

LORD HOWE SETTLEMENT, HONIARA

A community
case study on climate
(im)mobility from
Solomon Islands

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1. Research Context

Climate change is intensifying with a wide range of challenges to the sustainable development and resilience of all Pacific Island countries. Pacific political leaders collectively and individually continue to underscore that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security, and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific. Community leaders also emphasise the need to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change because communities want to continue living in their own countries, for as long as possible.

Mobility has always been a part of Pacific ways of living and is part of our resilience. This means that mobility is a measure of last resort when other options for the ongoing flourishing of life have been exhausted. In the context of climate change, mobility includes a broad range of responses influenced by individual, family, and community circumstances. It can include temporary movement of people within and between countries to support community resilience (e.g., via internal recruitment for work and international labour mobility schemes), relocation of people and communities within a country (whether voluntary or not, including in response to climate-related hazards), and permanent migration across the Pacific or further afield.

Consideration of climate-related (im)mobility also needs to account for other common forms of human mobility such as displacement, where people are forced to leave home to save their lives, and immobility, where people and communities adapt and respond to climate change without everyone moving, whether that ‘immobility’ is voluntary or not.

Climate change is adding to existing drivers of mobility, especially economic mobility, in the Pacific and elsewhere. Attributing current mobility decisions to the direct effects of climate change can be difficult, but climate change-related hazards will impact Pacific Island peoples’ wellbeing including their heritage, culture, language, and ancestral connections to land; security, including water shortages, the actual loss of land and increased risk to life from intensifying extreme weather events; and livelihoods, including salt-water intrusion affecting agricultural production.

This case study is one of 17 undertaken as part of a comprehensive research project, funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), known as Climate Immobility Research in the Pacific. The overall goal of the research is to “enhance Pacific resilience and well-being and ensure the livelihoods, security and well-being of the peoples of the Pacific are protected in the context of climate change” (MFAT, 2021, p. 25). Underpinning the overall goal is acknowledgement of Pacific values, knowledge and culture, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Each case study explores climate and hazard risk factors, resilience and decision-making practices, mobility patterns, land and marine tenure, understandings of wellbeing and climate-mobility associated loss.

This case study was undertaken in Lord Howe Settlement, a community in Solomon Islands, a country consisting of six large and 900 small islands. Solomon Islands is in the western Pacific, southeast of Papua New Guinea, and has a population of 734,887 (2023 official estimate).

2. Lord Howe Settlement

Brief introduction

Figure 1: Lord Howe Settlement, Guadalcanal



Lord Howe Settlement is a densely populated community located on a low-lying coastal zone adjacent to the frequently flooded Mataniko River and immediately behind the busy National Hospital in Honiara city. Honiara is the capital of Solomon Islands located on the north coast of the island of Guadalcanal.

Lord Howe Settlement is important to this study because it is an informally settled community. It did not relocate as a community, but small groups of people from the Luanuia, also known as Otong Java or Lord Howe atoll, began moving to Honiara in the 1940s because of poor livelihood options on the island and promises of postwar work opportunities. Over time, Lord Howe Settlement has established itself as a recognisable community with ancestral connections to Luanuia/Otong Java, located about 450 km northeast of Honiara. It has grown rapidly because of high fertility rates in the community as well as continued movement of people from Luanuia/Otong Java to the centrally located site in urban Honiara.

The place

Lord Howe Settlement is less than 3 ha in size (about 28,000 m²); it is exposed to coastal winds and susceptible to the impacts of flooding from the river and inundation from the sea. Houses are built close together, slightly raised above the sandy ground. It is a densely settled area, with no room for gardens although healthy mango trees thrive, and the community is poorly served by sanitation and water services despite being in the urban zone.

The people

The population of Lord Howe Settlement is approximately 800 (2019). They maintain pride in their culture and language, which, like those of other Polynesian outliers in Solomon Islands, are distinctive from cultures of nearby people on Guadalcanal Island. Lord Howe Settlement has formal governance structures and rich cultural activities that attest to the original foresight of the first settlers who secured tenure to this area. They are also facing daily health, social, and livelihood challenges. The impacts of climate change is one of these daily challenges.

3. Methodology

The University of Auckland (UoA) research project *Climate (Im)mobility in the Pacific* was co-designed to generate knowledge using formal and informal Indigenous qualitative social science methods. For each country, the research approach was informed by methodological contributions from Indigenous scholars to ensure consistency with Indigenous research principles.

Relationship building, ethics and community approval

Kerryn Sogha Galokale, from Solomon Islands, worked with her networks in Honiara, including ex-colleagues from Solomon Islands National University (SINU), to contact community leaders in Lord Howe Settlement. From initial discussions, there was an expression of interest. The UoA research team obtained University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee approval on 29 March 2023. As part of the ethics application, we had already secured support from SINU in the form of a letter of understanding between the Dean of the Faculty of Arts (UoA) and the Vice Chancellor of SINU. This outlined the mutually beneficial aspects of the research collaboration and specified each party's responsibilities and commitments, including the allocation of resources.

In April 2023, Professor Yvonne Underhill-Sem, Kerryn Sogha Galokale, and Roi Burnett visited community leaders at Lord Howe Settlement to begin the co-design process. We worked closely with Marklyn Vovo and Jamesford Keboy from SINU who facilitated communication between the UoA, SINU researchers, and the Lord Howe Settlement community.

To carry out the fieldwork, the team visited again in July to secure final permission from the local council. The research team held a community meeting to explain the research and get final agreement to undertake the research.

Team members

The research team, Kerryn Sogha Galokale, Marklyn Vovo, and Jamesford Keboy, are all from Solomon Islands although none are from Lord Howe Settlement or Ontong Java specifically. The in-country research team are all residents of Honiara with prior research

experience. Although the research team do not have Indigenous ties to this community site, the team were keenly aware of the nuances involved in conducting research in Lord Howe Settlement. Having cultural and Tok Pisin language skills enabled the team to build respectful and trusting relationships with key members of the Lord Howe Settlement community, like the current cultural head and the current governance head and, more importantly, with the community.

Recruitment of participants

Research in Lord Howe was conducted on July 11 and 13, 2023. Community members were invited to participate in the research by the village-based research assistant, Lawrence Makili, and 32 agreed.

Methods

Three methods were used to collect data.

Tok stori interviews method or key informant interviews

Tok stori interviews were one-on-one conversations with village elders. All interviews were audio recorded and conducted by Kerry, Jamesford, and Yvonne, assisted by Tina and Marklyn. All participants except one used Pijin. One male participant used English. The translations were undertaken by Jamesford. Each tok stori interview took 30–60 minutes.

Community workshops

The research team facilitated community workshops for men, women, and youth. The men's and women's workshops were conducted at the same time. Kerry facilitated the women's workshop, while Jamesford and Marklyn facilitated the men's workshop. Over half of the participants were part of the youth workshop (19–29 years of age) with only six participants 50 years or older. Male participants outnumbered female participants nearly 3:1.

During each group workshop, researchers posed questions relating to five themes: environmental challenges and movements; resilience and wellbeing; decisions and peace; land and marine tenure, use and planning; and climate mobility-associated loss. Community members were invited to share their insights, stories, and experiences in

relation to these themes. Each session lasted for up to 1 hour, then each workshop group took turns to share their thoughts to the whole group.

At the youth workshop, the young people were divided into three groups and took turns to visit three 'stations' representing a different generational perspective: youth, mature adulthood, and grandparenthood. The young people were asked to share their thoughts on what they thought would make a good life from the perspective of different generations. Station 1 was facilitated by Jamesford, Station 2 by Kerry, and Station 3 by Marklyn, assisted by Yvonne and Tina. The tok stori/sharing in each station lasted for 15–20 minutes.

Figure 2: Lord Howe Community Workshop Youth Participants



Front (L–R): Kerry Sogha Galokale, Sala Vahoe, Nathaly Anusa. Middle (L–R): Sam Samo, Micha Jordan, Bana Hone, Bartholomew Koropu & Jamesford Keboy. Back (L–R): Roy Nelo, Kingstone Polumanatu, Hexford Kapua, Noris Aisa, Wesley Kahano, Vandami Vaure & Terry Kemairi. (Lord Howe Community Workshop Youth Participants, 11 July 2023. Photographer: Professor Yvonne Underhill-Sem

Walk-the-land method

The community cultural leader walked with one member of the research team around the community. Observations relating to change were recorded. The leader also shared stories and experiences relating to the impacts of climate change in Lord Howe Settlement.

See **Appendix 1** for more details on research participants.

Data transcription, analysis and sensemaking

All interview and workshop data were transcribed into English and coded using NVivo 14 data analysis software. Research reports and researcher reflections were also translated into English. Photographs and video clips were shared and discussed so that all team members could share their insights.

In the next section, we present historical information about mobility relevant to the people who inhabit the Lord Howe Settlement. This is followed by feedback and findings from a resilient and adaptive community on a range of topics that demonstrate how a relocated community survives, even thrives, although not without challenges, in a location that seems vulnerable in so many ways.

4. Historical Settlement and Mobility

The people of Lord Howe Settlement originally migrated to Honiara between the 1940s and 1960s from Luaniua (Ontong Java – also called Lord Howe Atoll).¹ Luaniua is about 450 km away from Honiara and is considered by many to be an extremely remote part of Malaita province. Several factors contributed to this migration. One was rumours of employment opportunities with the Americans who were attempting to clean up the remnants of WWII and the other was the limited resources and space available on Luaniua, forcing families to seek education and employment opportunities in urban areas, particularly in Honiara. According to the chief of Lord Howe, the tiny island of Luaniua could not sustain everyone, making Honiara ‘a beacon of hope’ for those searching for a brighter future.

According to the chief, when the first small group of people moved to Honiara, they settled near the mouth of the Mataniko River. They lived with a man called Guso Rato Piko who was a medical officer at the Central Hospital (now National Referral Hospital) in Honiara from 1945 to 1960. The original landowners had allowed him to look after the current site a few metres from the hospital (Moore, 2020b). Later, some of the current

¹ For more information on Ontong Java in Malaita see Bayliss-Smith et al. (2018) and Moore (2020a).

occupants of Lord Howe Settlement moved further inland to an unoccupied area nearby and have been living at this location for over 40 years.

5. Language and Customs

The people of Luaniua (Ontong Java), where the Lord Howe Settlement participants came from, have a distinct culture, customs, and language like other Polynesian outliers in Solomon Islands. They have active cultural groups, and they perform in public events, for instance at Independence Day celebrations.

Lord Howe Settlement community continues to practise the traditional Ontong Java chiefly system. The chief of the settlement is assisted by a Honiara-based committee on issues concerning village health and law and order. They also discuss issues about potential relocation, which has been raised several times in the past after severe weather events.

The people continue to use their mother tongue as an essential communication medium and maintain traditional songs and cultural practices, for example the use of body decorations that involve painting turmeric on the body during festivals and important gatherings. Like other societies in Solomon Islands, there are also adverse effects of modernisation and popular culture on the customs and culture of the people. Generally, as elsewhere, Western education and the modern economy continue to affect people's livelihoods and culture positively and negatively.

Increasing intermarriage has resulted in a mix of cultural knowledge and practices. In the future, the community members think that their culture will change as this is already occurring as they adapt in their current location. For example, without land to grow crops to provide taro or kakake (a root crop) for marriage ceremonies, they have adapted their practice of exchange using rice, flour, lavalava, and biscuits. This is how the community is adapting its culture to ensure the cultural and social practices continue. In some instances, however, no exchange is carried out and community leaders are concerned that this means a decline in respect for these cultural and social practices.

In the Ontong Java culture, it is usually the husband who moves to live with the wife's family, instead of the wife moving to live with the husband's family. Members of Lord

Howe Settlement do not move back to their island settlement, and they are running out of room in the current settlement, so older generations of Lord Howe Settlement residents encourage marriage outside of the community, especially to people in Guadalcanal who have access to land.

Community members consider that their language, customs, community cohesion, and Christian faith all underpin their agency and capacity to address climate mobility impacts:

Together we stand, divided we fall ... we need to stand together as a community because we are the victims of this climate change and helping each other rather than facing the problem separately. (Member of youth community workshop)

Figure 3: Cultural performance by the Lord Howe Settlement villagers in traditional clothing



Lord Howe Settlement, 2023. Photographer: Prof. Yvonne Underhill-Sem

6. Faith and Education

Many inhabitants of Lord Howe Settlement are adherents of the Anglican Church of Melanesia, which has the only church building in the settlement, called the Transfiguration Parish, part of the St Barnabas Provincial Cathedral. Faith in God and religious programmes and activities are crucial to their everyday lives despite the challenges of life they experience daily. Being highly vulnerable to flooding and sickness,

they turn to religion to protect and sustain their lives and families. Faith and education are central to the life of the people.

Coupled with the church as an essential institution and agent of change, many Lord Howe settlers send their children to primary and secondary schools throughout Honiara and a minority to other schools throughout Solomon Islands.

7. Vegetation and Gardening

One member from the Lord Howe Settlement said that the population was small when he was a boy and there was plenty of land for them to make food gardens, even on the sandy soil. Today, there is little land for gardening due to the increase in population and subsequent need for housing.

Although the environment is not conducive to substantial vegetation and proper gardening, some occupants make small vegetable gardens on raised benches and inside old tyres, buckets, and containers. Fertile soil is purchased from nearby markets or sourced from friends and relatives living elsewhere. A few mango trees and banana plants exist in and around the settlement; however, shade trees are minimal.

The settlement is close to the Honiara Central Market, so this is a main source of food for the community.

8. Climate and Weather Patterns

The geographical positioning of the Lord Howe Settlement means it is exposed to harsh weather and increasingly unpredictable climatic conditions. The proximity to the riverbank also puts Lord Howe at risk of flooding during intense rainy seasons or cyclones. For example, Yvonne Kevahu, a resident of Lord Howe Settlement, recalled that, after flash floods in April 2014,

dead animals and rubbish came in because the flood brought them here [to the settlement] ... After that, people got diarrhoea and flu, headaches. Many were very sick.

Furthermore, the settlement is in the path of strong winds and fierce waves that have caused beach erosion. These extreme challenges, combined with direct evidence of the

impacts of higher sea levels, threaten the location of the community and its way of life. The community's exposure to these threats can be expected to increase as flooding and tropical cyclones become more frequent and intense.

Figure 4: Rubbish gathered along the shoreline



Lord Howe Settlement, 2023. Photographer: Dr Christina Newport

9. Land Tenure

The land on which the Lord Howe Settlement stands was once Indigenously owned and governed by customary land tenure. It underwent a complicated process of alienation prior to and during the colonial period (Foukona & Allen, 2017). In simple terms, after political independence from Britain in 1978, the land was registered under the state and leased to the Honiara City Council (HCC), which subleased it to various people and eventually to the people of Lord Howe Settlement.

The area encompassing the Lord Howe Settlement is 'owned' by the Lord Howe Settlement Committee (the Committee). This arrangement means that the people own the houses, but the Committee has the power over the land. Thus, any issues or disagreements between occupants must be taken to the Committee. However, arguably, the foreshore, beaches, and land below and above the high-water mark are still customary lands. The people from Lord Howe Settlement sought permission from the

original landowners of Guadalcanal on ownership issues of the foreshore. They then began to reclaim the foreshore area of the Lord Howe Settlement.

10. Water Availability

The inhabitants of Lord Howe Settlement use three main sources of water. Piped water is supplied by Solomon Water (a statutory body) for clothes washing, showers, and supposedly for drinking. Bottled water is purchased from shops and the water in the Mataniko River is used for swimming and washing clothes. However, the river is unsafe for human consumption and washing because it is polluted due to human waste upstream, and so water availability is a challenge.

11. Sources of Income

The Lord Howe Settlement community described that they earned income from the following sources:

- salaries and wages from working in the public service, or the private sector in Honiara, i.e., shop assistants for Chinese businesses in Honiara
- self-employed small business – trade stores, canteens, the sale of cooked food at the Honiara main market or nearby areas, selling betel nut in areas close to the settlement
- self-employed company – some community members have construction companies
- remittances or earnings from labour schemes in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia.

12. National Government and Honiara City Council Support

Due to the Lord Howe Settlement's location, the national government and HCC are accountable for providing assistance. Rubbish collection is an undertaking that falls within the scope of the HCC. Also, the HCC operates and manages the Honiara Central Main Market, which Lord Howe Settlement dwellers occasionally use to sell their goods,

such as fish and chips. Like other Solomon Islanders, the national government supports the National Referral Hospital, which Lord Howe Settlement dwellers depend on for medical attention, given its proximity to their locality. Like other communities in Honiara, during the COVID-19 crisis, Lord Howe Settlement also received food supplies and support from the national government through the Livelihood Sector Committee established with the support of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, HCC, and other stakeholders (Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, 2022). Also, at the constituency scale, intermittently, members of parliament (MPs) have extended support to the community through constituency-development funds, although it tends to be primarily politically motivated. This political support must be seen in the context of some voters who reside at Lord Howe and register in various constituencies for the national general elections, notably in Central Honiara and Lord Howe Settlement constituencies. However, some constituents living in Lord Howe Settlement complained about the national government and MPs representing their constituency for not doing much to find and fund higher ground or newer locations for the people to relocate to.

13. Future Thoughts on (Im)Mobility and Associated Losses

Most people of the Lord Howe Settlement believe that relocation is a vital option. Their community governance board, the Lord Howe Settlement Committee, plays a crucial role in facilitating their discussions and options for potential future moves.

Also influencing discussions are the climate change impacts being experienced in Otong Java and the resultant movement of community members now and in the future to the Lord Howe Settlement. The current settlement is overcrowded with families living as multigenerational households.

As described earlier, the community's proximity to the sea and river mouth is hazardous due to flooding, inundation, salination of land, and sea-level rise. This quote from a community member embodies the motivation to move for many of the inhabitants:

We are living between a river and the sea, so we are really affected by the climate change and sea-level rise. In 30 to 50 years' time, a good life will be seeing my community move somewhere that has land and area for us to live in a place that is safe and we are also able to make our garden. (Young female community member)

These sentiments were echoed by a community leader:

People will be willing to relocate or migrate. They want to move because there is no space, even new ones that are just married have stayed with their parents because there is no space to build their own houses. But if there is relocation, they will be the first people to put down their names to move to have land and to make their gardens. (Community leader)

However, some have reservations about relocation. Some community members do not want to move because they have built their property in the settlement:

Who will rebuild our house if we move? (Community member)

The location of the settlement is also a factor for staying. It is accessible, near major services such as the hospital, schools, and transport. Another factor is their attachment to the settlement.

Since we grow up in the settlement, we get used to our environment and adapt to it. (Community member)

Thoughts on mobility are also influenced by the idea that education is important and can improve the lives of individuals; hence, it has the potential to influence the current generation to move to other places in Honiara for them to reside. Marrying into landowning communities was also considered a strategy to secure the future of young families.

From a climate mobilities perspective, loss and damage related to climate change are linked to the community's ability to adjust to the adverse effects of climate variability and change in the places they occupy and may need to move from. (Kreienkamp & Vanhala, 2017). Mobility was seen as a loss in the Lord Howe Settlement due to the loss of ways of being and connection to the land:

Leaving the village will mean losing some of our ways of life and relationships in the community. Also, most of our relatives are buried in the village so all those things will be lost and missed. This will cause difficulties to move everyone as well.

(Community member)

Relationships within Lord Howe Settlement could also change which was a concern shared by the men's community workshop:

The feeling of togetherness is also one of the main things we will miss. This is because in our culture we are used to living together and helping each other so if some of our family members stay back then we will miss them. (Community member)

14. Conclusion

Lord Howe Settlement is a coastal community in Honiara with ancestral ties to Ontong Java atoll, the people of which began to settle here after WWII. The settlement faces significant challenges to stay in place but demonstrates resilience and adaptation in the face of its vulnerability.

Climate and hazard risk factors impacting the community – Lord Howe Settlement is in an urban location that has the advantage of being close to employment, schools, and health services; however, its location on a river estuary with a sea boundary makes the community increasingly vulnerable to sea-level rise, flooding, storms, and coastal erosion.

Access to clean water for drinking, bathing, washing clothing, and sanitation is an ongoing concern in the community. The Mataniko River water is unsafe for human consumption or washing as it is polluted from upstream sources. However, the community swim and wash clothes in the river and, as a result, diarrhoeal disease is evident. Piped water is available but increasingly families buy bottled water for drinking.

Due to climate change-related challenges on Ontong Java there is ongoing internal migration to Lord Howe Settlement that is causing overcrowding and pressure on land availability and services in the community. Only minimal gardening can be undertaken due to these constraints.

Practices of resilience and processes of decision making – The occupants of Lord Howe Settlement are resilient, not only adapting to life in Honiara but also to climate change impacts. This has included reclaiming land on the riverbank and building seawalls to protect their houses.

The Lord Howe Settlement continues to practise the traditional Ontong Java chiefly system. Community members have respect for their community governance and decision-making structures and processes and look to their leaders to resolve issues and maintain cooperation and seek support from external sources such as government and other stakeholders.

The community members identified their Christian faith and traditional customs as sources of resilience. These community strengths foster cohesion and a sense of identity and belonging.

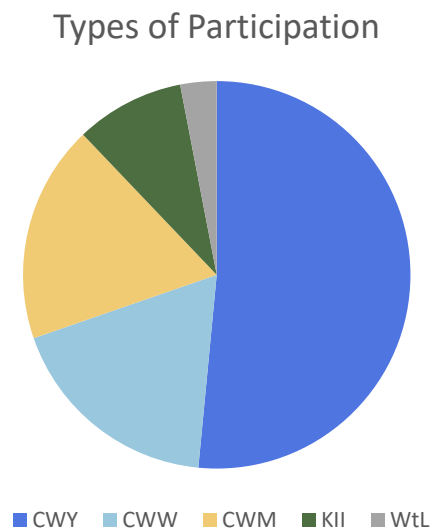
Understandings of wellbeing, security and identity – The Otong Java language and customs underpin community members' wellbeing, security, identity, agency, and capacity to address climate mobility. Faith in God and religious activities are crucial in the everyday lives of inhabitants of Lord Howe Settlement. Education is a very important priority and seen as a means to secure a future for the community.

Past, future and expected mobility patterns – The community is considering its future in the face of population growth, diminishing land availability, and the impacts of climate change. Many community members would like to move to secure land for housing and gardening, while others are concerned about practical issues such as the cost of rebuilding. Others expressed that they have become connected to the current location. The understanding is that local and national government entities would be involved in decision making on relocation, in consultation with community governance structures, although currently there seems to be little urgency applied to this issue.

Appendix 1: Research Participants

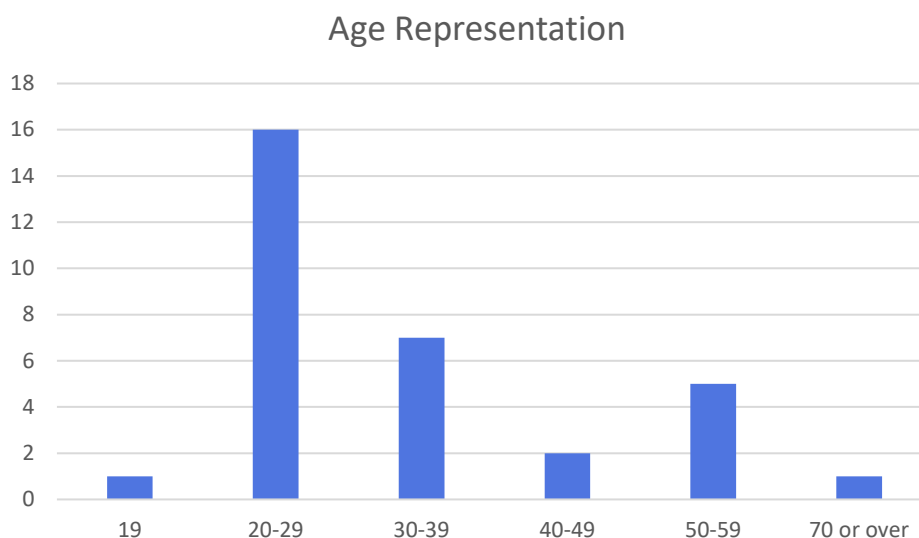
Research in Lord Howe was conducted on July 11 and 13, 2023. There were 32 participants from Lord Howe. One participant was part of a walk the land (WtL) and key informant interview (KII). The rest of the participants were divided amongst community workshops for men (CWM), women (CWW), youth (CWY) and the additional KIIs (see Figure 5). Over half of participants were part of the CWY.

Figure 5: Types of participation



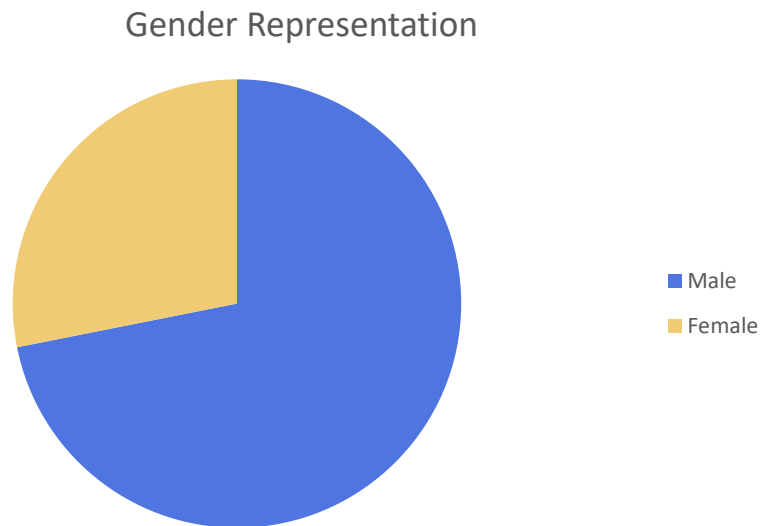
Due to the high participation in CWY, over half of participants (17) were 19–29 years of age. Only six participants were 50 years or older (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Age representation



The CWW and CWM had equal participation. However, overall, male participants outnumbered female participants nearly 3:1 (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Gender representation



Appendix 2: Map of Solomon Islands

Figure 8: Map of Solomon Islands



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