



INSIGHT SERIES

Workforce Skills Series - Building local construction sector capacity

November 2023



Overview

One of the objectives of Australia's Solomon Islands Infrastructure Program (SIIP) is to improve the capacity of the Solomon Islands Government and private sector to plan, prioritise, design, build and maintain good quality, inclusive, and safe infrastructure. In 2022, SIIP initiated the [Workforce Skills Series](#) to address part of this objective, with the aim of helping local companies overcome some of the barriers to tender and win Australian/SIIP-supported work.

To date (November 2023), the series has delivered eight workshops across tender preparation, contract administration, health and safety, and environmental impact assessment. Attendance is open to all Solomon Islands construction companies.

A total of 421 people from 112 companies and organisations (287 men, 134 women) participated in the eight workshops and one networking event. Of the companies were 107 construction-related, representing an estimated 64 per cent of Solomon Islands construction industry.¹ The sessions had high participant satisfaction. Participants interviewed months after training reported an increased understanding of the requirements to meet DFAT (and other donors) contracts. Companies also reported increased understanding and practices of inclusion, the development of new workplace inclusion and safety policies, and increased environmental management which in some cases have led to winning more work. SIIP is now exploring additional capacity development approaches such as small group mentoring and opportunities to overcome gaps in specific technical skill sets.

Context

The provision of infrastructure in Solomon Islands is highly complex. The construction industry, while grappling with issues such as a shortage of technical skills, low workplace inclusion rates, and regulatory gaps, presents avenues for targeted interventions.² Addressing these challenges could enhance the capacity of local companies to better meet donor tender requirements and contracting needs, fostering positive developments in the infrastructure landscape. In addition, this could have positive impacts on domestic economic growth, enabling local contractors to win major investment from donors.³

The Solomon Islands Infrastructure Program (SIIP) is Australia's ten-year partnership with Solomon Islands to create local opportunities through a large pipeline of economic infrastructure projects. Launched in 2021, SIIP has two end of program outcomes:

1. Enhance the capacity of government and private sector to plan, manage, finance, construct and/or maintain critical infrastructure
2. Deliver resilient, accessible infrastructure assets across the country that support inclusive economic growth.

SIIP's [Local Content Strategy](#) and [Capacity Development Strategy](#) outline approaches to build the capacity of the local construction sector to benefit from the pipeline of projects that the program will deliver. The Workforce Skills Series is one of the activities that works towards this.

The Workforce Skills Series

The Workforce Skills Series was initiated and delivered by the SIIP Hub to help local companies overcome some of the barriers to tender and win work Australian/SIIP-supported work. As part of its commitment to local content, SIIP looks to upskill local firms to win as much work as possible (or partner in a meaningful way with international firms). Local firms have been vocal in the past, advocating for greater local content

¹ Developing an accurate estimate of the construction industry and connected trades in Solomon Islands is challenging – the Ministry of Infrastructure Development has a list of 36 companies in architecture and building management services. SIIP has a list of 56 companies registered to receive procurement notices, and a list of 102 companies that have registered for Workforce Skills Series. Analysis of these three lists has identified 166 individual companies (sole traders to large companies) across architecture, construction, and construction consulting.

² Asian Development Bank, 2021, Land and Maritime Connectivity Project: Sector Assessment

³ Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility, 2022, Enhancing Procurement Practice and Local Content in Pacific Infrastructure

through the Solomon Islands Chamber of Commerce and Industry to the Solomon Island Government. The series is one of many tools in SIIP’s approach to local content. It acknowledges the need to support local firms to bid for SIIP contracts and to enhance skills of its sub-contractors. The nature of the Workforce Skills Series workshops also enabled SIIP to collaborate with Solomon Water, who have also sought to expand and strengthen the pool of sub-contractors available to participate in their substantial pipeline of infrastructure work. Four topics were agreed to with Solomon Water: tender submission, contract administration, health and safety, and traffic management.

Table 1 shows 421 people from 112 companies and organisations (287 men, 134 women) attended across eight trainings and one networking event. 107 companies were construction-related companies, which represents an estimate of 64 per cent of SIIP’s Solomon Islands construction industry estimate.⁴ Thirty companies attended three or more workshops.

Table 1: Session topics and participation

Session Topic	Date	Total participants	Male	Female
Tender Preparation	Oct '22	86	63 (73%)	23 (27%)
Contract Administration	Jan '23	72	47 (65%)	25 (35%)
Gender Equality & Social Inclusion policy	Mar '23	15	8 (53%)	7 (47%)
Local Content	Apr '23	47	32 (68%)	15 (32%)
Occupational Health & Safety Policy	May '23	47	31 (66%)	16 (34%)
Environmental Impact Assessment	Jun '23	46	34 (74%)	12 (26%)
Workplace Health & Safety Plan	Aug '23	38	23 (61%)	15 (39%)
Traffic Management	Sept '23	35	25 (71%)	10 (29%)
Certificate and networking event (with Green Construction Training Program)	Oct '23	35	24 (69%)	11 (31%)
Total		421	287 (68%)	134 (32%)

Participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the training. Of the 311 completed feedback forms from across the eight workshops⁵ (an average response rate of 81% of participants in each session), 98% of respondents stated that they learnt new and useful things. Feedback confirmed that the workshops were well structured (97% agreed) and facilitated in a skilled way (93% agreed).

Outcomes

Through follow-up interviews with participants, the training was found to have contributed to increased capacity in three areas: increased inclusion; safer worksites; and improved environmental management. The SIIP team conducted fifteen follow-up interviews with participants, with discussions ranging from two to six months after the trainings and found the following:

Increased inclusion

The Workforce Skills Series has led to applied learning in inclusive practices and policies in construction companies. One participant said her company had struggled to complete donor tenders due to a lack of gender policies. Prior to attending the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) policy training she had been unclear about what GEDSI was, and why it would matter in the tendering process. Through the training,

⁴ As previously footnoted, this is based on three different lists. Twenty companies (of 56) from the list of companies registered to receive procurement notices attended a Workforce Skills Series event.

⁵ The certificate and networking event of Nov 2023 excluded

she drafted a vision and mission statement for her company centred on the value of inclusion, which actively promoted GEDSI principles within her organisation and wider networks.

This led to improved employment opportunities within her company for people with disabilities. One young man with disabilities saw the new vision and mission statements and sought employment. He is an experienced sago palm weaver. He was subsequently hired to work on the Australian Federal Police Leaf Haus project at Central Police Station and Tetere. He has remained employed at the business, and is being provided with training in flooring and carpentry in exchange for training his colleagues in traditional weaving. The craftsman reported not being equally paid to his non-disabled colleagues at previous jobs and is pleased to be working on longer term projects.

Three other interviewees are also progressing GEDSI plans, citing their learnings from the GEDSI workshop. One said their company was seeking to recruit female construction workers as part of this process. Another, who has drafted a GEDSI policy with the support of the SIIP team, has also hired a person with disabilities and provided two training sessions to their workforce to champion inclusion and equal treatment in the workplace.



Head of RSF Constructions, Ms Mele Noda, noted that participation in the Workforce Skills Series had resulted her company winning larger contracts, including the construction of Australia's biomedical lab at Lata Provincial Hospital:

"Understanding the need to be more inclusive of women in our staff profile, and implementing improved work safe practices, means we can now meet the standards of overseas tenders. Our business has grown from three to 30 people as a result."

RSF Constructions Mele Noda receives her Certificate of Participation from Australia's Infrastructure Counsellor Craig Gillies, October 2023

Safer worksites

Several interviewees said they have put into practice the knowledge gained from sessions. One participant, having completed the Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) sessions, developed and led the implementation of an Occupation Health and Safety (OH&S) policy for his company. He also invested in personal protective equipment (PPE) for his employees and elevated safety issues in monthly discussions between management and staff. Prior to the training, their workplace was often dirty. Now he has instituted a daily routine to clean the worksite. He reported that his employees feel proud to wear the PPE, and customers are commenting on the changed environment. This improved worksite has decreased the risk of serious injuries or fatalities and improved the likelihood of staff retention.

Other workplaces are becoming safer because of the Workforce Skills Series. Twenty respondents who had not previously developed OH&S plans now intend to create them. One interviewee said they have been helping other companies with tendering health and safety components. This skillset will soon be featured on their company profile and enable them to distinguish themselves in the marketplace. Another said that their new OH&S policy enabled them to win a contract to provide cleaning services at the hospital. This highlights the timeliness of the training in addressing critical knowledge gaps related to safe work practices in the construction industry.



Participants from Traffic Management workshop, September 2023

Improved Environmental Management

Environmental impact assessment (EIA) was a popular topic. In follow-up interviews participants reported heightened appreciation and awareness of the environmental impact of the construction industry:

“EIA was a real eye opener – not only for construction but [going] beyond the construction industry.”

One participant said they have applied their learning on the Tulagi sea wall project, bringing a better understanding of the potential environmental impacts of the construction. Another stated that they have now included EIA into their bidding process. In the words of another, the training has encouraged members of the construction industry to, *“help my company to take measures to ensure safe environments”*, particularly in relation to developing a Company Environment Management Plan.



Participants at the Occupational Health and Safety workshop, May 2023

Conclusion

SIIP has made good inroads in addressing Solomon Islands infrastructure challenges, particularly in relation to inclusion, improved safety and environmental management. These outcomes help the local companies better meet tendering and contracting requirements of donors, and contribute to improved construction standards. Winning work provides the foundation for further capacity building to overcome other barriers to local companies winning and delivering infrastructure projects.

By providing tailored, context-sensitive training, SIIP has empowered industry with valuable skills and knowledge. The Workforce Skills Series not only aligns with SIIP's end-of-program outcomes of enhancing infrastructure capacity and delivering resilient assets, but also demonstrates a commitment to the program principle of local content. As a result, SIIP is contributing to the equitable development of Solomon Islands, developing local construction capacity to win tenders and ensuring that economic growth benefits all segments of society.

Summary Lessons

- **Ensure training is context specific** – Feedback from initial workshops said people wanted more practical examples from Solomon Islands. SIIP amended training to reflect this and subsequently received positive feedback. In addition, practical exercises and groupwork are now important components to reinforce knowledge.
- **Capacity building needs are ongoing** – participants need more than one session to draft new policies. SIIP has provided multiple participants with longer term support to develop and embed relevant policies, particularly OH&S and GEDSI policies. The GEDSI training was purposefully lengthened to two days (as opposed to usual half day training) to explore the benefit of extended group workshops and mentoring. SIIP will consider these and other avenues to support the embedding of learning in future training across a wider range of topics.
- **Informal networking has benefits** – participants said they enjoyed the opportunity to network with their peers and introduce their companies as part of the training. In response, SIIP hosted an 'end of year networking event with certificate presentation for all Workforce Skills Series participants.
- **Importance of monitoring impact** – it is important to track the impact of capacity building over time to demonstrate the case for such activities alongside the delivery of infrastructure projects. The Workforce Skills Series is building the capacity of the local construction sector to not only improve their ability to win SIIP work, but also other Australian infrastructure investments, as well as other donor infrastructure programs.