THE WANTOK SYSTEM, SCALE AND VULNERABILITY: SHAPING
DISASTER RECOVERY IN AN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY OF THE
WESTERN SOLOMON ISLANDS

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This thesis is dedicated to all of those affected by the 2007 Solomon Island earthquake and tsunami.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Wantok System, Scale and Vulnerability: Shaping Disaster Recovery in an Immigrant Community of the Western Solomon Islands

by

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Master of Arts in Anthropology
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On April 2, 2007, a 6m tsunami struck Ghizo Island, Western Province, Solomon Islands. One of the most severe impacts was in Titiana, a distinct Micronesian community, where 13 villagers were killed. Despite the similar impact in a nearby Melanesian village, Pailongge, no deaths occurred. Moreover, the villages experienced a differential recovery. Social vulnerability largely determines a hazard’s impact and the ability to recover, a process influenced by broader socio-political dynamics, like politics, regional exchange, and marginalization. This thesis examines how the Solomon Island government, wantok system, and immigrant status dynamically shaped vulnerability in Titiana and Pailongge and how this underlies their differential recovery. Results show the Solomon Island wantok system, a pre-capitalist Melanesian exchange pattern in which people favor their wantok – individuals united through shared kinship, language and place – heavily influenced recovery. Specifically, post-disaster aid distribution at multiple organizational scales flowed primarily along wantok networks, creating a biased allocation. Titiana and Pailongge households’ disparate connections to these networks strongly influenced the aid they received and their overall vulnerability to the tsunami’s impact. Importantly, this process was highly scale-dependent. While Titiana’s immigrant status largely excluded them from these wantok networks, increasing their vulnerability, Pailongge was not necessarily resilient at all organizational scales (e.g. community, regional, national). Therefore, this thesis also explores how the wantok system and vulnerability are dynamic, inherently contradictory processes, both dependent upon and transformative across scales. The analysis challenges more static approaches to vulnerability. Understanding the shifting articulation of the wantok system, vulnerability, and resilience has implications for the future vulnerability and resiliency of Melanesian societies.
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

DRSF – Disaster Relief Special Fund
MP – Member of Parliament
NDC – National Disaster Council
NDMO – National Disaster Management Office
OAG – Office of the Auditor General (Solomon Islands government)
PM – Prime Minister
PNG – Papua New Guinea
SA – Salvation Army
SAR - Special Audit Report
SC – Save the Children
SDA – Seventh Day Adventist
SIG – Solomon Island Government
SRS – simple-random-sample
SSEC – South Seas Evangelical Church
TAT – Technical Advisory Team
UC – United Church
WPDC – Western Provincial Disaster Committee
WV – World Vision
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As they say in Solomon Island Pijin, “Tangio tumas [Thank you very much]”, and in Kiribati, “Kam raba [Thank you all very much]”.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: THE SOLOMON ISLANDS 2007
TSUNAMI, VULNERABILITY, AND THE WANTOK SYSTEM

On April 2, 2007, an 8.1 magnitude earthquake shook the seafloor just 40km south of Ghizo in the Western Solomon Islands. It triggered a massive (6 meter) tsunami that struck the southern coast of Ghizo within minutes. One of the most severe impacts was in Titiana, an ethnically distinct village of 350 people. Titiana is one of a handful of Kiribati communities in the Solomon Islands that was relocated from the Gilbert Islands to the Solomons in the mid-20th century during British colonial rule (Knudson 1964). The tsunami heavily damaged or destroyed every structure in the community and killed 13 villagers, many of whom were children.

I began to grasp the deeper, underlying dimensions of this community’s response and recovery when in 2012 I arrived in Titiana for my second field season. It had not rained for weeks and out of concern, the woman I stayed with suggested I buy bottled water for drinking because recently their household’s rain tank, a main source of drinking water for many Titiana households, was either low or empty. Over the next few weeks, small, infrequent bursts of rain came, providing a day or two worth of water, but the area remained mostly dry, creating a precarious situation surrounding villagers’ access to water. During this time, I witnessed something, which at first seemed extremely peculiar, but later became foundational to the analysis in this thesis. About a week into my trip I moved in with another family that had a rain tank in front of their house. Although rain was currently sparse or non-existent, when the slightest drizzle occurred – maybe filling the six foot high, metal rain tank a couple inches – neighboring villagers and relatives (which are often the same) would come freely to fill water containers, brush their teeth, drink from the faucet, and wash their hands and feet from the family’s tank. Not only did villagers use the tank indiscriminately during this unusual dry spell, often leaving the household without potable water until the next spout of rain, but the family that technically ‘owned’ the tank never complained or attempted to
restrict people from using it. I was confused. Why wasn’t the family preserving ‘their water’ for themselves? They needed it just as much as the villagers that were taking it. And, it was their water. They paid for the rain tank; they maintained it; they needed it. Finally, I asked them why they did not keep other people from using their tank when they had so little to share. They simply replied that, ‘It is okay for people to come take the water’. Okay? How is it okay for others to take their water when the family often ended up without enough water for themselves? The answer to this question, I discovered, lies much deeper within the concepts of *wantok* and the *wantok* system.

Concepts of *wantok* and the *wantok* system are deeply embedded in Solomon Island culture. The term, *wantok*, is a Solomon Islands Pijin term that refers loosely to people who are united through kinship and/or shared language, although individual understandings and uses of the term vary. *Wan-tok* literally means people that are of “one-talk” and speak the same language. The *wantok* system refers generally to the widespread practice of helping and favoring one’s own *wantok*. More specifically, helping or receiving help from your *wantok* is largely implicit. Thus, villagers often said to me, “The *wantok* system, hem no save out”, meaning ‘the *wantok* system does not know how to get out’ – it is culturally ingrained; it is, “the way of the Solomon Islanders”. In the context of the *wantok* system, one can understand both: why many Titiana villagers frequently took water from my host family without asking; and, why the family never tried to stop them. Moreover, within this system, individuals do not behave impartially, but rather will favor and help their own *wantok* before other, more distantly related people. The Solomon Island *wantok* system reflects a deeper pattern of Melanesian exchange and provides the sociocultural context in which the 2007 earthquake and tsunami struck Solomon Islands, which had major implications for how post-disaster aid was distributed and overall recovery.

**Melanesian Exchange: People First, Objects Second**

In contrast to the commodity exchange so familiar in the Western world, Melanesian exchange reflects a pattern of gift exchange, also variously termed: gift economy, indigenous economy, and a pre-capitalist economy (Mauss 1925). In commodity exchange the focus is on the objects being exchanged and the quantitative value, or price, of those objects; whereas in gift exchange, the focus is on the people participating in exchange and the qualitative
social relations the exchange creates between them (Carrier and Carrier 1989; Gregory 1982). More specifically, Melanesian exchange is inextricably linked with conceptions of: (1) kinship and social relationships; (2) personhood; (3) and sociopolitical power, prestige and rank. Exchange is associated with social relationships in the sense that the object and mode of exchange (general, balanced, or negative reciprocity) represents, shapes, and maintains the social relationship between the donor and receiver (Akin and Robbins 1999; Carrier and Carrier 1989). For instance, food is commonly shared among close kin and this general reciprocation reinforces the relationship. Furthermore, individuals often rely on kinship networks for contributions during culturally important ceremonies that are too costly for single individuals, such as bride price payments or mortuary ceremonies (Akin 1999). In addition to reproducing social relationships, participating in exchange networks also reflects personhood in Melanesian societies. Specifically, to earn respect or prestige one is obligated to support their kin in exchange, while refusal often leads to social stigmatization (Akin 1999; Akin and Robbins 1999; Carrier and Carrier 1989). Extending notions of personhood, Melanesian exchange is also linked to social organization – particularly political power, prestige and rank (Gregory 1982; Mauss 1925; Nanau 2011; Sahlins 1963). In contrast to societies with hereditary chiefs, ascribed status, and centralized authority, pre-capitalist Melanesian social organization is primarily characterized by “tribes”, or distinct ethnic-cultural groups, subdivided by several “autonomous kinship-residential groups” (Sahlins 1963:287). Sahlins (1963) explains group leadership is not defined by a chief with vested authority, but emerges in the form of big-men, who achieve their status and obtain a following through personal prowess. Big-men derive their power through bravery and success in warfare, magical power, and demonstration of other personal skills; however, typically decisive is the deployment of one’s skills and efforts in certain directions towards amassing goods, most often pigs, shell monies and vegetable foods, and distributing them in ways which build a name for cavalier generosity, if not for compassion. A faction is developed by informal private assistance to people of a locale.” [Sahlins 1963:291]

Thus, pre-capitalist Melanesian exchange is not only linked to notions of kinship, personhood and prestige, but also orders much Melanesian socio-political organization in general.

Colonialism, missionization, globalization and market-economies have not necessarily eroded or displaced these pre-capitalist Melanesian exchange systems (Akin and Robbins 1999; Carrier and Carrier 1989; Gregory 1982; Nanau 2011). Moreover, Parry and
Bloch (1989) point out that the introduction of cash into gift economies does not necessarily result in a shift to commodity type exchange, as money may still be exchanged according to the principles of gift exchange, and the social obligations it entails. Additionally, the social organization that accompanies these exchange systems also remains largely intact.

Paralleling Sahlins’ (1963) description of Melanesian social organization – characterized by numerous groups united through kinship and locality – Nanau (2011) explains this organization still exists within the Solomon Island wantok system. Within this system, people, or wantoks, are united through shared kinship, linguistic and geographical identities. Within these kin or wantok groups, reciprocal exchange and goodwill, such as food sharing, and caring for one another’s needs, is emphasized. Firth states, “being relatives, they have a moral duty to help” (Nanau 2011:45).

Although colonialism and the formation of the Solomon Island nation-state added new layers of common wantok identity, arbitrarily uniting people at national, constituency and provincial levels, contemporary political boundaries have not erased traditional wantok identities or the general reciprocity and loyalty (kastom) that accompanies intra-group relations (Nanau 2011). Overall, Solomon Islanders continue to primarily identify themselves according to their kinship, island and language groups and “rarely as members of a national entity” (Nanau 2011:48). Additionally, big-man politics continue to operate in Melanesian societies. Akin and Robbins, for example, discuss a new type of big-man, including politicians and business men with “unprecedented access to money and power”, who both engage and transcend “local systems of reproduction” (1999:27). In particular, political leaders “often resemble the harbor masters of old, brokering the development and other moneys they are able to ‘pull’ into their local areas” (Akin and Robbins 1999:27). The continued presence of pre-capitalist Melanesian exchange – and more specifically and recently, the Solomon Islands wantok system – heavily influenced post-disaster aid distribution following the 2007 tsunami, subsequently shaping the recovery process disaster-affected regions and groups experienced to a considerable extent. Specifically, these exchange patterns resulted in a biased aid allocation that favored the wantok of those controlling aid distribution. This unequal aid distribution led to a differential recovery among tsunami victims, rendering certain individuals and groups more vulnerable to the disaster’s impact, depending on their connection to or exclusion from the wantok social networks along
which aid tended to flow. This process illustrates a broader pattern in which social, rather than physical, factors largely determine the impact of a natural hazard as well as the ability to recover.

**Disasters and Vulnerability: The Social Side of “Natural” Disasters**

The damage, destruction, and tragedy caused by physical events, such as hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes and tsunamis are all too well known among human societies. Contrary to popular beliefs, however, these “natural” disasters are not simply a result of extreme geophysical events; rather, they occur at the intersection of a natural hazard and a socially vulnerable group of people. Vulnerability is defined here as “the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard” (Wisner et al. 2004:11). While natural hazards can strike any human population, the severity and degree to which people are affected and their ability to recover is largely determined by the social context and vulnerability that characterize them (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002; Oliver-Smith 1996; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Torrence and Grattan 2002; Wisner et al. 2004). Sources of vulnerability are rooted in social, political, economic, ethnic, geographic, and demographic causes (Adger 2006; Wisner and Luce 1993). For example, the fact that the politically disenfranchised, the poor, minorities and other vulnerable groups experience more hardship and loss from the impact of a natural disaster in comparison to more well-off or less vulnerable groups is well documented (Bolin 2007; Bolin and Stanford 1999; Dyer and McGoodwin 1999; Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002; Zaman 1999). Although social vulnerability is what turns a natural hazard into a disaster, many academics, policy-makers, governments, and other organizations involved in disaster mitigation fail to recognize the social factors underlying natural disaster outcomes, effectively limiting their capability to plan for, mitigate, and provide relief in disaster situations (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002). Following the 2007 tsunami, underlying social factors, such as political organization, regional Melanesian exchange systems, and social marginalization, played significant roles in disaster aid allocation and the recovery process, shaping the social vulnerabilities that largely determined the disaster’s ultimate outcome.
During the relief and recovery phase in the aftermath of the 2007 disaster, numerous NGOs and sources of external aid flowed into Solomon Islands. Many villages on Ghizo and other islands received aid in the form of reconstructed houses or the replacement of fishing equipment and canoes. The Melanesian community of Pailongge, for example, received 15 complete wooden houses with labor included. In contrast, Titiana received comparatively little aid. The distribution of aid was controlled by the Solomon Island national government (SIG) and flowed along wantok networks, including kinship networks and patron-client relations. Because Titiana represents a tiny minority in comparison to the majority of Solomon Islanders, they have no representatives in the national parliament. Thus, when parliament members distributed aid very little of it reached Titiana. In other words, Titiana’s minority status appears to have been an important reason underlying the unequal distribution of aid during the recovery process and ultimately made the community more vulnerable to the tsunami relative to other Melanesian villages on Ghizo. My thesis examines how specific social factors, including the SIG, the wantok system, and minority status, created vulnerability, and how this vulnerability underlies the differential recovery experienced by Titiana and Pailongge villagers following the 2007 disaster.

Although I explore social vulnerability’s role in determining disaster outcomes, my thesis also questions current conceptualizations of vulnerability. While I argue the social factors characterizing Titiana made them overall more vulnerable to the disaster, the non-minority Melanesian village of Pailongge was not automatically rendered resilient. In particular, the degree to which each village was made vulnerable or resilient to the tsunami’s impact depended largely upon the extent to which they were connected to or excluded from the Melanesian dominated wantok networks along which much aid ultimately flowed. Importantly, Melanesian status does not necessarily determine connection to these networks. Additionally, the wantok system affected aid allocation differently at each organizational scale of its distribution, including at the national, provincial, NGO and village levels. Titiana and Pailongge households are differentially connected to the wantok networks operating at these various scales; therefore, the degree to which the wantok system conferred resiliency or vulnerability was also largely dependent upon and transformative across organizational scales. These scale-dependent and dynamic aspects of the wantok system and vulnerability complicate current approaches to vulnerability analysis. In particular, many disaster scholars
have attempted to quantify vulnerability, often based on simple indicators, such as income or ethnicity, for disaster planning purposes (Morrow 1999; Wisner et al. 2004). My thesis explores the idea that vulnerability cannot be quantified by simple, static indicators like income, age, gender, or minority status, rather it must be understood as a dynamic process, in which what renders one group vulnerable or resilient at one scale or context, may have contradictory effects at another. Overall, through revealing how post-disaster aid distribution articulates with Melanesian exchange systems in Solomon Islands, I show how region-specific forms of exchange dynamically shape social vulnerability and disaster recovery. Moreover, in the context of a regional exchange system based on deep ties to shared kinship, native language, and homeland, I explore how Titiana’s immigrant status affects their connection to Solomon Island exchange networks and their ability to access and receive resources during the post-disaster phase and how this, in turn, effected their recovery.

**STUDY SITE: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION**

I did my research in Solomon Islands, concentrating the majority of my time in the villages of Titiana and Pailongge, which are located on Ghizo Island in the Western Province.

**Solomon Islands**

Located in Melanesia, Solomon Islands are a linguistically, culturally, and ecologically diverse archipelago of hundreds of islands, although six main islands comprise most of the landmass. The climate is hot and humid year-round with little pronounced seasonality, averaging about 80°F. Dense tropical vegetation, mountainous interiors, and extensive coral reefs, mangroves and lagoons characterize much of the islands. The vegetation is painted with banana trees, imported coconut palms, bamboo, primary and secondary old growth forests, and a multitude of colorful floral plants. Bats are the only endemic mammal, but domesticated dogs and cats now populate many areas. Aside from saltwater crocodiles and sharks, the only other major animal threat to humans is the infamous giant centipede, which delivers a painful bite followed by searing pain that radiates throughout the body and lasts for days.

The country’s 500,000 inhabitants are predominantly Melanesian (~95%); however, small Polynesian (~3%) and Micronesian (~1.2%) minorities exist (CIA World Factbook
English is the country’s official language, but most speak the lingua franca, Solomon Island Pijin, as well as their own indigenous language. Over 80 distinct indigenous languages are spoken among the islands (Hviding and Bayliss-Smith 2000). Following missionization, Solomon Islanders mainly adhere to some form of Christianity, while a few maintain indigenous beliefs or retain elements of their custom religion in tandem with Christianity. The majority of Solomon Islanders subsist directly on land and marine resources, but cash-income activities are also present, especially in the Solomon Island capital, Honiara, where service jobs and other wage-employment exist; and in areas near Gizo town, where wage-labor opportunities and the Gizo market provide outlets for cash generation. Despite a GDP per capita of $2546 and low material living standards, most Solomon Islanders maintain reasonable subsistence security in comparison to several other developing areas in the world (Lauer et al. 2013).

**Ghizo Island**

Located in the Western Province 382 km west of Honiara, Ghizo Island forms part of the New Georgia Group. Ghizo was previously uninhabited because the island’s small size and relatively low elevation left it largely indefensible from marauding headhunters (Jackson 1978). During the mid-20th century, after colonial pacification of inter-island warfare and headhunting, the British colonial government relocated hundreds of Kiribati (Gilbertese) from their home country in Micronesia, Kiribati (Gilbert Islands), to the Solomon Islands. Kiribati (pronounced ki-ri-bas) consists of several islands characterized by low elevations, saline ground, and few cultivatable resources. Prior to relocating, inhabitants subsisted primarily on fish and other marine resources as well as coconuts, seaweed and a few other plants such as breadfruit. Due to population pressure and an associated acute need for resources, the British relocated several Kiribati to two main areas in the Solomons, including Wagina (Choiseul Province) and Ghizo (Western Province). In Ghizo, Kiribati settlers are concentrated in Titiana and the adjacent village of Nau Manda. These relocated Kiribati are official Solomon Island citizens.

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1 The [ti] construction in the Kiribati language is pronounced as [s], like in snake.
Melanesians also now populate Ghizo Island, which has several villages (~10-15),\textsuperscript{2} in addition to Gizo\textsuperscript{3} town – the Western Province administrative capital and second largest town in the country. The island population totals 7,177 – half of which is urban while the rural population accounts for 3,630 people/675 households (Solomon Islands Government 2011). Dirt roads connect Gizo to several main villages, including Titiana, Nau Manda, and Pailongge, but there is no electricity outside the town. Water sources, including piped, well, and rain tanks, are somewhat problematic given they are unevenly scattered throughout the villages and access is limited for many. Although annual rainfall is approximately 120 inches, long dry spells can occur on Ghizo, creating empty rainwater tanks and a precarious situation regarding villager access to potable water. A subsistence economy of gardening and fishing dominates most village livelihoods, although many have also become immersed in the cash economy to varying extents, either intermittently on a small scale in the local Gizo market, or fully through wage labor or entrepreneurial endeavors such as running a local \textit{canteen} [small store]\textsuperscript{4} in the village or producing copra for export. Ghizo is unique relative to much of Solomon Islands in that the town center and market facilitate villager participation in the cash economy, whereas most of the country is more remote from such opportunities.

\textbf{Titiana and Pailongge Villages}

Titiana is an ethnically, culturally, and economically distinct Micronesian village located about 2-3 km west of Gizo town on one of the southernmost tips of Ghizo Island (Figure 1). Four major settlement areas comprise Titiana village. The majority of its approximately 350 inhabitants (75 households) reside in three distinct settlement areas: Maiaki, Meang and Nikunau, which extend east to west, respectively, and comprise the seaside section of Titiana stretching from the shoreline to approximately 0.5 miles inland towards the bush and hill. In Maiaki, a few households live on Mt. Lina – a small hill near the seaside named after an infant killed by the tsunami. A considerable number also now live in a fourth major settlement area on the adjacent hillside, known as Mile 3, which is located substantially further inland (approximately 1-3 miles depending on the area) and requires

\textsuperscript{2} Villager statements differ from government census data regarding the number of villages.  
\textsuperscript{3} Ghizo refers to the island, while the town on the island is spelt Gizo.  
\textsuperscript{4} Italics distinguish Solomon Islands Pijin words and phrases. English translations follow in brackets.
about a 30 minute up-hill hike on foot if departing from Titiana’s seaside. Before 2007, Titiana and Pailongge villagers predominantly lived by the sea; however, the tsunami prompted mass migration onto the adjacent hillsides where survivors became concentrated and lived in temporary camps for months and even years. In the ensuing years of recovery, the majority of villagers trickled back to their original seaside locations, but several have not and now maintain more permanent residences on the hill. Villagers say they relocated because living by the sea is their way of life, makes resources – especially water – more accessible, or they have no land rights on the hill. Those remaining on the hill note they fear future tsunamis and rising sea levels from climate change, have already cultivated hill gardens, think it is too “crowded lo doan” [on the seaside], or have no rights to seaside land. Importantly, they also have no recognized right to land on the hills behind the coastal strip, which is government owned. Despite the government’s refusal to allow land registration in Mile 3 and threats for them to move, many persist for the reasons just stated. Overall, this resettlement has created diversity in the villagers’: settlement location, subsistence practices,
and access to resources, opportunities, roads and local markets. Additionally, settlement location affects the viability of potential livelihood and subsistence strategies. For example, fishermen find it extremely difficult to live in Mile 3, which is relatively removed from the seaside. Moreover, households belonging to the same religious denomination tend to be clustered within this resettlement.

Kiribati constitute the majority of Titiana’s population although Melanesians have intermarried, resulting in a mixture of Kiribati and Kiribati-Melanesian households (Table 1). The primary language spoken in Titiana is Kiribati, but nearly everyone also speaks Solomon Island Pijin. In addition, a few also speak their or their spouse’s indigenous Melanesian language. Three Christian denominations predominate in Titiana – the United Church of Melanesia (UC), South Seas Evangelical Church (SSEC), and Seventh Day Adventists (SDA). The UC has the largest following, followed by the SSEC, and SDA, which is the smallest, most isolated group. Religious differences manifest spatially so that most UC members live in one village area (Maiaki), while SSEC and SDA members live in other distinct areas, including between Maiaki and Meang and in Nikunau, respectively. Other faiths represented in small numbers include Baha’i, Anglican and Catholic. There is no centralized authority in Titiana and community leadership typically resides among church leaders and community elders. Community events often occur in the Temaneaba (traditional Kiribati [meeting house]), which is also where UC prayer is conducted. SSEC and SDA churches also provide community meeting places, but usually only among their respective members. A trust, representative of Titiana as a whole, holds title to the village land, although households usually maintain their own defined territories within.

Titiana villagers live a mixture of subsistence and cash-income lifestyles, the majority participating in both to varying degrees. Fishing and marine resource harvesting outweigh gardening, as Kiribati are not traditionally gardeners, although some have now planted gardens near the hillside and in Mile 3, where the soil is more conducive to cultivation. Many also raise pigs, and to a lesser extent chickens, although pigs are typically reserved for special celebrations like Christmas or major cultural ceremonies, such as the blesin blo kros [the blessing of the cross] – which commences after the gravesite of a loved one is

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5 This is a Kiribati, rather than Pijin, word.
Table 1. Household Composition in Titiana and Pailongge Villages (n=74)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Composition</th>
<th>Titiana (n=51)</th>
<th>Pailongge (n=23)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kiribati</td>
<td>45.1% (23)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanesian</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>91.3% (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed (Kiribati-Melanesian)</td>
<td>41.2% (21)</td>
<td>8.7% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13.7% (7)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other category includes mixed households with the following compositions: Micronesian-Micronesian/Polynesian (n=2); Micronesian-Polynesian (1); Micronesian-New Zealand (1); Micronesian-Papua New Guinea (Non-Solomon Island Melanesian) (1); Micronesian/Melanesian/Australian/Chinese-Melanesian (1); Micronesian-Micronesian/English (1).

completed. In addition to subsistence activities, many Titianans are variously immersed in the cash economy on both small and large scales. On a small scale, villagers sell fish and homemade food at the Gizo market, such as tea, buns, doughnuts and fried fish. In the market and village, they also sell sabo sabo [local tobacco rolls] and betel nut, which has a mildly stimulating effect when chewed and when used habitually it leaves a reddish color on the teeth. Betel nut spit can actually be seen scattered in red splashes throughout much of the area. On a larger scale, villagers are more fully immersed in the cash economy through wage labor as teachers, hotel staff, construction workers, and other service positions, or through entrepreneurial endeavors, such as running a local village canteen or driving a transpot [transport or truck] that brings villagers to and from Gizo town.

About 2-3 km west of Titiana is Pailongge village. Pailongge consists of multiple distinct communities, three of which participated in my research, including (from west to east): Pailongge “proper”, Suvania and Simboro. All three communities are separated by only a few minute walk and they often come together for prayer or other cultural events. In other words, they are distinct yet interrelated communities. To be clear, all three communities, Pailongge proper, Suvania, and Simboro fall under the broader heading of ‘Pailongge’, as do many other nearby communities, but only the villagers in Pailongge proper identify their village solely as Pailongge. For the remainder of this paper, Pailongge shall refer to all three

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6 The term Titianans is my own used for the sake of brevity, rather than an emic term Titiana villagers use to identify themselves.

7 Pailongge “proper” is not an emic term, but my own term used to distinguish the community that identifies themselves as ‘Pailongge’ from other communities, such as Suvania and Simboro, that also fall under the broader heading of Pailongge.
communities – Pailongge proper, Suvania and Simboro – while individual communities will be referred to by the specific names given here.

National census data reveal 75 inhabitants or 15 households reside in Pailongge proper, but my household surveys revealed only 10 households in Pailongge, eight households in Suvania, and 15 in Simboro. Similar to Titiana, residents in each community live on both the seaside and adjacent hill settlements established after the tsunami. Pailongge proper’s hill settlement is called April 2 [April Two] – named as such because it is the hill that villagers ran up to escape the tsunami when it struck on April 2, 2007. Suvania’s hill settlement is Teroduke and Simboro’s is Sitakava. Unlike Titiana’s hill settlement, Mile 3, April 2 is registered, family owned land and Sitakava was registered after the disaster.

Pailongge inhabitants are predominantly Melanesian with kinship ties to Simbo Island, which lies 35 km south of Ghizo and is where the first Pailongge settlers originated from. Additionally, one Kiribati man intermarried here while another individual is of Kiribati and Melanesian descent (Table 1). Villagers speak Pijin and their indigenous language, which for most is the indigenous language unique to Simbo, although some non-Pailongge-natives speak languages indigenous to other islands. Villagers primarily adhere to the UC, whose church is located on Pailongge proper’s seaside, although there is also a small SDA following, concentrated in Suvania. Additionally, a small number of Pailongge villagers identify themselves as Catholic, Methodist and Apostolic. Leadership in Pailongge proper is in the form of a chief, whose kin group owns a clearly defined territory. Informal leadership in all three communities derives from church leaders.

Pailongge livelihoods can be considered more subsistence based than those in Titiana, although cash-generating activities are not uncommon. In particular, most to all villagers have gardens where they grow a variety of foods, including guava, cassava, potatoes, cabbage, cucumbers, beans, peppers, and bananas. Many garden primarily for subsistence but also generate cash by selling their produce, as well as coconuts harvested from nearby forests, in the local Gizo market. In contrast to Titiana, gardening, rather than fishing, is the primary subsistence activity in Pailongge. Beyond these purely and partially subsistence lifestyles, some Pailongge villagers are more fully engaged in cash-income activities, such as: copra production, construction, road maintenance, transport driving, church treasurer, pastor, or working in the dive shop run by a local provincial government member.
In both Titiana and Pailongge, diets heavy in fish and garden produce are often supplemented with store-bought rice. Tea with heaps of sugar, biscuits [crackers], fried doughnuts, buns, pancakes and canned fish are also eaten, although these may be considered more of luxury items for some. Imported food and flour products are more common in Titiana than in Pailongge reflecting their deeper immersion into the cash economy, although I spent far more time in Titiana relative to Pailongge, so this may reflect a certain degree of bias. Houses are constructed from local materials, including leaf walls and thatch roofs, but corrugated iron roofs and wooden walls and floors are also now scattered throughout both villages. In many cases, the materials indicate the households’ level of income or ability to access resources, in addition to some more ‘modern’ wooden houses that were rebuilt by NGOs after the 2007 disaster. While water is problematic for some on the seaside, it is a problem for mostly everyone on the hill, who may have rain tanks for drinking water, but largely do not have access to pipe or well water for other activities like washing.

**Orientations of the Thesis: A Note on “Ethnic” Differences & Subsequent Chapters**

Here, I briefly explain my use of the terms Melanesian and Micronesian. In addition, I touch on what is discussed in subsequent chapters.

**Melanesian versus Micronesian**

Throughout my thesis I employ the terms Micronesian and Melanesian to distinguish Titiana and other Micronesian villages from Melanesian villages based on their immigrant and minority status, rather than to emphasize “ethnic” differences between them. Although comparing Melanesians and Micronesians suggests an ethnic distinction, and Solomon Island Melanesians and Solomon Island Kiribati commonly make emic distinctions between themselves, such as “Micronesians”, “Kiribati”, and “Gilbertese” versus “Melanesians”, “Solomon Islanders”, and “blacks”, conceptualizing ethnicity in Solomon Islands is more complicated than these simple binary distinctions suggest. Specifically, Melanesians are differentiated from each other by potentially as many factors as they are from the Kiribati, including language, culture, ethnicity, and skin color. For example, Solomon Island Melanesians from Isabel or Malaita are lighter skinned and have straighter hair like the Kiribati, in contrast to Melanesian groups from other areas with darker skin and curly hair.
So although Titiana and Pailongge villagers sometimes refer to differences in “ethnicity”, “race”, or “color”, I largely refrain from making “ethnic” comparisons between Titiana and other Melanesian groups in Solomon Islands. When I discuss ethnic differences between Micronesians and Melanesians it primarily reflects other peoples’ use of the term, including informants and other authors.

**Subsequent Chapters**

In Chapter 2 (Methods), I justify my study site choice and review my data collection and analysis methods. I emphasize the rigorousness of my sampling methods and my use of multiple data collecting techniques, which allowed for a high degree of triangulation among my research results. In Chapter 3 (The Tsunami’s Impact), I examine the tsunami’s immediate impact in Titiana, Nau Manda, and Pailongge and analyze what underlies differential fatality rates between Micronesian and Melanesian villages. The prominent role topography, rather than local indigenous knowledge, plays questions scholars that take sources of vulnerability, such as immigrant or ethnic status, to be static conditions, rather than dynamic, context-dependent processes. In Chapter 4 (*Wantok* and the *Wantok* System) I explore how pre-capitalist Melanesian exchange, encompassed in the contemporary Solomon Island *wantok* system, still operates, having major implications for how post-disaster aid was distributed and the differential vulnerabilities and recovery this created. I analyze how Titiana and Pailongge villagers define, identify and explain *wantok* and the *wantok* system, contextualizing how the recovery process ultimately played out. Moreover, I introduce the *wantok* system’s scale-dependent effects and how this dynamically shaped both vulnerability and resiliency in Titiana and Pailongge, depending on the degree to which households were connected to or excluded from the *wantok* networks influencing aid allocation at various scales of distribution. In Chapter 5 (Political Vulnerability and Recovery) I explore the most significant factors influencing Titiana and Pailongge villagers’ recovery, expanding on the SIG and NGOs’ roles. The SIG mishandled disaster funds reducing available victim aid and NGO rehabilitation project viability, rendering both Titiana and Pailongge relatively more vulnerable to the disaster. In this context, Chapter 6 (Dynamics of Social Vulnerability and Recovery), analyzes how the remaining aid was largely allocated via the *wantok* system, resulting in a biased, unequal distribution. This had differential and sometimes contradictory
implications for Titiana and Pailongge’s vulnerability and recovery, depending on each village’s degree of connection to the wantok networks dominating aid allocation at each scale of its distribution, including national, provincial, NGO and village levels. This dynamic, scale-dependent, contradictory nature of vulnerability in the context of the wantok system complicates approaches that attempt to a priori quantify and predict vulnerability based on fixed social indicators. In Chapter 7 (Conclusion) I review main themes and arguments surrounding how specific factors, including topography, the SIG, the wantok system and immigrant status contributed to the tsunami’s differential impact as well as the differential vulnerability characterizing Titiana and Pailongge that led to a differential recovery process. Moreover, I argue these processes were dynamic, context-specific, scale-dependent, and sometimes contradictory. Thus, I argue vulnerability approaches – that take social vulnerability indicators to be essential or static with homogenous outcomes, rather than dynamic, contradictory and transformative with heterogeneous outcomes – can become more nuanced to more accurately capture how vulnerability and disaster recovery play out. Additionally, I examine future research directions regarding the complex relationship between the wantok system, scale, vulnerability, and resilience and how these processes may articulate in the future.
CHAPTER 2

METHODS

To address my research questions, I conducted a combination of household surveys, focus groups, ethnographic and key-informant interviews, participant-observation, and document analysis assessing tsunami impact and recovery. Research occurred over 13 weeks in 2011 (June 5 – July 12) and 2012 (June 14 – August 7). I conducted research primarily on Ghizo, concentrating the majority of my time in Titiana, the primary study site, and to a lesser extent Pailongge. Additionally, I spent one week in Honiara doing key-informant interviews. I conducted interviews in Solomon Island Pijin – spoken by nearly every islander – or indigenous languages when necessary, including Kiribati in Titiana and Simbo in Pailongge. Two local villagers, Kerita Laxton Teiona from Titiana and Pia Qavoso from Pailongge, assisted in my research. Each assistant aided in language translation during interviews within their respective village – especially when indigenous language use was required. Assistants also contributed to geographical surveying of the villages, creating accurate spatial-stratification of samples, and organizing interview times convenient to the interviewees. In addition to formal and informal data collection, I lived with two different Titiana families throughout the fieldwork. The daily conversations, community and cultural immersion, and participant-observation that resulted have added context, detail and depth to the research as well.

SITE CHOICE

Titiana provided an appropriate research site to explore how Melanesian exchange systems shape social vulnerability and disaster outcomes. Specifically, Titiana represents a distinct Micronesian minority and their recovery appears different in comparison to nearby Melanesian villages that experienced a similar impact from the tsunami. I also surveyed the neighboring Melanesian village of Pailongge to provide a comparison for examining the role immigrant status plays in recovery. Additionally, I conducted interviews with government
and institutional officials in Ghizo and Honiara to provide a more encompassing view of the post-disaster recovery process.

**DATA COLLECTION**

I collected data using multiple techniques, including household surveys, focus groups, ethnographic and key-informant interviews, participant-observation, and document analysis.

**Household Surveys**

I administered two different household surveys in both Titiana and Pailongge. The 2011 survey collected preliminary data regarding demographics, livelihoods, and tsunami impact and recovery. Based on this preliminary research, I designed a second, 2012 survey to gather more specific data about how aid distribution, social networks and the *wantok* system influenced tsunami recovery and how these factors may have created a differential recovery among disaster victims. Both survey samples were random and spatially-stratified, although 2012 sampling methods were more robust. Because sampling was random, overlap exists between 2011 and 2012 informants, although some informants surveyed in 2011 were not surveyed in 2012, and vice-versa.

**2011 HOUSEHOLD SURVEY**

Through the 2011 survey we assessed how the 2007 tsunami affected individual households and evaluated the degree to which each has subsequently recovered. The survey contains qualitative and quantitative questions and is divided into seven sections, including each household’s: (1) knowledge of tsunamis, (2) demographic information, (3) time allocation, (4) modernity and wealth indicators, (5) experience regarding tsunami impact, (6) recovery and aid received after the tsunami, (7) and current and past (pre-tsunami) livelihoods. Essentially, we explored what livelihood activities households are engaged in, their living standards, how the 2007 earthquake/tsunami affected these, and what has contributed to or hindered post-disaster recovery. We asked informants several questions related to these topics and recorded responses on the survey form. Interviews lasted up to one hour.

Initially, we planned to conduct 40 household surveys in Titiana and 10 in Pailongge proper as recent census data reflects 366 inhabitants or 75 households reside in Titiana, while
Pailongge proper\textsuperscript{8} has 76 inhabitants or 15 households. Upon beginning fieldwork, however, I discovered Titiana is located next to the neighboring Kiribati community of Nau Manda. Considering Titiana and Nau Manda’s close geographical proximity and shared immigrant background, two factors seemingly relevant to the research, I decided to briefly survey Nau Manda as well. In Pailongge proper, our plan to survey 10 households also changed because only nine households currently resided there. Informants explained this population decrease was due to recent out-migration to the nation’s capital, Honiara, in pursuit of economic opportunities. Thus, we surveyed all households in Pailongge proper and conducted two interviews in the adjacent communities of Suvania and Simboro to increase the Melanesian sample and provide a better basis for comparing Melanesian and Micronesian impact and recovery. Ultimately, we completed surveys in the communities of Titiana (n=34), Nau Manda (n=6), Pailongge (n=9), Simboro (n=1), and Suvania (n=1).

Sampling was random, but spatially-stratified amongst the various settlements within each village to ensure a representative sample. Spatially-stratifying the sample involved ground surveying to determine the approximate number of households within each distinct village settlement area. Additionally, we questioned a minimum of 5-10 informants about the number of households in each settlement area to complement population estimates. We then conducted household surveys on a basis proportional to settlement population. In other words, in each settlement area the number of interviews completed was approximately proportional to the number of households.

2011 household population estimates for Titiana’s four main settlement areas are as follows: Maiaki (N~30+), Meang (N~15-20), Nikunau (N~3-4), and Mile 3 (N~20+/ ).

Household surveys completed in Titiana (n=34) were divided as follows: Maiaki (n=16), Meang (n=8), Nikunau (n=2), and Mile 3 (n=8). The largest settlement area, Maiaki, is further subdivided into distinct geographic areas, including: Mt. Lina and the adjacent Tsunami Valley (n=5); and the rest of Maiaki located near the seaside (n=11). Logistical problems such as non-available households, fluctuating population estimates, and time-

\textsuperscript{8} When I began my research, I understood Pailongge to be the community of 15 households that I have termed Pailongge “proper”. Upon realizing other adjacent, inter-related communities – Suvania and Simboro, for example – also fall under the broader heading of Pailongge, I began calling the community that I originally thought was the only Pailongge, “Pailongge proper”, to distinguish them from other communities that may or may not be referred to as Pailongge.
The 2012 Household Survey

The 2012 survey examined what specific factors influenced recovery in Titiana and Pailongge and to what extent the rate and process of recovery in each village differs. Specifically, we quantitatively and qualitatively explored the roles played by the Solomon Island government (SIG), NGOs, social networks, and the wantok system in the recovery process. The survey is divided into three major sections, including: (1) demographics, (2) post-tsunami recovery, and (3) the wantok system and tsunami recovery. Section one – demographics – collected basic demographic data, such as: gender, age, occupation, birth place, and ethnic and religious affiliations. Section two – recovery – gathered data regarding: aid received from kin, the SIG, churches and NGOs; as well as helpful and hindering factors influencing recovery (for example, family, friends, government aid, NGO aid, religious affiliation/church aid, fishing, gardening, cash income or lack thereof, market, or other livelihood activity). Section three – the wantok system and tsunami recovery – focused on:
the meaning and function of wantok and the wantok system in general; and the impact of the wantok system and social networks on aid distribution and household recovery. We asked informants a number of questions related to these topics and recorded responses on the survey form. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes.

We sampled Titiana, Pailongge proper, Simboro and Suvania. We sampled Simboro and Suvania for two reasons. First, they are part of the broader region, known as “Pailongge”, which is composed of Melanesian communities. Second, Pailongge proper only contained 10 households in 2012 (one of which was in Honiara at the time) resulting in a complete, yet small sample, making comparisons of Titiana and Pailongge questionable in terms of reliability. Therefore, we surveyed neighboring communities Simboro and Suvania to broaden the Melanesian sample and provide a more robust basis for comparing differences in recovery between Micronesians and Melanesians.

The 2012 sample was random, but spatially distributed amongst village settlement areas to produce a representative sample (Table 2). Specifically, every household in Titiana and Pailongge was identified through a ground census research assistants and I conducted, mapped according to location and village settlement area, and numbered. To spatially-stratify the sample, we performed household population counts in each settlement area and selected 75% of eligible households during a SRS. Households not eligible include those that are new, post-2007 residences resulting from migration, marriage, or the division of a larger household. Due to non-available households, that were either gone for the study or could not be reached after multiple attempts, and a few households that declined participation, sample sizes in each settlement area sometimes exceed or fall short of the 75% minimum, resulting in a 66.6-100% sample in all but one area. Ultimately, we surveyed 78.5% of eligible households in Titiana and 74.2% in Pailongge. The final sample size for Titiana was n=51 and in Pailongge n=23. The Titiana sample was stratified as follows: Maiaki (n=24), Meang (n=10), Nikunau (n=2), and Mile 3 (n=15). Maiaki, Meang, and Nikunau are further subdivided spatially to account for households living right by the sea and those further in the bush towards the hill. In the Pailongge region, stratification resulted in the following: Pailongge proper (n=9), Simboro (n=10), and Suvania (n=4). Pailongge proper was further subdivided into the seaside (n=4) and April 2 (n=5). In Simboro, there are 2 distinct settlement areas: the seaside and adjacent ridge (n=4) and Sitakava on the hill (n=6).
Table 2. Breakdown of Village Household (HH) Populations Estimates, HHs Eligible for Interview, and Spatially-Stratified Sample Sizes in Titiana and Pailongge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Settlement area</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>HH population (N)</th>
<th>Eligible HHs (Adjusted N)</th>
<th>Sample Size (n)</th>
<th>% of area sampled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>Maiaki</td>
<td>school houses (seaside)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=31; n=24</td>
<td></td>
<td>seaside</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>bushside</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>*11</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mount Lina</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“On top”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=31; n=24</td>
<td>Meang</td>
<td>seaside</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=20; n=10</td>
<td></td>
<td>bushside</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nikunau</td>
<td>seaside</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=7; n=2</td>
<td></td>
<td>bushside</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mile 3 (hill)</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=24; n=15</td>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>82 HH</strong></td>
<td><strong>65 HH</strong></td>
<td><strong>51 HH</strong></td>
<td><strong>78.5%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pailongge</td>
<td>seaside</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=10; n=9</td>
<td>April 2 (hill)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simboro</td>
<td>seaside &amp; ridge</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=15; n=10</td>
<td>Sitakava (hill)</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suvania</td>
<td>seaside &amp; ridge</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=8; n=5</td>
<td>Teroduke (hill)</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>33 HH</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>31 HH</strong></td>
<td><strong>23 HH</strong></td>
<td><strong>23 HH</strong></td>
<td><strong>74.2%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One household here was not random and is the only household in the sample that was not random.

also has two distinct areas: the seaside (n=1) and Teroduke on the hill (n=3). Overall, we consider Titiana and Pailongge survey samples representative, given they are random, spatially-stratified, and a large proportion of the population was surveyed.

Focus Groups

Focus groups generated information on individual and village perspectives regarding what factors have contributed to or hindered post-disaster recovery. Focus groups are
extremely useful for determining consensus and disagreement within the study population (Ervin 2005), while they also frequently offer a higher level of detail than surveys alone (Bernard 2006). Thus, these group interviews complemented surveys and other formal and informal interviews.

We conducted focus groups (n=3) with 5-6 participants in 2012. Five to seven specific, but open-ended questions guided focus groups. Questions focused on how recovery was influenced by the SIG, NGOs, churches, Melanesian or Micronesian status, community cooperation, and the wantok system. Open-ended questioning allowed me to address particular research questions, while also encouraging participants to engage with one another and direct the conversation in ways meaningful to them, which may have been precluded by close-ended questions. I moderated focus groups while Kerita assisted in clarifying and translating questions into Kiribati when necessary. Kerita and I both took notes, which were later re-written and analyzed for patterns and prominent themes. We recorded group interviews, which lasted approximately 1-2 hours.

For focus groups we selected participants according to three criteria: (1) Melanesian-Micronesian status, (2) religious affiliation, and (3) potential for participation. Preliminary research from 2011 indicates that Melanesian-Micronesian status and church affiliation influenced post-disaster aid distribution and thus recovery. Therefore, household composition – defined as ‘Kiribati’, when both household heads are Kiribati, or, ‘Kiribati-Melanesian’, when one household head is Kiribati and the other Melanesian – may be an influential factor regarding recovery. Furthermore, different religious affiliations within villages create another distinct layer of social and exchange networks, in which resources, such as post disaster aid, may be shared among members. Thus, we used Melanesian-Micronesian status and religious affiliation as two main criteria to stratify focus groups. The third criteria – potential for participation – refers to the notion that we selected participants who, based on our previous experience, we thought would participate, be comfortable talking in a group setting, and have extensive knowledge regarding the tsunami impact and ensuing recovery process.

Originally, we planned to do five focus groups, with four in Titiana stratified by household composition and religious affiliation, and one in Pailongge, resulting in the following groups in which participants are: (1) Kiribati, UC members; (2) Kiribati-Melanesian, UC; (3) Kiribati, SSEC; (4) Kiribati-Melanesian, SSEC; and (5) Pailongge
villagers. In Pailongge, we only planned one focus group because it contains a small population relative to Titiana and is composed almost entirely of Melanesians who are predominantly UC members. Ultimately, we only conducted three focus groups. Focus group #4 was eliminated because not enough Kiribati-Melanesian, SSEC households existed to form a focus group. Additionally, we eliminated focus group #5 due to logistical issues, including time constraints, cancelled meetings and an inability to find an accommodating meeting time for enough participants. Therefore, the final focus group composition was: focus group #1 – composed of six individuals from Kiribati, UC households; focus group #2 – composed of six individuals (three married couples) from Kiribati-Melanesian, UC households; and focus group #3 – composed of five individuals from Kiribati, SSEC households.

**Key-Informant Interviews**

We conducted a combination of formal and informal key-informant interviews in Ghizo and Honiara in 2011 and 2012. Our purpose was to interview multiple stakeholders involved in disaster recovery to provide a more comprehensive view of the recovery process. While focus groups and surveys generated data on village, household, and individual levels, key-informant interviews with other stakeholders, including individuals within NGOs and the government, who played major roles in post-disaster mitigation and recovery, served to broaden the research sample beyond local villagers and produce a more holistic and nuanced understanding regarding differential disaster recovery.

Formal interviews (n=8) with NGO and government workers and officials were semi-structured, open-ended, and lasted about an hour. I asked approximately 10-12 specific questions about the informant’s and/or their affiliated institution’s role in post-disaster mitigation, recovery and rehabilitation. Questions were open-ended and I encouraged the interviewee to discuss anything they considered pertinent. I recorded responses on a questionnaire designed for each interview and later transcribed them. I recorded some interviews, but not when I felt recording would negatively influence the interview by making participants apprehensive.

Interviews were conducted with individuals representing the following institutions: Save the Children (SC), Oxfam, World Vision (WV), and the Ghizo provincial government.
Regarding SC, I interviewed one individual in Honiara in 2012 that had considerable knowledge regarding the NGO’s post-disaster involvement in the Western Province. For Oxfam, who was the primary NGO involved on Ghizo, I interviewed three individuals in 2011 on Ghizo, including: an expatriate construction project manager, a local Melanesian staff member, and the project boss who arrived at the completion of Oxfam’s Ghizo shelter project. Additionally, I interviewed one person from Oxfam’s Honiara-based office in 2012, who had detailed knowledge about Oxfam’s post-disaster rehabilitation project on Ghizo. For WV, I interviewed three individuals as a group at the NGO’s Honiara-based office in 2012. Two had direct involvement in WV’s post-tsunami recovery project in the Western Province, while the third had ample knowledge regarding the project’s implementation and results. Lastly, Ghizo’s elected provincial government member, who was directly and extensively involved in immediate and long-term post-tsunami relief, rehabilitation and recovery was interviewed in 2011 and 2012 on Ghizo.

In addition to formal key-informant interviews, I also completed several informal key-informant interviews. These interviews were fairly unstructured, allowing informants to emphasize points they found important and relevant to my research questions, but I also asked specific questions of interest. Conversation topics ranged widely from the Solomon Island socio-political system, elections, land tenure, and the tsunami to topics of traditional Kiribati and Melanesian culture, leadership, subsistence strategies, and the influence of globalization on Solomon livelihoods. Culturally knowledgeable individuals and those involved in post-disaster recovery in Honiara, Gizo, Titiana and Pailongge were interviewed. For example, one informal interview emerged when I was invited by a group of Titiana villagers to attend a meeting with a lawyer, who was on Ghizo to obtain villager signatures in order to file a court case against the current Prime Minister (PM) for tsunami fund misuse.

**Participant-Observation**

Participant-observation provided another key research method. In Titiana, and to a much lesser extent Pailongge, Gizo and Honiara, I participated in, observed, and was immersed in daily village life and routine activities, such as fishing, gardening, cooking, cleaning, house building, *stori* [story], mealtimes, prayer, and leisure activities among others. Additionally, I observed and participated in socio-cultural events such as weddings, funerals,
cross blessing ceremonies, church and school fundraisers, and cultural song and dance performances. I routinely recorded my observations and participation surrounding these activities throughout the project. Overall, data I gathered through participant-observation served to contextualize, complement and support data obtained by other methods.

**Document Analysis**

Document analysis consisted of a small, yet informative portion of my research. Specifically, I reviewed and analyzed the following for information and data relevant to my research: the local Solomon Island newspaper, *The Solomon Star*; a Special Audit Report (SAR) (Office of the Auditor General 2010) documenting tsunami victim funds in great detail, allocation of those funds, and the use and misuse of those funds; as well as court documents related to an impending court case against the current PM for misuse of tsunami relief aid. While *The Solomon Star* is publically accessible, I obtained all other documents privately through informants. In particular, litigants involved in the court case gave me the court documents, while I obtained the SAR through two different individuals, one of whom asked me to omit how he obtained the document to presumably avoid negative repercussions. Currently, the SAR is now available online.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Collected data provided qualitative information regarding the relationships between Melanesian or Micronesian status, social (wantok) networks, vulnerability, disaster impact, aid distribution and recovery and allowed me to identify patterns in these relationships. Additionally, surveys generated quantitative data related to both sources of vulnerability, such as demographics, minority-majority status, kinship affiliations, and subsistence practices and to recovery, including losses from the tsunami, aid received, and the wantok system’s influence on aid distribution. I performed statistical analyses, including Chi-square and Fisher’s Exact Test, using MyStat 12 statistical software to identify significant differences in recovery between Titiana and Pailongge. I created graphs using MyStat 12 and tables in Microsoft Word 2010. I transcribed individual and group interviews from notes and analyzed transcriptions for patterns and information relevant to tsunami impact and recovery. I read and analyzed documents for information that helps explain the post-disaster recovery process. The use of multiple methods and data collecting techniques aimed at answering the
same questions yielded a high degree of triangulation, ultimately strengthening the conclusions of the research.
CHAPTER 3

THE TUSNAMI’S IMPACT: DAMAGE, FATALITIES & ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT VULNERABILITY

Early in the morning on April 2, 2007, an 8.1 magnitude earthquake shook the seafloor approximately 25 miles Southeast of Ghizo, triggering a 6-12 m tsunami that struck the island, destroying or heavily damaging several villages. The impact was similar in Titiana, Nau Manda and Pailongge, where 6 m waves destroyed, swept away, or severely damaged most structures and property. Additionally, the tsunami killed 13 Titiana villagers and eight Nau Manda villagers, many of them children. In contrast, no one died in the neighboring Pailongge communities of Pailongge proper, Simboro and Suvania. Despite provocative arguments stating that indigenous knowledge underlies the differential fatality rate between Micronesian and Melanesian villages, surveys (n=51), ethnographic interviews, and observations demonstrate that, while indigenous knowledge may be a factor, local topography plays a far greater role. Moreover, the way in which Titiana’s assumed lack of indigenous knowledge, based on their immigrant status, did not render Titiana more vulnerable to the Tsunami’s initial impact complicates understandings of how we identify and assess social vulnerability.

APRIL 2, 2007: THE EVENT

Just before the earthquake, villagers were beginning their day, mostly cooking, eating, washing, praying, fishing, or working on transpot trucks, cutting todi,9 or in stores. A few were still sleeping or just waking up. At 7:39 am, the earthquake began violently shaking the ground knocking most villagers off their feet until the tremors subsided about a minute later. When the earthquake struck, most villagers felt shock, fear, panic and confusion, and either sat, stood, held onto something, or ran to get their small children once able to stand.

9 Todi is used to make a sweet (honey-like) drink. When fermented it also becomes a strong alcohol.
Afterwards, the sea receded exposing the seabed, only to be followed by 6 m tsunami waves minutes later. A couple Titiana villagers went to look at the sea, while most other villagers stood confused and scared, clinging to their children or gathering together with others outside their houses. Only a few villagers in Titiana (n=4) and Pailongge (n=2) ran up the hill immediately after the earthquake. Of those who ran before the tsunami arrived (n=17), only 29% knew a tsunami would come after a big earthquake, while 53% were following or told by others, who had already seen the tsunami, or knew one would come, to run (Table 3). Three individuals (19%) ran because they heard the wave and were frightened, saw the first smaller wave and ran, and were scared. The majority of respondents ran towards the bush and hill only after seeing the wave.

Table 3. Villager Reactions to the Earthquake/Tsunami

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Villages</th>
<th>Ran before tsunami</th>
<th>Ran when saw wave</th>
<th>Did not run</th>
<th>Caught by wave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melanesian (n=11)</td>
<td>27.3% (3)</td>
<td>63.6% (7)</td>
<td>9.1% (1)</td>
<td>54.5% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micronesian (n=35)</td>
<td>40.0% (14)</td>
<td>45.7% (16)</td>
<td>14.3% (5)</td>
<td>45.7% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All respondents</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Micronesian sample size is reduced. Five respondents were not in major impact zones when the tsunami struck (two were in Honiara, one was in Noro, and one was at sea fishing).

The tsunami water caught about half of respondents in both regions, including the Titiana-Nau Manda and Pailongge region. In Micronesian villages, villagers primarily swam, were swept toward the hill by the water, clung to branches and clothes lines, or climbed trees to escape. Some survivors became pinned under branches, logs, or houses – often becoming fully submerged, but managed to break free or were pulled out by others. For example, one villager escaped by swimming as the water tossed her around carrying her to the bush. After her arm got caught, pinning her under a sago palm, she describes breaking loose with ‘the last breath she had’, climbing high up a sago palm and holding on. Weak from the struggle, she later crawled up the hill as people ran past her crying for help. Others describe looking back as the second wave approached, surpassing the height of their houses, many of which the water uprooted and carried into the bush. Escape experiences differ in nearby Melanesian villages. Five of the six respondents there caught in the tsunami explain the water only
caught their lower legs before they reached the hill and climbed up. The sixth person is elderly and was pulled up the hill by his kids.

After the tsunami’s force exhausted itself and the water receded, survivors remained on the hills adjacent to their village. They note being grateful for the calm, dry weather that night as they slept outside huddled in large groups. In Pailongge, villagers subsisted on gardens. In Titiana, the owner of a heavily damaged canteen located near the hill freely gave out all his food. Other Titiana villagers shared what smokes they could find, or searched for clothing scraps and towels to cover their bodies, as the tsunami ripped some villagers’ clothing off. Still others waited anxiously and in shock, unsure where certain family members were or if they were alive. Within days the Solomon Island government (SIG) and local and international NGOs began bringing in aid in the form of rice, water, and tents and later blankets, clothing, water containers and other essential items. Titianans largely remained on the hill in the days and months following the tsunami. Many stayed for years. In the initial days after the disaster, villagers went back down to the bush and seaside to search for survivors, or rather, bodies. Many describe the smell. Some bodies were not found for several days, even weeks. One man involved in the search told me a story about finding a child killed by the tsunami. It was getting too dark to bury him, so they waited for the next day. When they came back, his leg was missing – possibly a dog took it – and “worms” covered the body. They buried the child, but no minister was there to do a prayer, so this man said a few words instead, saying something to the effect of, ‘Here God, we’re putting him back in the ground, he is in the ground now, “[we have] given him back to you”’ (male, age 47).10 Another villager describes praying to see her one-year-old granddaughter again. When they found her body, she explained that her prayer was answered because the little girl was found, would be buried, and would not be lost or missing.

Like these examples, most fatalities were children or elderly. Of surveyed households in Titiana and Nau Manda (n=40), eight lost one or more members to the tsunami, resulting in 12 deaths captured by the surveys – ages and genders are presented below (Table 4). Ages for one household were not determined, although they were young children. During the

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10 All informant identities are confidential and withheld. Gender and age are included to provide depth and demonstrate that major themes and ideas in the research are not stratified by age and gender, but are widespread across informants.
Table 4. Gender and Age Profile of Tsunami Victims Identified through Household Surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Households with deaths</th>
<th>Victims (gender/age)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1. M/60; M/4; F/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. M/64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. F/4; F/?; F/?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. F/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5. M/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6. F/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nau Manda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7. M/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8. F/4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* M – male; F – female; question mark indicates age unknown.

The interview, the informant became visibly upset, and I suggested we move on from that particular survey section. It was also at this point that my assistant and I wiped a tear from the corner of our own eyes as well. Many young children died because the tsunami ripped them out of their parents’ or siblings’ arms, sweeping them away with the strong, fast moving seawater and tumbling debris. Elderly individuals who died likely had a hard time reaching the hill quick enough. One middle-aged man lost his life trying to save his elderly mother. Another villager tells a story of an old Titiana woman, who tried to run when the earthquake happened, but was disabled and had a walker. A brick house collapsed on her. “She cried out for help, but hard for anyone to help her [because everyone was running for their lives]. They found the body five days later under brick house with walking sticks,” (female, 37).

**THE 2007 TSUNAMI’S IMPACT**

The tsunami severely damaged and destroyed most villagers’ houses and property. Out of everyone surveyed in Micronesian (n=40) and Melanesian villages (n=11), the tsunami destroyed all but five individuals’ houses, including one in Pailongge and Nau Manda and three in Titiana. Three houses had geographical advantages – two were located slightly uphill and another was deep in the bush by the hill – thus shielding them from the wave’s full impact. It is unclear why the other two houses were not destroyed. Households with boat engines, canoes, water tanks, generators, gas tanks, TVs or radios, toilets or animals mostly lost these. Kitchen utensils and clothing were largely swept away as well. In addition, many lost other items such as bikes, savings, shell money, books, fishing gear,
tools, family valuables, documents of land ownership, a qualification certificate for building, *canteen* goods, a chicken coop with 300 chickens, sewing machines, and medicine. These losses not only eliminated individuals’ material wealth, but also most Titianans’ ability to pursue their livelihood. For example, villagers who lost their fishing equipment were unable to fish. This negatively affected subsistence, but also their ability to recover and rebuild since many Titiana fisherman sell their catch at the market to earn cash for daily needs and materials. Some villagers make and sell clothing to generate income, thus lost sewing machines represent a lost income source for them. *Canteen* owners’ shops and goods were badly damaged or lost, resulting in a lost income and livelihood source for them as well. Overall, the tsunami largely destroyed villagers’ homes, possessions, and, at least temporarily, many villagers’ ability to pursue their previous livelihoods – especially those who rely on cash income generation.

Beyond property loss, many Titiana and Nau Manda villagers experienced the heart-wrenching loss of their villagers and family members. The 2007 disaster killed a total of 52 people throughout the Solomons. Of those deaths, the tsunami killed 13 villagers in Titiana and eight in Nau Manda for a total of 21 deaths within these two adjacent villages alone, accounting for 40% of all earthquake and tsunami related fatalities. Moreover, Titiana’s fatality rate is highest relative to all other disaster affected villages, accounting for 25% of all deaths. Fortunately, no one was killed in the nearby Melanesian villages of Pailongge proper, Simboro and Suvania, despite the similar physical impact all five communities experienced.

**A Differential Impact in Micronesian and Melanesian Villages: Social Vulnerability or Topography?**

Ultimately, the tsunami similarly affected both Micronesian and Melanesian villages in terms of heavy property loss, severe structural damage and destruction. The main difference in impact stems from fatalities, which were high in Micronesian villages, yet non-existent in nearby Melanesian villages. The tsunami’s physical impact was similar across Nau Manda, Titiana, and Pailongge, in which 6 m waves struck these south-facing, seaside Ghizo villages just minutes after the earthquake; however, deaths are disproportionately higher among Micronesian villages. Contrary to those who argue that indigenous knowledge underlies the differential fatality rate Micronesian and Melanesian villages experienced
(McAdoo et al. 2009), my research demonstrates multiple factors potentially played a role, including experience, indigenous knowledge and topography. Moreover, I argue differential geographic vulnerability carries more explanatory power than any other factor.

Ethnographic interviews, surveys and observations suggest three causes behind why so many died in Titiana and Nau Manda, but not Pailongge, including differences between villagers in experience, indigenous knowledge, and topography. First, many Titiana villagers state, ‘Pailongge villagers are from the Solomon Islands, therefore, they have experience with tsunamis following earthquakes and know how to respond, whereas Kiribati do not’. Contrary to this perception, social and physical science suggest tsunamis in the Western Solomons are relatively infrequent. Specifically, oral history about large tsunamis does not exist, just vague references regarding waves following earthquakes, suggesting no large tsunamis have occurred in this region for centuries (Lauer et al. 2013). Moreover, evidence of regional seismic activity further supports the notion that tsunamis occur rarely (Taylor et al. 2008). Therefore, differential experience with tsunamis between Micronesian and Melanesian villages does not likely explain Titiana-Nau Manda’s high fatality rate, given no one has directly or remotely experienced these natural hazards.

Aside from experience, several Titiana and some Pailongge villagers assert that Pailongge villagers have indigenous knowledge of tsunamis, often passed down from elders or their grani [grandparent] through oral history or stori. Thus, Pailongge villagers knew a big wave would follow the earthquake and to find high ground. In contrast, Titiana-Nau Manda villagers lack this indigenous knowledge, so they did not seek high ground after the earthquake and some even went to look at the sea. Paralleling informant statements, McAdoo and colleagues argue indigenous knowledge of tsunamis dictated an appropriate response in Pailongge, where immediately after the earthquake villagers gathered on the hill, while in the ethnically distinct, immigrant communities of Titiana and Nau Manda, curious villagers went towards the sea to look at “the exposed seafloor” (McAdoo 2009:76). It is unclear what evidence McAdoo and colleagues draw from. While some villagers immediately went to the hill and others to the sea, 13 weeks of ethnographic research suggests these patterns do not predominantly characterize Melanesian and Micronesian responses. Instead, research suggests indigenous knowledge may have influenced villager responses following the earthquake, but does not primarily explain the differential death rate. Specifically, on surveys
we asked: “Did you know that a tsunami would come after a big earthquake and that you had to escape? Yes/No. If yes, how did you learn that tsunamis would come after earthquakes and that you had to escape?” Results (Table 5) demonstrate no significant difference exists between Micronesian and Melanesian villages regarding knowledge of tsunamis. In particular, only 27.3% of Pailongge villagers responded “yes” they knew a tsunami would come, while 25% of Titiana-Nau Manda villagers said yes. This minute difference does not point to differential indigenous knowledge, which presumably accounts for fatality differences. Moreover, of Pailongge informants that knew a tsunami would come, only two (66%) knew because of generational storytelling (i.e. indigenous knowledge), while 25% of Titiana respondents assert they knew about tsunamis because of stori, indicating individuals in both villages have varying degrees of indigenous knowledge about tsunamis.

Table 5. Responses to the Question: “Did You Know that a Tsunami Will Come After a Big Earthquake? If Yes, How Did You Know?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Melanesian (n=11)</th>
<th>Micronesian (n=40)</th>
<th>All Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>27.3% (3)</td>
<td>25% (10)</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>72.7% (8)</td>
<td>75% (30)</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stori (oral history)</td>
<td>66.6% (2)</td>
<td>25% (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside media</td>
<td>33.3% (1)</td>
<td>50% (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20% (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instinct</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5% (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Of the ten Titiana informants that knew about tsunamis, 13 responses were given regarding how they knew, as three informants gave two reasons. Therefore, for reasons, raw counts reflect how many times each explanation was given, while percentages were calculated by giving each reason half its weight if two reasons were given.

Other survey data further refutes the notion that differential indigenous knowledge explains the opposing death rates. For example, McAdoo and colleagues (2009) argue indigenous knowledge generated an appropriate response in Pailongge, where everyone ran to the hill after the earthquake, but not in Titiana; however, the majority of people in both villages (50%) ran only after seeing the tsunami coming (Table 3). Furthermore, only three Pailongge informants (27.3%) ran to the hill immediately after the earthquake, while 63.6% ran after seeing the wave approach, which contradicts arguments that they all fled to high ground beforehand. Since over half of Pailongge informants ran to high ground only after seeing the tsunami, it is more likely some reason other than indigenous knowledge underlies why no one died in Pailongge. Moreover, Titiana and Nau Manda are not ethnically homogenous communities, as Kiribati have intermarried with Melanesians, further
weakening arguments that differential indigenous knowledge – based on ethnic differences – can alone explain the deaths in Micronesian villages. Also, the majority of respondents who state indigenous knowledge or differential experience regarding tsunamis accounts for Titiana-Nau Manda’s high death rate are from Titiana. Thus, interviews suggest Micronesians perceive a gap in knowledge between themselves and Melanesians, but surveys suggest this gap may not be significant in explaining differences in deaths.

Many Micronesian and Melanesian informants that mention indigenous knowledge, and some that don’t, also state that topography, or “the distance to the hill”, is a primary reason why so many died in Titiana-Nau Manda and no one died in Pailongge. In Pailongge, the hills adjacent to the seaside are relatively close in comparison to the hill in Titiana and Nau Manda, which is much further away. Therefore, when the tsunami came, Pailongge villagers that were not already on high ground were able to reach safety on the hill relatively faster than Titiana-Nau Manda villagers. Moreover, all deaths in Titiana occurred where the hill is furthest from the seaside in the settlement areas of Meang (11 deaths) and Nikunau (2 deaths) (Figure 2). In contrast, east in the settlement area of Maiaki where the hill (Mt. Lina) is 3-5 times closer than in Meang and Nikunau, depending on the exact location, no one died. In Nau Manda the hill is located relatively far from most houses and requires moving through thick bush to reach. Interviews also support observations regarding the correlation between hill distance and location of deaths. The close distance to the hill in Pailongge may also explain why the tsunami water only reached the legs of those caught by it, who were then able to climb onto the hill; whereas most Titiana villagers caught in the tsunami had to swim in addition to many that became fully submerged before eventually reaching the hill.

Although indigenous knowledge potentially played a role in the differential death rate between Micronesian and Melanesian villages, evidence suggests this role is far less significant than that of local topography. In particular, no significant difference exists between Titiana-Nau Manda and Pailongge villagers’ knowledge of tsunamis – only a quarter of each sample knew a tsunami would come after the earthquake. Moreover, the tsunami caught many Pailongge villagers, indicating their initial response was not to seek high ground, contrary to McAdoo and colleague’s (2009) argument that they all fled to high ground – a response that was generated by their supposed indigenous knowledge. Ultimately, differential geographic vulnerability, in which the hill was close in Pailongge and generally
Figure 2. Elevation map showing distance to the hill from main settlement areas in Pailongge, Titiana and Nau Manda (elevation lines in 20m increments).

far in Titiana and Nau Manda, appears to largely explain the differential death rate. Furthermore, most victims were small children or elderly, who were unable to swim or flee the tsunami, lending further support to the notion that it was the distance and time it took to get to high ground, rather than appropriate responses generated by indigenous knowledge, that caused the majority of deaths in Titiana and Nau Manda, and explains the lack of deaths in Pailongge communities.

The Dynamic, Context-Dependent Nature of Vulnerability

The tsunami’s impact was similar among Melanesian and Micronesian villages in terms of physical impact, structural and property loss and damage. The more severe impact in
Micronesian villages demonstrated by their high fatality rates relative to nearby Melanesian villages is explained predominantly in terms of differential geographic vulnerability, rather than a lack of indigenous knowledge, dictated by their immigrant status. The fact that Titiana and Nau Manda’s immigrant status was not an overt indicator of vulnerability to the tsunami’s impact problematizes current conceptions of vulnerability that attempt to *a priori* identify and quantify vulnerability. Sources of vulnerability, such as minority status, immigrant history, and ethnicity, cannot be generalized because they have different, often contradictory effects. Particularly, in one context (the tsunami’s impact), non-Melanesian immigrant status and related degrees of indigenous knowledge had minimal to neutral effects and did not make Titiana more vulnerable to the disaster. On the other hand, the remaining chapters show that in other contexts (the *wantok* system and recovery), Titiana’s immigrant status becomes a significant source of vulnerability with related, tangible effects on their recovery, thus demonstrating vulnerability’s dynamic and context-dependent nature.
CHAPTER 4

WANTOK AND THE WANTOK SYSTEM: THE WAY OF THE SOLOMON ISLANDERS

Deeply embedded in Solomon Island culture, concepts of *wantok* and the *wantok* system continue to affect contemporary political, social and economic processes (Nanau 2011). They are, therefore, integral to understanding the political and social behavior that largely shaped and determined post-disaster recovery following the 2007 earthquake and tsunami. Here I engage Melanesian exchange literature to both: (1) illustrate how *wantok* social networks and exchange patterns operate, necessarily contextualizing how they shaped post-disaster aid distribution and subsequent recovery; and (2) highlight where conceptualizations of the *wantok* system and its relation to social capital, disasters, resilience and vulnerability should be altered to reflect more accurate and nuanced understandings of how these processes articulate. I then present household survey and interview results on the meaning and function of *wantok* and the *wantok* system among Titiana and Pailongge villagers. Specifically, I address how villagers: define “*wantok*”; identify their *wantok*; and explain the *wantok* system. Understanding how Solomon Islanders conceptualize and employ *wantok* and the *wantok* system has significant implications for the biased aid allocation that followed the 2007 disaster and the differential recovery this created.

**MELANESIAN EXCHANGE: THE WANTOK SYSTEM, NEW KINDS OF BIG-MEN AND DYNAMICS OF DISASTER RECOVERY**

Pre-capitalist Melanesian exchange is still prominent throughout Solomon Islands and encapsulated in the contemporary *wantok* system – *wantok* being a relatively new term, appearing in the 1800s with the emergence of Pijin during colonialism and blackbirding. The term “*wantok*” refers generally to people united through shared kinship, language and geography, while the *wantok* system is about helping your *wantok* – a practice often manifested through exchange. By participating in exchange you help your kin, which ensures they will help you (Akin 1999). It is similar to a “‘you scratch my back and I scratch yours’
understanding” (Nanau 2011:44). Thus, some state that wantok social networks and the wantok system at the local level serve as a source of resiliency or safety net among autonomous subsistence groups (Nanau 2011), although I argue later this process is not monolithic, but much more nuanced and contradictory, creating sources of vulnerability as well.

Beyond serving as a social safety net, participation in Melanesian exchange also reinforces a person’s social relationships (Carrier and Carrier 1989), personhood (Akin and Robbins 1999), and rank (Gregory 1982; Mauss 1925; Nanau 2011). Moreover, exalted rank or big-man status is often contingent on successful participation in exchange (Sahlins 1963). For example, a future big-man typically begins building his following among kinsmen by capitalizing on the reciprocal exchange that characterizes close kin. His kin help him, knowing it is implied he will return the gesture. He also brings in strays, like orphans and widows – thus drawing people without kinship support into reciprocal exchange with the rising big-man. In turn, he is able to amass greater and greater amounts of goods through his faction’s support to “give away”, or essentially redistribute them within and outside of his group or clan. The larger the output the greater the prestige and renown of the big-man. Thus, it is through exchange, and more specifically giving away more than people can possibly return, that creates “relations of loyalty and obligation on the part of a number of people such that their production can be mobilized for renown building external distribution”, which is necessary to attaining political power and big-man status (Sahlins 1963:291). Because his status is achieved it is also reversible, and therefore he must constantly engage in exchange and maximize his output. Ultimately, his concern for the welfare of others, illustrated through his calculated generosity, is laden with undertones of self-interest and socio-political, economic considerations.

The formation of the Solomon Island nation-state has not necessarily displaced pre-capitalist Melanesian, or more recently wantok, exchange systems or the big-man politics they entail (Akin and Robbins 1999; Carrier and Carrier 1989; Gregory 1982; Nanau 2011). Sillitoe echoes this when he states Melanesian societies continue to reflect a somewhat “stateless social order” and it is exchange, which is largely governed by kinship networks, that orders social and political relations in Melanesia (Sillitoe 1998:92-93). For example, the way in which Members of Parliament (MPs) in the Solomon Island Government (SIG)
allocate discretionary funds can be understood within the context of big-man politics, wantok unity and loyalty (Nanau 2011). In other words, fund allocation does not necessarily follow the idealized principles of the nation-state, in which elected representatives help their constituents equally; rather, Solomon Island politicians often dispense public funds according to the principles of the wantok system, in which they favor their own kin and wantok regardless of merit. Accordingly, Nanau argues that “the further one uses wantok away from the local towards the national the system also changes from being a subsistence and livelihood buffer to one of exploitation and corruption” (2011:50). For example, during the Solomon Island ethnic tensions (1998-2003) between Guadalcanal and Malaitans, police officers did not behave impartially. Instead of protecting citizens, many Guadalcanal and Malaitan officers ignored their state duties and aligned with militants that were from their wantok groups. In effect, guns that were meant to protect citizens were instead used on them. It is the tendency to support one’s wantok during needful times that often lends itself to corruption as well as nepotism (Nanau 2011). This tendency towards nepotism during critical situations and as one moves further away from the local towards the national level is illustrated by SIG members and others involved in the 2007 Solomon Island tsunami recovery, who tended to disproportionately distribute disaster aid to their own wantok, rather than helping all victims equally. This biased aid distribution has significant implications for how the wantok system ultimately shaped vulnerability, resiliency, and tsunami recovery in Titiana and Pailongge.

Despite Nanau’s astute encapsulation of the wantok system’s significance in explaining contemporary Solomon Island socio-political processes, he makes two points that appear either ambiguously explained, or, slightly inaccurate. First, he states wantok is “an identity concept at the macro level and a social capital concept at the micro and family levels” (Nanau 2011:32). However, I argue wantok is also a social capital concept at the macro level, especially with respect to political leaders. Social capital here refers to the potential collective benefits that derive from cooperation between people and their inclusion in a broader social group. In other words, at the micro level, villagers potentially benefit from reciprocal wantok exchange and cooperation. Their social capital and ability to acquire resources and access opportunities is extended beyond their individual self and expanded by inclusion in wantok social networks. I argue this also occurs at the macro level, in which
politicians both maintain and reinforce their wantok networks through exchange, nepotism, and bribes, and, in effect, simultaneously ensure they’ll receive the necessary social and political support from their wantok – the necessary social capital –that keeps them in power. In this sense, many political leaders are new types of big-men, utilizing exchange to maintain and increase their sociopolitical influence. Second, in referencing the ethnic tensions Nanau quotes a Solomon Island government report (2004), which praises the wantok system for its ability to minimize the manmade disaster’s devastating effects on individuals and households by providing “a social framework within which they [Solomon Islanders] can cope” (Nanau 2011:42). Nanau concludes that, “The wantok system in this instance is resilient and a useful safety net for people when faced with natural and man-made disasters” (2011:42). My thesis questions the notion that the wantok system provides a source of resiliency for people in disaster situations. Particularly, in the aftermath of the 2007 earthquake and tsunami the wantok system proved to be a source of resiliency for some, but also of extreme vulnerability, especially in the case of Titiana. Furthermore, the degree to which the wantok system conferred resiliency or vulnerability was largely dependent on context and organizational scale, demonstrating the wantok system and vulnerability are dynamic, rather than static, processes with inherent contradictions. The way in which the wantok system dynamically and differentially shaped vulnerability, resilience and disaster recovery in Titiana and Pailongge is informed by how Titiana and Pailongge villagers understand and employ concepts of wantok and the wantok system.

**The Meaning of the Term “Wantok”**

Through household surveys, we asked Titiana (n=51) and Pailongge villagers (n=23) what the word or concept “wantok” means, producing 102 responses, as some gave multiple definitions (Table 6). As a whole, villagers define “wantok” as people who: (1) share the same language; (2) are related through blood or extended family; (3) originate from and/or stay in the same place (geographic area), usually meaning the same village, island, and sometimes country; (4) share the same ethnicity; (5) know each other well and/or help each other; and (6) other. Responses grouped under other (8.8%) include: friends (4%); same tribe (3%); same culture (.09%); and “relationship” (.09%).
Both Micronesian and Melanesian villagers are similar in that they most frequently define *wantok* as ‘people that are relatives/family’ (29.4%) or ‘people that are of “wan-tok” ’ (32.4%) – literally meaning people that are of “one-talk” and speak the same language. Despite these similarities, Titiana and Pailongge villagers also differ in their definitions. In particular, Titiana villagers define *wantok* primarily as: one talk (38.8%); relatives (29.9%); and same ethnicity (14.9%). In contrast, Pailongge villagers define *wantok* primarily as: relatives (28.6%); same place (22.9%); one talk (20%); and people you know/help (11.4%). Two interesting differences are apparent here. First, when defining the meaning of *wantok*, comparatively more Pailongge informants emphasize the notion that ‘*wantoks* should help each other’ (11.4%), whereas this connotation is less frequent in Titiana (4.5%). Secondly, responses demonstrate that, aside from a shared emphasis on kinship and relatedness, Titiana villagers tend to emphasize shared ethnicity and language comparatively more in defining *wantok*, while Pailongge villagers concentrate more on shared place/geographic origin. For instance, *shared ethnicity* is the third most frequent definition given by Titiana villagers (14.9%), whereas this response is virtually absent in Pailongge (2.9%). Moreover, Titiana villagers emphasize *shared language* (38.8%) at nearly twice the rate of Pailongge villagers (20%). In contrast, *shared geographic origin* is the second most frequent definition Pailongge informants gave (22.9%), whereas this response is insignificant for Titiana (6%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>All villager responses (n=102)</th>
<th>Titiana villager responses (n=67)</th>
<th>Pailongge villager responses (n=35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“One talk” (same language)</td>
<td>32.4% (33)</td>
<td>38.8% (26)</td>
<td>20% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“One blood”; “one line” (relatives)</td>
<td>29.4% (30)</td>
<td>29.9% (20)</td>
<td>28.6% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same place (geographic area)</td>
<td>11.8% (12)</td>
<td>6% (4)</td>
<td>22.9% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“One color”; “one race” (same ethnicity)</td>
<td>10.8% (11)</td>
<td>14.9% (10)</td>
<td>2.9% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People you know/help</td>
<td>6.7% (7)</td>
<td>4.5% (3)</td>
<td>11.4% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.8% (9)</td>
<td>5.9% (4)</td>
<td>14.2% (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. How Villagers in Titiana and Pailongge Defined the Term “Wantok”
WHO TITIANA AND PAILONGGE VILLAGERS CONSIDER THEIR WANTOK

In addition to defining “wantok”, we asked villagers (n=74) whom they actually considered their wantok, such as people within their family, church, village, ethnicity, language, country, or some combination of the latter. Many identified their wantok according to multiple criteria, generating 179 responses (Table 7). Overall, both villages identify their wantok principally in terms of their kin, with slightly more importance placed on blood (68%), rather than affinal (61%), kin. Some villagers also identify friends (18%). In contrast to these similarities, Titiana and Pailongge differ in that Pailongge villagers more frequently identify “people that help them” as their wantok (13%) in comparison to Titiana (4%). Another difference is that in addition to kinship, Titiana villagers also identify their wantok principally in terms of shared Micronesian, Kiribati ethnicity (33%), whereas Pailongge villagers overall do not identify their wantok in terms of shared Melanesian ethnicity (9%). Furthermore, Pailongge villagers tend to distinguish their wantok according to shared geographic place (78%), including those who share: the same village (43%) and home island (35%), while this response is comparatively rare in Titiana. For example, only 20% of Titiana informants consider their wantok to be people who come from or stay in the same village (12%) or island (8%).

CONCEPTUALIZING WANTOK

Results reveal that wantok is conceptualized and applied in various ways. In particular, the concept is employed differently depending on: Melanesian or Micronesian background; spatial and organizational scales; and contexts. Understanding how villagers conceptualize and identify wantok has important implications for post-disaster recovery, as wantok social groups and networks often provide the foundation for both material and nonmaterial exchange, including disaster aid distribution.

Results from survey questions that asked how villagers both define and identify “wantok” correspond closely, demonstrating that aside from a shared emphasis on kinship, Micronesians and Melanesians conceptualize wantok in substantially different ways. First, Melanesians more frequently attach notions of social help to the wantok concept. Secondly, Micronesians tend to concentrate on shared ethnicity and language in defining their wantok, while Melanesians emphasize shared place, including living in or coming from the same
Table 7. Who Titiana and Pailongge Villagers Consider their Wantok

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Total: n=74</th>
<th>Titiana: n=51</th>
<th>Pailongge: n=23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total responses:</td>
<td>Total responses: 179</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood Relatives</td>
<td>68% (50)</td>
<td>59% (30)</td>
<td>87% (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Family</td>
<td>61% (45)</td>
<td>55% (28)</td>
<td>74% (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>18% (13)</td>
<td>16% (8)</td>
<td>22% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Solomon Islanders</td>
<td>7% (5)</td>
<td>6% (3)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Kiribati</td>
<td>24% (18)</td>
<td>33% (17)</td>
<td>4% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Village</td>
<td>22% (16)</td>
<td>12% (6)</td>
<td>43% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Island</td>
<td>16% (12)</td>
<td>8% (4)</td>
<td>35% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same language</td>
<td>7% (5)</td>
<td>6% (3)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People that help/you help</td>
<td>7% (5)</td>
<td>4% (2)</td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Members</td>
<td>7% (5)</td>
<td>6% (3)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7% (5)</td>
<td>4% (2)</td>
<td>13% (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The Other category includes: people that you know (n=2); same tribe (n=2); and "everyone, because the church says everyone is important" (n=1). Notable outliers include one Pailongge informant that identifies other Kiribati as his wantok. He is the only Kiribati informant in the Pailongge sample, and to my knowledge, the only Kiribati villager in the Pailongge population sampled, aside from one other individual who is of Melanesian (Simbo) and Kiribati descent.

village, island or country. One explanation for this divergence is that in the past, Solomon Island Melanesian social groups were geographically differentiated. Thus, the place one was from also dictated who was in their social group. Furthermore, place is fundamental to the Melanesian worldview, to the point that ancestry, decent, ideology, identity and the whole social structure rests on peoples connections to their land (Scott 2007). This likely explains why more Melanesians refer to shared place, village, and island in defining and identifying their wantok. In contrast, for the Micronesian Kiribati, who were relocated to two main areas in the Solomons, place does not necessarily demarcate their different social groups here. Rather, according to many Kiribati, the main factor differentiating the social groups of this small handful of Micronesian immigrants from other groups in the Solomon Islands is their distinct Micronesian status, or ethnicity. Moreover, as immigrants, Kiribati villagers are largely disconnected from social networks defined through shared geographic origin. The emphasis Melanesians place on shared geographic origin and social help in defining their wantok networks helps illuminate certain instances of post-disaster aid allocation. In particular, the flow of aid was controlled primarily by Melanesians, who, in many instances,
tended to preferentially help their own *wantok* over others, resulting in specific villages and islands receiving comparatively more aid than other, often more severely affected, areas.

Aside from the overall manner in which Titiana and Pailongge villagers define and identify *wantok*, many informants touch on the flexible nature of the concept. Specifically, how one defines and distinguishes their *wantok* is often fluid, malleable, and dependent upon the specific scale and context in which they are defining it. Scale here refers to spatial and organizational scales. Spatial scales in the sense that the location of an individual, whether that is in their village, island, country, or some region outside the Solomons, often dictates who they identify as their *wantok*. Moreover, at the organizational level of the community, *wantok* may be defined differently than at the organizational level of the household, village, island, constituency, national government, or country. The flexible and scale-dependent nature of the *wantok* can be demonstrated through a somewhat hypothetical example, which was how I was first introduced to the concept. I was walking through the market one day when all of a sudden my assistant said, “*Eh, datwan wantok blo iu!* [Hey, that is your *wantok!*]”, as she pointed to a white, Australian person. I replied, “*Mi no kam from Astrelia* [I am not from Australia]”; however, in the Solomons, where white people are primarily outsiders and tourists, a white person might identify all white people as their *wantok*, as they are considered more closely affiliated to that individual in comparison to darker-skinned, native Solomon Islanders. Likewise, an American white person would be considered a ‘closer *wantok*’ to me than an Australian white person. Furthermore, an American white person from my home state, Nevada, would be considered a closer *wantok* than an American white person from Texas. Similarly, someone from my hometown, Reno, Nevada, would be a closer *wantok* than someone from Las Vegas, Nevada, and my family in Reno would be much closer *wantoks* than the rest of Reno inhabitants. So hypothetically, when I am home in Reno, I may consider my *wantok* to be only my close family and friends, but when I am in the Solomons, I might consider all white people in general my *wantok*.

The flexible, spatial and organizational scale-dependent nature of the *wantok* concept is illustrated in countless informant statements as well. For example, one Melanesian informant explained that *wantok* means “relative”, but if you are not related but are from the same island then you are *wantok*. Thus, while he is in his village, Pailongge, he only considers his blood relatives to be his *wantok*, rather than everyone in his village, but when
he travels north to Choiseul Province, he considers other Pailongge villagers there his wantok. Likewise, another informant told me that he is from the Eastern Solomons, so when he is in the Western Province, he considers anyone from the East his wantok. Another informant stated that, although he primarily considers his family and people that speak his language to be his wantok, when he is in Papua New Guinea (PNG) he considers everyone there that shares his same skin color as his wantok. Overall, wantok is a flexible, malleable concept, whose meaning is not only transformative across spatial and organizational scales, but also largely dependent upon them. As one Titiana informant summarizes, “The term wantok is flexible, and it could refer to everyone in the Solomons or friends. There is no limit or bar on wantok” (male, 46).

Just as the wantok concept transforms at various spatial and organizational scales, it also becomes modified and redefined within different situations and contexts. For example, a Titiana villager explained that, although he considers his wantok to be his family, “some people will jump from family to other, more distant people to rely on” (male, 68). This implies individuals are able to redefine their wantok in different situations enabling them to either expand or contract their social and exchange networks, potentially allowing them to access a broader range of support and resources. Informants living in Honiara further illustrate this process. Specifically, people often rely on their close and more distant wantoks living in Honiara to provide housing, food and other necessities. In other words, if one lives in Honiara, their relatives or wantok will come stay with them for what is supposed to be a short time – maybe a few weeks or a month, but they often end up living there. It is very difficult for the hosts in Honiara to say no, because helping one’s wantok is commonly considered Solomon culture or kastom [custom]. Conversely, this can be very burdensome for the hosts because living in Honiara is extremely expensive in comparison to rural village life. One informant expressed frustration over her wantok staying with her in Honiara for “no good reason” and referred to this situation as, “Tumas wantok bisnis!” [Too much wantok business] (female, 39). The important point is that wantoks will utilize the wantok system – or, this practice of wantok helping wantok – in order to live in Honiara, which they could not do otherwise, showing how the notion of wantok can be used in different contexts to facilitate different goals.
The way in which the wantok concept operates within different scales and social contexts helps explain how the wantok system ultimately influenced aid allocation at various levels of the country following the 2007 tsunami. In particular, because the wantok system operates at numerous scales, the national government, provincial government, National Disaster Committee (NDC), and other institutions at various organizational levels within the country involved in disaster mitigation and recovery are not immune to its influence. Wantok social and exchange networks often served as an underlying foundation for the allocation of disaster funds, resulting in a biased and unfair distribution. For example, there are specific instances in which MPs of affected constituencies preferentially helped the areas in their constituency that they are from, rather than helping the entire constituency equally, or on a basis proportional to disaster impact. This process effects our conceptualizations of disasters, vulnerability and resilience. Specifically, those who are likely to receive disproportionately more or less disaster aid relative to other affected areas – subsequently subjecting them to differing degrees of vulnerability and resilience during disaster recovery – cannot be deciphered a priori through static indicators such as class, income, age and gender, but is based predominantly on individuals’ wantok connections and networks, which are dynamic and contradictory as they are dependent upon as well as transformative across contexts and scales.

THE WANTOK SYSTEM

Through surveys, I also asked Titiana and Pailongge villagers to explain the wantok system. Informants (n=73) generated 119 responses, as some explained it in multiple ways (Table 8). Survey responses reveal most informants (89%) identify the wantok system as a system of “favoritism”, in which you “favor” or “help” your own “family”, “relatives,” and “wantok.” This practice of helping your own family and wantok is also commonly referred to as “wantok bisnis [wantok business]”. Of those that did not explain the wantok system in these terms (11%), informants explained the it exclusively in terms of: favoritism within the government (n=2); Solomon Islanders giving only to Solomon Islanders (Melanesians) and not Kiribati (n=1); people who share the same custom, language, ethnicity, or geographical place (n=4); and a burden on one’s own family (n=1).
Table 8. How Titiana and Pailongge Villagers Explained the Wantok System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Total (n=73)</th>
<th>Titiana (n=50)</th>
<th>Pailongge (n=23)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favoritism; you help/favor your own family/relatives/wantok</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices within Solomon Island Government</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepotism</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biased post-disaster aid distribution</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomon Islanders helping Solomon Islanders (not Kiribati)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custom/culture/system of Solomon Islands</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing the same custom, ethnicity or birthplace</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A negative/burden</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WS is different now</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total responses:</strong></td>
<td><strong>119</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
<td><strong>44</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding those informants who explain the wantok system in general terms of kin and wantok favoritism, several also note that it can be: (1) obligatory, (2) burdensome, and (3) simultaneously a good and bad thing. First, implying the system can be more of an obligation rather than a choice, one informant states that within this system, ‘you must help relatives’. Likewise, another villager asserts that:

You can’t escape from it; [you] must accept it. Your wantok comes and you must offer what you have to share and help them. It is part of the culture and you have to do it or people will talk badly about you. You have to accept all the people in your family. For example, if your wife is from Simbo [and you are not] – her family is still your wantok. [Pailongge, male, 68]

Secondly, some informants (n=3) note that the wantok system can be problematic and burdensome because their wantok depend too heavily on them. Informants on both ends of the ‘help’ spectrum evidence this. For example, one informant states, “the wantok system spoils family” because his wantok comes and asks for help and food frequently' (male, 50). Likewise another villager told me the wantok system strains her family because “some villagers do not manage their resources well and at the end of the day they come ask [the informant] for help. Even if you are kros [upset] and don’t want to help you have to help so people are not angry and do not talk behind your back” (female, 49). Conversely, individuals who rely on their wantok also point to notions of obligation. Two informants explicitly state, for instance, that ‘if their wantok have jobs then they should help them.’ Despite indications that the wantok system is obligatory, several informants were less rigid in this respect and did not explicitly explain the wantok system it in terms of obligation. For example, one villager
humorously told me that people ‘only share with the wantok they like’. Third, some informants note that the wantok system is a good and bad thing: good because you and your wantok help each other, but bad because if your wantok rely on you too much, it creates a strain on the individual and his own family, who may not have enough to share, but must share regardless. These responses only begin to hint at the dual, context dependent nature of the wantok system in which it can be an advantage or disadvantage, a source of help or a source of strain, and simultaneously a creator of resilience, but also of vulnerability.

Beyond general explanations of helping and favoring wantok, many add further details concerning the function and implications of the wantok system. Specifically, several villagers also explain it in terms of: the SIG, nepotism, biased disaster aid distribution, Solomon Islanders only helping other Solomon Islanders, and culture or kastom. Below, I briefly introduce each of these categories and then illustrate its meaning and implications through informants.

Ten informants specifically discuss the wantok system in relation to the government, explaining that it influences the recipients and uses of government funds, including disaster aid. The following statements illustrate this process:

Wantok system is really big here - the government looks for their own wantok when they distribute help and they do not help the Gilbertese [Kiribati]. Government only helps one side. [Titiana, female, 45]

You favor who you know before others, for example, your friends. Everyone victims of tsunami, but only some, who had wantok or friends with power to distribute aid, received aid while others received much less. Wantok system is barava [extremely] strong here. This is the system here, for educated people, politicians, and everyone. For example, people in the government helped their own wantok or homeland within their constituency, even though it is the constituency as a whole that elected these MPs and government officials. [Titiana, male, 59]

Wantok system is not good - wantok bisnis - because people help their own wantok during the tsunami versus helping the tsunami victims. Within the committees and government it is hard for aid to come straight or be distributed equally because people with the power to distribute aid help themselves and their own wantok. [Pailongge, male, 48]

Wantok system is big here – wantok bisnis. Big men in government help their own wantok when their wantok ask, but when other people ask it is difficult to get help. [Pailongge, male, 63]
Four informants discuss the system explicitly in terms of “nepotism”, defined as favoritism based on kinship. They state that those with power and/or resources will favor their own wantok in employment, educational, rural development, and other opportunities, over other, potentially more qualified individuals. For example:

The wantok system is common. Nepotism - people that have access to funds or money or rehabilitation assistance help their own wantok. [Titiana, male, 39]

Favoritism. For example, if you apply for any project, the person in a position to approve the project will choose or favor his own wantok; people favor own wantok. [Pailongge, male, 51]

The people you know and who are your wantok are the people you help before helping others. One drawback or disadvantage is if your wantok does not have qualifications for doing something you will still hire your unqualified wantok - this is a big problem in the Solomons. [Pailongge, male, 41]

The wantok system is like a virus where blacks help other blacks or their own color or relatives - this is their first priority. Kiribati people come second. Both Kiribati people and Solomon Islanders practice the wantok system - so Kiribati people help their own wantok too. For example, if a Chinese person that owns a shop marries a Kiribati person or a Kiribati person owns a company or has a good job you will notice that every employee of theirs is Kiribati. Also, in school, when Kiribati apply they are always waitlisted and Melanesians are chosen first. Solomon Islanders and Kiribati practice this wantok system and help themselves and their own wantok. Wantok helping their own wantok is something that occurs in every group or race in the Solomon Islands. [Titiana, male, 50]

Regarding the last statement, it is interesting to note this Kiribati informant specifies the wantok system functions among both Melanesians and Micronesians; however, there is one important difference between the two groups. Specifically, while nepotism may occur among Melanesians and Micronesians, Melanesian groups are of the majority in the Solomons and thus they control access to opportunities and resources at a much greater magnitude than those of the small, Micronesian minority. Therefore, in the Solomons opportunities for nepotism and the tangible benefits of it for those involved are far greater for Melanesians.

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11 Several Kiribati informants referred to Solomon Island Melanesians as “blacks”. It is an emic term. It should be noted that there are Solomon Island Melanesian groups, such as in Isabel or Malaita that are as light skinned as the Kiribati. I have two interpretations of the use of this term that are not mutually exclusive. One, the Kiribati use the term “black” as general way to distinguish themselves (Micronesians with lighter skin) from other Solomon Islanders (Melanesians with dark and lighter skin). Two, in the Western Province where Titiana is located most Melanesian groups are dark skinned, thus the use of the term “black” reflects this bias in which Kiribati are interacting with darker skinned Melanesians at a much higher frequency than lighter skinned Melanesians.
than Micronesians. Importantly, not all Melanesian groups necessarily benefit from nepotism – only those that are connected to the specific wantok networks in which favoritism and opportunities flow, but again, Micronesians’ immigrant, minority status largely excludes them from these kinship and place-based networks altogether. Differences in degrees of connectivity strongly influenced aid allocation and the differential recovery that characterized the Solomons, and specifically, Titiana and Pailongge, following the 2007 disaster.

Accordingly, nine informants specifically explain the wantok system in relation to its influence on post-disaster aid distribution, which was ultimately problematic and biased: For instance:

Favoritism - during tsunami the wantok system came out clear. Anything that came to help tsunami victims and affected regions went elsewhere to places like Vella. Gizo office, for example, spoke Vella and thus Vella people got help - this is wantok system. Informant is kros [upset] with this (he was burying dead bodies around this same time, many of them children). [Titiana, male, 47]

Wantok bisnis - some people got help after the tsunami that had wantok with power to distribute aid so some benefitted while others didn't which is a problem. Not in relation to the tsunami, the wantok system is when people help their own relatives. [Titiana, male, 32]

For example, a man from Choiseul that worked for Red Cross went to help Sitakava because he has wantok their [referencing one Sitakava villager that was originally from Choiseul]. [Pailongge, female, 57]

These statements illustrate that the wantok system influenced aid distribution at multiple levels and scales. For example, it affected aid allocation at the: Provincial and island level, as shown in the first statement regarding how some aid was distributed to Vella Island from the Gizo office because of shared linguistic ties; and at the NGO level, as a Melanesian from Choiseul working for Red Cross influenced the aid received by Sitakava – a distinct settlement area in Pailongge – because of geographic ties to a Sitakava villager. Although these excerpts are somewhat anecdotal evidence provided by single individuals, statements reflecting similar views regarding the wantok system’s influence on disaster aid distribution are replete throughout Ghizo, Titiana and Pailongge.

Five Titiana informants also note the wantok system is about Solomon Islanders [Melanesians] only helping other Solomon Islanders [Melanesians] and not helping the Kiribati. For example:
[It’s about] how Solomon Islanders distribute things - they give to Solomon Islanders and not to the Kiribati. [Titiana, female, 26]

Wantok bisnis - you help your own relatives. For example, Solomon Islanders only help other Solomon Islanders. [Titiana, male, 52]

People help only their own wantok; Solomon Islanders helped Solomon Islanders after the tsunami. [Titiana, male, 38]

In contrast to these statements, not a single Melanesian informant explicitly mentioned the wantok system was about Kiribati or Micronesians helping only other Micronesians. This is not to suggest wantok favoritism does not occur among Micronesians, but it does hint at something already mentioned, which is that because Melanesians are of the national majority, opportunities for wantok favoritism are far greater among them. Thus, this Melanesian-Melanesian favoritism, rather than just wantok favoritism, is apparent in statements made by Titiana informants, who currently do not generally benefit from forms of wantok favoritism beyond the level of their village. Again, not all Melanesians necessarily benefit either, only those that are hooked into the particular wantok networks, through kinship, place, or some other factor, along which aid, opportunities, resources, and other benefits flow are at an advantage.

Several informants (n=13) also state that the wantok system is part of the Solomon Island “culture”, “kastom [custom]”, and “system”, demonstrating that the help and favoritism inherent in wantok social and exchange networks remains a deeply ingrained part of Solomon Island culture and ways of life. The way in which the wantok system often provides the underlying context for many social, economic and political processes and interactions within the Solomons is further illustrated by a statement made to me repeatedly, which was, “The wantok system, hem no save out” – meaning literally, ‘the wantok system does not know how to get out of Solomon Islands’. These deeply embedded wantok social and exchange networks carry important implications for the way in which disaster aid was distributed, in which much aid flowed along these kinship and social exchange networks, rather than being allocated directly from the donor to the victims.

**Implications of Wantok Exchange for Post-Disaster Recovery**

Within the Solomon Island wantok system, material and nonmaterial help is exchanged largely along wantok social networks. These networks are variously defined by
shared kinship, language, and geographic origin. Therefore, when relief and rehabilitation aid flowed into the country following the tsunami, it did not necessarily get distributed directly to disaster victims or distributed to victims in a manner proportional to the disaster’s impact, as many donors likely envisioned it would. Rather, post-disaster aid distribution was biased and flowed largely along kinship and patron-client relationships outlined within the wantok system. This biased aid allocation contributed to the differential and comparatively hindered recovery of certain affected areas and villages. Specifically, those households not hooked into the wantok exchange networks along which aid more heavily flowed tended to experience a slower and more problematic recovery, overall making them more vulnerable to the tsunami in comparison to other nearby areas. This includes Micronesians and Melanesians; however, as will be discussed in future chapters, Kiribati Islanders’ immigrant status largely excluded them from Melanesian dominated kinship, linguistic and geographical wantok networks making this particular group even more vulnerable to the tsunami’s impact. Moreover, the wantok systems’ influence on aid distribution had differential and sometimes contradictory effects at various organizational scales of aid distribution, making conditions of vulnerability dynamic and context dependent, rather than any single characteristic of an individual or group resulting in a related result. In other words, in the same way immigrant status did not make Titiana automatically more vulnerable to the tsunami’s initial impact (Chapter 3), Melanesian standing did not automatically render Melanesian villages like Pailongge resilient in the context of wantok exchange and disaster recovery. The degree to which each village was rendered vulnerable or resilient depended on the scale and context in which aid was being distributed. In other words, at the national level, certain households may have been vulnerable and disconnected from the wantok networks along which aid more heavily flowed, while at the provincial or NGO level, these same households’ were more connected to the wantok networks shaping aid allocation, making them more resilient at these scales.
CHAPTER 5

POLITICAL VULNERABILITY: THE DYSFUNCTIONAL ROLE OF THE SOLOMON ISLAND GOVERNMENT AND ACTIONS OF NGOS IN DISASTER RECOVERY

While the 2007 tsunami’s physical impact was similar across several areas in Western Province, Solomon Islands, including Titiana and Pailongge, disaster outcomes were ultimately different among victims. This differential recovery is not explained by environmental factors, but results from specific political and social processes that influenced aid distribution. During the 1960s and 1970s, human ecology largely ignored the role political factors played in human-environment interactions. Holling’s (1973) seminal work in ecology, for example, was foundational to shifting the focus from ecosystem stability and equilibrium to ecological uncertainty, dynamics and resilience; but analysis regarding how political factors’ influence socio-ecological systems is largely absent. In reaction, political ecology emerged emphasizing how political, economic, and social processes influence human-environment relationships, often in an unequal way (Bryant 1992; McCay 2008; Vayda and Walters 1999). Environmental degradation in Honduras, for instance, is a result of broader sociopolitical processes – namely Western imposed development and Honduran economic policies (Stonich 1995). Likewise, famines in Bangladesh cannot be explained by adverse climatic conditions alone; rather, food shortages here often result from unequal distribution rather than insufficient supply (Hartmann and Boyce 1983). Similarly, differential tsunami recovery in Solomon Islands cannot be understood in terms of environmental factors, such as proximity to the earthquake’s epicenter or wave height and intensity, but results largely from how the Solomon Island government (SIG) and wantok system influenced aid allocation, creating an unequal distribution.

Although the influence of sociopolitical processes on human-environment interactions is well-established, Vayda and Walters (1999) argue political factors have come to assume a priori importance, possibly precluding recognition of other key factors. Political
factors are frequently important in explaining environmental phenomena, but this relationship should be empirically determined, not assumed (Vayda 1983; Walters and Vayda 2009). Both employing and building on political ecology my thesis empirically demonstrates how specific political and social processes in Solomon Islands have unequally influenced human-environment interactions in the context of the 2007 tsunami. Particularly, the SIG’s misappropriation of disaster recovery funds in combination with deeply embedded patterns of exchange based on wantok favoritism resulted in a biased aid allocation creating a differential and unequal disaster recovery among affected individuals and groups.

When the tsunami struck early in the morning on April 2, 2007, its swift, turbulent waters swept away nearly every possession, canoe, and structure owned by most Titiana and Pailongge villagers. Left with little to nothing, many Titiana villagers also experienced the trauma and heart-wrenching loss associated with losing several villagers to the fast rushing water and debris that swept through their village. Given most villagers live subsistence or extremely low-cash income lifestyles, the luxuries often associated with the First World, such as savings accounts or insurance to rely on in times of crisis, provided no buffer or safety net for villagers to fall back on. Losses from the tsunami coupled with this lack of economic buffers left many villagers with virtually nothing, making external aid crucial to post-disaster relief, recovery and rehabilitation. External aid from the SIG, local and overseas donors was largely controlled by the SIG, per government policy; therefore, the SIG necessarily played a major role in the recovery process. Accordingly, the failings of the SIG to efficiently, effectively, or appropriately allocate disaster relief and rehabilitation funds reduced the overall amount of aid available to victims. Moreover, the SIG’s handling of disaster aid served to undermine NGO and donor rehabilitation plans, further reducing the amount of aid certain victims received. Government aid distribution was effected specifically by: (1) political corruption, in which many government officials and power-brokers allocating aid helped themselves; and (2) the wantok system, in which many aid distributors helped their own wantok, rather than helping victims on a basis proportional to tsunami impact. While government actions and corruption reduced the total amount of aid available, potentially making all victims more vulnerable to the tsunami’s impact, the wantok system caused the remaining aid to be distributed biasedly, making certain individuals and groups – who are disconnected from the wantok networks along which aid flowed – even more vulnerable. In
this chapter I focus on how political corruption and the subsequent reduction in NGO and donor aid negatively influenced the recovery of many victims, especially in Titiana and Pailongge, while I reserve the wantok systems’ effect on aid distribution and recovery for the next chapter. Accordingly, here I discuss results from household surveys, document analysis, and interviews to address: the most significant factors in Titiana and Pailongge villagers’ recovery, the SIG’s role in recovery, NGOs’ role in recovery, and how the political vulnerability characterizing many Titiana and Pailongge households negatively affected their recovery by reducing the government and NGO aid they received.

**Main Factors Influencing Recovery: The Importance of Self-Sufficient Activities and Failings of the SIG**

During 2012 household surveys, we asked Titiana and Pailongge villagers (n=73) to identify the most significant factors influencing their post-disaster recovery. Immediate relief aid like food, water, and tents was crucial to victims in the days and weeks following the disaster; but, we were interested in what factors were most important to villagers’ overall recovery, rehabilitation, and rebuilding, which lasted several years for most informants, and for some, is still an ongoing, unfinished process. Therefore, recovery here refers to the five-year time-span from immediately after the 2007 tsunami until the time of the 2012 interviews. Specifically, we asked informants to explain and rank: “What two things were most important to helping your household recover from the tsunami impact?”; and, “What two things had the most negative impact on your household’s ability to recover from the tsunami?” We gave examples, such as: family, friends, government aid, NGO aid, the church (aid or mentally), fishing, gardening, cash wages, market, other livelihood activity, or other; but encouraged participants to identify whatever factors they saw as most important.

**Helpful Factors**

For all villagers, the most important factor helping recovery was cash income/market (34.2%) followed by gardening (23.3%). Within Titiana only, the next most helpful factor in addition to cash income/market (36%) and gardening (26%) was family (22%), and to a lesser extent fishing (12%) (Figure 3). In Pailongge, the most helpful factors after market (30.4%) are gardening (17.4%) and NGO aid (17.4%), followed by copra (13%). Overall, the
Figure 3. The main factor Titiana and Pailongge villagers identify as helping their household’s recovery.

ranked importance of cash income/market and gardening shows that for many villagers, self-sufficient activities were essential to recovery. Results for the second most helpful factor in recovery further support this assertion, revealing the following for Titiana: gardening (25%), cash income/market (24%), and fishing (24%); and Pailongge: gardening (34.8%), cash income/market (26%), and fishing (13%). Furthermore, these results show Titiana more heavily relies on fishing, whereas Pailongge depends more on gardening. Although both villages depended heavily on cash income/market for recovery, there is an important qualitative difference between them. Specifically, of the 36% of Titiana villagers that state cash income/market was most important to their recovery, 18% refer to cash generating activities, such as wage labor, canteens, chicken farming, and teaching, while the other 18% refer to the market, in which they sell fish, tea and cooked foods like doughnuts, buns and fried fish. In other words, half of these informants refer to wage employment and entrepreneurial activities and an overall immersion into the cash economy, while the other half refer to cash income based on the market, in which subsistence activities like fishing generate income. Conversely, all 30.4% of Pailongge villagers refer only to the market, where they primarily sell garden fruits and vegetables like guava, bananas, cassava, potatoes,
and cabbage, or coconuts harvested from nearby forests. In other words, many Pailongge villagers’ reliance on cash income is primarily limited to income generated from subsistence activity surpluses, or, producing garden food beyond what is required for consumption. This difference reveals that although subsistence activities and the market are important for both villages, Titiana villagers are comparatively more immersed into the cash economy.

In contrast to the importance of livelihood activities for household recovery, all Titiana villagers and several Pailongge villagers ranked external government and NGO aid extremely low in importance. Only one informant, for example, states the government was most helpful. This notable outlier results from the fact that this individual is a teacher, and as a public servant he received $15,000 from the government after the disaster. Regarding NGO aid, no Titiana informants state it was most helpful, whereas nearly a fifth of Pailongge informants identify NGOs as the most helpful factor in recovery. The fact that many Pailongge informants received complete houses with labor included from the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Salvation Army (SA) and Oxfam may explain this discrepancy. Moreover, the reason behind why the PNG SA built houses in Pailongge may relate to wantok favoritism—a point I will expand on in the next chapter. Suffice it to say for now that the comparatively higher importance of NGO aid in Pailongge provides an instance in which connection to Melanesian wantok networks may have bolstered the amount of aid certain Pailongge villagers received. Likewise, a lack of connection to these networks reduces the potential to receive aid, effectively increasing one’s vulnerability to the disaster’s impact.

**Hindering Factors**

In addition to helpful factors, we asked informants to explain and rank what two factors had the most negative impact on their households’ ability to recover (Figure 4). Villagers most frequently identified the government (47.9%), with slightly higher rates in Titiana (50%) than Pailongge (43.5%). The second most hindering factor was “expenses or lack of money” (17.8%), with slightly higher rates in Pailongge (21.8%) than Titiana (16%). Villagers explained expenses and lack of money was frequently problematic because, despite the losses incurred from the tsunami, they still must pay for expenses, such as school fees, which range from $100/year for small children to $5,000-$6000 for adolescents. Additionally, most villagers needed to purchase materials to rebuild their homes since NGOs
only provided partial building materials. Moreover, many Titiana villagers also needed to buy food because many rely on cash to purchase food, rather than subsistence activities; had few gardens before the tsunami; and lost their canoes and fishing equipment to the tsunami, making fishing temporarily, but largely, unviable. Identifying expenses/lack of money as a major hindering factor has important implications for the political vulnerability of many victims. Presumably, the government could have alleviated monetary shortages to an extent if they had delivered the aid they initially promised. For example, household surveys, interviews and document analysis reveal villagers were initially promised approximately: $17,550 for completely destroyed houses; $9,100 for collapsed houses; and $2,600 for damaged houses; however, they received $4000, $2000, and $1000 respectively, leaving them with insufficient funds for rebuilding and, often, daily needs. This discrepancy between aid promised and aid received is best understood in terms of the government’s misappropriation and biased distribution of aid – as much aid was ultimately unaccounted for.
Results regarding the second most negative factor influencing recovery further support the notion that the government was a major hindering factor. Specifically, villagers identify the second most hindering factor in recovery as: NGOs (26%), the government (20%), and expenses/lack of cash (11%). All three factors are explained in terms of the government. In particular, the government’s handling of disaster aid funds undercut NGO rehabilitation projects, leaving NGOs to do “a piecemeal job with rehabilitation and rebuilding” (provincial government employee). This ultimately rendered NGOs a hindering factor because many victims received only part of what they were initially promised. For example, in 2012 a Titiana villager told me that Oxfam told him they would rebuild his house. He received some materials, but was still waiting, unsure if and when Oxfam would return. Disappointed to be the bearer of bad news and upset this individual was left wondering, I reluctantly explained that, to my knowledge, Oxfam completed their project in 2011. Moreover, the reason he likely never received a complete house is because Oxfam’s rehabilitation project was ultimately under-implemented as a result of government actions. The government’s actions not only help explain why many see NGOs as a hindering factor in their recovery, but also why lack of money was a major issue, because appropriate government aid allocation would have at least partially alleviated this problem. Therefore, the three most negative influences on villagers’ recovery result in part, or fully, from government actions and the overall political vulnerability characterizing many tsunami victims. Accordingly, in the following section I detail the government’s role in disaster recovery, with specific attention to their use and abuse of disaster victim funds.

**The SIG’s Role in Disaster Recovery: “Help Did Not Come Fairly from the Government”**

Before delving into how the SIG mishandled disaster victim funds, it is important to contextualize the current state of Solomon Island’s political system.

12 Gender and age of informant withheld to protect confidentiality.
Background: The Structure and Function of Solomon Island’s Political System

The SIG is a constitutional monarchy with a unicameral parliament at the national level and a provincial system at the local level. At the national level, Parliament consists of 50 Members, elected every four years by the people within their respective constituencies. Members of Parliament (MPs) then elect the Prime Minister (PM), who in turn selects his cabinet members. The PM also appoints ministers, who are responsible for heading the 20 or so different ministries, such as the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Ministry of Finance and Treasury. At the local level, government is divided into 10 administrative regions, including the nine provinces (Central, Choiseul, Guadalcanal, Isabel, Makira-Ulawa, Malaita, Rennell and Bellona, Temotu, Western) and the capital, Honiara. Elected provincial officials and assemblies head each province, while Honiara is overseen by Honiara’s Town Council. Under constitutional law, the 1989 National Disaster Council Act mandates the National Disaster Council (NDC), which falls under the Ministry of Home Affairs, to handle natural disasters “by coordinating and administering relief assistance from the government and other local and overseas donors” (Office of the Auditor General 2010:4). The acting administrative branch for the NDC is the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO). The 1989 Act also requires the NDC to establish Provincial Disaster Committees within each province to administer disaster relief at the provincial scale. The 2007 earthquake and tsunami primarily affected Western and Choiseul Provinces, thus Provincial Disaster Committees were established for both areas. Overall, the NDC and NDMO are responsible for coordinating relief efforts among various stakeholders involved in recovery, including the government, NGOs, and donors; therefore, their failure to effectively do so would impede recovery efforts.

At a functional level, instability, frequent leadership turnovers, and substantial corruption generally characterize the SIG. Although the election term for MPs and the PM is four years, Parliament can be dissolved and the PM ousted by MPs through a “vote of no confidence” – meaning little support exists for current government directives. These turnovers are not uncommon. Aside from instability, corruption also plagues the SIG’s ability to function in a manner consistent with the best interests of its citizens. For example, numerous Melanesian and Micronesian informants state Solomon Island politicians
commonly exchange money or favors for votes while campaigning. For instance, one Titiana household told me a Ghizo provincial member gave them three water drums for their vote. Pailongge villagers recount similar stories about this same official who gave out $100 to $500 in exchange for votes. Furthermore, villager and provincial government informants note the MP for their constituency, Ghizo-Kolombangara, gives cash hand-outs for votes. As one Titiana villager summarizes, “Politicians must have a lot of money during election time to campaign”, because they essentially pay for votes (female, 49). Exchanging money and favors for votes also occurs within Parliament, in which the PM ‘persuades’ MPs to elect him. For example, when I asked one informant if anyone besides the current PM and opposition leader to the PM would run for PM next election, they responded that the prospective PM must have money to pay MPs to vote for him, implying other candidates cannot successfully run unless they have enough money to pay for political support. Other informants added that, “iu garem mani [you have money], iu garem paoa [you have power],” and, in the end, Solomon Island politicians must spend “a lot to buy votes” (Titiana focus group participants). Although proving these types of election fraud stories is difficult, informants are replete with them, including local villagers and certain elected government officials. Government corruption and fraud is also evidenced by the existence of the ‘Ombudsman’ – a department that investigates complaints against capricious or abusive acts by public officials, such as public fund misuse. In the Gizo post office, an Ombudsman poster depicts skinny villagers filing free complaint forms with the Ombudsman and asking a big, fat government official what happened to their funds – the official replying he has no funds. While discussing the meaning of the poster, an informant commented on how the big, fat appearance of the government official visually represents him keeping the peoples’ money. Fund misuse is further evidenced by the fact that one MP is currently serving several months in jail for abusing the peoples’ funds.

The instability and corruption that frequently characterizes the SIG provides an important foundation for understanding their role in the 2007 disaster recovery. Specifically, political corruption heavily influenced how the SIG distributed post-disaster relief funds, in which much aid was ultimately unaccounted for, while the remainder tended to travel along kinship and patron-client relationships. As I detail in the following sections, the SIG’s actions during disaster recovery not only reduced the overall amount of aid available to
tsunami victims and resulted in an unequal distribution of the remaining aid; but, also resulted in underfunding the shelter and rehabilitation phase of recovery administered by various stakeholders, including the SIG, donors, and NGOs.

The SIG’s Use and Abuse of Disaster Funds

Approximately one year after the tsunami, the Solomon Island Office of the Auditor General (OAG) completed a special audit report draft of tsunami and earthquake disaster relief funds, entitled, *Special Audit Report: Tsunami and Earthquake Relief Fund within the National Disaster Council (NDC) under the Ministry of Home Affairs* (2008). The report’s primary objective was to determine the use and recipients of disaster funds. The audit covers all tsunami and earthquake disaster funds received from April to December, 2007 – totaling around SBDS$39 million (~USD$5.3 million) – and provides a detailed account of how the funds were used. The report reveals much fund use is characterized by a lack of accountability and transparency, misuse, and misappropriation. Furthermore, because the audit report meticulously traces disaster funds and details donors, contribution amounts, bank account numbers, deposits and withdrawals, questionable or fraudulent uses of the funds can often be linked to the specific parties involved. Although the OAG finished the report in 2008, it was not officially published until December, 2010, and has yet to be discussed in the SIG Parliament. I received a copy of this report from two informants. One asked that I not publish on how he obtained the report. The other is currently pursuing a case with the Solomon Island High Court, using this document as evidence, to demand that involved parties, including the current PM, Gordon Darcy Lilo, produce “black and white” evidence regarding the use of victim funds (male, 46). In the following sections, I report the context surrounding the production and ultimate suppression of the audit report and the audit’s key findings.

**Production and Suppression of the Disaster Fund Audit Report**

The OAG is an external auditor of government and public funds whose purpose is to ensure government transparency and accountability to the public through reporting audit results directly to Parliament. Currently, the *Special Audit Report: Tsunami and Earthquake Relief Fund* (2010) is essentially suppressed within the SIG, per instruction of the current
PM. The audit was intended to examine and document the use and recipients of tsunami and earthquake relief funds. The OAG’s findings would then be tabled for discussion within the Parliament, potentially leading to an investigation if questionable or fraudulent use of funds is discovered. The report was tabled for discussion in 2011; however, Gordon Darcy Lilo, who became PM in 2011, shelved the report – effectively impeding efforts to evaluate the appropriateness of disaster fund use. Several informants, including villagers and government officials, explain that Lilo suppressed the report for personal and political reasons, because he is implicated throughout it in the misuse of disaster relief funds. In particular, the report details that during the time period being audited (April-December, 2007), the then Minister of Finance and several MPs, including the MP for the Ghizo-Kolombangara constituency, are implicated in questionable, inappropriate and fraudulent uses of tsunami and earthquake victim funds. During this same time period Lilo served as the Minister of Finance (May 2006 - November 2007) and as the MP for Ghizo-Kolombangara (2001-present). Therefore, many negative implications surrounding the misuse of disaster funds revolve directly around Lilo. When probed about why he shelved the audit report, Lilo responded that, as PM, he has every right to determine the SIG agenda and not discuss this document. At the time of my second field season in 2012, I attended a meeting in which several individuals from Ghizo and Kolombangara met with a lawyer from Honiara to sign a letter of support and consent for the High Court to open an investigation, which would in turn require Lilo to ‘produce evidence on how he administered the public funds that belong to us [the people]’ (letter of support, submitted and accepted by high court, July 2012).\(^\text{13}\) When I left in August, 2012, the case was being pursued in the courts.

**Key Findings of the Audit Report**

From April to December of 2007, there was a total of SBD$39,972,023 (~USD$5,416,210) in local and overseas donations, government funds and unidentified deposits contributed to tsunami and earthquake relief funds. The audit’s objective is to determine how disaster funds totaling $21 million were allocated throughout the emergency

\(^\text{13}\) To maintain informant confidentiality, this letter of support is not included as an appendix because it contains names of specific individuals that are litigants in the court case.
period and specifically, the use and recipients of these funds. Additionally, the $15 million distributed to MPs to implement phase two of recovery – centered on shelter and housing – was reviewed to date, but will require additional auditing in the future. Notably, at the time of this audit, approximately $4 million in donated funds remained to be used to help victims, who were still very much in need of basic assistance in terms of food, water, clothing and shelter (Office of the Auditor General 2010:67). Below I present some key findings of the audit report regarding: the initial emergency response phase; the need for improvement among the NDC; and phase two of recovery – shelter and rehabilitation.

Emergency Relief and Recovery Phase: Review of SBD$21 Million in Expenditures

For the emergency disaster relief and recovery phase, SBD$21 million was expended from five different accounts, including the: SIG recurrent budget ($14,941,095); Disaster Relief Special Fund (DRSF) ($6,730,250); NDC Operational Account ($3,300,677); Western Provincial Disaster Committee (WPDC) ($3,583,822); and Choiseul Provincial Disaster Committee ($1,203,580). Note that account amounts total more than $21 million due to transfers between accounts resulting in overlap. The OAG raises numerous audit issues within each account, several of which I present below to highlight the OAG’s overall findings. I do not elaborate on Choiseul Provincial Disaster Committee funds here – although they too are characterized by similar mismanagement and abuse – as these funds primarily influenced victim recovery in Choiseul Province, rather than victims in Western Province.

The SIG Recurrent Budget

With respect to the SIG recurrent budget of $14,941,095, which comprises a large portion of the $21 million utilized during the emergency phase, several audit issues are raised, including: a lack of accountability of funds; large and unusual payments not related to tsunami victims; and an inadequate distribution of critical relief aid.

OAG’s review of the SIG recurrent budget of approximately $14.9 million designated for disaster victims demonstrates there is a substantial lack of accountability, transparency and documentation surrounding the use of these funds. In particular, the $14.9 million was divided into two accounts, totaling approximately $8.3 and $6.6 million. Extracted from the
audit report, Figure 5 shows that out of the $8.3 million, 73 of 121 total payments were processed with no documentation, resulting in 21% of the total expenditure being unaccounted for. Furthermore, of the $6.6 million, 27 of 45 total payments were not documented, resulting in 41% of the total expenditure being unaccounted for. OAG recommends missing documentation be produced for audit to ensure the funds were used for their intended purposes and were not illegally expended; however, given this audit report was suppressed under the current PM, OAG’s recommendations were never enacted. Overall, the use of approximately $4.5 million of the $14.9 million is utterly undocumented and unknown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regional Disaster Fund</th>
<th>$1,725,504.24 – no documentation for this amount of expenditure</th>
<th>73 out of a total of 121 payments with no documentation</th>
<th>21% of total expenditure of $8,326,308</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation</td>
<td>$2,712,352.61 - no documentation for this amount of expenditure</td>
<td>27 out of a total 45 payments with no documentation</td>
<td>41% of total expenditure of $6,614,786</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Figure 5. Unaccounted for portion of SIG recurrent budget used for disaster relief. Source: Office of the Auditor General 2010 Special Audit Report: Tsunami and Earthquake Relief Fund within the National Disaster Council (NDC) under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Honiara: Office of the Auditor General, Solomon Islands Government.

In addition to this $4.5 million, there is a total lack of accountability regarding $1.65 million that was paid directly to 11 MPs from affected constituencies, including Ghizo-Kolombangara, to fund much needed assistance in these areas (Figure 6). The use of these funds could not be accounted for as there is no NDC requirement to oversee or request documentation from MPs regarding how this money was used. OAG notes this ‘lack of requirement by the NDC increases opportunities for fund misuse and theft’ (2010:30).

Apart from undocumented and unaccounted for funds, several expenditures that are actually documented were misused or misappropriated. For example, $2.2 million is documented as boat charter payments, which is a substantial portion of relief funds. Aside from a lack of proof for some of the payments, two other specific audit issues are raised here. First, the Superintendent of Marines set the standard daily rate for boat charters during the post-disaster phase between $20,000-25,000/per day; yet, the PM and his delegates chartered a 6 day boat tour of disaster victims at $60,000/day, totaling $360,000. They provided no
Figure 6. 1.65 million in disaster relief funds given to MPs that is unaccounted for. Source: Office of the Auditor General 2010 Special Audit Report: Tsunami and Earthquake Relief Fund within the National Disaster Council (NDC) under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Honiara: Office of the Auditor General, Solomon Islands Government.

documentation or explanation to support why this excessive rate was charged. Moreover, the OAG states this money should have come from the PM’s office or an account designated specifically for “‘Other Related Disaster Assistance Costs’ so it is clear which funds are used directly for victims and which funds are for other related disaster costs” (Office of the Auditor General 2010:27). Secondly, $131,168 was expended to pay for a boat charter to deliver 15 water tanks to affected areas. The water tanks were never delivered and were returned to Honiara, resulting in a waste of resources and money “due to a lack of planning and coordination” (Office of the Auditor General 2010:27). In addition to the excessive and wasteful use of victim funds for boat charters, overtime claims provide another example of payments unrelated to victims. Specifically, an overtime claim of $288,888 was withdrawn from tsunami funds, but this payment should have been processed through the normal government payroll rather than subtracted from victim funds (Office of the Auditor General 2010:28). Moreover, OAG could not ascertain who this was actually paid to, increasing the
risk that funds were not used for their intended purpose of providing relief and assistance to disaster victims.

The OAG also documents the inadequate distribution of rations, in which the distribution of food, clothing and bedding totaling $1,783,941 was improperly coordinated. Although staff accompanied boats that were to deliver this aid and had a list of recipients, they never reported back to the NDMO or returned with the list. Thus, the OAG concludes there is no assurance this critical aid was ever delivered to disaster victims (Office of the Auditor General 2010:28). Overall, the OAG highlights throughout the report, that, a major reason aid was mismanaged or misappropriated was due to lack of coordination, planning, transparency and accountability that characterize the operations of the NDC, which is by law responsible for coordinating disaster relief.

**Establishment of Disaster Relief Special Fund (DRSF) is “Ultra Vires”**

In April 2007, the Ministry of Finance and Treasury under Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo opened a bank account entitled the DRSF. The Ministry of Home Affairs, under which the NDC operates, is responsible for natural disaster related operations and thus this Ministry should be responsible for establishing such an account. However, the signatories to this account were not from the Ministry of Home Affairs, but rather individuals within the Ministry of Finance, including the Permanent Secretary (PS) of Finance Mr. Luma Darcy and Mr. Harry Kuma (under Secretary/Finance). The establishment of this fund was found to be both unnecessary and illegal (Office of the Auditor General 2010:34). Under the 1989 NDC Act, a special fund was already created for the purpose of managing and administering all disaster related funds. Therefore, the 2007 DRSF is unnecessary because a fund serving the exact same purpose had already been established under law 18 years prior. Moreover, the establishment of the DRSF is illegal because it allowed the Minister of Finance and Treasury to override the control of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the NDC, and take control of these funds, as all payments and transactions are authorized by the PS of Finance. Interestingly, the PS of Finance, Luma Darcy happens to share the same name as the then Finance Minister, Gordon Darcy Lilo, although it is unknown by me if the two are related. As summarized by the OAG:
The existing 1989 Special Fund provides the same purpose and objective in relation to managing funds being received for the Earthquake and Tsunami Disasters, therefore, the only reason for the establishment of the 2007 Special Fund was maybe for other reasons, that may be political or fraudulent. [2010:35]

Furthermore, a report of transactions within this fund was never submitted, despite national law requiring submission of an annual report. Again, OAG states, “this lack of transparency and accountability increases the opportunity for fraud and theft” (2010:35). The OAG also notes that a total of $6,730,250.40 from local and overseas donations was deposited into the 2007 DRSF bank account established by the Finance Minister. Of this amount, approximately $4.7 million of the donations (70%) were withdrawn with absolutely no documentation. The OAG states “the lack of documentation to support these payments does not give assurance that these funds have been used for the tsunami victims” (2010:37). They recommend documentation for these unaccounted expenditures is provided for audit, a recommendation that again was not followed as this report was never tabled for discussion.

**NDC Operational Account**

The NDC operational account is another account used to manage and dispense relief funds during the time period being audited. Several audit issues are raised regarding this account. Two examples are presented here, including one situation in which donations received are higher than money deposited, and another situation in which there was a delay in the deposit of substantial donations.

Within the NDC operational account a total of $3,300,677 was deposited from April to December, 2007. Receipts were issued to people who directly donated so that receipt amounts should match deposit amounts. The OAG notes the following issues regarding this receipting process. First, two receipt copies of donations received were torn out. Second, ten receipts copies were cancelled. By law, all cancelled receipts must contain the original copy of the cancelled receipt, which the donor would return upon cancelling his donation. These ten cancelled receipts did not contain the original receipt copy raising concerns that receipts were issued for donations, but not all of the money was actually deposited. Third, no deposit slips were found for $446,700 worth of receipts. And forth, the total amount of money received according to receipts is $1.4 million, while the total according to a list provided by the NDC is $1.1 million, resulting in a $300,000 discrepancy. The OAG states this “failure to properly account for receipts and deposits…increases the opportunity for cash that is not
accounted for and loss of funds received” (2010:39). Furthermore, the “lack of controls to ensure donations received are accounted for increases the risk of theft and fraud” (Office of the Auditor General 2010:40). They recommend further investigation and disciplinary action for those involved if satisfactory explanations regarding the unaccounted for money are not achieved.

Another illustrative example regarding the SIG’s handling of relief funds stems from the NDC failing to deposit donations into their operational account until they were questioned by the OAG about the money. In particular, three donations totaling $412,419.62 were not apparent on account statements. When OAG inquired about the missing checks, they were informed the checks were misplaced; however, “two days later these checks were ‘found’ and deposited directly into the NDC Operational Account” (2010:41). In addition to the deposits being six months late, the actual check amounts deposited were higher than initially stated, one of the checks being initially understated by approximately $12,000, as Figure 7 shows (Office of the Auditor General 2010:41). Moreover, these donations should not have been deposited into the Operational account in the first place, but rather, should have been deposited into the DRSF. Overall, OAG concludes the consequences of this depositing delay are: a loss of accountability for donations; security concerns regarding substantial amounts not deposited; and that this aid has not been accessible for victims and disaster relief, which is the paramount purpose of the funds (Office of the Auditor General 2010:41).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DONOR</th>
<th>AMOUNT</th>
<th>Date Donation Received</th>
<th>Date Donation Deposited</th>
<th>Delay in Deposit</th>
<th>Deposit Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Commission of Brunei Darussalam</td>
<td>$355,618.78</td>
<td>17 May 07</td>
<td>21 Nov 07</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>$367,627.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI Vatu Community</td>
<td>$43,287.33</td>
<td>24 July 07</td>
<td>21 Nov 07</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>$43,267.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Britain Provincial Government</td>
<td>$13,513.51</td>
<td>31 July 07</td>
<td>21 Nov 07</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>$13,822.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$412,419.62</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7. Disaster fund amounts that were initially understated and deposited late – deposits were made only after the OAG inquired about the missing money. Note: Under “Amounts” are checks that were initially not deposited. A comparison of the “Amount” and “Deposit Amount” reveals donations were initially understated. Source: Office of the Auditor General 2010 Special Audit Report: Tsunami and Earthquake Relief Fund within the National Disaster Council (NDC) under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Honiara: Office of the Auditor General, Solomon Islands Government.
Western Provincial Disaster Committee (WPDC)

The WPDC was established, per policy, by the NDC to administer disaster relief at the Provincial level. A total of $3,460,949 was received by the WPDC from various sources, including the: SIG recurrent budget, DRSF, and NDC Operational Account. Out of $3,574,994 in payments made from this account, a total of $1,242,575 in payments lack documentation. In other words, approximately 36% of $3.5 million in WPDC expenditures are completely unaccounted for. Moreover, of the payments made that are actually documented, OAG notes several unusual payments that are entirely unrelated to tsunami victims, including expenses related to: alcohol, non-disaster related funeral costs, and overtime allowances. For example, accommodation expenses for a one night stay at Gizo hotel for an Isabel Provincial Minister and his delegates totaled $2,904, including one invoice for $704 spent on SolBrew (Office of the Auditor General 2010:47). Sadly, this $700 beer tab was charged to victim funds about seven weeks after the tsunami - at the very same time many victims were struggling about 2-3 miles away from Gizo hotel in make-shift camps with limited rations, water and supplies. Furthermore, details and names of the delegates are undocumented and unknown. A second example stems from a funeral expense. As OAG notes:

On 21 May 2007 an amount of $5000 was paid from this account to pay for airfares and funeral expenses for an Inland Revenue Division Officer from Gizo to attend the funeral of his adopted son in Honiara. This expenditure has no relevance and connection to the Tsunami and Earthquake Disaster and therefore should not have been processed or paid. [2010:47]

A third, but my no means final, example revolves around $52,853 in overtime paid to public officials. Overtime was paid from the WPDC account, rather than from the officials’ respective Ministries, resulting in substantial funds donated for disaster victim relief being diverted to pay for unrelated and administrative costs. Additional issues noted by the OAG in relation to the WPDC account include: a lack of documentation for expenditures, in which the WPDC provides a summary, rather than traceable records of their expenditures; and, a lack of control or security over assets purchased by the WPDC to relieve logistical pressure during the emergency phase. Many assets are now lost, damaged or being used by others, resulting in a substantial loss of disaster funds as well as key resources that may be used in future disaster situations.
**Need for Improvement within the NDC**

The OAG notes that much mismanagement and abuse of disaster funds also stems from the failings of the NDC, including: an overall lack of capacity; financial mismanagement; and a failure to follow predefined operational procedures. Specifically, when the tsunami struck in 2007, the NDC had 2 staff members, an outdated disaster response plan developed in 1987, and lacked formalized or written procedures. This lack of capacity, resources and trained staff resulted in public officers who were not experienced or briefed in relief operations distributing aid without reporting back to the NDMO that operates under the NDC. Additionally, the NDMO and Provincial Committees did not maintain a proper accounting of funds, which ‘breaches the NDC Act (1989), the Public Finance and Audit Act, and financial instructions’ (Office of the Auditor General 2010:72). Consequently, not only was the NDC not equipped to deal with disaster and relief operations, but their lack of management increased opportunities for mismanagement and fraudulent use of victim funds. For example, the OAG found that in January, 2008, $66,014 in remaining funds donated for the 2007 tsunami and earthquake within NDC’s operational account were used for other disasters that occurred in January, 2008, and other expenses unrelated to the 2007 disaster, such as a new air conditioner for the NDMO building. OAG also notes $141,705.96 was withdrawn on January 18, 2008, but no documentation was provided. Therefore, a potential excess of $200,000 in tsunami fund donations were used for purposes other than those they were donated for (Office of the Auditor General 2010:70). Moreover, after the 2007 tsunami and earthquake occurred, the OAG notes that the:

NDMO refurbished a new office building with computers, laptops, printers totaling $381,400. The NDMO has been in existence since 1989 therefore the office should have been equipped and fully operational before the April 2007 Tsunami and Earthquake disaster. It appears that when the Tsunami and Earthquake occurred NDC took the opportunity to utilize the funds that were flooding in to upgrade their offices. [Office of the Auditor General 2008:70]

From this excerpt it is clear the OAG is of the opinion that these *victim funds* could and should have been used for victim relief, rather than for upgrading the NDMO offices, which should have been achieved prior.

Aside from operational and financial failings of the NDC, the NDC also failed to follow predefined procedures for implementing phase two of recovery. In particular, the National Disaster Act (1989) dictates that following the end of the initial emergency response
phase, the NDC is to submit a report to the Technical Advisory Team (TAT). Based on this report and the recommendations of the NDC, the TAT, NGOs, and donors are to develop a reconstruction plan for phase two. OAG states:

OAG obtained a copy of this TAT Recovery Action Report. However the Director of the NDMO advised that in June 2007 the Minister of Finance at the time, sent a directive that this stage of the disaster relief as described in the “TAT Recovery Action Plan” was to be transferred to the Ministry of Finance and Treasury. This was carried out and also any funds received were transferred to the Ministry of Finance and Treasury. [Office of the Auditor General 2010:72]

Failing to follow predefined disaster relief and recovery procedures again demonstrates a lack of capacity on the part of the NDC, as well as showing another instance in which the then Finance Minister, Lilo, appears to be interfering with tsunami victim relief and recovery plans in addition to inappropriately and illegally intervening in the allocation and use of victim funds.

Given this Audit report reveals substantial misuse and abuse of disaster funds, it is unsurprising that when the government changed leadership in 2011, the report that belonged to the former cabinet and was inherited under Lilo’s cabinet was suppressed. Apart from a lack of accountability for substantial amounts of money, many funds that were accounted for were found to be misappropriated and misused, rather than going to aid disaster victims, as most donors envisioned it would. Main themes emerging from this report include that funds were: (1) misused and spent on administrative costs, logistics, and other non-victim related expenses. These expenses should have been charged to the accounts of the respective government ministries or offices involved in the expenditure, rather than charged to victim relief funds; (2) misappropriated and spent on non-victim or disaster related expenditures, like beer, unrelated funerals, and air conditioners; (3) unaccounted for altogether, as there is no paper trail or documentation regarding the allocation and use of several funds, although the money is gone; and (4) unused, as large and substantial amounts of funds remain sitting in bank accounts or un-deposited checks – an observation the OAG finds especially alarming given the basic needs of many victims are yet to be met.

The above examples illustrate how many funds were improperly utilized or misappropriated during the initial, emergency disaster response phase. Next I briefly discuss the funds used – up until the date of the audit – during the second phase of recovery focused on rehabilitation, and specifically shelter and housing.
Phase Two – Recovery and Rehabilitation: Review of SBD$15 Million in Expenditure

On January 17, 2008, $15 million was distributed to 11 MPs from affected areas to implement phase two of recovery: shelter and rehabilitation (Figure 8). Other options for implementing phase two were proposed – such as purchasing materials through a central tendering process and then distributing them to victims – but were ultimately rejected. The then Minister of Finance, who was also one of the 11 MPs who received funds, stated the reasoning behind disbursing the $15 million directly to MPs was that this approach was “in accordance with the Government’s bottom up approach polity”, which requires MPs to be accountable for their constituency’s fund allocation (Office of the Auditor General 2010:59). The OAG concludes the following regarding the allocation of $15 million directly to MPs: (1) The option to purchase material rather than writing checks to MPs would have been more transparent and accountable, and, more importantly, “the victims would be in shelter or at least see the government helping them”; (2) The provision of funds to MPs should not be allowed because there already exists an established institution through the NDC that administers and coordinates relief assistance; (3) The “bottom-up approach” referenced by the Finance Minister is “irrelevant” as disaster or relief situations “are not normal development programs” (2010:60). Furthermore, this $15 million was issued to MPs via check, despite the fact that funds allocated to MPs are “always processed as a direct transfer into their respective Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF) Accounts” (Office of the Auditor General 2010:61).

In addition to the suspect distribution of this $15 million designated for phase two, there was a delay in the collection and depositing of these funds by MPs. Specifically, as of April 2008, two checks remained to be picked-up, including: a $2,700,000 check issued for the Gizo-Kolombangara constituency and a $510,000 check for Marovo. Additionally, Figure 9 shows five other checks totaling $6,940,000 were presented to MPs, but were never deposited (Office of the Auditor General 2010:61).

Of the four out of 11 checks actually collected and deposited, two of them were deposited in full, and then withdrawn in full shortly thereafter. For example, Figure 10 shows that one check for $750,000 was deposited on 2/11/08 and then withdrawn in full on
Figure 8. $15 million (inappropriately) distributed to 11 MPs to implement shelter and housing projects. Source: Office of the Auditor General 2010 Special Audit Report: Tsunami and Earthquake Relief Fund within the National Disaster Council (NDC) under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Honiara: Office of the Auditor General, Solomon Islands Government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Bank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  North Vella la Vella</td>
<td>$1,360,000</td>
<td>ANZ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  North New Georgia</td>
<td>$750,000</td>
<td>ANZ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Ranogga/Simbo</td>
<td>$2,720,000</td>
<td>BSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  North West Choiseul</td>
<td>$1,360,000</td>
<td>BSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  West New Georgia</td>
<td>$750,000</td>
<td>BSP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong> $15,000,000.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9. Money allocated via check to MPs for disaster relief that was never deposited. Source: Office of the Auditor General 2010 Special Audit Report: Tsunami and Earthquake Relief Fund within the National Disaster Council (NDC) under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Honiara: Office of the Auditor General, Solomon Islands Government.

2/12/08, while a check for $1.36 million was deposited into a different constituency account on 2/19/08 and $1.36 million was withdrawn on 4/11/08.

Although the majority of funds for “these four constituencies have been withdrawn OAG has been advised there are still a large number of complaints regarding lack of work from these areas” (Office of the Auditor General 2010:62). Overall, OAG recommends that: the option of procuring goods is considered rather than allocating money directly to MPs; MPs provide a report to the NDC detailing how the $15 million in funds was used; and the
Figure 10. Shows two checks issued to MPs in South Choiseul and South East Vellelavella that were actually deposited but soon after withdrawn in full. Source: Office of the Auditor General 2010 Special Audit Report: Tsunami and Earthquake Relief Fund within the National Disaster Council (NDC) under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Honiara: Office of the Auditor General, Solomon Islands Government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>$15 million allocated</th>
<th>Bank Account Balance as at end of 22/4/2008</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rendova/ South New Georgia</td>
<td>1,360,000</td>
<td>32,212</td>
<td>Cheque collected on 28/1/2008 and $1.36m deposited on 29/1/2008. Balance prior to this $1.36m was $22,770.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortland/Mono</td>
<td>1,360,000</td>
<td>67,157</td>
<td>Cheque collected 28/1/2008 and $1.36m deposited on 28/1/2008. Balance prior to this $1.36m was $7,205.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Choiseul</td>
<td>1,360,000</td>
<td>497,809</td>
<td>On 19/2/2008 $1.36m was deposited and then on 11/4/2008 $1.36m was withdrawn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East Vellelavella</td>
<td>750,000</td>
<td>35,785</td>
<td>Cheque collected on 11/2/2008. $0.750m deposited on 12/2/2008 and $0.750m withdrawn on 21/2/2008.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td><strong>$4,830,000</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NDC monitor progress to see how effective the implementation of the shelter and housing projects of phase two have been (2010:62). Clearly, these recommendations have not been followed or even entertained as this audit report remains to be discussed.

The decision to allocate the $15 million to MPs had significant ramifications beyond those regarding the lack of transparency, accountability, and appropriate use of funds I just highlighted. Specifically, the decision to allocate this $15 million directly to MPs resulted in a withdrawal of donor support and funds for rehabilitation. Phase two was estimated to cost the SIG up to $40 million. It was originally envisioned that the government would commit $15 million and donors would cover the remaining balance, including overage costs (Office of the Auditor General 2010:65). Many meetings between the SIG and donors were held to determine a strategy for implementing phase two; however, late in 2007 the SIG decided to allocate the $15 million directly to MPs. It was at this point that certain donors who were willing to support the housing strategy retracted their support (Office of the Auditor General 2010:65). The understanding of the OAG is that because of “SIG actions the donors were not willing to give funds directly to MPs to manage as there was no ‘faith’ or ‘assurance’ that the
funds would be used for the right purposes” (2010:65). This lack of faith is due to the fact that there is “no strategy or mechanism in place to ensure MPs were accountable and had to report the use of these funds to SIG or donors” (Office of the Auditor General 2010:65). This lack of planning, accountability and assurance of transparency that led to a withdrawal of donor support is seen as especially negative by OAG because the SIG relies upon donors for several projects and thus should always maintain a positive business relationship with them. The OAG concludes the rapid decisions implemented by SIG may have “resulted in a housing strategy that is underfunded and not fully implemented” (2010:66). Furthermore, the OAG states that the actions of SIG may have affected future relationships with donors, resulting in reduced help and cooperation from donors. It is unclear why the SIG decided to undermine the original rehabilitation plans and allocate these funds directly to MPs. One informant suggested that MPs may have wanted control over this money and that, in the absence of this control, they may have initiated a vote of no confidence.

Before I obtained the disaster fund audit report, a provincial government official told me that ‘all the government had to do was leave that $15 million in the bank and donors would have funded the remainder of the shelter and housing project, including any overage costs’ – an assertion the audit report verifies. The OAG suggested in 2008 that the withdrawal of support due to SIG’s hasty actions could result in an underfunded and poorly implemented housing project. It is now 2013 and my data, including interviews with local villagers, NGO and government officials, household surveys, and focus groups, demonstrate the housing project was ultimately underfunded and thus not fully implemented, resulting in an incomplete recovery and rehabilitation for many Titiana and Pailongge households. For example, most received only partial building materials, many of which were of low quality or unusable, such as rotten posts. Moreover, the housing repair and replacement estimates for victims - based on a Red Cross assessment of damages – provided the basis for estimating the cost of phase two. The Red Cross assessment contained three categories of damage with concomitant costs for repair and or replacement, including: damaged houses ($2,600); collapsed houses ($9,100); and lost houses ($17,500). Household surveys show informants received significantly less than this and received $1000, $2000, and $4000, or, approximately 38%, 22% and 23%, respectively, of what villagers were initially told to expect. According to informants, they, as victims, were not only left with broken promises and insufficient aid to
rebuild with, but because SIG undercut the initial shelter and housing plan, some subsequent NGO projects were poorly implemented, which is especially evident with Oxfam’s project on Ghizo. Encapsulating this sentiment, many villagers often told me, “Help, hem no kam stre long gavman [help did not come straight (literally meaning fairly) from the government].” Lastly, to add injury to insult, the $15 million paid to MPs was actually an over-allocation of $2 million due to poor planning (Office of the Auditor General 2010:63). Despite this over-allocation, the shelter and housing project on Ghizo was somehow still severely underfunded.

**The Role of NGOs’ During Disaster Recovery: Problems with Oxfam’s Shelter Project on Ghizo**

Immediately following the tsunami, numerous NGOs and sources of external aid flowed into Solomon Islands. NGOs and aid donors participated in the initial, emergency relief phase of recovery as well as the second, rehabilitation phase focused on shelter and housing. Originally, phase two was to be executed collaboratively by the SIG, NGOs and donors and was designed to rehabilitate every victim at an upward cost of approximately $40 million. When the SIG diverted their $15 million contribution from the established joint fund – allocating it directly to MPs – donors withdrew their support for the plan, redirecting their funds through NGO networks (Office of the Auditor General 2010). This withdrawal of support created the potential for the housing strategy to be under-implemented and underfunded and left NGOs to do a piecemeal job with rehabilitation. Despite the SIG’s actions, many regions underwent successful NGO rehabilitation and housing projects. In contrast, Oxfam’s shelter project on Ghizo was ultimately problematic, underfunded, and poorly implemented. Oxfam experienced specific problems revolving around land, logistical, and timber supply issues; however, had the SIG not undermined the original rehabilitation plan, the problems Oxfam and their beneficiaries, the victims, experienced, may have been precluded.

During the initial recovery phase, NGOs like World Vision (WV), Save the Children (SC), Oxfam, Red Cross, UNICEF, Caritas, and the WWF distributed critical relief aid to disaster victims. In Titiana and Pailongge, aid included rations, drinking water, water containers, blankets, tents, clothes, lanterns, and other essential items. Kids’ toys, garden and carpenter tools, and community water tanks were also distributed. Throughout this
emergency phase, NGOs worked in multiple, overlapping areas. SC, for example, worked throughout Western Province concentrating on water purification and distribution as well as improving child well-being through “play safe areas” – tented areas with toys, children’s activities, and temporary trauma counselors. Likewise, WV helicoptered water containers, tents and food into several affected areas. And, the remnants of UNICEF tents can still be seen scattered throughout Titiana – now providing a bit of shade or covering a window.

Following the relief phase and breakdown of the collaborative rehabilitation plan, NGOs implemented the second rehabilitation phase – shelter and housing. During this phase, NGOs took on different areas within Choiseul and Western Provinces, depending on where each NGO was best equipped to help. For example: SC implemented a shelter and housing project in Choiseul; Oxfam in Ghizo; and WV worked on approximately 5000 households throughout Western Province in Simbo, Ranonga, Kolombangara, Vonavona, Rendova, Vella, and in Shortland. Each NGO had a set budget based on a previous Red Cross assessment of housing and property damage, but how NGOs decided to implement their housing strategy was flexible. According to SC and WV employees, their housing strategies were largely successful. In Choiseul for instance, SC supplied households with building materials, which were then supplemented by Choiseul MPs. MP Ken Gava of Northwest Choiseul paid for roofs after SC supplied the timber. Likewise, in South Choiseul, MP Lestie Boseto contributed by building houses to the floor level. Notably, both MPs who helped their Choiseul constituencies are also originally from Choiseul, thus they presumably have strong *wantok* connections to these areas. In addition to housing in Choiseul: another NGO replaced all canoes lost from the tsunami; Red Cross provided and replaced chainsaws and tools; and MPs provided timber mills. Regarding WV’s project, in addition to the housing materials they distributed, the MP in Ranonga provided some roofing irons. In Kolombangara where timber is plentiful and materials were not necessarily needed, MP Lilo, who is from Kolombangara, dispersed money from his rehabilitation fund. A WV informant heard Ghizo also received money from Lilo, which may explain the disbursement of $4000, $2000, and $1000 to Titiana and Pailongge households for lost, collapsed and damaged houses. On the other hand, Ghizo informants state Kolombangara villagers told them they received complete houses and solar panels – something most villagers desperately want, but cannot afford. In
contrast to SC and WV projects, the shelter and housing project Oxfam implemented on Ghizo appears less successful and far more problematic.

Initially, Oxfam planned to completely rebuild destroyed houses and supply materials to rebuild partially damaged houses. During an interview, an Oxfam employee in Honiara identified three main problems that impeded Oxfam’s success, including issues surrounding land, logistics, and timber. The first problem involving land stems from the fact that, after the tsunami, many villagers migrated inland to land on top of the hill, which is mostly government owned. Oxfam was unable to commence building because, despite repeated attempts to negotiate, the government would not permit permanent settlement on the hill, and villagers were unwilling, largely out of fear, to move back down to their original seaside locations. Land issues bled into a second major problem – logistical issues, and especially time constraints. Specifically, the project time-frame donors agreed on was too short, and further exacerbated by the fact that land issues were preventing much rebuilding. The third major problem was that building materials were in short supply. While other NGOs harvested local timber for their shelter projects, this was nearly impossible on Ghizo, which has comparatively less timber. As a result of these issues and an increasingly close deadline for completion, Oxfam decided to distribute materials to households assuming they would begin the rebuilding process themselves. Furthermore, because timber was in short supply, most households (and every household I interviewed) only received partial building materials at this time, such as posts, roofing irons, or timbers for walling – villagers chose their preference. Some materials were of such subpar quality, such as rotten timbers or posts, they were not usable. Informants note several other problems emerged at this stage that prevented rebuilding. First, several villagers who were left to rebuild on their own did not know how to build a house. Second, many who received partial materials were unable to purchase the remaining necessary materials. Third, many who were unable to rebuild because they lacked the knowledge or material to do so ultimately sold their partial building materials in order to feed themselves and their families. This characterized the first phase of Oxfam’s shelter project, which was largely unsuccessful at providing housing.
Due to this lack of success, Oxfam implemented a second phase directed at helping the most vulnerable households, including widows, disabled and elderly, who would otherwise be unable to rebuild. The goal was ‘to help those households that cannot help themselves’ and build houses for these vulnerable individuals (personal communication with Oxfam contractor, July, 2011). Oxfam completed approximately 25 houses throughout the entire island, including in Titiana, Pailongge, and several other villages, during this second and final housing project stage, which finished in the 2011 summer. While this second stage provided critical housing aid to certain individuals, numerous villagers were left with partial dwellings, insufficient materials, and an incomplete rehabilitation. Because Titiana and Pailongge were two of the most severely affected areas, most Titiana and Pailongge villagers lost their houses. Therefore, the partial building materials Oxfam supplied may have been helpful in other less affected Ghizo villages, but they largely failed to help rehabilitate Titiana and Pailongge villagers. This observation is not meant to criticize the presumably well-intentioned projects implemented by NGOs, but rather to highlight how the actions of the government undercut the initial rehabilitation plan, resulting in an underfunded and poorly implemented shelter project on Ghizo, which negatively affected the recovery of many Titiana and Pailongge villagers. Furthermore, informants feel that “everyone was affected, so everyone should get help”, not just the most ‘vulnerable’ households. Many also note that not all vulnerable (widowed, elderly, and disabled) households received this help, while certain households that did may not have actually qualified for it, but were able to appear eligible.

**IMPLICATIONS OF POLITICAL VULNERABILITY FOR TITIANA AND PAILONGGE VILLAGERS’ RECOVERY**

The Special Audit Report (SAR) of tsunami and earthquake victim relief funds demonstrates that government corruption and fraud characterize the use of substantial amounts of victim recovery aid. This reduced the total amount of aid available for victim relief, potentially making all Solomon Islanders affected by the tsunami and earthquake more vulnerable to the disaster’s impact. In addition, the SIG’s use and abuse of victim funds

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14 Vulnerable here refers to Oxfam’s definition for their project, which included elderly, widowed, and disabled individuals.
resulted in a withdrawal of donor support for the original rehabilitation plan, leaving NGOs and donors to implement their own shelter projects and creating the potential for the shelter strategy to be underfunded and under-implemented. Although many NGO projects successfully provided housing for victims, Oxfam’s Ghizo project was ultimately problematic, leaving many Titiana and Pailongge victims without shelter, making them comparatively more vulnerable to the tsunami’s impact relative to other individuals and groups in areas that were either less severely affected, or, underwent comparatively more successful NGO shelter projects. Furthermore, much of the remaining aid the SIG controlled was distributed unequally, and flowed along wantok networks and patron-client relationships. Biased aid allocation resulted in many instances in which certain individuals, groups and areas affected by the disaster received comparatively more aid than other victims and regions that were similarly or more severely affected. This biased distribution along wantok networks has significant implications for Solomon Islanders who are not connected to the wantok networks along which aid tended to flow, but especially for Titiana, who, as an immigrant community and small minority, is largely excluded from these Melanesian dominated networks altogether.
CHAPTER 6

DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL VULNERABILITY: HOW THE WANTOK SYSTEM AND IMMIGRANT STATUS SHAPED AID DISTRIBUTION AND DIFFERENTIAL RECOVERIES

As alluded to previously, disaster victims’ recovery and rehabilitation was heavily dependent upon external aid. Disaster aid distribution was ultimately problematic for two main reasons. First, government actions and corruption surrounding aid allocation reduced the overall amount of aid made available to those affected by the 2007 earthquake and tsunami, potentially making every victim more vulnerable to the disaster’s impact. Additionally, government actions weakened the initial NGO rehabilitation plan, resulting in a somewhat unsuccessful housing project on Ghizo. This placed two of the most severely affected villages – Titiana and Pailongge – at a further disadvantage in comparison to other areas that underwent more successful housing projects. Second, following this initial reduction in aid, the remaining aid was largely distributed along Melanesian dominated wantok networks, creating an unequal and biased allocation. Individuals and groups in Titiana and Pailongge are differentially connected to these wantok networks operating at multiple scales of aid distribution, including at national, provincial, NGO, and village levels. The degree to which people in Titiana and Pailongge are connected to these networks strongly influenced the amount of aid they received. Thus, Titiana and Pailongge villagers’ connection to or exclusion from these wantok networks has significant implications for their recovery and overall vulnerability to the tsunami’s impact.

Many current approaches to vulnerability attempt to identify, quantify and predict social vulnerability, either through static indicators, like income, location, and ethnicity (Morrow 1999); or by exploring how broader socio-political processes, such as national economic policies, differentially affect households rendering them more or less vulnerable to natural hazards (Wisner et al. 2004). The way in which the culturally ingrained Solomon Island wantok system ultimately had heterogeneous and indirect effects on villagers’
vulnerability, resiliency, and recovery, rather than a direct or homogenous influence, problematizes such approaches. Specifically, instead of creating vulnerability or resilience, the wantok system simultaneously did both, rendering villagers more vulnerable at certain organizational scales involved in recovery, yet resilient at others. Additionally, being of the Melanesian national majority or Micronesian minority had different implications for villagers’ connection to the wantok social networks directing aid as well as for their overall vulnerability. In the following sections I engage current approaches to vulnerability analysis and expand on how the wantok system illustrates vulnerability’s dynamic and inherently contradictory nature, which complicates less nuanced understandings that focus on quantification and prediction. I then examine survey, interview and focus group data to determine how recovery in Titiana and Pailongge was influenced by the wantok system’s effect on government aid allocation, wantok favoritism at each specific scale of aid distribution, and immigrant status.

VULNERABILITY ANALYSIS: TOWARDS A MORE DYNAMIC, MULTI-SCALE APPROACH

The vulnerability approach to natural disasters stresses the role social factors play in disaster impact severity and recovery (Kasperson et al. 2010). Central to this approach is the notion that, although natural hazards strike human populations of all types, the severity and degree to which people are affected and their ability to recover is in large measure determined by the social vulnerability that characterizes them (Adger 2006; Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Torrence and Grattan 2002; Wisner et al. 2004). For example, Dyer and McGoodwin (1999) examine how relief aid following Hurricane Andrew in 1994 contributed to the recovery of commercial fishermen in Louisiana, but not Florida. This difference was due to Florida state law and the lack of political clout and ethnic marginalization that characterize Florida’s commercial fishermen. Furthermore, a 1991 cyclone that struck the southern coast of Bangladesh killed 80% of inhabitants in low-lying coastal areas, who lived in these marginal regions because of population pressure, acute poverty, and the need for a tiny piece of cultivatable land (Zaman 1999). Conversely, death rates were limited to 5-10% in villages just a few kilometers inland (Zaman 1999).
Recognizing that social vulnerability determines natural disaster outcomes to a considerable extent is necessary for understanding differential disaster impacts and recovery; however, identifying and quantifying particular sources of vulnerability has proven difficult (Adger 2006; Wisner and Luce 1993). Many scholars note this difficulty arises from the locally-situated, historically-specific and dynamic nature of vulnerability (Bolin 2007; Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Wisner et al. 2004). Moreover, the context-specific nature of vulnerability makes any generalization of vulnerability indicators for disaster planning purposes problematic (Adger 2006). For example, equating poverty with vulnerability is overly general and unhelpful – even though the two are often highly correlated – because individuals with similar incomes do not suffer equally during disaster situations (Wisner and Luce 1993).

Some researchers have attempted to address this issue and develop techniques to quantify vulnerability to make vulnerability analysis more generalizable, and thus, applicable to disaster planning. Morrow (1999), for example, argues quantification can be achieved by identifying, mapping, and integrating community vulnerability into GIS systems; however, she provides little direction for accomplishing this, aside from the need for local participation. Wisner et al. (2004) have also addressed this difficulty through development of the Pressure-and-Release (PAR) model, which examines how the structural causes of vulnerability translate into the specific conditions of vulnerability that characterize individuals and groups in disaster situations. These conditions can then be mapped at the micro-level to illustrate and identify which households are more vulnerable to the impact of natural hazards. Although Wisner et al. provide a useful model for conceptualizing how social vulnerability manifests in disaster contexts, operationalizing the PAR model necessarily simplifies the causes of vulnerability, thus limiting the ability to quantify or predict relationships (Adger 2006).

Rather than generalized approaches that ignore local context, variability and complexity, many argue in-depth, on-site ethnographic research focused at household and individual levels is a more appropriate approach for assessing vulnerability profiles (Adger 2006; Oliver-Smith 2002; Wisner and Luce 1993). Using such an approach, I attempt to move beyond generalizations through ethnographically exploring how the wantok system dynamically and differentially influenced tsunami recovery among Titiana and Pailongge
households. Because disaster aid tended to flow according to the exchange principles and social networks outlined by the *wantok* system, the degree to which villagers were connected to or excluded from these exchange networks heavily influenced the aid they received and their recovery. Households less connected to these networks tended to receive disproportionately less aid, making them overall more vulnerable to the disaster. However, the degree to which Titiana and Pailongge villagers were hooked into the *wantok* networks largely dictating aid flow is both dependent upon and transformative across various organizational scales of aid distribution, including at national, provincial, NGO, and village levels. Therefore, villagers’ social connections at one scale, such as the national, may have rendered them more disconnected from the *wantok* networks dominating aid distribution and thus more vulnerable, while at other scales, like the provincial and NGO, villagers’ *wantok* networks may have contradictory effects, resulting in a neutral or advantageous influence on the aid they received and their recovery. This process is especially true for the Melanesian village of Pailongge, while for the immigrant community of Titiana, the *wantok* system tended to generate vulnerability at a greater number of scales.

**THE WANTOK SYSTEMS’ INFLUENCE ON GOVERNMENT AID DISTRIBUTION**

Broadly, quantitative survey data suggest the *wantok* system strongly influenced government aid distribution in Titiana and Pailongge, but with different implications for each village. During household surveys, we asked Titiana (n=51) and Pailongge (n=23) villagers: “*Did the wantok system have any effect on the way aid/help/food/infrastructure was distributed [by the government] following the 2007 tsunami? Explain.*” Among Titiana villagers, 94.1% stated yes, while only 3.9% said no and one was unsure (2%). In contrast, only 52.2% of Pailongge informants stated yes, while 43.5% said no, and one was unsure (4.3%).

I also ran a second, more conservative data analysis. I refined this question after completing several initial surveys, making it more specific and asking if the *wantok* system influenced aid distribution at the *government level*, rather than in general. Although many initial informants referenced the government, unprompted, we did not question approximately 15 Titiana informants in this newly standardized manner; therefore, I cross-checked all 74 responses. As a result, I changed all responses not referencing the *wantok*
system’s influence on aid distribution specifically at the government level from “yes” to “no”. This more conservative treatment of the data may be unnecessary – as it is unknown if these informants would have still answered yes had they been asked specifically about the government. Results from the second analysis remained the same for Pailongge and reveal the following for Titiana: yes (84.3%), no (13.7%), and unsure (2%). Results from both analyses reveal the true “yes” value for Titiana lies between >84% to <95% (Figure 11).

Using the more conservative result (with unsure cases (n=2) deleted for analytical purposes), a two-way frequency table and Chi-square analysis demonstrates statistically significant differences between Titiana and Pailongge, yielding a value of 8.381, p<.004. Moreover, Fisher’s Exact Test – a similar, but more conservative statistical test designed to deal with smaller sample sizes – generated a value of p<.006, revealing similarly significant results. Specifically, a comparison of expected versus observed counts reveals that we should expect more “yes” answers in Pailongge and more “no” answers in Titiana than observed, demonstrating Titiana villagers recognize the wantok system’s influence on government aid allocation at a significantly higher rate than Pailongge villagers. Overall, statistical tests establish that there is a <1% chance that the differential rate at which Titiana and Pailongge villagers identify the wantok systems’ influence on government aid distribution is due to random chance, rather than specific differences between the two groups – the most prominent difference being Titiana’s immigrant or minority status.

Figure 11. Answers to the question: “Did the wantok System influence how the government distributed aid?”
ARTICULATION OF THE WANTOK SYSTEM, AID DISTRIBUTION AND VULNERABILITY AT MULTIPLE ORGANIZATIONAL SCALES

While the wantok system affected government aid distribution in general, it also had tangible effects on aid recipients and amounts at each organizational scale of aid distribution, including at national, provincial, NGO and village levels. Using quantitative and qualitative survey, interview and focus group data, I highlight specific instances in which the wantok system affected the aid Titiana and Pailongge villagers received at these various scales. The extent to which wantok favoritism influenced aid allocation at each level has important implications for the differential recovery Titiana and Pailongge villagers experienced.

The National Level

At the national level, the wantok system’s influence on government aid distribution affected both Titiana and Pailongge’s recovery. In Titiana, focus groups, surveys and interviews reveal that the government’s allocation of disaster aid was biased and unequal. Aid distribution was not proportional to disaster impact, resulting in areas minimally affected by the tsunami receiving equivalent or larger aid amounts relative to the most affected areas, like Titiana. Informants attribute this outcome to the fact that certain government officials controlling aid distribution kept some of it and/or allocated it to their own political supporters, friends, family and wantok before distributing the “leftovers” to Titiana. For instance, after the tsunami the country of Kiribati sent money specifically for Kiribati victims in the Solomons, yet, Titiana never received it. When one villager inquired about the money, the SIG replied that, ‘It was lost in the bank.’ Therefore, the national government diverted substantial aid amounts away from intended recipients.

Like Titiana, biased national aid allocation also affected Pailongge. An example revolving around MP Lilo – who was responsible for distributing aid from the national government to his constituency, Ghizo-Kolombangara – demonstrates this. In particular, there appears to be a differential distribution of aid between Ghizo and Kolombangara Islands, in which Lilo helped Kolombangara comparatively more. Because this distribution occurred at an inter-island scale, it negatively affected both Titiana and Pailongge. In Titiana, focus group (n=3) participants explain that affected Kolombangara households received complete houses, solar panels, outboard motors and canoes, while Titiana households
primarily received food and other relief supplies, in addition to the partial building materials Oxfam later supplied. Informants state Lilo helped Kolombangara more than Ghizo because he is from Kolombangara, thus implying he has family, wantok and political supporters there. Multiple interviews and surveys (n=3) in Titiana further support this assertion. For example:

*Wantok system hem no save out* [the wantok system it does not know how to get out] – it is a part of life here… Solomon Islanders shared aid among themselves first…wantok system very strong in government and affected aid distribution. For example, MP Lilo from Kolombangara gave a lot of help to Kolombangara.

[Titiana, female, 64]

*Wantok system barava* [is very] strong here. This is the system here for educated people, politicians and everyone. For example, people in the government helped their own wantok or homeland within their constituency, even though it is the constituency as a whole that elected these officials. [Titiana, male, 59]

[The] piggery or chicken project was sent to Kolombangara instead of Titiana because people with the power to distribute aid have wantok in Kolombangara. Also, Kiribati sent aid to Kiribati victims but the victims never received it.

[Titiana, male, 47]

Overall, villagers feel that because Titiana, as a minority, has no wantok or Kiribati people in the government, this biased manner of aid distribution negatively affected their recovery. They feel if they had Kiribati government representatives they would have “recover[ed] good” because they would have received more help (Titiana focus group participants).

Like Titiana, Pailongge villagers also recognize wantok favoritism at the national level and aid differences between Ghizo and Kolombangara, although they note it with considerable less frequency and detail. According to Pailongge surveys (n=2), Kolombangara received solar while Ghizo did not. For example:

Aid came from overseas and then some people within the government and parliament kept some aid and money for themselves - in their pocket - and helped their own wantok which is a problem. If you have a good MP or government official then the wantok system is not a problem, but if you do not have a good MP then the wantok system is a problem. When the tsunami came the aid that followed was distributed in a one-sided and biased way that favored the wantok of those who distributed aid. For example, Lilo gave solar to Kolombangara but not Ghizo, even though he promised to because Lilo is from Kolombangara.…

[Pailongge, male, 80]

Although MP Lilo was responsible for distributing disaster funds at his disposal to both islands in his constituency, Kolombangara appears to have received more. This differential distribution is initially perplexing, given the tsunami’s impact was in general
more severe in many Ghizo villages in contrast to the impact on Kolombangara; however, in the context of *wantok* favoritism, combined with the fact that Lilo originates from Kolombangara, the reason underlying the comparatively higher quality and quantity of aid Kolombangara received becomes more apparent. Ultimately, at the national constituency level, Ghizo, in comparison to Kolombangara, appears at a disadvantage, making both Titiana and Pailongge more vulnerable to the disaster.

**The Provincial Level**

Biased aid practices trickled down to smaller scales below the national government, occurring at the provincial or regional level as well, including within the provincial government and other groups involved at this level. This affected aid distribution on both inter and intra-island scales, which has important, but differential, implications for Titiana and Pailongge’s recovery.

On an inter-island scale, *wantok* favoritism negatively affected both Titiana and Pailongge. Several Titiana and Pailongge villagers note that many distributing aid in Western Province, such as NDC or Ghizo disaster committee workers, preferentially helped their own *wantok* in areas outside Ghizo, negatively affecting the amount of aid Titiana and Pailongge received. For example, surveys generated these statements regarding aid allocation at the inter-island level:

Aid should have come [to informant] but instead it went to other provinces, like Choiseul or Vella, who were not as affected by the tsunami as Ghizo. This is because people that have the power to distribute aid, such as people in the NDC, had *wantok* in these other provinces. [Titiana, male, 31]

Aid or things you are supposed to receive don't always get received. For example, in the school they were supposed to receive supplies like chairs and supplies for the kids but they never received these supplies, but the school in Vella did receive this aid. This is because in Vella they are Melanesian and Titiana they didn't get anything because they are Micronesian. [Titiana, female, 38]

[The *wantok* system is] *barava* [extremely] strong. *Wantok* system big problem, people who work within government ministries looked to help their own *wantok*. For example, one man in Morovo worked in aid assistance office in Ghizo. When person from Simbo or Gilbertese, for example, would come to get help [they would] be told to come back tomorrow or that aid was gone. If informant was Morovo he would receive things and be able to ask for things and receive them quickly - this is the *wantok* system. [Pailongge, male, 57]
…when aid came in a Ranonga man had the power to distribute this aid in Ghizo and Ranonga, but this man diverted aid to Ranonga. The same process occurred with a Kolombangara man, who diverted aid that came for Ghizo to Kolombangara. Need an "independent" person to distribute aid. [Pailongge, male, 41]

Underground deals. Wantok bisnis - government distributed aid to friends and their wantok and then only a portion of aid was distributed transparently. For example, NDC - government sent money to NDC and money was diverted to different places. [Pailongge, male, 59]

These statements illustrate how, even after the national government allocated aid to lower levels for further distribution among the provinces and islands, wantok networks continued influencing aid amounts and recipients. Likewise, biased aid allocation also occurred at an intra-island level within Ghizo, as the following survey statements evidence:

Aid was slow to come. Then when aid came, the government controlled its distribution and helped their own wantok more and helped them first. Also, no Micronesians in the Provincial government, who controlled aid distribution in Ghizo, so we received less. Aid must come to the people, not through the government in Ghizo – we expected aid but didn’t receive what they should have in comparison to wantok of power brokers. Aid distributed unfairly. [Titiana, male, 68]

[Informant and] people here were really affected by the tsunami - highest death rate here in Titiana - but a lot of aid went to the wantok of the people who had power to distribute aid, for example, [to] Simbo [people] – [this is] wantok bisnis….. For example, when food was delivered to Mile 3 they got noodles or rice whereas people in areas that had wantok with the power to distribute aid got corn beef, or nicer food… [Titiana, male, 49]

When aid was delivered to Ghizo, people with the power to distribute that aid helped their own wantok much more than they helped the informants. For example, if an aid distributor has a wife with a family in another village they will get more help. The wantok system creates corruption in the government, thus the wantok system within the government should be stopped. [Pailongge, male, 51]

These excerpts show how wantok favoritism on Ghizo negatively affected the amount of aid Titiana and Pailongge villagers received; but, evidence suggests Titiana may have been further disadvantaged relative to Pailongge on an intra-island scale. In particular, Titiana focus group (n=3) participants state that Ghizo’s provincial government official disbursed comparatively more aid to Pailongge than Titiana. Pailongge also received higher quality aid, including milk, coffee, and canned meats, while Titiana received cheaper food stuffs such as taio (canned [tuna]). Informants said this provincial member helped Pailongge more because most Pailongge villagers politically support and vote for him, whereas most in Titiana do not.
Notably, several Pailongge villagers also work, or have worked, for him. As one Titiana villager summarizes, “if you don’t vote for the winning candidate, you must wait until their term is over to receive help” (female, 49).

In contrast to Titiana, Pailongge villagers do not assert they received less aid than Titiana from their provincial member. Furthermore, some Pailongge villagers see this member as a source of help. For example, one Pailongge informant considers this provincial member’s wife as one of the most important people in her life because if the informant needs help, she can ask this individual (social network survey, female, 34). Additionally, another villager noted that, during the disaster relief phase, he could ask this member for more food when needed (male, 80). Based on statements from both villages, it’s reasonable to conclude that if this provincial member practiced favoritism during disaster relief, it placed Titiana, rather than Pailongge, at a disadvantage. Conversely, Pailongge’s socio-economic and political connections to this provincial member may have been advantageous for certain Pailongge households, making them less vulnerable to the disaster.

The NGO Level

Survey, interview and focus group data indicates the wantok system potentially influenced NGO aid distribution as well. In particular, NGOs like World Vision (WV) and Save the Children (SC) are aware the wantok system can influence their projects, whereas this is unclear for Oxfam, suggesting their Ghizo project was susceptible to wantok favoritism. Several Titiana and Pailongge villagers affirm wantok favoritism ultimately affected Oxfam’s project. Aside from Oxfam, the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Salvation Army (SA) aid Pailongge proper received may have resulted from this community’s connection to certain political, social or wantok networks.

Interviews with WV, SC and Oxfam employees demonstrate serious potential exists for the wantok system to influence NGO projects and aid allocation. For example, a WV employee explains there must be ‘a balance with local staff because it is second nature for these people to try to bring benefits to their own wantok’. He identifies ways around this problem, including: bringing in “outsiders” or “neutral people”; having “clear, documented selection criteria for beneficiaries” – so aid recipients are predefined and fixed; and maintaining an “open recruitment process” in which related persons (wantoks) cannot hire
one another. Moreover, he explains ‘local staff will warn him about the wantok system in the
government and identify individuals who may try to pull aid into their own village’. “You
need to have cultural informants,” he states, ‘because you can’t take people out of their
environment, culture, or the wantok system, so you must try and balance things and create
checks and also work with the wantok system’. Like WV, a SC employee also appears aware
of the potential for wantok bisnis. He notes a SC project strength was that they were already
well established in their project area, Choiseul; had local knowledge; and had approximately
180 staff members trained to maintain appropriate codes of conduct, respect for gender and
other culturally relevant behaviors. For example, ‘if one’s wantok(s) want to jump on a boat
or transport with material, SC’s policy is they cannot because of safety and insurance
policies’. These types of training and policies allowed SC to effectively implement their
housing project. In contrast to WV and SC’s cultural awareness, the wantok system was not
mentioned in any of the four interviews conducted with Oxfam workers, including with: a
contractor, a local Melanesian staff member, a project manager, and a Honiara employee. In
fairness, only WV was asked directly about the wantok system, but Oxfam’s apparent lack of
awareness suggests wantok favoritism may have affected their project.

Multiple Titiana and Pailongge villager statements made during surveys, interviews
and focus groups support the notion that wantok favoritism affected Oxfam’s Ghizo housing
project. Specifically, Oxfam hired locals to help implement their project, who – based on
field observations and informant statements – were all Melanesian. Local staff then looked
for their “frens [friends]” on the list of beneficiaries and disproportionately helped them over
others. Informant responses regarding if the wantok system influenced aid distribution
illustrate this process:

Yes. For example, the Solomon Islanders that worked for Oxfam engaged in
wantok bisnis; they helped their own wantok more with things such as timber,
rather than helping everyone equally. [Titiana, male, 43]

Yes. For example, NGOs came to help, but the people who worked for the NGOs
were Solomon Islanders [Melanesians] and they created a biased aid distribution,
in which the tsunami victims got less help in comparison to the wantok of the
NGO staff. The NGO staff helped themselves and their own wantok. For example,
Titiana got tuna while other areas got corned beef. Also, the wantok system
affected communities because this unequal aid distribution created anger and
fighting. [Titiana, male, 50]
We received a little bit, but some other places received a lot because the wantok system. For example, some people received complete houses because the people who organized this aid made deals and engaged in favoritism. [Titiana, male, 37]

People in the government and working for aid organizations and NGOs helped and favored their own wantok by giving them the aid whereas they left out those who were not their wantok. [Pailongge, male, 56]

Favoritism. Wantok system is very big (both before and after tsunami). Whatever help comes in, people with the power to distribute aid, either in the government or within the local staff of NGOs, will help their own wantok. [Pailongge, male, 46]

Ultimately, it is not feasible to verify the accuracy of such statements; but, based on NGOs’ differential cultural awareness and numerous informant statements, I reasonably conclude that some local staff employed by Oxfam likely engaged in wantok favoritism when helping distribute aid. At a minimum, it is plausible certain local staff members directed more timber, building supplies, or food aid towards their wantok. At a maximum, it is possible much larger amounts of aid, such as entire houses, were directed biasedly towards staff members’ wantok. The fact that these local staff members were all Melanesian implies the beneficiaries of this biased aid distribution were predominantly Melanesian. In other words, while wantok favoritism within NGO projects may have negatively influenced the recovery of both Melanesians and Micronesians, it is principally only Melanesians who also stand to benefit.

Accordingly, the substantial aid Pailongge proper received from the SA is possibly related to wantok favoritism. In particular, the PNG SA built 15 complete houses in Pailongge proper – one for each household. These houses, plus a portion of the 25 houses Oxfam completed on Ghizo, including five in Titiana and five in Pailongge, comprise the only complete houses built in both villages combined, resulting in 20 complete houses in Pailongge and five in Titiana. Given that approximately one hundred houses were completely destroyed between the two villages (Office of the Auditor General 2010), it begs the question as to how it is that every single household in the small community of Pailongge proper managed to receive a complete house with labor included.

Numerous informal interviews and surveys (n=19) with Pailongge villagers suggest several reasons why the PNG SA ultimately built houses in Pailongge proper. One primary reason centers on land dispute; other potential reasons suggest some sort of political or wantok favoritism. The SA initially planned to build on Rendova Island, but did not due to a land dispute there. The NGO wanted to build where land ownership was clearly defined and
undisputed. Most Pailongge informants acknowledge this is why the SA built in Pailongge proper, where a kin group headed by a chief owns a clearly defined territory, including the seaside region and adjacent hillside, April 2, where the houses were built. Although undisputed land ownership ultimately allowed the SA to build in Pailongge proper, it remains unclear as to why the NGO came from Rendova to here, rather than another area with clear land ownership. How did the SA find Pailongge? Responses to this question support approximately six reasons, five of which revolve around political and wantok favoritism:

First, a Pailongge proper villager said that the MP for Simbo-Rendova referred the SA to Pailongge, which needed help. Pailongge has tangible ties to Simbo. Specifically, Simbo people founded Pailongge, most non-native Pailongge villagers originate or have parents from Simbo, and most Pailongge villagers identify Simbo as their primary language. Because geographic, kinship, and linguistic ties help define wantok networks, the Simbo-Rendova MP’s actions, if true, point to wantok favoritism.

Second, multiple Titiana informants and a few Pailongge informants think the aid was directed to Pailongge proper because of political favoritism. Specifically, most to all Pailongge proper villagers voted for Ghizo’s provincial member, who many also work or have worked for. Therefore, informants speculate this member directed the aid towards Pailongge proper. Moreover, a Pailongge informant from Simboro stated this provincial member directed aid to Pailongge proper rather than any other Pailongge community because the family there politically supports, votes and works for him. Upon asking this member how the SA knew about Pailongge, he replied he didn’t know, but thought the NGO may have gone around and spoke with villagers about land tenure.

Third, several Pailongge informants, most from Pailongge proper, state the SA asked MP Lilo of Ghizo-Kolombangara where they should build and he directed them to Pailongge proper. Why would the SA ask Lilo? One informant said the Simbo-Rendova MP sent the NGO to MP Lilo, but no other direct explanations were given. Furthermore, why did Lilo send the NGO specifically to Pailongge proper? Several informants said this was because Lilo knew or found out their land was secured and registered; however, another informant stated Lilo talked with a Pailongge proper villager (one of the chief’s sons) living in Honiara, who then directed Lilo to his village where land was registered and could be built on.
Accordingly, the fourth explanation for why the SA came to Pailongge proper revolves around the chief’s son. Two informants in neighboring Simboro heard that the chief’s son heard about the SA aid and found a way to contact them and direct the housing aid to Pailongge proper. A third informant from Pailongge proper stated the chief’s son was able to direct the SA aid to their village because he talked with Lilo in Honiara after Lilo became aware of the aid package. When discussing whether he considers his wantok as an advantage or disadvantage, this same informant stated that, “[the chief’s son] is my wantok and he told the SA to go to April 2. So sometimes wantok is good because they think of their own people” (male, 50).

Fifth, two Pailongge survey participants and a Titiana villager think “someone” from Pailongge proper was able to seek out the SA and direct the aid package to their kin group.

Sixth, one Pailongge informant explained the SA prayed to god, who told them to go to Pailongge. In addition to these six explanations, about a quarter of informants formally interviewed about this process were unsure why the NGO came to Pailongge proper.

Although secure land title provides an important foundational reason for why the SA ultimately built in Pailongge proper, the question remains as to how and why the NGO came specifically to Pailongge proper, which is presumably not the only area with secure land title. Land in Titiana, for example, is registered and corporately owned by a trust of villagers; although it is reasonable to assume the SA project may have been unsuitable for Titiana, where the population is much larger and land tenure divisions between households are less clearly defined. Regardless, among all disaster-affected regions, Pailongge proper is very likely not the only area with secure land title. The majority of responses imply some form of political or wantok link facilitated the channeling of this aid to Pailongge proper. Aside from prayer, there is ultimately no explanation for why the SA came to or found out about Pailongge, other than informant responses stating the NGO was directed there by individuals that are connected to the village via political, social, kinship or wantok networks, thus illustrating how wantok networks potentially, and often do, influence the direction and recipients of disaster aid.

If secure land title is truly the only reason the SA came to Pailongge proper, which evidence suggests otherwise, then the reason Pailongge proper received this aid and other areas did not can still be explained in terms of social factors. In particular, because the kin
group has secure land title the SA built here. Family ownership of land is related to social organization and land tenure practices. Therefore, a lack of this specific form of social organization/land tenure precluded many other groups and areas, including socio-culturally distinct immigrant communities, from receiving the SA aid package, overall making them more vulnerable to the tsunami’s impact. Conversely, the social organization and land tenure that characterizes the Pailongge proper kin group ultimately made them more resilient to the tsunami’s impact.

At the NGO level, *wantok* favoritism had implications for both Titiana and Pailongge. Individuals in both villages were negatively affected when local Melanesian Oxfam staff preferentially helped their own *wantok*, rather than helping all victims on a basis proportional to their needs. Additionally, both Titiana and Pailongge villagers outside the settlement area of Pailongge proper were at a disadvantage because they were not connected to the *wantok* networks that likely channeled the SA aid to Pailongge proper. Beyond this, *wantok* favoritism at the NGO level appears to have further disadvantaged the immigrant village of Titiana. In particular, all NGO aid that was distributed biasedly via *wantok* favoritism was channeled through Melanesian dominated socio-political networks, thus precluding the Micronesian village of Titiana from receiving it. Therefore, while biased NGO aid distribution may have negatively affected both Titiana and Pailongge, it is only Pailongge villagers that also benefited from it.

**The Village Level**

To an extent, Titiana and Pailongge villagers similarly recognize the *wantok* system caused biased aid distribution at national, provincial and NGO scales. Despite these similarities, Titiana villagers recognize this process with far greater magnitude and detail. For example, only 13.7% of Titiana villagers did not explicitly state the *wantok* system influenced aid distribution at the government level. Furthermore, all but one “unsure” informant (98%) acknowledge its influence at one level or another. In contrast, many Pailongge villagers recognize the *wantok* system’s influence on aid only at the level of the village (34.8%) or not at all (8.7%). For example:

Within the government *wantok* system had no affect; within the community, leaders spoiled aid distribution as community leaders were selfish and kept aid and did not share it equally and gave more to own families. [Pailongge, male, 38]
Government distributed aid straight, but middlemen in community did not and people with power to distribute this aid helped themselves and the people they are close to and their *wantok*. [Pailongge, male, 44]

Government distributed aid straight, but community leaders selfish and did not distribute aid fairly when it reached the community. Leaders kept aid for themselves or helped their friends. [Pailongge, female, 57]

Everyone got the same help and the *wantok* system did not affect aid distribution or else people would have argued about why they did not receive anything. [Pailongge, male, 36]

Many Titiana villagers similarly acknowledge individuals practiced *wantok* favoritism once aid reached the village. For instance, each Titiana settlement, such as Mile 3, nominated a committee to: go to Ghizo; collect the aid the Ghizo committee designated for Titiana; and distribute it among community members. Two focus groups state some committee members shared aid unequally, keeping higher qualities or quantities for themselves and/or their *wantok*. The third focus group, two of whose participants served on these community committees, did not mention this problematic aid distribution specifically at the community committee level. These mixed results, in which some see *wantok* favoritism within the village while others don’t, are corroborated by interviews and surveys as well.

Once aid trickled down to the village, *wantok* favoritism influenced its distribution among Titiana and Pailongge community members, placing certain households and individuals in each village at an advantage or disadvantage. Villagers controlling aid allocation and/or their *wantoks* likely benefitted from this biased distribution. Conversely, those not involved in village aid distribution or not socially connected to these distributors, frequently received lower quality or quantities of aid. To be clear, it is understandable that, during crises, individuals help their own kin and social network. My purpose is not to vilify them, but rather, to show that *wantok* networks also affected how community members shared aid, thus influencing how aid was distributed from the top to the bottom at all levels, rendering certain groups and individuals extremely vulnerable to the disasters’ impact, while making others more resilient.

Community level *wantok* networks not only influenced aid allocation, but also general recovery efforts. In other words, *wantok* networks influenced the material and nonmaterial help individuals received. Specifically, surveys conducted in Titiana (n=51) and Pailongge (n=23) demonstrate individuals’ intra-village social connections influenced things
such as their ability to acquire food, water, and rebuild their homes. We asked: “How did your wantok affect the following aspects of your household’s recovery (Were they an advantage, disadvantage, or had no effect)? Explain: 1. Agriculture/food/crops availability 2. Water supply 3. Housing 4. Fishing 5. Land availability 6. Money 7. Community cooperation” (Table 9).

Table 9. Answers to the Question: “How Did Your Wantok Affect the Following Aspects of Your Household’s Recovery?” (n=74)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Advantage</th>
<th>Disadvantage</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>No Affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture/food/crop availability</td>
<td>Pailongge</td>
<td>17.4% (4)</td>
<td>52.2% (12)</td>
<td>8.7% (2)</td>
<td>21.7% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>43.1% (22)</td>
<td>19.6% (10)</td>
<td>5.9% (3)</td>
<td>31.4% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water supply</td>
<td>Pailongge</td>
<td>13.0% (3)</td>
<td>56.5% (13)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30.4% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>25.5% (13)</td>
<td>43.1% (22)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31.4% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Pailongge</td>
<td>34.8% (8)</td>
<td>52.2% (12)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
<td>37.3% (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>39.2% (20)</td>
<td>21.5% (11)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31.4% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing</td>
<td>Pailongge</td>
<td>30.5% (7)</td>
<td>39.0% (9)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30.5% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>45.1% (23)</td>
<td>21.5% (11)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
<td>31.4% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land availability</td>
<td>Pailongge</td>
<td>26.1% (6)</td>
<td>17.4% (4)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>56.5% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>25.5% (13)</td>
<td>19.6% (10)</td>
<td>3.9% (2)</td>
<td>51% (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>Pailongge</td>
<td>13.0% (3)</td>
<td>26.1% (6)</td>
<td>8.7% (2)</td>
<td>52.2% (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>21.6% (11)</td>
<td>21.6% (11)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>56.9% (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community cooperation</td>
<td>Pailongge</td>
<td>4.3% (1)</td>
<td>34.8% (8)</td>
<td>34.8% (8)</td>
<td>26.1% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>27.5% (14)</td>
<td>23.5% (12)</td>
<td>2.0% (1)</td>
<td>47.1% (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average for all categories</td>
<td>Pailongge</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range for each category</td>
<td>Pailongge</td>
<td>4.3 - 34.8%</td>
<td>17.4 - 56.5%</td>
<td>8.7 - 34.8%</td>
<td>13 – 56.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Titiana</td>
<td>21.6 - 45.1%</td>
<td>19.6 – 43.1%</td>
<td>2 – 5.9%</td>
<td>31.4 – 56.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, informants that consider their wantok an “advantage” to their household’s recovery regarding agriculture/food/crops availability explain their wantok shared food with them, or, they shared with each other (balanced reciprocity). Conversely, informants consider their wantok a “disadvantage” when their wantok did not share, and/or frequently relied on them for food – often making the informant’s own food supply short. A middle ground also exists, in which wantok are seen as an advantage and disadvantage. For example, one Titiana villager describes that when he had enough his wantok came and ate; but, when he did not his wantok helped him – “balance”, he says. For water supply, advantage refers to when wantoks helped provide or build a water source, such as a rain tank, well or stand-pipe. Disadvantage refers to when the informant’s water supply: became depleted from sharing with wantok,
especially during dry periods; was “dirtied” or “spoiled” because wantoks use it to wash or as a “toilet”; and was used by wantoks, but they did not help build it. For housing, advantage means wantok helped rebuild the informant’s house, sheltered the informant, or provided building supplies. In contrast, disadvantage refers to the informants’ wantok not helping rebuild, staying with the informants, or both. For fishing, advantage means the informant and his wantok shared their catches, equipment, and canoes; fished together; or, the informant does not fish, but his wantok gave him fish. Disadvantage means the informant “has to share their fish”, wantok took the informant’s canoe, or wantok didn’t help the informant with fish or fishing. For example, one informant sells his catch at the market and his wantok come take fish without paying. He says, “you must help [your wantok], but not every time – so this is a disadvantage” (male, 47). For land availability, advantage means wantoks shared land, gave the informant land, or did not dispute land ownership. Disadvantage means wantoks wouldn’t share or disputed land ownership. For some informants, the government, rather than wantok, affected land availability. In Titiana in Mile 3, for example, the government owns the land, won’t let villagers register it, and have asked them to move. These Kiribati informants think if they were “Solomon Islanders” (Melanesian) the government would let them register. In Pailongge, most of the hill where many live is also government land. Informants say the government has not asked them to move and will allow registration, but some haven’t registered yet because it is too expensive. For money, advantage means wantoks gave the informant money, both parties helped each other with money, or wantoks do not ask for money (except for emergencies, some added). As a disadvantage, the informant must share their money with wantoks; wantoks borrow money – often without repaying; and informants cannot save because they are always helping wantok with things like food and money. Lastly, for community cooperation, informants state their wantoks are an advantage when they cooperate and contribute to community planning and projects, and a disadvantage when they do not. When wantok are considered both an advantage and disadvantage for any given factor, it usually implies wantoks sometimes help and sometimes do not, or, that both parties must help each other. For all factors, when one’s wantok has no effect, it generally means either their wantok lives elsewhere; the informants feel everyone struggled “seleva [by themselves]” to help their own family, so wantoks conferred no advantage or disadvantage; or the informant and their wantok do not share food, water or money, so there is no effect.
Although it seems informants generally see their wantok as an advantage when they help them and a disadvantage when they don’t, or they rely on the informants too heavily, this is not a definitive pattern. For example, with water one informant states his wantok are a disadvantage because ‘they complain when he uses their water supply too much’. So his wantok is helping him, but not unyieldingly, making them a disadvantage. Moreover, another informant states his wantok was an advantage because his ‘wantok uses his water supply, so he is helping them, and this is good’. Thus, the informant is the one helping, but he sees that as advantageous or beneficial. Likewise, with housing one informant says their wantok is an advantage because they helped him rebuild, but also because he let his wantok stay in his house during recovery, thus seeing both helping and receiving help as advantages. Likewise, with money one informant says he has money so he can help his wantok when needed, which is an advantage. Another informant considers his wantok a disadvantage regarding money, but is not upset about it; rather, he just finds it very hard to save. For example, he goes to Gizo town for a big bag of rice but ultimately only gets kilos because he ends up sharing money with his wantoks along the way (Titiana surveys). These examples illustrate that receiving help from your wantok and considering them an advantage, and giving help to your wantok and considering them a disadvantage are not one-to-one correlations, and are not only about gains and losses, but also social relationships and kastom. Moreover, examples show the dual nature of the wantok system in the village, in which it is simultaneously an advantage and disadvantage, a help and a burden, and a source of both resiliency and vulnerability.

I infer two main patterns from this data. First, no clear trend exists regarding whether informants consider their wantok as predominantly an advantage, disadvantage, both or neither. This appears largely dependent upon the specific factor, context, and individual. Deciphering potential correlations among these factors to explain variation in responses is beyond the scope of this thesis and perhaps beyond reasonable expectations of data analysis given a multitude of related or causal factors exist. Second, for all but one factor (land availability), Pailongge villagers consider their wantok more of a disadvantage than advantage at the village level, relative to Titiana. For instance, Pailongge villagers consider their wantok a disadvantage at an average rate of 39.76%, whereas this rate in Titiana is only 24.34%. Likewise, Pailongge villagers consider their wantok an advantage 19.86% of the
time on average, while Titiana’s rate is much higher (32.5%). The fact that Pailongge villagers see their wantok as a disadvantage at a distinctively higher frequency than Titiana could be related to other evidence that suggests the wantok system created a biased aid distribution and problematic recovery for many primarily at the village level in Pailongge, rather than at higher scales. In other words, the wantok system gave Pailongge certain advantages at one level, such as at provincial and NGO levels, but also conferred disadvantages at another, namely the village level and to an extent the national level. In contrast, the wantok system problematized recovery at the village level in Titiana, but also effectively reduced the amount of aid funneled into Titiana at each former, higher organizational scale. These examples demonstrate the conflicting, scale-dependent influence that the wantok system has on vulnerability and resilience. Importantly, this complicates approaches to vulnerability in which scholars attempt to decipher or map vulnerability profiles based on specific indicators, like income, ethnicity, or national majority status, as if ‘conditions of vulnerability’ were static and essential, rather than dynamic, multi-faceted, context-dependent and transformative across organizational scales.

**Marginalization: “We Are Solomon Islanders, but Still They Treat Us Different”**

The Kiribati are second grade [class]

Yes, because we are Kiribati our recovery was different… [the wantok system is] part of the way of Solomon Islanders… because Kiribati people are not part of the wantok of the Solomon Islands [our recovery was different]

It’s Melanesian culture for Melanesians to help their wantok; the wantok system is part of their lives

--Titiana focus group participants

The wantok system is characterized by social connections and favoritism based primarily on kinship, geographic and linguistic ties. Much post-disaster aid flowed along these wantok networks, therefore Titiana’s status as a tiny Micronesian minority among a predominantly Melanesian population has significant and tangible effects on their recovery. Here I briefly describe the marginalization characterizing Titiana and the implications of this for their recovery. I draw from focus group summaries because they succinctly express the most pertinent and frequently made points, but these points are strongly triangulated in survey and interview data as well.
All focus groups (n=3) stated that “Solomon Islanders”, also referred to by participants as “Islanders”, “Melanesians”, or “blacks”, ethnically discriminate against Kiribati people. This ethnic marginalization is encapsulated by the phrase “floating coconuts” – a phrase Melanesians of the Western Province use towards Kiribati people, who they say floated over here [to the Solomons] on a coconut and who do not belong here. Participants state this “racism” pervades all levels of the country and that Kiribati people are “second grade” in education, employment, and funding/aid relative to Islanders. In other words, individuals are chosen for admittance into college, jobs, and funding opportunities based on their affiliation to other Melanesians, not on their qualifications. Kiribati people are always chosen second if opportunities are still available, regardless of their qualifications.

Although Titiana is mainly comprised of Kiribati, many villagers have intermarried with Solomon Island Melanesians, making Titiana an ethnically heterogeneous, rather than homogenous, group of people. Because my research examines how immigrant status influences Titiana villagers’ recovery, I explored the effect, if any, household composition – whether all Kiribati or a mix of Kiribati and Melanesian – had on aid received and overall recovery. We asked focus groups how having a Melanesian and Kiribati household head or two Kiribati household heads influenced their recovery and the aid they received. Furthermore, we asked Kiribati households if they thought their recovery would have been different, better or worse had they had a Kiribati and Melanesian household head. Likewise, Kiribati-Melanesian households were asked the reverse. Focus group #2, composed of mixed households, states that having a Melanesian in their household did not positively influence their recovery or aid received. Participants said the government treated everyone in Titiana the same; therefore, everyone residing in Titiana experienced the effects of marginalization. As one participant declared “[if] iu stap lo hia [you stay here], iu Titiana nao [you are Titiana now], iu Kiribati nao [you are Kiribati now]!”

In contrast, focus group #3, composed of Kiribati households, states the composition of their household has affected their recovery. Specifically, because they are all Kiribati they are not part of Solomon Islanders’ wantok system, thus they received less help from the government. Participants further suggested “intermarriage” with Solomon Islanders

References to ethnicity or racism within this section are emic, rather than my own words.
(Melanesians) as a solution to the ethnic discrimination practiced by the government and other power brokers. They propose discrimination will decrease overtime as they “aotem kala [out the color]” through intermarriage and people become “mixed good.” Focus group #1, composed of all Kiribati, also suggested “intermarriage” as a solution to ethnic discrimination. Interestingly, this statement was unprompted, as I added the question regarding household composition after this focus group.

These seemingly contradictory answers regarding intermarriage are not mutually exclusive. In particular, the smallest scale aid was distributed on, until it was controlled within the community, was at the level of the village. In other words, the government gave aid to communities, not individuals within communities. Titiana village is, in general, marginalized, therefore all households, regardless of household composition, were negatively affected by the Micronesian status characterizing Titiana and the comparatively less aid they received because of it. One can see how Kiribati households would propose intermarriage with Melanesians as a solution to discrimination, because this would presumably connect them to Melanesian social, kinship, and wantok networks, through which material goods often flow; however, because aid was distributed on a village by village basis, household composition ultimately had no effect on government aid received.

**Implications of Wantok Favoritism and Immigrant Status for Vulnerability, Resiliency, and Recovery in Titiana and Pailongge**

The statistically significant and comparatively higher rate at which Titianans quantitatively and qualitatively recognize the wantok system’s influence on aid distribution has important implications for the differential recovery experienced between Titiana and Pailongge. Melanesians inherently dominate social and exchange networks in the Solomons. Thus, when large portions of aid were ultimately directed along wantok networks, Melanesians generally had a much greater potential to benefit in comparison to Micronesians, who are largely disconnected from these networks, especially those operating at the level of the Melanesian dominated government. To a lesser degree, Pailongge villagers also recognize the wantok system’s problematic influence at the government level, showing the government’s biased aid distribution likely affected them as well; however, many Pailongge informants state aid from the government, “hem kam stre [it came straight],”
meaning the government delivered aid fairly. Many Pailongge informants assert that, rather than within the government, it is when aid reached the village level that those in Pailongge with power over its distribution were influenced by wantok exchange systems, resulting in an unequal aid distribution among community members, as certain individuals preferentially helped their own family and wantok before other Pailongge villagers. In contrast, almost every Titiana informant that states the wantok system influenced aid distribution recognizes this influence specifically within the government, in addition to specifying it at the community and other levels. Furthermore, because Titiana’s marginal status virtually disconnects them from the Melanesian socio-political and wantok networks dominating the Solomons, they were largely precluded from receiving any NGO aid that was (mis)-directed through these networks. Therefore, while the wantok system influenced aid allocation in Pailongge at the community level, and to some degree at the level of the national and provincial government and NGOs, in Titiana, the wantok system influenced aid allocation at virtually every organizational scale of its distribution, effectively reducing the amount of aid Titiana received at every level. As one Titiana villager told me:

> When they [the government] distributed aid – which all came to the government – government people in office gave aid to wantok, even if they weren’t really affected [by the disaster]; then sent leftovers to provincial government – then provincial government did same thing as national government; then leftovers came to village and people in community distributed aid in the same biased way. The wantok system starts at the top and goes all the way down – it’s a big problem. [male, 40]

Overall, both villages were negatively affected by biased aid allocation via wantok networks at national, provincial, NGO and village levels; however, I argue biased aid allocation at provincial and NGO levels also conferred certain advantages upon several Pailongge villagers, in comparison to Titiana. At the level of the village, both villages experienced disadvantages and advantages in relation to the wantok system’s influence on aid and recovery efforts. Ultimately, Titiana’s immigrant status combined with the deeply ingrained Melanesian exchange systems that continue to operate in the Solomons resulted in Titiana receiving comparatively less aid, relative to nearby Melanesians villages, making them overall more vulnerable to the tsunami’s impact.

Just as vulnerability, recovery and the wantok system are not static, but dynamic, processes with heterogeneous outcomes, Titiana’s marginalization from the Solomon Island
wantok system is not absolute. For example, the country of Kiribati sent money specifically for Kiribati settlements in the Solomons, rather than for all disaster affected regions. Unfortunately it was intercepted via Melanesian dominated wantok networks operating at the national government level and never made it to its intended recipients; however, this still exemplifies potential ways in which the wantok system may also ultimately confer more resilience upon Titiana in the future. Moreover, an informant cited earlier in the thesis (Chapter 4) notes that Micronesians practice wantok favoritism too, stating:

Both Kiribati people and Solomon Islanders practice the wantok system - so Kiribati people help their own wantok too. For example, if a Chinese person that owns a shop marries a Kiribati person or a Kiribati person owns a company or has a good job you will notice that every employee of theirs is Kiribati. [Titiana, male, 50]

Therefore, depending on future Solomon Island demographics and economic development, Kiribati villagers may become more represented and present within the wantok networks influencing access to resources and opportunities. Additionally, Titiana’s immersion in the cash economy has resulted in certain households maintaining a higher standard of living, with higher quality housing material or more cash, for example, which may ultimately make them more resilient to other types of disturbances. Therefore, conclusions regarding Titiana’s increased vulnerability to the 2007 tsunami in the context of the wantok system should not be overly generalized, as their vulnerability or resilience to future socio-ecological disturbances will likely be highly dependent upon context and scale, including both organizational and temporal scale. Attention to temporal scale becomes important in this instance because over time Kiribati’ social networks may diversify, increase, or become more articulated with the wantok social networks dominating much contemporary Solomon Island socio-political life. For example, the current opposition leader to the current PM, who will likely run for PM next election, is married to a Kiribati woman with ties to Titiana.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Several key factors shaped the 2007 earthquake and tsunami’s impact and post-disaster recovery in Titiana and Pailongge, including geographic, political, and social vulnerability as well as the dynamic influence of the wantok system. The role of geography is relevant to the disaster’s different impact, while the remaining factors primarily influenced recovery. In particular, political and social vulnerability, manifest in the SIG’s handling of disaster funds and the wantok system’s influence on aid distribution, made both Titiana and Pailongge vulnerable to the disaster. Because of the scale-dependent, dynamic nature of the wantok system and vulnerability, wantok social networks and exchange also rendered certain Pailongge households more resilient at certain scales of aid distribution and recovery. On the other hand, Titiana’s immigrant status made this Micronesian village further vulnerable to the tsunami, relative to nearby Melanesian villages, because they were comparatively more disconnected from the Melanesian dominated wantok networks along which much aid ultimately flowed. These processes have several implications.

Although Titiana’s immigrant, minority status helps explain their differential recovery, it is of marginal relevance in understanding the tsunami’s severe, initial impact on the community. Despite arguments that differential indigenous knowledge – based on immigrant versus native status – accounts for the disproportionately high fatality rate in Titiana relative to Pailongge, topography, or, distance from the seaside to the hill, appears far more significant. The fact that many Titiana and some Pailongge villagers point to differences in indigenous knowledge of tsunamis to explain their differing death rates, but that no significant differences in this knowledge appear to exist between the two villages, suggests villagers have appropriated and internalized the global discourse on indigenous knowledge. Future research should focus on both how and why villagers have appropriated this metanarrative to explain the processes and outcomes of their own lives. Moreover, the observation that Titiana’s immigrant status in fact did not make them more vulnerable in terms of the tsunami’s initial impact complicates understanding of vulnerability that take
conditions of vulnerability, like minority status, to be static and indicative of outcomes. To the contrary, the role played by immigrant, minority status in this case is dynamic and highly dependent upon scale and context.

Regarding post-disaster recovery, the SIG’s use, misappropriation, and abuse of disaster relief and rehabilitation funds effectively reduced the overall amount of aid available and undercut NGO projects, potentially making all victims more vulnerable. Additionally, the remaining aid was largely distributed along wantok networks, resulting in relatively more aid reaching the affected individuals, villages and islands that are considerably more connected to these networks. Conversely, those who were relatively disconnected or excluded from these networks were comparatively disadvantaged in terms of the amount of aid they received. Ultimately, this biased aid distribution resulted in many individuals who were less affected by the disaster receiving comparatively more aid than others who experienced similar or more severe impacts, instead of all victims receiving aid on a basis proportional to their needs, as donors and NGOs likely envisioned they would. This grave mismatch between donor expectations and the actual allocation of relief and rehabilitation funds to victims, points to the continued importance of the need for outsiders to understand local, regional and culturally-specific contexts before implementing aid and development projects.

The way in which the wantok system influenced aid allocation conferred vulnerability on both Titiana and Pailongge, but with greater magnitude in Titiana. Specifically, biased aid distribution negatively affected both villages at national constituency, provincial and NGO scales; however, Pailongge also received tangible benefits from wantok favoritism at provincial and NGO levels. In contrast, Titiana was disadvantaged at every scale of post-disaster aid distribution because their immigrant background effectively disconnected them from the Melanesian dominated kinship, linguistic, and geographic wantok networks operating at each level. Furthermore, in Titiana and to a certain extent Pailongge, reliance on cash income likely compounded the negative effects of receiving reduced and incomplete aid amounts. Villagers had few livelihood options in the aftermath of the tsunami, making recovery, and specifically rebuilding, extremely problematic. For example, one Titiana villager commented, in regard to the NGO aid he received, ‘Why didn’t they give us a canoe or something, instead of a spoon?’ (Kitchen utensils were among the NGO aid items
distributed). ‘I can rebuild my house with a canoe; I can feed my family with a canoe (by fishing for subsistence and cash generation in the market). I can’t rebuild my house with a spoon; I can’t feed my family with a spoon.; it’s just a spoon’ (male, 61). This not only points to the need for cash in order to purchase materials for rebuilding, but also the limited effectiveness of top-down NGO planning, in which outsiders determined victim needs, rather than actually asking the victims themselves what they needed.

While the *wantok* system created vulnerability, it also proved a source of resiliency following the 2007 disaster. In particular, at the organizational level of the community the *wantok* system simultaneously provided a source of vulnerability and resilience in both Titiana and Pailongge, depending on the *wantok* connections, or lack there-of, among households and individuals. While the *wantok* system provided resilience and a social safety net for many Micronesian and Melanesian villagers within the community, it conferred advantages and resiliency only for Pailongge villagers at the multiple scales beyond the community that were involved in recovery.

For thousands of years, pre-capitalist Melanesian exchange systems have been instrumental to household livelihoods and broader social cohesion. Although they have created tensions and conflicts, they have provided social safety nets, necessary support for large cultural events, and mechanisms for gaining social and political prestige. In the contemporary Solomon Island “nation-state”, these networks continue to present a source of resiliency, but also a significant challenge. At smaller scales, such as the community level, the *wantok* system continues to provide an important source of resiliency for many individuals. Although some villagers see it more as a disadvantage and burden, many, including both those that primarily receive or give help within these networks, continue to view the *wantok* system positively, at least to a certain degree. In contrast, at larger scales, such as the national and provincial government, the consensus is that the *wantok* system at these levels is not a positive or beneficial thing, and it breeds corruption, inequality and nepotism. As many villagers commented, “*wantok system lo community, hem orae, hem gud. Lo gavman, hem bik problem, hem barava rabis* [the *wantok* system in the community is alright, it’s good. In the government, it is a big problem, it is extremely rubbish (bad)].”

The way in which the *wantok* system and its repercussions are limited by scale has significant implications for future disaster and aid situations in particular, and for large-scale
socio-political processes in general. In other words, in the context of natural disaster recovery, in which the SIG is responsible for distributing aid to its citizens victimized by the disaster, there is mismatch between victim expectations regarding aid distribution and its actual distribution within the deeply ingrained cultural context of *wantok* exchange. As many Titiana villagers said throughout my fieldwork, expatriates or outsiders should distribute aid, not Solomon Islanders. This is because not only does the government have “no proper mechanism in place for dealing with a disaster of this scale” (male, 46), as evidenced by the mismanagement and dysfunction that characterizes the SIG’s role in recovery; but also because “Islanders have the *wantok* system in their blood” and thus will always practice “*wantok* bisnis” – in which they help their own *wantok* before helping others. Informants state that if aid donors want to help, they need to come do the job themselves.

In the context of my research’s results and Nanau’s (2011) astute observation that the further one moves away from the local level to the national, the more the *wantok* system transforms from a system of resilience and social safety net to one of corruption and nepotism, we are left with many future research directions regarding the relationship between the *wantok* system, vulnerability, resiliency and scale, especially in the face of rapid globalization and change. At what spatial, organizational and temporal scales and in what contexts does this deeply embedded social system continue to provide a source of resiliency and confer advantages as it traditionally has been known to do? Is the *wantok* system necessarily a source of resiliency at the micro level or will it continue to be, given certain villagers see it as more of a disadvantage and burden? At what scales and among which groups does the system transform from one of resiliency to one of vulnerability? At what scales does this system breakdown into outright corruption and nepotism and become primarily a negative phenomenon?

The way in which the *wantok* system articulated with post-disaster aid distribution to differentially shape vulnerability, resilience and recovery at multiple organizational scales illustrates vulnerability’s dynamic, contradictory nature. More nuanced understandings of vulnerability’s dynamic, context and scale-dependent attributes allow us to more accurately visualize and comprehend how disaster recovery is heterogeneously shaped, rather than using static approaches and social indicators to infer, sometimes erroneously, probable outcomes. Static approaches might have predicted Micronesian minority communities would be more
vulnerable to the tsunami in terms of impact due to their lack of local indigenous knowledge based on their immigrant status; however, immigrant status in this context was not an overt indicator or cause of vulnerability. Likewise, assumptions about Pailongge’s lack of vulnerability or resilience to the tsunami, via their presumed connection to Melanesian wantok networks dominating aid distribution, are equally incorrect, as this non-minority community was rendered both resilient and vulnerable, depending on the specific household, context and organizational scale in question. Moreover, many individuals identified through Oxfam’s shelter project on Ghizo as “most vulnerable”, including the elderly, widows, and disabled, received complete houses from Oxfam and thus were ultimately rendered less vulnerable by being labeled as “vulnerable”. Therefore, current approaches to vulnerability must take into account that vulnerability cannot necessarily be identified, quantified, mapped or predicted by static social indicators, as it is a dynamic process with inherent contradictions, that is best explored in-depth and ethnographically at the household level.

The potential for natural hazards to encounter socially vulnerable groups is probabilistically increasing in the context of a growing world population (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002) and increasing social stratification (Garcia-Acosta 2002). Moreover, global climate change will only escalate the occurrence of extreme climactic events, rises in sea level, and the need for coastal population migration, effectively increasing the chance for socially vulnerable, minority, and immigrant populations to intersect with natural hazards. Understanding how social vulnerability and culturally embedded social systems articulate in the context of a natural disaster will only become more important and relevant to reducing peoples’ vulnerability in the face of natural hazards in the future. Furthermore, the wantok system and gift exchange systems are still operating in multiple areas across Melanesia, not just the Solomon Islands, making understanding these social systems in the context of increasing interconnectedness and rapid change essential to mitigating both natural disasters and the potentially negative aspects of globalization. While we may be able to do little to control the physical occurrence of natural hazards, attention to the social side and vulnerability that so often characterizes affected individuals will enable us to increase the chances of preventing natural hazards from becoming what is so commonly conceived of as “natural” disasters.
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