Inclusive and resilient shelter guide: accounting for the needs of informal settlements in Solomon Islands

Mittul Vahanvati
What are the unique challenges and localised solutions to fulfil adequate, disaster-resilient, and inclusive housing needs of urban informal settlers in Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands?

1. What does adequate housing mean?

2. What are the unique housing challenges facing urban informal settlers in Honiara?

3. What are locally-appropriate solutions to adequate, disaster-resilient, and inclusive housing, to support shelter responders to better support communities?

Table 1: AHP objectives to attain the goal of strengthening local humanitarian capability and community resilience to natural hazards.

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<td>1</td>
<td>Communities are better prepared for rapid and slow onset disasters.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>The rights and needs of women, people with disabilities, youth and children, are being met in disaster preparedness and response at all levels.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Government, NGOs, the private sector and communities coordinate more effectively for inclusive disaster preparedness and response.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>National NGOs and faith-based organisations have more influence and capacity in the country’s humanitarian system.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>AHP NGOs work effectively together and with other relevant stakeholders.</td>
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2. Unique housing challenges, Honiara

7500 islands

Grouped into three diverse social, cultural and geographic sub-areas, namely:

1. Melanesia
2. Micronesia and
3. Polynesia

Figure 1. Urban share of population (per cent) by Pacific sub-region. Source: Adapted from Pacific Island population estimates and projections, Secretariat of the Pacific Community (September 2010).
2. Unique housing challenges, Honiara - urbanisation

Rapid population growth, urbanisation and unplanned housing developments leading to:

- Approximately 40 percent of city's population lives in informal settlements, with declining living standard, a lack of sanitation, water and infrastructure (Trundle and McEvoy, 2016)

- Approximately 1/3rd of city's population lives outside of government-tenured land
  - 87 percent land = customary
  - 8 percent = state owned
  - 5 percent land = held under perpetual estate and fixed-term estate (Trundle and McEvoy, 2016)

- Development of land limited by road access, utilities and government release of land
  - Population density = 2,953 people/sq.km. and average household size = 7 people (UN-Habitat, 2014)
  - Unemployment = 20 percent of youth unemployed, a lot of women are self-employed
  - Inequality = 1/3rd of children are stunted and significant gender inequalities (UN-Habitat, u.d.)

The country placed 151st out of 189 countries and territories (UNDP, 2020) and the Human Development Index value of 0.567.
2. Unique housing challenges, Honiara - poverty

As per the 2009 Solomon Islands census, the so-called affordable homes being sold by Solomon Islands Home Finance Limited (SIHFL) cost SBD495,000 (AUD 83,100) to SBD 735,000 (AUD 123,500), which is over 50 times the annual median wage. (Keen and Mcneil 2016; Kiddle and Hay 2017)
2. Unique housing challenges - hazard exposure

The Solomon Islands face multiple natural hazards and climate extreme events:
- Prone to cyclones, earthquakes, coastal floods, landslides, tsunamis, urban floods, extreme heat, wildfires.
- Climate variability, sea-level rise
- Ranked 2nd in the world (after Vanuatu) for disaster risk (the World Risk Report, 2021).
- Located in the ‘Pacific Ring of Fire’.
The unique challenges facing urban informal settlers in Honiara in addressing housing inadequacy and vulnerability or differential disaster impacts:

- Social aspect - insecure land tenure, *wantok* system (kinship connection), high density
- Environmental aspect – high exposure to hazards and climate change, people’s close connection to the place (of origin/ atoll) and with nature.
- Technical – substandard and un-serviced housing, village-like in urban environment
- Financial – poverty, housing unaffordability, heavy reliance on international aid
- Governance aspect – informal governance, limited capacity
Methodology: Inclusive and disaster resilient shelter

Methodology and method: a predominantly qualitative methodology and case-study method was adopted for this applied research, developed over an eight-month period in 2021. It is informed by a series of engagement activities, including:

- **Five community workshops (representing 11 different settlements)**, conducted in August and September 2021
- **Two validation workshops**, one held with civil society organisations (CSOs), NGOs, faith based organisations (FBOs), and second with local and national Government in October 2021
- In total, 189 participants were involved in the workshops, including 90 women, 15 people living with disabilities, 26 young men and 43 young women. Among people with disabilities, 7 men (one blind man, one man with limited mobility, five deaf men) and 8 women (two blind women, five deaf women and one intellectually disabled woman) were involved in the workshops

![Figure 4: Validation workshop involving women, youth and people with disabilities. (Photo credit: Solomon Yeo)](image)
3. Solutions for disaster resilient & inclusive shelter

3.1 A strong presence of technical skills in construction

“80-90% of houses built in the community are without a proper house plan so may be in breach of relevant laws. It would be great for them [the building code] to explain the rules, why they exist. To raise awareness and train people how to build according to the code.”

(Wind Valley settlement resident)
3. Solutions for disaster resilient & inclusive shelter

3.1 A strong presence of technical skills in construction, but some technical guide for multi-hazard resilience
3. Solutions for disaster resilient & inclusive shelter

3.2 An emphasis on ‘assisted’ self-recovery i.e. a combination of financial, material and technical support and housing strengthened incrementally, underpinned by principles of ‘core space’

Incrementally strengthening housing (Source: Vahanvati et. Al. 2022)

Core space built to be disaster resilient (Source: Vahanvati et. Al. 2022)
3. Solutions for disaster resilient & inclusive shelter

3.2 An emphasis on ‘assisted’ self-recovery i.e. a combination of financial, material and technical support
3. Solutions for disaster resilient & inclusive shelter

3.3 A positive role for Government and the international shelter community

“Before an event, you do an assessment — is there any weakness in the house? If so, you must improve it.” (Ottowide Jara settlement resident)

“At the family level, women said they had stores of clean water, matches, torches, and radio batteries for times of disaster.” (Adria settlement resident)

Community Members: Always try and prepare well before the wet season, with more targeted efforts leading up to or at the beginning of a disaster.

What can community members do?
- Stay informed.
- Have a community and family disaster plan in place.
- Prepare shelter by tying down the house at every level from the roof to the ground.
- Clear the site around your house.
- Prepare your family by stocking up supplies and having a ‘pick-n-go’ bag (the local term) ready in case evacuation is necessary.
- Leave no one behind i.e. ensure people with disabilities, children and older people are evacuated earlier.
- Be prepared.

Shelter Responders: Provide practical upgrading training and advice, appropriate for local budgets.

What can shelter responders do?
- Inform yourself on the context and appropriate assistance types and methodologies.
- Conduct disaster awareness training, education and drills on an ongoing basis, by employing a combination of technology and traditional knowledge.
- Conduct inclusive best practice construction training and advice for more resilient housing.
- Communicate using all available formats for early warning.
- Actively seek out and understand your organisation’s roles and responsibilities.
- Stay updated by maintaining regular contact and knowledge sharing with:
  - Relevant government agencies and contact points at national, provincial and municipal levels.
  - CSOs and community groups such as women, youth and People with Disabilities.
  - Community Development Committees (CDCs), or village committees especially those within your operational area.

(Source: Vahanvati et al. 2022)
Thank you

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