The research highlighted other gaps that SIIP can potentially influence, including a lack of bridging courses from SDCs to industry and tertiary courses, employer lack of focus of the benefits from employing people with disabilities, and employers rarely encouraging people with disabilities to apply.

Barriers outside of SIIPs sphere of influence, including limited, inaccessible, and low quality education, and in some cases, lack of support from some family members.

5 Recommendations

Two sets of recommendations have been developed: the first set is focused on influencing change in the sector, and the second set is focused on areas of further research.

Recommendations to influence change are:

1. Support SIIP partners (in partnership with DPASI) to understand and implement the priority accommodations (see Recommendation #4), and then update their job advertisements to encourage people with disabilities to apply and highlight the accommodations made.
2. Strategically advocate for the establishment of inclusive bridging courses to enable interested students with disabilities to transition from SDCs or mainstream schools and then successfully complete entry assessments for enrolment in courses that offer more advanced and marketable qualifications for entry level work in the infrastructure industry (e.g. Certificate II in Construction). Also advocate for entry level courses such as Certificate II in Construction to be designed and delivered for inclusion of people with varying abilities and disabilities.
3. Build DPASI organisational capacity to provide infrastructure sector inclusivity strengthening advocacy and services.

These recommendations were the basis of the ICN – ‘EmployAble: Improving Infrastructure Sector Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities in Solomon Islands’ intervention that SIIP commenced implementation in early 2024. There are three outcome areas:

- **Outcome area one:** Increased access by people with disabilities to infrastructure relevant training and graduation pathways to employment
- **Outcome area two:** Increased capacity of DPASI to provide a package of infrastructure relevant disability and inclusion services
- **Outcome area three:** Increased awareness and practice of disability inclusion by Solomon Islands infrastructure stakeholders

The following recommendations on areas for further research have been identified:

4. Consult with DPASI to identify the priority accommodations that will have the greatest positive influence on people with disabilities at the lowest cost for employers.
5. Trace how companies benefit from hiring, retaining, and accommodating individuals with disabilities.
6. Conduct interviews with government agency representatives as originally planned in the research design. Based on findings, design and implement activities to support infrastructure sector government agencies to be able to meet disability inclusive obligations.
7. Trace the experience of employees with disabilities working at local companies that are or have been provided with SIIP support for more inclusive practices
8. Examine family and community supports and barriers to female and male children and youths accessing relevant education pathways (economic, normative, and cultural, geographic – comparisons with supports for female and male children without disabilities).
9. Examine the effects of independent income on the family and community lives of people with disabilities (any similar findings to the Do No Harm research into impacts on women? How does independent income affect people’s participation in social/cultural reciprocity and obligations?).

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Annex 2 Interview for people with disability

Consent declaration

Hello, my name is #. I am conducting research on behalf of the Solomon Islands

Infrastructure Program (SIIP) an initiative of the Australian Government, and People with disabilities Solomon Islands -people with disabilities -the peak body for people with disability in the Solomon Islands. The research will help us understand some of the barriers and opportunities to employment of people with disabilities in the Solomon Islands infrastructure sector.

I would like to ask you some questions about your own experiences and ideas. Interviews will be used to inform SIIP's activities in support of inclusion of, and benefits for, people with disabilities. The findings of the research will be shared with the SIIP program, people with disabilities, and relevant DFAT (Australian Aid) staff and may be shared publicly, but we will make sure that your responses remain anonymous (your name or other identifying information will not appear in any of the documents that will be produced).

The interview will take about one hour to complete, but you may stop the interview at any time.

To help me with writing up the interview I would like to record our session, but if you do not want me to record that is fine too. Do I have your permission to record? Yes/No

Do you consent to participate in the interview? Yes/No

Date of interview													
Name of interviewer													
Gender of interviewer													
Name of respondent (person being interviewed)													
Position of respondent (if currently employed)													
Volunteer or unpaid roles/responsibilities of respondent													
Gender of respondent													
Age of respondent													
Level of formal schooling completed (if any)													
Does the respondent live in an urban or in a rural setting?¹³										Urban/Rural			
Impairments of respondent (if identified and shared by them)													
Type and severity of impairment/s – circle impairment and level of difficulty													
Visual				Hearing				Physical					
No difficulty	Some difficulty	A lot of difficulty	Cannot do at all	No difficulty	Some difficulty	A lot of difficulty	Cannot do at all	No difficulty	Some difficulty	A lot of difficulty	Cannot do at all		
Mental health				Intellectual				Other					
No difficulty	Some difficulty	A lot of difficulty	Cannot do at all	No difficulty	Some difficulty	A lot of difficulty	Cannot do at all	No difficulty	Some difficulty	A lot of difficulty	Cannot do at all		

Do you have some questions before we start, or anything I should explain? [list questions asked and responses to questions]

To the interviewer

During the interview there are some terms that aren't easily translated that might need to be explained to the person being interviewed:

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) defines a disability as: any long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with various

¹³ Most will be urban, as interviews are mostly being conducted in or near Honiara

barriers, may hinder the full and effective participation of disabled people in society on an equal basis with others.

Reasonable accommodation means necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments that do not impose a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Reasonable adjustments or accommodations typically include adjustments of work equipment, modification of job content or adaptation of working arrangements and environments. Awareness of and attitudes towards needs are other important elements of reasonable accommodation. Examples of reasonable accommodations include flexible working arrangements – more/ longer breaks, telecommuting etc.; Documents in certain format – information in electrical version and in Braille etc.; Assistance persons – assistance/ buddies for commute to/within office or at conferences etc.; Communication support – sign language interpreter, closed captioning etc.

Infrastructure means public and private physical structures such as roads, bridges, wharves and ports, water supplies, sewers, electrical grids, telecommunications. Work or jobs in the infrastructure sector might include: planners, designers and architects, contract managers, engineers, electricians, carpenters, plumbers, truck drivers, traffic controllers, logistics managers, community or social consultants, risk analysis environmental scientists and many others.

1. Experiences of people with disability working in the infrastructure sector

1.1. Just to get started, would you like to tell me a bit about yourself and what you do – your formal and informal roles, and your life in general? [Wat nao iu doim dis taim.... \[stori fastaim\]](#)

1.2. Could you tell me about your experience of working (or trying to work) in the infrastructure sector? (if you have no experience trying to be employed in the infrastructure sector – what has been your experience of trying to get work more generally?) ([iu savve talem mi wat nao samfala experience blo iu lo find waka lo infrastructure? Infrastructure hem meanim oketa tings osem waka lo rot, mekem haus, mekem wata saply. If iu no waka lo infrastructure wat nao experience blo iu long findm any narafala waka?](#))

1.3. If you have worked in the construction or wider infrastructure sector, could you tell me how you were able to get work in the sector? (if iu waka long waka osem mekem rot, buildm haus, waka inside office blong campani wea mekem haus or wharf, iu kare timber or gravel, how nao iu gogo findm disfala waka?)

1.4. If you have worked in the construction or infrastructure sector, what have been the challenges and bad things you have had to face in your work? (if iu waka lo construction or infrastructure, wat nao samfala samtng iu facim insait waka or mekem hard or problem wea mekem hard fo iu waka?)

1.5. If you have worked in the construction or infrastructure sector, what have been the opportunities and good things you have experienced in your work? (If iu waka lo construction or infrastructure befoa, wat nao samfala good samting happen long iu time iu waka or mekem life blong iu easi time iu waka?)

1.6. What is your advice to other people with disabilities who hope to work in the construction or infrastructure sector one day?(what nao samfala advice or samfala toktok blo iu fo pipol wetm disability wea laik foa waka long construction or infrastructure wan dei ?)

2. Attitudes

2.1 What attitudes by employers and co-workers have encouraged you to work in the infrastructure sector? (Wat kyn gud wei blo oketa pipol iu waka fo oketa and pipol waka wetm iu na mekem iu hapi and lik fo go hed waka insait infrastructure?)

2.2 What attitudes by employers or co-workers in the infrastructure sector have been discouraging (negative)? (Wat kyn nogud wei blo oketa pipol iu waka fo oketa and pipol waka wetm iu na mekem iu no hapi and no lik fo go hed waka insait infrastructure?)

2.3 What changes in attitudes by employers and co-workers do you think would encourage and enable you to work in the infrastructure sector?(wat nao samfala wei wea oketa wakaman or bisnis sud sensim fo oketa helpim iu and mekem wei fo iu waka inside infrastructure?)

2.4 What attitudes of family and carers/support-workers encouraged you to work in the infrastructure sector? (wat nao samfala wei wea oketa famili showm fo iu wea hem mekem wei or easi fo iu find waka lo infrastructure or find eni narafala waka?)

2.5 What attitudes by family and carers/support-workers were discouraging (negative)?(Wat nao samfala wei wea oketa famili blo iu showm fo iu wea mekem iu less or mekem iu no hapi fo findm waka?)

2.6 What changes in attitudes by family and carers/support-workers do you think would encourage and enable you to work in the infrastructure sector? (Wat nao samfala wei wea oketa famili sud sensim wea bae mekem iu hapi and mekem wei fo iu savve waka lo infrastructure.)

3. Workplace policies or processes

3.1. What workplace policy and processes (if any) do you feel enabled your employment in the sector (e.g. recruitment processes, job descriptions, inclusion awareness of co-workers, etc)? (Wat nao samfala rule blo waka wea hemi mekem wei fo iu save tekem waka in sait infrastructure? Eg how oketa chosim man for waka, oketa mekem waka man save dat everi one nomata garem disability sae waka)

3.2. What workplace policy and processes do you feel were a barrier to your work? (Wat nao samfala rule lo waka wea hemi mekem hard fo iu or no easi fo iu duim waka blong iu?)

3.3. What changes in workplace policy and processes do you think would encourage and enable you to work in the infrastructure sector? (Wat na samfala rule lo waka wea sud sensim fo mekem easi fo iu waka insite infrastructure?)

4. Physical and environmental

4.1. What 'reasonable accommodations' (if any) have enabled you to be employed in the sector or to work more effectively in the sector? [e.g. flexible working hours, accommodations in transport, physical access, appropriate communications, assistive devices or technology, etc) (Wat nao samfala tings wea oketa kampani duim or mekem wea hem mekem easi fo iu time waka?

Eg. oketa helpim iu wetm transport to and from waka or rump go insite waka ples or mekem batrum lo wakaples fitim iu or oketa kyn samtng osem)

4.2. What physical or environmental factors do you feel were a barrier to your work? (wat nao samfala samtng wea mekem iu hard fo move around insait waka?)

4.3. What reasonable accommodations do you think would encourage and enable you to work in the infrastructure sector? (wat nao samfala tngs pipol wetm disability needim insite lo infrastructure waka ples wea sud helpm oketa fo waka gud?)

5. Best ways forward

5.1. There are many reasons why different people with disabilities are or are not employed in the infrastructure sector. Some examples include: attitudes of employers, personal level of interest, availability, skills and education (literacy and qualifications), getting to work sites, accessibility of work sites or work places, reasonable accommodations, workplace attitudes or stigma, family encouragement, and reliability and predictability of work. In your own view, what do you think would be the most useful or effective ways to increase employment opportunities for people with disability in the infrastructure sector?(lo tnk tnk blong iu wat nao samfala wei fo openem up moa waka fo pipol wetm disability inside infrastructure?)

6. Any other comments

6.1. Do you have any other comments or remarks you would like to add before we finish this interview? (iu garem eni tng moa iu like fo talem fo me tek note lo hem befoa intala finis stori?)

Thank you for participating and sharing your time and ideas for this interview.

Annex 3 Industry Baseline Survey

About People with disabilities (Impairment)

23. Does your company currently employ People with disabilities?

YES NO Don't know

23a. If YES, how many people with disabilities do you employ? _____

23b. What disabilities or impairment does this person (s) have and what roles do he/she does?

Impairment (hearing, sight,	Roles/positions	Male or Female

24. What 'accommodations', if any, does your company provide to enable People with disabilities to use their abilities to benefit the company?

(Examples of accommodations – include provision of transport options, flexible working hours, physical access for mobility disability e.g. ramps, handrails, accessible communication – for hearing impairments, or sight impairments)

25. If your company currently does not provide 'accommodations', would it consider doing so?

YES NO Don't know

26. What would enable your company to put in place for 'accommodations'?

27. Does your company collect data (information) on People with disabilities? If yes, how do you collect this data? (e.g. self-reported, use of Washington Group Questionnaire?)

28. How does your company use this information (e.g. identify number of employees with disabilities, workplace accommodations required)?

29. Would your company choose to employ someone with disabilities?

YES NO

Why?

or why not

27. What do you see as the barriers to employing People with disabilities in your company or in the construction industry?

28. How, if at all, does your company encourage and support People with disabilities to apply for positions or roles?

31. Are there changes in how your company works that you think might enable greater employment of People with disabilities? If yes, what kinds of changes?

32. Does your company consult with local Organisation for People with disabilities (OPDs) ?

YES NO

32a. If YES, what would your company consult the OPDs about?

(e.g. to seek their disability advice and guidance on workplace accommodations, to identify, encourage and support potential people with disabilities applicants when positions are advertised)

End of the survey.

Thank you for your time to complete the questions in this survey. Any questions?

Annex 4 Details of interviewee and survey respondents

Annex

Forty-five people with disabilities were interviewed: 22 women, 23 men. Ages ranged from 22 to 63. Of the 45 people interviewed, 18 (5W, 13M) have some experience in infrastructure work, ranging from very low skilled labour through to carpentry and building. The remaining 27 who did not have infrastructure sector experience offered their views of what they saw as barriers to employment in the sector.

Interviewees with disabilities shared their disability and the level of difficulty it creates (based on the Washington Group questions as adapted by DPASI). Many respondents reported more than one disability:

Levels of difficulty for different disabilities among people with disabilities interviewed

Level of difficulty	Walking			Seeing			Communications			Hearing			Concentrating			Self-care		
	W	M	Total	W	M	Total	W	M	Total	W	M	Total	W	M	Total	W	M	Total
No difficulty	11	10	21	14	16	30	11	12	23	14	15	29	20	18	38	16	20	36
Some difficulty	3	5	8	5	1	6	11	8	19	1	1	2	2	4	6	6	1	7
A lot of difficulty	8	6	14	3	5	8	0	3	3	6	5	11	0	1	1	0	2	2
Cannot do at all	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0

- Twenty-four (W11, M13) respondents reported difficulty with walking. Some respondents who have visual impairments may have reported a walking difficulty because of the Washington Group questions being framed inaccurately (i.e. some respondents reported that they found it hard to walk around – because they could not see clearly where they were going, not due to mobility issues).
- Fifteen (W8, M7) respondents reported difficulty with seeing.
- Twenty-two (W11, M11) respondents reported difficulty with communication.
- Seventeen (W8, M8) respondents reported difficulty with hearing.
- Seven (W2, M5) respondents reported difficulty with concentrating.
- Nine (F6, M3) respondents reported difficulty with self-care.

Employment status

Employment status	Gender			Level of schooling attended (at any level)				
	W	M	Total	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	SDC	None
Holds a paid position (currently employed), includes one person who is a project employee on different work sites	3	6	9	1	2	3	3	0
Student	0	3	3	0	0	1	2	0
Self-employed other (market vendor, seamstress etc)	2	1	3		1	0	2	0
None recorded as volunteer or paid or self-employed (includes those with family or community roles such as parenting)	8	7	15	4	4	0	7	0
Volunteer/intern	9	6	15	2	2	5	4	2
Total	22	24	45	7	9	9	18	2

Of the 45 people with disabilities interviewed, nine were recorded as having paid roles, three were recorded as carrying out small marketing or other small enterprises. Three were students, 16 were volunteers or interns, the majority volunteering with DPASI or other organisations for of people with disabilities. Fifteen¹⁴ did not report any ongoing employment, study, income generation activity or volunteer roles.

¹⁴ It is likely that some of these respondents do have small enterprises such as marketing but did not offer this information due to the way questions were asked.