



Australian
National
University

Department of
Pacific Affairs

“Navigating Change, Nurturing Hope: Reflections on Inclusive Development in the Solomon Islands”

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**Navigating Change: Towards Sustainable and Inclusive Development in the
Solomon Islands**

Panatina Seminar, 3 November 2025

Your Excellency, the Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, the Honourable Jeremiah Manele;
The Honourable John Dean Kuku, Deputy Leader of the Democratic Party and Member of
Parliament for North New Georgia;

Your Excellencies, members of the Diplomatic Corps;

Professor Helen Sullivan, Dean of the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National
University;

Sir Dr. Nathan Kere, Chancellor of the Solomon Islands National University;

Dr. Morgan Wairiu, Pro-Chancellor and Chair of the University Council;

Distinguished guests, colleagues, students, ladies and gentlemen —

It gives me great pleasure, and indeed a deep sense of honour, to welcome each and every one of you to this inaugural gathering. Your presence here this morning — from the highest offices of government and the diplomatic community, to our partners in academia and development — reflects the shared commitment we all hold to the progress, unity, and prosperity of our nation.

Good morning to you all. It is my great honor, as Vice-Chancellor of the Solomon Islands National University, to welcome you to the inaugural Panatina Research Seminar. This important gathering – under the theme “Navigating Change: Towards Sustainable and Inclusive Development in the Solomon Islands” – marks a new chapter in our national dialogue. Today, we have in this hall a rich assembly of leaders, scholars, community voices, and development partners, all here to engage with the pressing challenges and opportunities facing our beloved nation.

First and foremost, allow me to acknowledge Your Excellency the Prime Minister. Sir, your presence this morning is a profound manifestation to the priority our nation’s leadership places on knowledge and inclusive development. I also warmly welcome all our VIP guests – from government ministers and Members of Parliament to representatives of our international partners, including the Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australian National University. This seminar is a collaborative effort: it is hosted by SINU in partnership with the Australian National University and supported by the Government of Australia under its Pacific research and education programs. We deeply appreciate this partnership and support, which exemplify the spirit of regional cooperation in pursuit of sustainable development.

Ladies and gentlemen, our theme “*Navigating Change: Towards Sustainable and Inclusive Development*” could not be more timely. The world around us is changing rapidly – environmentally, socially, economically – and the Solomon Islands must steer its course wisely through these shifting currents. This forum is designed to help us do exactly that. The Panatina Research Seminar is envisioned as a national nexus for interdisciplinary dialogue, research, and policy debate on Solomon Islands’ development[3]. In other words, it is more than an academic conference – it is a platform for action. Through this seminar series we aim to gather global experts, local stakeholders, policy architects and students, to share insights and best practices, spur collaborative research, uplift local voices, and ultimately guide better policy and practical

solutions for our country. By coming together across sectors and disciplines, we signal our collective commitment to shaping a future that is resilient, sustainable and inclusive.

In creating the Panatina Seminar, we draw inspiration from the groundbreaking Waigani Seminar held in Papua New Guinea in the 1960s. Many of you will recall that the Waigani Seminars were famous for assembling scholars, officials, business and civil society leaders to debate every aspect of national development as PNG approached independence. Those forums ignited ideas and policies that helped shape our neighbor's destiny. In that same spirit, the Panatina Seminar aspires to become Solomon Islands' own national forum for vigorous intellectual exchange and nation-building dialogue. We have also been inspired by the more recent *PNG Update* conferences co-hosted by the University of Papua New Guinea and ANU – a reminder that partnership between a national university and international peers can produce truly impactful dialogue. It is my hope that the Panatina Seminar will likewise convene leaders, thinkers and citizens from all corners of Solomon Islands and our wider Pacific region, to share knowledge and address the complex issues we face. From climate change to societal shifts, our country presents a challenging but rich landscape for study, and SINU, as the national university, is uniquely placed to facilitate local and global solutions to these development challenges. Through events like this, we can generate ideas that help shape our nation's destiny.

Before we delve into our program, I would like to share a personal reflection that, to me, underlines why our theme and this seminar are so important. Two weeks ago, from October 20th to 27th, I visited Wagina Island in Choiseul Province – one of the most remote communities in our country. The visit was an eye-opening journey that revealed both the daunting challenges we must confront and the incredible potential we must unlock. Wagina is a unique community, predominantly inhabited by Gilbertese families relocated to the Solomon Islands in the 1950s and 60s. It is a place of beauty and resilience, its people sustained by the ocean through a thriving seaweed industry. In fact, Wagina produces around 90 percent of Solomon Islands' dried seaweed exports, making it the largest seaweed-producing community in the entire Pacific Islands region. Yet, beneath this economic success lies a paradox. Despite the steady flow of cash income from seaweed farming, this prosperity has not translated into greater educational outcomes for the island's youth. The isolation of the island continues to hinder access to higher

education and essential services, leaving many children and families struggling to convert hard-earned income into long-term human capital and opportunity.

At Wagina Community High School, where I had the honour of officiating their graduation ceremony, I learned that very few students progress to tertiary education, even though the community has a proud history of producing professionals in earlier generations. I spoke with elders and teachers to understand this decline, and the reasons were painfully clear. Families still struggle to pay school fees despite earning income from seaweed; and while the seaweed industry keeps households afloat, it also demands the labour of young people who might otherwise be in classrooms. The paradox of Wagina is that economic activity is strong, yet educational participation is weak. The island's isolation limits access to information, technology, and opportunity. Many students walk long distances each day to attend a school without laboratories or libraries, and where the promise of a better life through education is dimmed by daily hardship. Geographic isolation, economic pressures, and social expectations combine to divert bright young men and women away from their studies, perpetuating a cycle where income sustains survival but not advancement.

Yet, amid these challenges, I also witnessed hope, resilience, and innovation in Wagina. Let me share one story in particular – the story of Mr. Tonginako “Tony” Uro. Tony is a local entrepreneur from Wagina who graciously hosted me during my stay. His story is nothing short of inspirational. Tony has no formal tertiary education, and like many in Wagina he started out as a humble subsistence farmer. About a decade ago, in 2012, he began a small business centered on the one resource Wagina has in abundance: seaweed. He would buy and sell dried seaweed from local farmers – a modest operation at first. But Tony had a bigger vision. Over the years, through sheer hard work and keen insight into his community's needs, he expanded that little seaweed venture into a multifaceted rural enterprise. Today, Tony's Otin Tai Company is the pride of Wagina. It still leads in seaweed farming and export, but that's just one part of a much larger operation. Otin Tai now runs a general store and fuel depot, a kava bar (in fact a floating kava bar on the lagoon!), engine repair and fibreglass boat workshops, a sea taxi transport service, a pair of resthouse bungalows for visitors, and even a new conference hall with internet connectivity – the first ever in Wagina. In recent months Tony even opened a small restaurant to cater to locals and guests. Standing there at his waterfront outpost – with bungalows built over

the mangrove shallows and a satellite dish linking Wagina to the world – I felt I was witnessing something remarkable: a blueprint of grassroots innovation.

What Tony has achieved is not only a personal success; it is a model of community-minded entrepreneurship. In one of the most remote, traditionally neglected parts of our country, he has built an ecosystem of services and jobs. His business now employs 55 people – 30 men and 25 women – from Wagina and nearby villages. That is fifty-five breadwinners who can support their families without leaving their island home. These are youths who might otherwise have drifted to urban centers in search of work, but are instead building their futures in their own community. Tony's enterprise has become a lifeline: it keeps local money circulating in the local economy, and even contributes significant revenue in business licenses to the provincial government. Just as importantly, Tony leads with his heart. Those who know him speak of his generosity. He regularly gives back to the community – whether it's helping the four villages on Wagina with projects (each has received SBD\$10–20,000 in assistance from him), or donating prizes for school graduations and youth sports, or supporting church and women's groups. This is inclusive development in action – profits being reinvested in the people. Tony Uro's story, in essence, is the story of resilience, creativity, and hope. It shows what is possible when local people are empowered to take charge of their own development – even with minimal formal education, even far away from the capital. I share his story today because it carries lessons for all of us and perfectly illustrates why a forum like the Panatina Seminar is so vital.

Tony's experience in Wagina is not an isolated anecdote – it is a microcosm of the broader development tapestry of Solomon Islands. The threads of climate change, education, sustainable livelihoods, good governance, and social cohesion are all interwoven in that story. Allow me to elaborate. Wagina's livelihood, seaweed farming, is part of our blue economy and closely related to our fisheries sector. The people there are on the frontlines of climate change: they have already noticed changes in weather patterns and the marine environment. In fact, the community worries about how rising sea temperatures and stronger storms are affecting their seaweed yield – just like farmers on land, these “*marine farmers*” feel the impact of climate change on their crops. They spoke to me about the need for climate adaptation strategies, such as protecting mangroves as natural sea barriers. This directly connects to our seminar's focus on climate change innovations and environmental challenges. When we discuss climate resilience in our

sessions, let us remember places like Wagina where those ideas will be applied on the ground to safeguard livelihoods.

Education, of course, is another thread. Tony's success is extraordinary, but as an educator I cannot help but think how many more talented individuals in Wagina and other rural areas could thrive if given greater educational opportunities. His story highlights both the value of practical knowledge and the gaps in our formal education reach. As we talk about improving education and technology today, especially through distance and flexible learning, we are addressing how to ensure no community's youth are left behind due to where they are born. My visit underscored the importance of SINU's efforts to extend distance learning and skills training to remote islands. Education – whether formal or informal – is the key that can unlock so much potential in communities like Wagina.

Consider also the topic of fisheries and marine resources. Solomon Islands' future development and food security depend on how we manage our rich ocean resources. Wagina's seaweed industry may be unique, but across our provinces many communities rely on the sea – be it for fishing, aquaculture, or seaweed – to earn income and feed their families. The seminar session on fisheries innovations will explore ways to sustain and grow these livelihoods. The idea of an “Integrated Seaweed Management” project was even raised during my Wagina meetings – a concept of combining resource management, value-adding, and training for seaweed farmers. That kind of integrated thinking is exactly what a forum like this can push forward, bringing scientific research and local knowledge together.

The theme of governance is equally pertinent. Entrepreneurs like Tony can flourish, or fail, depending on the enabling environment created by policy and governance. In Wagina, I saw how the lack of certain government services and infrastructure hinders progress – for instance, without adequate transport and communications infrastructure, even the best ideas struggle to get off the ground. Conversely, smart and transparent governance – from fair access to credit and markets, to supportive local government that eases business licensing and provides basic utilities – can empower rural development. Our discussions on transparency and effective governance later today will feed directly into how we can create conditions for inclusive growth nationwide. Good governance is the thread that ensures the efforts of our people, whether in Honiara or Wagina, can translate into tangible development outcomes.

Finally, social cohesion and nation-building – the very fabric that holds our diverse society together. What moved me deeply in Wagina was seeing a community often perceived as “on the margins” stand up and claim its place in our national story. Tony’s example shows how community leadership and initiative can strengthen social cohesion. By creating jobs and sharing his success, he has reinforced the bonds among Wagina’s four villages, giving people a sense of pride and unity. This speaks to the importance of inclusive development: when all groups in society feel heard, valued, and involved in progress, our nation as a whole is stronger. In our session on peace, social cohesion, and identity, we will delve into ways to foster unity in our diversity – because development is not just about economics or infrastructure, it is about building *One Solomon Islands* where everyone has a stake. The story of Wagina – its struggles and its triumphs – is a part of the Solomon Islands story. It reminds us that rural grassroots innovation and community resilience are as critical to nation-building as are high-level policies.

Ladies and gentlemen, taken together, these threads form what I like to call the *development tapestry* of our nation. Each thread – be it climate change adaptation, educational improvement, economic innovation, governance reform, or social inclusion – is woven into the other. Pull one out, and the pattern unravels; strengthen each of them, and the whole fabric becomes stronger. Our seminar’s sessions today may seem to cover disparate topics from agriculture to digital technology to governance, but in truth they are all connected. And it is in forums like this that we can tie those threads together into coherent strategies for change.

As I conclude, I wish to emphasize the significance of this moment. Today will be the beginning of a tradition. We envision the Panatina Research Seminar to be SINU’s flagship annual forum, one that endures and grows in impact each year. Consider this an open invitation to all of you – in government, in communities, in academia, in industry, and among our development partners – to make this your forum for collaboration. Let the Panatina Seminar be a standing appointment on our national calendar, a space where we come together regularly to share research, discuss policy directions, and align our efforts for the common good. In doing so, we will build a legacy of open dialogue and evidence-based decision-making in Solomon Islands. Our goal is a sustained partnership of government, academia, and society – a true whole-of-nation approach to development.

Your Excellency, the Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, the Honourable Jeremiah Manele; distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends —

On behalf of the Solomon Islands National University, I wish to once again express our deep appreciation to Your Excellency for honouring us with your presence this morning. Your participation reminds us that knowledge, policy, and leadership must walk hand in hand if we are to navigate the challenges of our time.

I also extend sincere thanks to all our invited guests, members of the diplomatic corps, representatives from government, academia, industry, and civil society, as well as our students and participants. Your presence here today enriches the spirit of this inaugural Panatina Seminar and affirms the value of collaboration in the pursuit of sustainable and inclusive development.

May the exchanges that take place throughout today's program inspire new ideas, forge stronger partnerships, and nurture the intellectual energy that will guide our nation forward. I encourage each of you to engage openly, to share generously, and to listen thoughtfully — for it is in the meeting of minds that true progress begins.

Once again, Your Excellency and distinguished guests, thank you for gracing this occasion and for supporting SINU's continuing mission to serve as a hub of learning, dialogue, and innovation. I warmly welcome you all to the Panatina Research Seminar 2025, and I wish everyone a productive and enlightening day of discussions.

Tagio tumas. Thank you.