



INFORMATION PAPER

Legal factsheet on small boat safety



Solomon Islands

Context

Coastal commercial fisheries in the Solomon Islands have grown modestly, increasing from 3200 tonnes in 1999 to 5000 tonnes in 2021 (Gillett and Fong 2023). However, they remain significantly smaller in scale than coastal subsistence fisheries, which expanded from 13,000 tonnes in 1999 to 25,000 tonnes in 2021 (Gillett and Fong 2023). In 2020, the Solomon Islands Maritime Authority (SIMA) reported 329 vessels registered in the national registry, all engaged in domestic voyages, with 39% dedicated to passenger and cargo transport and 10% classified as fishing boats (SIMA Corporate Plan 2022–2023). However, the number of small craft under 10 metres, widely used by communities for

fishing and inter-island transport, remains undocumented. By 2022, the number of registered vessels under the Solomon Islands flag had declined to 184, with 20% carrying passengers and 9% classified as fishing vessels (SIMA Annual Report 2022).

Maritime safety remains a critical issue in the Solomon Islands, particularly for small boats, which are frequently involved in accidents and breakdowns. According to the governmental data, the primary causes of these incidents include mechanical problems with outboard motors (often due to a lack of tools onboard), fuel shortages, navigational errors, overloading, adverse weather conditions, alcohol



Legal framework

Registration and safety inspections

consumption, collisions and unskilled skippers. These factors contribute to a significant number of search and rescue operations each year. Between 2021 and 2024, the Solomon Islands recorded a fluctuating number of banana boats lost at sea, all approximately 6.4 metres in length. In 2021, 46 boats were lost and subsequently rescued, with six adult males lost at sea and 202 people rescued. In 2022, the number of lost and rescued boats dropped to 35, but the number of people lost at sea increased to 14, including men, women and children, while 178 individuals were rescued. By 2023, the number of lost and rescued boats surged to 60, with 11 adult males lost at sea and 353 people rescued. In 2024, 39 banana boats were lost and recovered, with four adult males lost at sea and 196 people rescued.¹

The *Solomon Islands Maritime Authority Act 2018* repealed the *Maritime Safety Administration Act 2009* and amended the *Shipping Act 1988*. This Act gives the SIMA broad powers, including the ability to enforce applicable maritime laws, inspect and control vessels in port and at sea, and set and enforce standards for construction of vessels (section 7). Additionally, the document states that SIMA is responsible for the development and planning for addressing maritime emergencies (section 46).

The *Shipping Act 1998* details safety rules and crew certification requirements, and includes a dedicated section on small craft. Part IX Small Craft defines “small craft” as a vessel that is less than 10 metres in length. The SIMA has the authority to develop maritime orders

¹ Data taken from responses of the questionnaire sent by SPC to its members in October 2024.





regulating small craft, covering aspects such as record-keeping, identification, construction, inspections, equipment, licensing and fees. Under this *Act*, registration is mandatory for all the vessels except for those below 10 metres, pleasure craft, and traditional vessels. Before a vessel can be registered, it must undergo an inspection by an approved surveyor, who will determine its tonnage and issue a Tonnage Survey Report (section 20). The *Act* also requires the marking of the vessel (section 21) and the issuance of certain certificates before a vessel can navigate (section 58).

The *Shipping (Registration) Regulations 2010* provide further details on the registration process. To be registered, a vessel must demonstrate its seaworthiness and have a builder's certificate (regulation 4). Additionally, the Regulations specify marking requirements such as the placement, colour and size of the letters (regulation 8). A vessel registry is maintained to record all the registered vessels.

Sea safety and equipment

The *Shipping Act 1998* establishes a general obligation for vessels to carry safety equipment, with non-compliance resulting in a maximum fine of SBD 10,000 (Solomon Islands dollars) (section 68). However, the *Act* specifically mentions only radio communication as a required piece of safety equipment, and no dedicated regulations for small boats have been developed yet.

In the event of a casualty involving a vessel, the *Shipping Act* mandates that the incident be reported to the Director of the SIMA via radio or the fastest available means of communication (section 83). Following the report, a preliminary investigation is conducted (sections 84 and 85), with additional procedural details outlined in the *Shipping (Marine Inquiries and Investigations) Regulations 2011*. The *Act* also places responsibilities on vessel masters, requiring them to report navigational hazards, assist vessels in distress, and provide aid in the event of a collision.

Several additional regulations complement the provisions of the *Shipping Act* and *Solomon Islands Maritime Authority Act*:



The *Shipping (STCW Convention) Regulations 2010* include specific provisions for small boats (15 metres and smaller), focusing on safe manning, crew responsibilities, watchkeeping, and medical standards for personnel on deck.

The *Shipping (Non Convention Vessel Safety) Regulations 2006* detail safety equipment, but fishing vessels, vessels below 15 metres, pleasure craft and traditional vessels are excluded from the scope of these Regulations.

The *Maritime Safety Administration (Ship and Port Security) Regulations 2011* apply to fishing vessels of 12 metres in length and above that are fishing in the EEZ. Under these regulations, SIMA may require a declaration of security for those vessels after a risk assessment, and such vessels must hold a valid security certificate.

In a nutshell

The maritime safety framework in the Solomon Islands is well developed for vessels above 15 metres, with comprehensive regulations covering registration, construction standards and crew certification. The Shipping Act 1998, the Solomon Islands Maritime Authority Act 2018 and associated regulations provide clear guidelines for vessel safety, inspections and emergency response mechanisms.

However, gaps remain in the regulatory framework for small boats, particularly those under 10 metres, which are widely used by local communities for fishing and inter-island transport, and despite their frequent involvement in maritime accidents, there are no specific safety regulations mandating essential equipment such as life jackets, distress signals or communication devices for these vessels. Furthermore, registration is not required for boats under 10 metres, making it difficult to monitor and enforce safety standards.

References

Solomon Islands Maritime Authority (SIMA) 2023. Annual report 2022. <https://www.sima.gov.sb/wp-content/uploads/SIMA-Annual-Report-2022-DRAFT.pdf>

Gillett R. and Fong M. 2023. Fisheries in the economies of Pacific Island countries and territories (Benefish Study 4). Noumea, New Caledonia: Pacific Community. 704 p. <https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/ppizh>



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Legislation

- Shipping Act 1998
- Shipping (Registration) Regulations 2010
- Shipping (Marine Inquiries and Investigations) Regulations 2011
- Shipping (STCW Convention) Regulations 2010
- Shipping (Non Convention Vessel Safety) Regulations 2006
- Solomon Islands Maritime Authority Act 2018
- Maritime Safety Administration (Ship and Port Security) Regulations 2011