



# Solomon Islands National General Election 2019

Australia Assists' Election Support in the Pacific

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## Solomon Islands



### Report summary

Elections are acknowledged to be the largest peacetime logistical exercise a country can undertake — and supporting the Solomon Islands’ Government to deliver safe, fair and credible elections is a key priority for the Australian Government. The **Australia Assists Program, through delivery partner RedR Australia, supported the 2019 Solomon Islands National General Election via the deployment of six Election Specialists from the RedR Australia Roster, who worked throughout the five largest provinces.**

This team deployment was in response to a request made by the Office of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (O/SIEC) to the Australian High Commission (AHC) in Honiara for support for the 2019 General Election. The support was designed to be responsive, with Australia Assists deployees **working closely alongside SIEC staff in the provinces and taking a flexible, needs-based approach.** Expected activities included supporting SIEC with operational planning, logistics, communications and training.

RedR program monitoring in April 2019 found that the Australia Assists team deployment **delivered over and above its objectives — a finding verified through feedback obtained from a range of stakeholders in Solomon Islands.** Australia Assists’ 2019 election support facilitated Solomon Islands’ first ever election pre-poll; contributed to conflict mitigation by supporting a credible, peaceful election process; and reinforced Australia’s role as a good development partner, particularly in the provinces.

The six Australia Assists deployees brought many years of elections experience from other contexts and built solid relationships to fulfil the objectives of their collective task. This report outlines the **key outcome areas of the 2019 team deployment, lessons learned and recommendations for future election support** under the Program.

Australia Assists is the Australian Government’s humanitarian civilian deployment program. Managed by RedR Australia, technical specialists are deployed to help partners prepare for, respond to and recover from natural disasters and conflict.

**“ I work with international advisors and they say ‘this is what you need to do’, but he always said ‘how do we do this, what do you think, what is the context?’ My staff did not treat him as a European guy. He eats what we eat. I studied food as my first degree...if you eat what I eat, then you are part of me. That’s what makes him very close to us. ”**

– Provincial Election Manager, Solomon Islands Electoral Commission, on working alongside an Australia Assists deployee, April 2019

**“ I give credit to her for our success, especially for the pre-polling. We protected the process and it was near perfect. The public appreciate how the election was conducted smoothly and peacefully. People have confidence in the system. There’s no room for tampering now... we’re very confident in the process. ”**

– Provincial Election Manager, Solomon Islands Electoral Commission, on working alongside an Australia Assists deployee, April 2019



Australia Assists deployee Barnaby delivering training to provincial election staff.

### National elections in Solomon Islands – why was 2019 unique?

Conducting a credible election in Solomon Islands is challenging due to the geography, limited infrastructure, dispersed population, institutional capacity and the political context. Between 1998 and 2003, Solomon Islands experienced a period of internal conflict, commonly referred to as ‘the tensions’, which resulted in the eviction of 20,000 settlers from Guadalcanal province, hundreds of deaths and the destruction of much of the country’s infrastructure.

As a result of ongoing unrest, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) arrived in July 2003, charged with restoring stability and strengthening governance. RAMSI was in operation until 2017 and this fifteen-year period included three national elections. The 2019 National General Election in Solomon Islands was the first election to be held post-RAMSI and also followed significant changes in 2018 to the country’s Electoral Act.

“ This was the first election since RAMSI so it was sort of a test, with all the logistical, coordination and security aspects that come with it. In the end it was peaceful, transparent and under the auspices of good governance. For us it was a real test as to whether Solomon Islands really is the Hapi Isles. ”

– Election Manager, Solomon Islands Electoral Commission, during an interview with RedR Australia, April 2019

### Australia Assists’ election support in Solomon Islands

Supporting the Solomon Islands’ Government to deliver safe, fair and credible elections is a key priority for the Australian Government. The Australia Assists Program supported the 2019 Solomon Islands National General Election through the deployment of six Election Specialists from the RedR Australia Roster, who worked throughout the five largest provinces (Malaita, Western, Guadalcanal, Makira and Honiara City).

This team deployment was in response to a request made by the Office of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (O/SIEC) to the Australian High Commission (AHC) in Honiara for support for the 2019 General Election. The AHC and DFAT in Canberra, through RedR Australia and the Australia Assists Program, then developed a proposal for a team of Election Specialists to deploy for approximately three months from January 2019 to support election operations across the country. The support was designed to be responsive and complement existing long-term electoral support programs, with Australia Assists deployees working closely alongside SIEC staff in the provinces and taking a flexible, needs-based approach. Expected activities included supporting SIEC with operational planning, logistics, communications and training.

### Australia Assists on the ground – key achievements

The Australia Assists team deployment delivered over and above its objectives – a finding verified through feedback obtained from a range of stakeholders in Solomon Islands. RedR Australia’s program monitoring found that Australia Assists’ 2019 election support in Solomon Islands:

1. Facilitated Solomon Islands’ first ever election pre-poll
2. Contributed to conflict mitigation by supporting a credible, peaceful election process
3. Reinforced Australia’s role as a good development partner

“ Australia Assists deployments at the provincial level became more and more relevant closer to election day. Many of the Election Managers have autonomy over how the elections are held, so in a way it’s almost nine elections, not one. It was extremely helpful for us to have deployees in the provinces. ”

– Representative of the Australian High Commission in Honiara, April 2019

Collectively, the six Australia Assists deployees brought many years of elections experience from other contexts, including but not limited to Bougainville, and quickly learned the electoral processes specific to Solomon Islands. This included grasping the intricacies of the new Electoral Act, which only came into effect late in 2018.

The Australia Assists team were instrumental in the delivery of Solomon Islands’ first ever pre-poll – a process that, for the first time, gave hundreds of police officers and electoral staff the opportunity to exercise their democratic right and facilitate the country’s national election. Deployees contributed to peace and stability during the critical pre-election period and on polling day, and in some cases actively helped to quell voter and candidate dissatisfaction by listening, responding transparently and – above all – reinforcing the process.

Deployees played critical support roles in the SIEC as project coordinators, team builders and conduits of information – all whilst ensuring that election processes and timelines were strictly followed. As a cohesive team operating across a vast archipelago, the deployees acted as connectors, facilitating information on a daily basis

between key election actors from Honiara and out to the provinces. The placement of a Deployment Team Leader (Election Specialist) in the O/SIEC in Honiara was an important enabler; this was a strategic role that provided a centralised point of contact for SIEC staff, deployees in the provinces and other election actors.

Representatives from SIEC, RSIPF, AHC, UNDP, AFP and the ADF routinely commended Australia Assists' 2019 support: *"They knew the processes and the timelines and they kept the information flowing between all of us – they were like a bridge between Honiara and the provinces,"* remarked one SIEC interview respondent. A representative from the Solomon Islands Police Development Program (Advisor to the RSIPF Liaison Officer to SIEC) relayed the close working relationship he and his colleague forged with an Australia Assists deployee in Honiara: *"She readily provided us with relevant SIEC information to assist the Police Force in planning for election support operations."* A Returning Officer from Makira province felt that the recent national election was an important test for the future: *"This support for national elections really helps us to be ready for the provincial elections, which we'll need to do on our own."*

RedR's program monitoring in Solomon Islands found that without the additional support from Australia Assists, the SIEC would have struggled to meet critical deadlines and ensure adherence to electoral processes at provincial level, particularly as the changes to the 2018 Electoral Act were not widely understood or operationalised. One provincial Election Manager commented: *"I think I would have had to work night and day and get sick, I would have been overworked without [Australia Assists deployee's] support. It was too much to manage in a short period of time, especially with the new Electoral Act."*

**“ From the Solomon Islands Police Development Program (SIPDP), we were able to work together and jointly solve issues and problems. Without that Australian involvement, the information flow would have been disjointed and would not have been received in a timely manner... She was an excellent representative in this role for the Australian Government. ”**

- Representative of the SIPDP, Australian Federal Police, on working closely alongside an Australia Assists deployee, April 2019.

Given the highly relational nature of their roles, the **deployees' interpersonal and cultural competencies ('soft skills')** were consistently regarded as key to their success. This underpinned all of the achievements mentioned above, in addition to their technical expertise: *"You seemed to pick the right kind of people... people who fit in... that's everything,"* a Returning Officer remarked. Quotes from monitoring interviews in April 2019 provide further evidence of this aspect of the team's approach, and can be found on page 15.

### Challenges, lessons learned and recommendations

RedR also identified lessons learned and recommendations to be taken into account for future election support under the Australia Assists Program. Key challenges related to the leadership and organisational structure of the SIEC (and related issues with reporting lines and information blockages), operational resourcing for the team (communications, printing, transport) and suggestions for an improved coordination and information sharing structure (with clear responsibilities and lines of authority) among the various Australian Government-funded election support actors in Solomon Islands.

Aside from operational resourcing challenges, deployees consistently raised the **difficulty of striking an appropriate balance between the support nature of their roles (capacity building; role modelling) with getting the election done (leading; doing)**. The team also raised concerns regarding the **sustainability of some deployment outcomes**. This was largely because SIEC staff are not permanently appointed and, more specifically, in relation to institutionalising systems and processes for future election pre-polls.

The most **consistent feedback from SIEC representatives related to the timing of the Australia Assists team deployment**, with the majority of respondents recommending deployees arrive in the provinces up to six months in advance of a future national election. RedR notes that this recommendation presents a challenge given that the SIEC does not (yet) have a permanent provincial presence, but was nonetheless a widely held view during interviews. RedR suggests that **future Australia Assists election support in Solomon Islands take the form of a smaller cohort of deployees (2-3) based in Honiara six months before the election**. These deployees would travel to the provinces to assist with logistics and security planning, identification of suitable provincial offices and counting centres,

### RedR program monitoring in Solomon Islands

As part of regular program monitoring, RedR Australia's Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) team reviewed election-related documentation and formal deployment reporting ahead of the in-country component. In Solomon Islands, RedR staff led a reflective workshop with all deployees and subsequently interviewed 27 key informants. This included representatives from the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (SIEC), including four Election Managers and eleven Returning Officers from five provinces, the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF), staff at the Australian High Commission in Honiara, UNDP, and representatives from the Australian Defence Force and Australian Federal Police.

In Melbourne, RedR conducted an operational debrief that brought deployees and relevant staff together to reflect on the key achievements and lessons learned from Australia Assists' inaugural election support deployment. An underlying principle throughout these monitoring activities and in the preparation of this report has been ensuring that key findings have been verified by a range of sources.

and ensure that community awareness is well underway. If required, a further two to three deployees could then deploy as surge support eight to 12 weeks ahead of polling day.

## Key outcome areas

### Australia Assists' support to the 2019 Solomon Islands National General Election

Six Election Specialists deployed to the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission in Malaita, Western, Guadalcanal, Makira and Honiara Provinces

#### 1. Facilitated Solomon Islands' first ever election pre-poll

The Australia Assists team were instrumental in the delivery of Solomon Islands' first ever pre-poll – a process that **gave hundreds of police officers and electoral staff the opportunity to exercise their democratic right as individuals and help to facilitate the country's national election for the first time.** This cohort of Solomon Islands society had previously been unable to do both.

#### 2. Contributed to conflict mitigation by supporting a peaceful, credible election process

Deployees contributed to peace and stability during the critical pre-election period and on polling day, in some cases **actively helping to quell rising voter and candidate dissatisfaction by listening, responding transparently and – above all – reinforcing the process.**

#### 3. Reinforced Australia's role as a good development partner

Deployees played critical support roles in the SIEC as **project coordinators, team builders and conduits of information – all whilst ensuring that election processes and timelines were strictly followed.** The Australia Assists team collectively acted as 'connectors'. They were well respected by their colleagues and regarded as *"excellent representatives of the Australian Government."*

### Key program enablers:

- Extensive scoping of the Solomon Islands context; incorporated lessons learned from previous Australian election support in other Pacific contexts.
- RedR selected the right people from the RedR Humanitarian Roster, with significant and relevant elections experience.
- Deployees' interpersonal and cultural competencies ('soft skills') facilitated all of their achievements.
- Deployees were well supported by RedR – operational and administration support pre, during and post deployment; risk, safety and security (planning and support).

**From January – April 2019, Australia Assists deployees assisted, trained and mentored more than 350 Solomon Islands Electoral Commission staff across the country,** in areas from nominating, polling and counting processes, to project management, logistics and effective team-building and leadership approaches.

## Future support to the SIEC

Australia Assists employees recommended that future election support to the SIEC involve developing:

- a comprehensive **Elections Logistics Plan** which includes the dispatch of materials from Honiara and receipt and dispatch of materials at provincial level.
- nation-wide **civic education and community awareness programs** which run throughout the election cycle and could be rolled out through schools, churches and community groups.
- a more **comprehensive training program for Election Managers and other SIEC staff**, which incorporates budgeting, activity and logistics planning, and leadership and management strategies.

## Key outcome areas

RedR Australia found that Australia Assists' 2019 election support in Solomon Islands contributed to a more peaceful and credible election. This review found that the Program:

1. Facilitated Solomon Islands' first ever election pre-poll
2. Contributed to conflict mitigation by supporting a credible, peaceful election process
3. Reinforced Australia's role as a good development partner, particularly in the provinces

### 1. Facilitated Solomon Islands' first ever election pre-poll

The Australia Assists team were instrumental in the delivery of Solomon Islands' first ever pre-poll – a process that **gave hundreds of police officers and electoral staff the opportunity to exercise their democratic right and facilitate the country's national election for the first time**. The legislative requirement for a pre-poll

**“ Credible elections are the cornerstone of democracy. It's critical for a country like Solomons, which is emerging from civil conflict, to have credible elections that are acknowledged and supported by the population. ”**

– Australia Assists deployee, April 2019

came about as a result of changes to the Electoral Act late in 2018, however electoral commission staff did not yet have the processes in place or capacity to undertake this. **Solomon Islands' 2019 pre-poll would likely not have taken place without the assistance of the Australia Assists team**, a statement often repeated in interviews with SIEC representatives from both Honiara and the provinces.

The successful delivery of the pre-poll had flow-on effects for the credibility and stability of the remaining election period. For the 2019 election, SIEC staff and RSIPF officers knew they would be eligible to vote for the first time. **If Solomon Islands had not undertaken the pre-poll as promised, this could have put RSIPF officers and election staff offside in the crucial days and weeks leading up to the election.** One Election Manager summarised the importance Solomon Islanders place on casting their vote: *“Recently I've seen more people become interested and engaged in elections. If they have to choose between not being able to work on elections and not being able to vote, they will choose the vote. That's why the pre-poll was so important here.”* The following two quotes further verify the pre-poll outcome:



Women from the Solomon Islands Electoral Office (SIEO) at a pre-polling station for the 2019 Election. Photo credit: Solomon Islands Electoral Commission

*“I give credit to her for our success, especially for the pre-polling. We protected the process and it was near perfect. From the feedback I received, the public appreciate how the process was conducted smoothly and peacefully. People have confidence in the system. There's no room for tampering now, we're very confident in the process.”*

– Election Manager (Honiara), SIEC on working closely alongside an Australia Assists deployee.

*“My first day working as a RSIPF Liaison Officer to SIEC was a great day because [Australia Assists Election Specialist] was my co-subordinate. She was easy to consult, she was open to all locals and understood Pidgin a little. Her coordination in preparing the pre-polling was outstanding. She was available at odd hours regarding any preparations that were requested by our Police Operations Centre. From my point of view, she was a kind of person that controls pressure when the workload is heavy.”*

– RSIPF Liaison Officer to the SIEC, CPP Training Wing, Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.

### 2. Contributed to conflict mitigation by supporting a credible, peaceful election process

The investment of six Australia Assists Election Specialists to support the 2019 Solomon Islands National General election **contributed to a more peaceful and credible election outcome**. Throughout the three months, the team developed excellent relationships with the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force and provincial administrators in particular, as well as Australian election support actors in the country (ADF, AFP and AEC). These relationships contributed to better logistics and security planning. One deployee reported: *“Without [Australia Assists Team Leader in Honiara] providing me almost daily information that she managed to source at HQ, it is likely our province would have not been able to secure and utilise military logistics support for the election.”*



Australia Assists deployee Kate with the Honiara City election team at a training day on election procedures.

Focusing support at the provincial level was a particular strength of the Program. Australia Assists employees' presence in the provinces *"supported an atmosphere of credibility and proper process before and up to polling day... this helped us to respond to the constituents... and maintain peace and order"*, according to one election specialist. As a result of the deployees' consistent presence in the provinces and strong relationships, they also played a critical role in **communicating early warning signals of potential unrest** to the provincial operations centres and to Honiara, meaning that security assets could be rapidly deployed. RedR's monitoring interviews revealed that two deployees **played a direct role in de-escalating tensions on polling day through a process of sustained consultation and negotiation.**

In one case, an Australia Assists deployee directly intervened to mitigate and resolve the deadlock between hostile supporters of one prominent candidate, the Police Commander

and the SIEC Election Manager. The candidate was losing and his supporters were unhappy — demanding the removal of the Police Force, changes to the counting process and recounting of all ballot papers. Over a tense three-hour period, the deployee was able to convince the crowd that the SIEC was legally unable to meet their demands. He convinced them that it would be better to let the counting proceed and to take their complaint to the High Court, which was the only institution permitted to authorise a recount. **Using effective negotiation skills and the local language, he was able to convince them of the benefits of acting lawfully, which contributed to the delivery of a relatively peaceful election in that particular province.** The deployee later reflected on this experience: *"Erasing the cultural divide and strong mistrust towards foreigners and advisors took a lot of effort and energy, but was key. This trust facilitated the opening for dialogue and by taking the time to understand their grievances, needs and rights, I was able to propose solutions and resolve issues."*

### 3. Reinforced Australia's role as a good development partner, particularly in the provinces.

Deployees shared that they were consistently recognised and praised as "Australians helping Solomon Islanders to conduct their first national election since RAMSI – it was a good sign of cooperation," according to a deployee stationed in one of the country's most remote provinces. Another deployee reported that "the person-person relationships I formed demonstrated that Australia has a direct and genuine interest in supporting the Solomon Islands Government to strengthen its democratic institutions... and deliver a credible election." This aspect of Australian Government visibility, particularly during what were widely reported by election staff and deployees to be long and exhausting days for all, **contributed to a sense of solidarity and shared interest among Australians and Solomon Islanders.**

With regard to the practical components of the support, deployees played critical roles in the SIEC as **project coordinators, team builders and conduits of information – all whilst ensuring that election processes and timelines were strictly followed.** As a cohesive team operating across a vast archipelago, the deployees acted as connectors, facilitating information on a daily basis between key election actors from Honiara and out to the provinces. They became a trusted part of the community and **led by example:** by being responsive, demonstrating commitment, maintaining integrity and being a sounding board for local election staff. In each of their locations, deployees helped to demonstrate that **adhering to clear democratic processes leads to a reliable and transparent outcome that can be defended.** The following responses were collected during monitoring interviews in Solomon Islands in April 2019 and provide testament to Australia Assists' collective contribution.

## Australia Assists Election Support

**“ What [Australia Assists deployee] brought to the team was an ability to look at the details – she was there going through the new legislation manual in detail and figuring out exactly what we needed to do. From my side we wouldn’t have had the simplified guidelines without her to go ahead... she simplified everything. ”**

– Election Manager, Honiara, SIEC

**“ I’ve been working in elections for nearly twenty years but she kept us from veering off the course. This is positive but it can also be negative. When she suggested something, we had to negotiate – that wasn’t always easy but she had a calm and supportive style. I really respected her. ”**

– Returning Officer, Honiara, SIEC

**“ Nobody is trained to be a manager, but it’s a real skill. And we’re not permanent staff. For me, [Australia Assists deployee’s] strength was building my capacity on elections and management. She was there for my team day and night, she came in on time, she was always on the phone, which gave me pressure too. It’s a good influence, that’s what I’m saying. ”**

– Election Manager (remote province), SIEC

**“ The big thing that helped me was with our daily and weekly planning... he had a very good traffic light system. He is always thinking about what’s next, what we haven’t done, prodding us to keep going. ”**

– Election Manager (remote province), SIEC

**“ We had the new manual but he was reading it with me and supporting me, helping me to check what needed to happen. ”**

– Election Manager (remote province), SIEC

## Australia Assists Election Support



Australia Assists deployee Gail supports a training for provincial Electoral Officers.

### On ‘soft skills’ as the key to everything, everywhere:

The most consistent theme that emerged from RedR’s monitoring interviews, particularly those with SIEC staff, was the degree to which the ‘soft skills’ and cultural competencies of the deployees facilitated their success. This is not surprising nor unique to Solomon Islands but nonetheless provides an insight into what it takes to be effective – and be considered effective by local actors. This aspect was routinely revealed as a real strength of all six Australia Assists deployees. The following quotes recorded during RedR’s interviews with SIEC staff demonstrate this sentiment:

*“Her approach was the best part. Before I’ve worked with advisors and they come in and push you, impose themselves, and it doesn’t work.”* – Returning Officer (remote province), SIEC

*“He’s got good skills in team building, always giving us new ideas on planning, coordinating, reporting. His approach was that he brought us together to help each other. He had one team member who wanted to resign before the election and he mentored him to say, ‘No come on, you can keep going, you can do this.’ And the guy stayed on.”* – Returning Officer (remote province), SIEC

*“He’s kind, he’s open, he listens to me, he always says ‘I come to support you’. I work with several advisors and they say this is what you need to do, but [Australia Assists Election Specialist] says, ‘How do we do this, what do you think, what is the context?’ and then we look at it together.”* – Election Manager, SIEC

*“I think the other thing was the culture – she was very respectful, she absorbed the culture, but she didn’t pretend to know our culture.”* – Returning Officer (remote province), SIEC

*“She was behind the scenes but always there. She’d give support and say ‘That’s an excellent idea.’ She presented in a way that she reminds you that it’s your job and you have to do it, but she supported us to do it. She allowed us space.”* – Returning Officer (Honiara), SIEC

## Australia Assists Election Support



A Solomon Islander woman sticks envelopes with voter education booklets onto rice bags in preparation for the election. Photo credit: UNDP Solomon Islands



### List of acronyms:

- AA – Australia Assists
- ADF – Australian Defence Force
- AEC – Australian Electoral Commission
- AFP – Australian Federal Police
- AHC – Australian High Commission
- EM – Election Manager
- DFAT – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- MEAL – Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
- O/SIEC – Office of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission
- RAMSI – Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
- RO – Returning Officer
- RSIPF – Royal Solomon Islands Police Force
- SIEC – Solomon Islands Electoral Commission
- UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

Australia Assists deployee Franck with Election Officials and voters in Malaita Province.





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