

The impacts of logging on human rights in Solomon Islands

Key findings of October 2022 community visits



Introduction

A publication by Franciscans International in collaboration with Dominicans for Justice and Peace, the Society of Saint Francis, the Dominican Network in the Solomon Islands, and the Community of the Sisters of the Church (Solomon Islands - Pacific Province)

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Relevant documents



Outcomes of the 2021 Universal Periodic Review of the Solomon Islands



Matrix of recommendations made during the review



2020 Joint Stakeholders' Submission ahead of the Universal Periodic Review

Industrial logging in Solomon Islands has impacted all aspects of life for communities living nearby or downstream from the harvesting sites. Following reports shared by these communities, our organizations submitted a joint stakeholder report in October 2020 which documented the wide-ranging human rights implications of this practice, ahead of the country's examination under the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in May 2021. At the end of this process, the Government of Solomon Islands accepted several recommendations to improve practices for logging projects.

In October 2022, we conducted a follow-up visit to six communities on Guadalcanal Island to gain a deeper understanding of the impacts of past and ongoing logging projects and ascertain whether UPR recommendations are successfully being implemented. We consulted over 300 people in a series of key informant interviews and focus group discussions during which participants were divided according to various characteristics, including gender and age. This methodology, complemented by the deep roots of our organizations in Solomon Islands and the familiarity of its members in the communities, allowed for frank, open, and in-depth discussions.

The key findings of these visits, which are compiled in this report by thematic issue, indicate that the concerns of affected communities are left largely unaddressed with little confidence that future logging projects will be handled differently. Instead, the impact of logging threatens to cause irreparable harm to people and the environment they inhabit and rely on. Important steps to reverse these trends can still be taken, but it is imperative that action is taken as a matter of urgency. Building on our conversations with affected communities, this publication aims to provide practical and concrete steps the government of Solomon Islands can take to implement the commitment it made during its 2021 UPR.

Water and sanitation

UPR recommendation accepted by the government

“That all forest exploitation projects include prior and informed consultation with the concerned local and indigenous communities, as well as a report on the environmental and human rights impact, specifically in the area of the rights to water and sanitation.”

What we found

Communities report the pollution of streams, rivers, and other water bodies as a direct result of the logging activities. Since people depend largely on rivers, streams, and wells for drinking water and sanitation purposes, their daily welfare is immediately affected once these sources are contaminated. With boreholes drying up and the unavailability of alternatives, people now must travel up to three kilometers to access safe drinking water.

Water bodies in the upper hills, where the trees are harvested, have been blocked by logs and mud, at least in part because the protected boundaries near streams and gullies are not respected by loggers. Consequently, these water bodies have become shallower or dried up entirely. As a result, flash flooding has increased during the rainy season, resulting in damage to the villages.

What can the government do?

The government should undertake a scientific study to determine the extent of the river changes and identify areas that are at increased risk of flash floods due to the logging operations. This should be done with a view to providing a remedy to the affected communities and mitigating the risks they face.

Authorities should also conduct regular inspections at active logging sites to ensure that the restrictions in the Code of Logging Practices are respected.

Most common issues identified by the focus groups



Water sources
are polluted

83%



The rivers are
brown and muddy

78%



Rivers are dryer
and shallower

67%



The right to health

UPR recommendation accepted by the government

“Continue to promote [...] the national health strategy policy that focuses on improving health, universal coverage and access to basic care, especially with the strengthening of rural medical centres.”

What we found

Communities overwhelmingly experience skin problems after being exposed to pollutants while bathing or swimming in rivers. In two of the villages we visited, parents of children showing symptoms found that the water had been contaminated by diesel oil from logging machinery.

Further health concerns include the loss of medical plants, herbs, and trees, which have been cut down or destroyed during logging operations. Access to health care provided by the government remains limited although religious organizations attempt to fill this gap.

It’s also noteworthy that in these normally peaceful communities the noise disturbance from logging, at times throughout the night and day, causes distress, especially among children and infants.

What can the government do?

The government should facilitate a scientific assessment of what chemical pollutants cause such skin irritations and the implications of prolonged exposure. Stringent measures need to be employed to prevent further contamination of water sources and adequate healthcare should be provided to those already affected.

More generally, the government should follow-up on the recommendations accepted during the 2021 UPR and continue to promote better access to health care in rural communities.

Most common issues identified by the focus groups



Skin irritation
after bathing
in the rivers

72%



Medicinal plants
are destroyed or
hard to access

67%



Occasional
shortages
of drugs

44%



The right to adequate food

UPR recommendation accepted by the government

“Take appropriate legislative and administrative measures to ensure that the use of exploitation of natural resources, in particular logging do not adversely affect the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights of local communities.”

What we found

Communities report a range of impacts by logging on their food sources, including diminishing numbers of fish and shellfish, the destruction of gardens by flash floods, and scarcity of traditional foods harvested from the forest. This loss, combined with the introduction of new foods by the loggers, has increased dependency on imported foods that are more expensive yet less nutritious.

The loss of tree coverage is already raising surface and water temperatures, which in turn makes traditional foods harder to grow. The destruction of the forest is also causing wild pigs and other animals to encroach on vegetable plots inside or near the villages.

People report the presence of invasive species – notably the Giant African Snail and the Rhinoceros Beetle – which authorities believe to have been introduced by logging equipment landed without biosecurity clearance. These species devastate local agriculture and, in the case of the Rhinoceros Beetle, can permanently destroy the coconut trees on which the communities rely as a cash crop.

Most common issues identified by the focus groups



Fish and shells becoming scarce

67%



Logging brings invasive species

50%



Food from the forest is lost or diminished

39%

What can the government do?

As a matter of priority, the government should take steps to prevent the spread of invasive species, especially considering the risk that these may permanently destroy certain crops. The authorities should also conduct further study on the impacts of forest exploitation projects on food security: this should be done in the larger context of safeguarding food sovereignty and sustainability of communities near the logging sites.



The rights of women and girls

UPR recommendations accepted by the government

“Increase the minimum age for marriage to 18 years and criminalize the sale and sexual exploitation of girls and boys,” and “Take additional steps to address the sexual exploitation of children, particularly within logging camps.”

What we found

Girls as young as 13 are said to have married much older foreign workers at the logging sites in exchange for financial promises to their families. As these girls are underage – the legal age for marriage and consent in Solomon Islands is 15 – the relationships are likely to constitute sexual abuse. Others are working as ‘house girls’, an ambiguous term that often obfuscates sexual exploitation or unpaid labor.

Interviewees report that often the women and children born during these marriages are abandoned when foreign loggers return home. Although the children are generally accepted by the communities, the mothers face stigma and rarely receive continued financial support – some loggers allegedly married using false identities making it impossible to track them once they leave the country.

Women also regularly travel with the loggers when they move operations to different areas and islands, uprooting them from their communities. In some cases, this practice may constitute domestic trafficking.

What can the government do?

The government should raise the age for marriage to eighteen and create better legal safeguards against domestic trafficking and sexual exploitation. It should also support and expand existing initiatives that provide shelter and protection for women and their children, including long-term financial support and education.

Most common issues identified by the focus groups



Young girls marrying older men from the logging camps

50%



Mothers and children abandoned by foreign loggers

44%



Sexual abuse in the logging camps

33%



Transparency, security, and social cohesion

UPR recommendations accepted by the government

“Enhance the rights, well-being and safety of women by: [...] developing a road map to improve accessibility of safe accommodation services for survivors of domestic violence” and “Conduct credible investigations into, and impose and enforce criminal penalties for, government corruption through operationalizing the 2018 Independent Commission against Corruption.”

What we found

Interviewees describe a situation where a sudden influx of cash for local, often young, men employed by the logging companies has increased the consumption of alcohol. This, in turn, seems to directly influence the rates of domestic abuse.

Corruption continues to be widespread in Solomon Islands. Community members allege that when they sought to raise problems caused by logging operations, authorities have been bribed to look away. This endemic corruption fuels impunity and erodes trust in institutions, which consequently discourages people from turning to the authorities for assistance and protection. Some report being threatened by police on behalf of the logging companies.

Logging has also caused a breakdown in traditional governance structures. Although the agreements with logging companies frequently include provisions for development projects such as contributions to schools, infrastructure, and medical facilities, the communities indicated that these contributions were rarely made. Traditional leaders, who served as the liaison between the logging companies and the communities are blamed for this failure, leading to a breakdown in trust.

Most common issues identified by the focus groups



Increasing rates of domestic violence

44%



Feelings of unsafety due to loggers

39%



Logging brings disunity and division

28%

What can the government do?

The government should make meaningful efforts to root out corruption practice, including through the effective implementation of the 2018 Independent Commission against Corruption. It should also ensure safety of local communities affected by logging activities and prevent, investigate and prosecute domestic violence.



Land rights and free, prior and informed consent

UPR recommendations accepted by the government

“Strengthen its development policy and the full utilization of resources for the benefit of its people [...]” and “That all forest exploitation projects include prior and informed consultation with the concerned local and indigenous communities [...]”

What we found?

Solomon Islands recognizes both registered land, which is owned privately, and customary land, which is owned communally. In the case of logging, contracts to exploit customary land are often signed by a single individual considered as a representative of the community – even though they may not have received a mandate to do so. With the compensation flowing to one person but the burdens of logging being shared by all, this has fueled conflict within the communities.

Interviewees also reported that property rights for registered land are not respected, with loggers felling trees on adjacent plots despite not being granted permission to do so. Although people have filed legal claims against logging companies, these cases are often dropped, allegedly after the complainants or the authorities are bribed to do so.

What can the government do?

The government should establish additional safeguards to ensure that any contracts affecting customary land are signed with the consent of the entire community. It should also provide a clear and comprehensive framework through which people can seek redress if the companies breach agreements made with communities. More generally, the government should provide and inform the population, particularly communities near logging sites, on the procedure of forest exploitation projects, ensuring the implementation of free, prior and informed consent principles.

Most common issues identified by the focus groups



Disputes over land

78%



No consultations by landowners with communities

22%



Only landowners and chiefs benefit from logging

17%



The right to a healthy environment

UPR recommendation accepted by the government

“Ensure the conservation and protection of fragile habitats against deforestation and forest degradation, and strengthen sustainable forest management practices to protect human rights related to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.”

What we found

Life in the consulted communities is deeply interwoven with the surrounding environment. The impacts of intensive logging, in particular the unsustainable way in which the exploitation of the forests takes place, has affected all aspects of this relationship.

Communities report that, even with replanting efforts in some areas, the composition of forests is permanently changed, with secondary vegetation replacing the trees that have been logged.

Aside from the direct impacts like landslides, the emergence of invasive species, and the loss of access to natural resources, respondents also note that the river and surface temperatures have been rising and observe changes to weather patterns. Solomon Islands is part of the world’s ‘carbon sink’ and the impacts of deforestation will be significant in relation to global efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

What can the government do?

The government should create adequate mechanisms to fully operationalize the environmental protections already enshrined in its domestic legislation and adopt a coherent and comprehensive policy in line with the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Considering the country’s important role in global efforts to combat the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, international technical and financial support should be made available, with the support of the international community.

Most common issues identified by the focus groups



Soil erosion
and landslides

61%



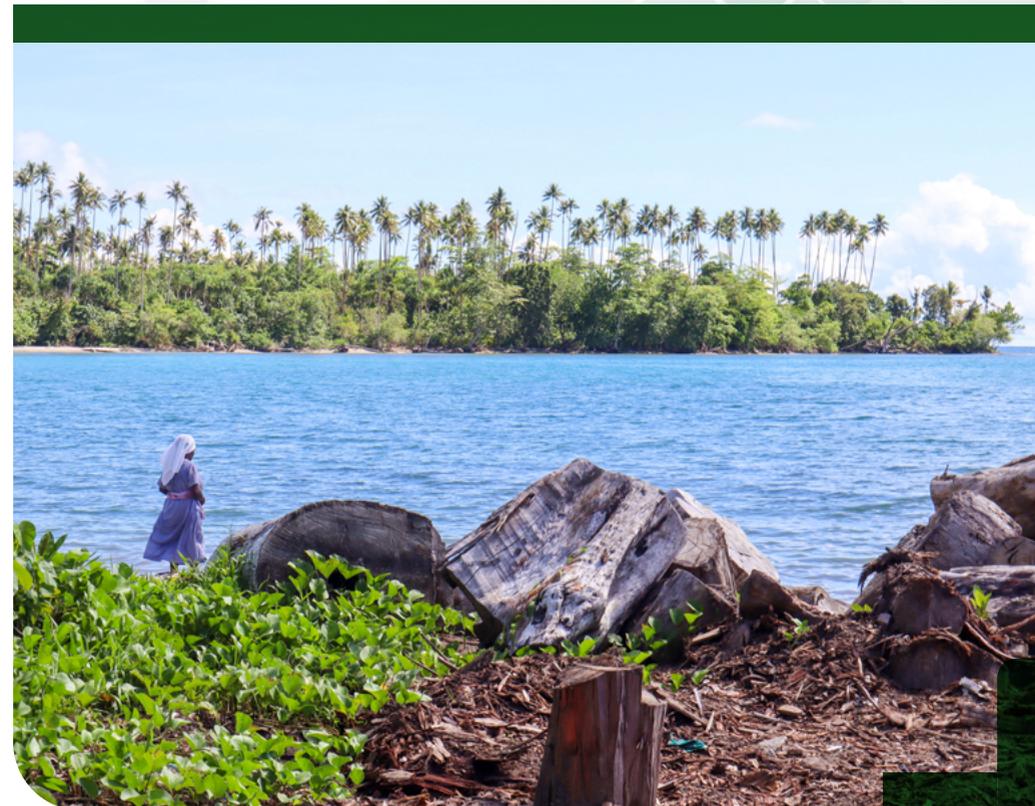
Warmer rivers

39%



Changing
weather patterns

28%



What will we do?

The Society of Saint Francis, the Dominican Network in the Solomon Islands, and the Community of the Sisters of the Church are aiming to strengthen community resilience by incorporating awareness raising about logging into their ministry. They will also continue to provide support to those directly affected by logging, including women and children that have been abandoned.

Franciscans International and Dominicans for Justice and Peace will continue to highlight the human rights impacts of industrial logging in the Solomon Islands through the different mechanisms available at the United Nations.

We will also continue to support the creation of a legally binding instrument on business and human rights, which UN Member States are negotiating through the Open-Ended Intergovernmental Working Group on Transnational Corporations. In this context, strong due diligence requirements and accountability mechanisms in cases of adverse human rights impacts and environmental degradation caused by business activities, are essential to address the challenges described in this publication.

Through wider national, regional and international networks we will continue to develop holistic approaches to address the adverse impacts of logging, advocate for the mitigation of existing harm while promoting human rights-based and sustainable policies in this area.

Considering the implications of deforestation in the global fight against climate change, loss of biodiversity, and environmental degradation, as well as the complexity of the global production chains that the logging industry is part of, this problem can only be effectively addressed with the support of the international community.





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