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**ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL RIGHTS OF EMPLOYEES IN THE  
PRIVATE SECTOR OF SOLOMON ISLANDS: A CASE STUDY OF THE  
WORKING CONDITIONS OF THE COUNTRY'S LOW INCOME  
EARNERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper investigates aspects of the economic and social rights of employees in Honiara, Solomon Islands. It assesses employers' compliance with basic employment requirements such as minimum pay, occupational health and safety measures, the incidence of workplace injuries, payment of members' superannuation contributions, mistreatment of employees in the workplace and payment of overtime allowances as required under the Employment Act Cap. 72. The research team interviewed more than 400 respondents across all sectors in Honiara, mainly with Low income earners. The disturbing finding is that more than one-third of respondents' employers are negligently overlooking payment of some of these legislated social and economic rights of their employees, although well aware of their obligations under the law. More effort is required of the relevant authorities to bring these culprits to face the law and ensure that local employees—especially those desperately seeking job opportunities—are not exploited because they are already handicapped socioeconomically in finding jobs to support their families. Government and private sector employers each have roles to play in ensuring that low income bracket employees are not exploited by unscrupulous business owners. Government must ensure provision of an environment in which exchange of their labour and services is beneficial to employees and employers. The desired expansion of the economy will require both business operators and employees in this low to medium income earners category to cooperate with the government, through proper and effective mechanisms embracing private and government sectors equally, as they are vital for sustainable development of the economy.*

**Keywords:** Economic and social rights, low to middle income earners, employment rights, and economic growth.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The Solomon Islands is located in the Southwest Pacific about 1,900 km northeast

of Australia with 996 Islands stretching in 1.450 km chain southwest of Papua New Guinea (Coleman & Kroenke, 1981). It has

a population of around 600,000 inhabitants who share a total land area of approximately 27,500 km<sup>2</sup>. The majority of the population lives in rural areas (Gagehe, 2011) mainly along the coastlines and participates in the subsistence economy for their livelihoods (Ha'apio & Gonzalez, 2015). Rural communities in Solomon Islands have shown to anticipate tangible development programs in their villages, implemented by the government and donor aid partners to adapt to the increasing cost of living and general livelihood across the economy (Ha'apio et al, 2014). In light of this, many rural dwellers have left their villages and migrate to Honiara, the capital city to find employment in order to financially support their families (Kabutaulaka, 1998.) Since majority of these people are young, unskilled and inexperienced they find jobs in mostly lowly paid jobs in the private sector. For example, a good number of them are employed as taxi drivers, restaurant waiters, factory labourers, security officers or guards and shop keepers. Because of their status as cheap labourers and workers most often no proper employment contracts are negotiated with their employers prior their commencement. The labour market information and analysis situation on these

cases poses significant challenges. The availability of labour market statistics is limited, infrequent and scattered, while some of the available sources produce irrelevant and at times inaccurate statistics. For example, Solomon Islands have neither proper household labour force survey in place, nor an establishment survey in the country in the recent past. In addition, labour market analysis that would increase the understanding of the reality in the labour market and could serve as the basis for policy and decision making is virtually non-existent. Even the National Statistics Office system is not robust enough to capture the relevant labour information in real-time, allowing relevant authorities to make informed decisions (Kimi, 2009). Irrespective of these deficiencies, the Solomon Islands workforce can generally be categorized into formal and informal sectors providing employment for thousands of employees throughout the country.

The Solomon Islands National Provident Fund (SINPF) —the only superannuation fund in the country—has an important administrative source of information in its enterprise register, containing information on formal sector employment. However, in a country where most of the population is

outside the formal economy, there is an obvious need for a data collection instrument covering the entire labour force. Moreover, the weak enforcement of regulations and employers' record-keeping around the country makes it difficult to establish accurate reports on numbers of employees and issues surrounding their terms of employment. The latest census (Gagahe, 2012) shows that only about 85 per cent of the population lives in the rural villages, putting the remainder in Honiara or other urban centres throughout the country. According to (Global Economy, 2017)<sup>1</sup>, the unemployment rate over the years from 1991 to 2016 varies from 30.99 to 32.35 per cent. This may further escalate if government do not have better policies to create jobs to absorb hundreds of young tertiary graduates from national and international institutions every year are pushed into the economy to find employment in public and private sectors that have been stagnating over the years without any robust substantive government job creation strategies to absorb these new graduates into the employment sector.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Solomon-Islands/Unemployment\\_rate/](http://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Solomon-Islands/Unemployment_rate/) accessed 18/10/2017

Bartlett (2013)<sup>2</sup> recently claims that unemployment in the youth<sup>3</sup> sector could go up to 75 per cent, which implies the current unemployment rate across the economy should have increased within that same range (75 to 80 per cent).

Labour market data suggest that about three-quarters of the population is engaged in agriculture, largely on a subsistence basis. The number of persons in paid employment was estimated at 81,194 in 2009, including 54,536 men and 26,658 women. More than 11,000 were employed in the public sector (Gagahe 2011). Within the formal sector, only about 80 businesses employ 15 or more workers. The remaining 1,500 or so registered businesses are very small, often made up of a single self-employed entrepreneur (and his or her family) running a shop, driving a taxi, or catching and selling fish for a living. The gender imbalance in the workforce is also very significant: more than twice as many males as females are in paid employment while in unpaid work,

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<sup>2</sup> Sandra Bartlett is Manager of the Youth at Work Program based in Honiara, where she and her team support hundreds of unemployed youth in realizing their livelihood potentials.

<sup>3</sup> The conventional international definition of youth includes those aged between 15 and 24 years.

females outnumber males by about 25 per cent.

This research is aimed at finding the compliance level of selected employers (firms and businesses) in Honiara to the Labour Act Cap.73. There is an assumption by the Shop Keeper's Association that many employees who are employed in the low income bracket <sup>4</sup> do not have proper contracts and often are denied what are their economic and social rights under the employment laws of the country. Therefore, the outcome of this study will help policy makers and administrators, particularly the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, Labour and Immigration (MCILI), to enforce on the employers in the country their obligations under the law country. The study will make some policy recommendations on aspects of enforcement and the economic and social rights of the country's low income earners, as well as highlighting implications from the results that warrant further research and discussion.

## **2. OVERVIEW OF EMPLOYMENT SECTORS IN THE COUNTRY**

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<sup>4</sup> Shop workers, hotel workers, restaurant employees, factory workers, security guards, transport workers and suchlike.

The majority of the people employed within the country lean towards the agricultural sector, which stands at 75 per cent, compared with 5 per cent in the industrial and 20 per cent in the service sectors. The 75 per cent representing the agricultural sector comprise small agribusinesses including farmers, cocoa and coconut plantation workers, root crop farmers, cattle and pig raisers, poultry and small-scale rice growers. The 20 per cent in the service sector represents the public servants, teaching services, hotel and motel services, retailing, financial, and other services. The remaining 5 per cent in industry includes those involved in such activities as the timber, tuna (fisheries) and mining sectors. The industrial production growth rate in the country currently stands at 14 per cent, which is the 3rd highest rate in the world. The government, as formulator of policies and laws to regulate employment opportunities in the country, must strive towards achieving substantial reduction and effective management in this industrial production sector while simultaneously increasing the service and sustainable agricultural sectors across the country. This high growth rate in the extractive industries is likely to accumulate risk of unsustainable

harvesting of the country's resources, to the detriment of its present and future citizens. In the long term, resources to support and benefit the growing population and work force will be inadequate if the industrial sector continues its present unsustainable extraction rates (Lal & Holland, 2010).

### **3. STUDY SITE- HONIARA, SOLOMON ISLANDS**

Honiara, the capital city of Solomon Islands, is located in Guadalcanal Province, the largest Island province of the seven main islands of the country. Honiara's land area is 22 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of over 64,602 people according to the National Statistics Office (Gagahe, 2012). The urban growth of the country is 4.7 per cent, and is one the fastest urban growth in the Pacific (UN Habitat, 2012). Many of those people who migrated from the rural commutes to the urban centres are find employment and other opportunities which are not available in the villages. The total population of the country is increasing to 600,000 which implies about 13 per cent of the country's total population lives in the capital city. Since it is likely that a high proportion of employees in the "service sector" will reside in the capital city, the majority of the people who are

employed in the formal sector live in the capital and small urban centers. In addition, an increasing number of the capital city residence also employed in the informal sector, as taxi drivers, betel-nut sellers, fishermen, street vendors, house servants and all other casual workers.

The selection of the Honiara city site for our case study rested on the convenience of transport and proximity for finding suitable employees and employers to question. Also majority of the urban drifts come to Honiara as the only main capital city of the country. The focus group was employees, primarily in low income (blue and grey collar) jobs, and having proper employment contracts that explicitly state their economic and social rights during the course of their employment tenure. The study looked at social rights issues such as: level of wages, social security payment (the national provident fund contributions), occupational health and safety provisions, protections from mistreatment at work, and overtime payment to employees. Lastly, Honiara, as the largest commercial and trading hub of the country, was the obvious choice for ease of finding, purposively, "low to middle class" employees in numbers to interview.

It should be said as a backdrop that the country underwent about 5 years of grave civil unrest from 1998 to 2003, mainly between Malaita immigrants settled in Guadalcanal and the original Guale landowners of the province. As a result about 15,000 to 25,000 Malaitans (Liloqula, 2000) were chased away from their mostly acquired land and settlements (including squatters) in the province and ostensibly went back to their island province of origin. In the event, a majority of those people chased away but unable, for socioeconomic reasons, to go back to Malaita, has settled, primarily in the outskirts of Honiara, where a good number of them participates in lower income jobs and in the informal employment sector of the economy.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The investigation team has employed two different research instruments in order to collate accurate information required for data analysis: survey questionnaires and semi-structured questionnaires. Other researchers (Barriball, & While 2006); (Kelley, *et al.*, 2003) have confirmed the usefulness of these two instruments for small social science research of this nature. The survey respondents were selected

randomly from shops, factories, security guard services, and transport, restaurant and construction employees. A group of high school and tertiary students engaged as part-time research assistants to administer the questionnaires helped our not necessarily educated respondents in answering the questions by filling in their responses correctly during the interview. With the semi-structured questionnaires we also interviewed a group of taxi and bus drivers, shop workers, hotel workers and security employees to gauge their experiences and perceptions on how their employers should treat them according to their understanding of the basic social rights under the relevant legislative framework requirements in the country.

With the time and resource constraints we could include only about 530 employees in our survey. This number represented the “low income earner” bracket (blue and grey collar jobs) in the economy. Although most of the respondents were in hospitality, transport, construction, restaurant, media, security, factories and shops (retailing services) they seem a fair representation of our study’s targeted group. Because of the limited opportunities in the local market, the number selected based on

best judgment seems to be adequate for our empirical study. We therefore used the appreciative inquiry approach in designing our questionnaires and framing our semi-structured questions (Bushe, 1995). This appreciative inquiry helped us in analyzing our responses—whether the employees were happy about the range of their salaries or wages reconciling with the type of work they were performing and whether the employers were paying some of their social and economic rights benefits under the law (Liebling *et al.*, 1999).

#### **4.1 Random survey**

We used the random survey as the instrument for obtaining the respondents' perceptions about terms and conditions of employment and reconciling their responses with the economic and social rights employers should be paying the employees in exchange for their services. Since little or no similar study had been conducted earlier at this site, this study, though small in size, will be used to provide baseline information for future studies in this particular area. The random survey consisted of 120 questions, which were divided under 6 sections. To represent a fair cross-section of Honiara in the analysis, we used 200 questionnaires from Chinatown area, 150 from Point Cruz,

80 from Kukum, 56 from Town ground and 44 from Ranadi area. The variables used to investigate the level of benefits and perceptions in our survey included such items as "*The sources and level of income*", "*The level of expenses by individual household unit*", "*Do you receive your wages fortnightly or monthly?*", "*Is national provident fund deducted from your wages?*", "*Do you receive your pay with a payslip detailing the amount the company owes you for your service?*", "*Are you entitled to sick leave?*", and "*Have you experienced injury at the workplace?*". We requested the participants to base their responses on what their employer was paying them and some of the basic economic and social features that should be covered as part of the terms and conditions of the employment. The employees also expressed their satisfaction or dissatisfaction of their terms of employment.

#### **4.2 Semi-structured interview questionnaires**

We also interviewed 45 respondents with semi-structured questionnaires during the visit. We used these 45 respondents' interviews to confirm and verify the random survey respondents' views on some of the terms and conditions of these target groups.

We asked the respondents such questions as: “What do you think the employees should do to improve the situation?”, “Why is there an employment law in the country but the compliance is very low?”, “Who do you think should take the leading role in ensuring that the employers are complying with some of these employment social obligations?”, “Do you ever think of joining a trade union?”, “What do you think government should do to improve the general employment conditions of employees within this employment sector?”, “If you are not satisfied with your employment do you know of any organisation that you should go to to hear your complaint?”, and “If you are not happy with your terms and conditions of your employment, can you resign, and if you do so, is it possible to get a job elsewhere easily?” These questions are vital in obtaining a picture of the levels of satisfaction and variation in the perceptions employees hold of their employers in relation to their terms of employment. The questionnaire consisted of 4 sections with 50 open-ended questions.

## 5. RESULTS

The survey’s focus on economic and social labour rights limits findings to the following features: wage or salary, overtime, working hours, provision of protective gear for the workplace, treatment from employers, and working conditions.

### *Wage and salary*

- The result shows that 55 per cent of the respondents are receiving wages or salaries below the average wage of SBD840<sup>5</sup>, per month whilst the other 45 per cent receives above the rate.
- Most of these employees work in the service sector as; security, shop workers, and restaurant and hospitality services employees earn amongst the lowest wages within the economy.
- Respondent employees in the construction, factory, media and transport sectors receive on average more than SBD840 per month (with

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<sup>5</sup> The minimum rate was SBD4.00 per hour for all sectors, except SBD3.20 for agriculture and fisheries.

34 per cent, 40 per cent, 55 per cent and 32 per cent respectively).

#### *Working during weekends and overtime payment*

- Some 58 per cent and 37 per cent of construction and factory employee respondents work during the weekend. Despite those relatively higher percentages, only 30 per cent of those categories of employees reported receiving overtime payment.
- In the 67 per cent of security employee respondents working on weekends, only 24 per cent is receiving overtime pay as a portion of the wages.

#### *Provision of protective tools and gear*

- Less than 42 per cent of employees in both security and shops receives protective tools and gear, of which 29 per cent and 13 per cent of males and females respectively, particularly among shop workers, enjoy the benefit.

- Generally, it was noted that less than 30 per cent of employees in all sectors are provided with protective tools.

- *Injury at the workplace*
- Forty-one per cent of workers from the construction sector said they had previously experienced injury at work.
- Twenty-three per cent of security sector workers, too, claimed to have sustained minor injury at some earlier stage of their engagement.

#### *Mistreatment at the workplace*

- Respondents from the following occupations indicated having encountered some form of mistreatment from their employers: shop (78 per cent), restaurant (73 per cent), and factory (64 per cent).

#### *Social benefit scheme (NPF)*

- Of the 35 per cent of restaurant workers whose social benefits are paid as required, females constitute only 16 per cent.

Twenty five and 26 per cent of employees from the factory and transport sectors are eligible for the social benefit scheme.

## 6. DISCUSSION

**Average Wage:** The study found that for half of the respondents, incomes range from SBD600.00 to SBD1,040.00 per month, the other half receive income range more than SBD\$1,040 to SBD\$1,800. Although each occupation has its own average income, the mean wage found for the overall study was SBD840.00 (equivalent to USD108.00). This amount falls well below the amount one needs in order to afford comfortably the most reasonable expenses to live in Honiara (Cost of living in Honiara 2015)<sup>6</sup> Because of the economic hardship city residents have experienced in meeting their living expenses, they have no alternatives but to work in low paid jobs such as security guards, shopworkers, hotel workers, construction and other casual employment opportunities to support their livelihoods. This situation may have allowed employers

to be lax about following the employment laws and requirements in the country. Coupling this with the relatively increasing demand for employment in the communities, most of the employers were reluctant to improve the terms and the conditions of the employees in the city.

**Overtime payment:** Overtime payment, also a social rights issue, is clearly unmasked by the study as another area employers should reconsider; and if warranted, they should adopt urgent remedial action to comply with the employment legislation by paying the employees their overtime dues. It was observed that while some employers do pay their employees with overtime payment, the majority of them just ignore paying this legal obligation under the Employment Act Cap 72. For example, 21 per cent of the construction sector reportedly works on weekends; however, only 2 per cent of them confirm receiving overtime allowances in addition to their monthly wages. A similar finding is evident with the security employees: overall, 11 per cent of security guards reported working during the weekends although only 4 per cent reported receiving overtime allowances with their wages.

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<sup>6</sup> A list which outlines the cost of living in Honiara, Solomon Islands: [www.expakistan.com/cost-of-living/honiara](http://www.expakistan.com/cost-of-living/honiara).

Having looked at the negative instances, the researchers were heartened to find that shopworkers were paid some form of overtime allowance with their wages. For example, overall 24 per cent of shopworkers worked during weekends, entitling them to overtime payments. Out of this percentage, about 26 per cent reported receiving payment for this as was their due. Though this figure is dismally small, it is encouraging to be able to record some overtime allowances paid amongst the shopworkers, since on the basis of the focus group interviews it seemed that shopworkers were one of the underpaid and ill-treated groups in this low-paid category of workers in the country.

**Protective tools and gear:** Respondents indicated that a range of about 11 to 33 per cent of security guards and construction workers are issued with protective tools and gear. This appears to imply that between 68 and 89 per cent of respondents are not issued with basic protective gear. This fits well with the worrying finding that high numbers of employees report having experienced injury in the course of their employment history. The Employment Act requires that basic protective tools and gear be provided to employees for their protection in the

course of employment, dependent on the nature of work assigned and performed. International Labour Organization (ILO)<sup>7</sup> rules also require this for carrying on business and many countries are now adopting and/or adapting to Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) requirements ensuring the provision of OHS protocols and standards for employees in appropriate sectors.

**Injury at work:** The research investigated the proportions of workplace injury for each sector based on the degree of risk associated with the nature of tasks being performed. Less than 6 per cent of factory respondents have experienced injury at their workplace in their employment history, which is a smaller proportion than in other sectors. This small margin perhaps indicates employer enforcement and compliance with the Labour Act through provision of better protective tools and gear. Contrariwise, it was also shown that 23 to 41 per cent of employee respondents in the security and construction sectors report experiencing

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<sup>7</sup> Solomon Islands is a member of the International Labour Organization:  
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/>.

some form of injury in their employment. This represents the highest percentage of injury recorded in the economy across all sectors. Shops and Restaurants (hospitality), which at first glance might appear to be injury free occupations, record a surprising 12 to 18 per cent. Consequently, these relatively higher proportions amplify the degree of negligence some of these employers display within these sectors by failing to provide adequate protective gear and by seeming to guarantee less concern for OHS issues in the workplace. **(Figure-1)**

**Mistreatment at work:** This is a common topic of discussion across all sectors of employment in the country. The study uncovered the admission that most respondents perceive themselves as having been subjected to some form of mistreatment in the workplace in their work history. It is alarming to note that 78 per cent of the responding shopworkers claim that they have been mistreated by their bosses or employers. This is followed by restaurant workers with 73 per cent, while respondents from the media, hotel and security categories report less mistreatment. What is being classified as mistreatment experienced in these sectors is abusive

words, sexual harassment, unfair dismissal, and blackmail, which all have adverse emotional effects on the workers' esteem at some point. It was noted that some cases in this regard were reported to relevant authorities such as the Ministry of Labour and Employment but often outcomes were slow and most often these complaints reached no positive conclusion. Respondents from the transport and media sectors report 22 and 25 per cent respectively for mistreatment, the lowest for the overall sector.

**Superannuation Payment:** Under the National Provident Fund Act, it is compulsory that employers pay their employees' superannuation contribution to the SINPF. This money will assist the employees settle down to their lives in the rural villages during their retirement after employment. The study, though, reveals clearly that employers are reluctant and often fail to pay the employees their legal social right under the Act. In the transport sector, for instance, only 2 per cent of respondents indicate that their employers are paying in their share of the NPF contribution. The restaurant employees such as cooks, waiters and waitresses confirm

that only 5 per cent of them are having their NPF contributions paid in.

For factory workers, 9 per cent of respondents report stipulated payment of their NPF contributions, 12 per cent of the media respondents reporting likewise. Nineteen per cent of the security guards and 33 per cent of the shopworkers have their NPF contributions paid. Notably, this implied that a high level of awareness and compliance prevails among employers in these two occupation groups when it comes to paying in their employees' NPF contributions. Significantly, the study found that payment of employees' contributions entirely depends on the following factors: advocacy of workers' unions for granting NPF; more formalized mutual agreement between employees and employers regarding benefit payment; and employers' adherence to the Labour Act.

## 7. CONCLUSION

It is evident that some employers in Honiara are willing and have shown some responsibility in adherence to their statutory obligations in paying their employees' economic and social employment rights such as equitable wages, complying with

OHS requirements, and payment of NPF contributions in their employment contracts. However, the rate of compliance with these economic and social rights issues for these blue and grey collar jobs is discomfortingly low. The demonstrably high rate of unemployment in Honiara cannot be regarded as giving leeway to exploit these desperate residents by forcing them to accept poor terms and conditions of employment and not providing them with the level of OHS support for maximal performance of their functions. The government and SINPF should collaborate more to ensure that proper data about the employees are taken and the terms and conditions of employment must be adhered to in compliance with the relevant legislation available in the economy.

## 8. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- It is recommended that further study should be undertaken with an extended scope to capture broader occupational cross-sections across the country, to determine whether there is any significant difference from the findings at the Honiara study site. This would enable

building a stronger case that government must seriously look into these findings and propose ways to prevent employers from taking advantage of and abusing these least fortunate employees in the country.

- Lastly, the government must strengthen its compliance regime to ensure that those who offend against these economic and social employment rights issues to employees in the country must be brought to justice and face severe penalties. The intention of this is to safeguard present and future employees whose contribution to the economic growth of the country is essential though not always given a high profile.

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### LIST OF FIGURE

Figure 1 : The proportions of workers injured in each sector

