



**PEOPLE FIRST
NETWORK**

**The Solomon Islands
Remote E-mail Network +**



www.peoplefirst.net.sb

What is PFnet?

The People First Network, or PFnet, is a rural connectivity project, which aims to promote and facilitate equitable and sustainable rural development and peace building by enabling better information sharing and knowledge building among and across communities forming the Solomon Islands.



The project has established an email system based on a robust, proven and sustainable technology that permits remote locations on islands across thousands of square kilometres to have access to Internet emails using a simple computer, short-wave radio, and solar power, and PFnet is now working with partners to develop applications of the network in many sectors.

The objectives of the PFnet are to:

- Facilitate point-to-point communications to and from the remote provinces of the Solomon Islands;
- Facilitate rural development and peace-related information flows among all social groups;
- Facilitate the exchange of information between communities and development programmes, NGOs, government offices, the media, businesses and other stakeholders.

The People First Network is a project of Rural Development Volunteers Association (RDVA), a not-for-profit organisation established by the Department of Provincial Government and Constituency Development. It has received funding and technical support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNOPS, New Zealand Aid, the governments of Britain, Japan and the Republic of China, the EU and AusAid.

Why an E-mail System for Deprived and Remote Areas?

It is precisely in deprived and remote areas that basic telecommunication has the most value and impact. For such locations, telecommunication is the only and vital link with the outside world, either to ensure health security,

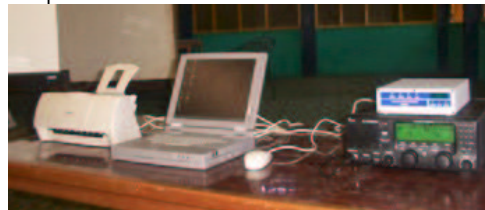
public services such as education, or essential contacts with family and professional peers.

Yet, currently, the only two means of communication with the outside world for most remote locations in the Solomon Islands are short-wave radios and satellite telephones. Telecommunication in Solomon Islands suffers from small scale, scattered population with logistical challenges and lack of opportunity to aggregate demand, resulting in extremely high costs. When shortwave radios are used for voice communication, they often require hours of patient queuing and retrials, at a cost still very high for rural folks living in a non-cash subsistence economy. In turn, satellite telephones, when available, are far beyond the reach of most of the population.

The PFnet system, offering basic email services, seeks to improve connectivity while dramatically reducing the prices of communication, making it affordable for low-income users and sustainable over time. As a basic utility to all other activities, this affordable telecommunication and information network will assist the country, particularly low-income groups, in taking in charge their own development through improved logistics, information and knowledge. A particular attention is given to gender equity and democratic governance. This is in concrete terms what bridging of the *digital divide* means to the Solomon Islands.

How Does PFnet Work?

PFnet has two key components. One is an Internet Café in Honiara, which allows residents of the capital city to access the Internet for writing emails to all locations across the Solomon Islands or the wider Internet. They can also browse the World Wide Web in search of information, or post their own information to share with others. The Café has been operational since February 2001 with 25 workstations, and has proven very useful to the community and is already financially self-sufficient. The Café also serves as a training facility for a number of rural development stakeholders and the broader public.



The second and, over time, most important component of PFnet is the network of email stations located in remote islands across the country. The stations are usually hosted in provincial clinics, community schools, or other accessible and secure public facilities. Email operators assist customer to send and receive emails at a nominal cost.

The stations use a simple, robust and well-proven technology, consisting of a short-wave radio (already ubiquitous and well-



known in the South Pacific), a low-end computer, and solar energy. On schedule, several times a day, each remote email station connects to the hub station in Honiara automatically. At such time, incoming or outgoing emails are transferred between the remote station and the hub, and between this hub and the wider Internet. Now the network is established, it is being used to facilitate the rural networking needs of sectors such as education, health, women, sustainable livelihood programs, finance and agriculture. The operator-assisted facilities are able to directly access web sites using the *TEK* search engine (tek.sourceforge.net). The stations operate sustainably by charging small affordable fees for services.



Already, as of May 2004, PFnet has:

- Conducted trials to deliver distance learning courses by email and will start a nationwide program of e-learning centres using VSAT technology (funded by EU and NZAid);
- Opened in a farmer's technical and marketing advice centre in partnership with Kastom Gaden Association (AusAid);
- Linked the rural email service to an indigenous business development service run through the Ministry of Commerce
- Linked the network to a sustainable livelihood seaweed farming project, including private sector marketing (EU);

The rural stations are community managed and the expansion of the network is driven by their needs. In order to better understand these needs and be more effective, PFnet has conducted a research program into the social impacts and factors affecting the appropriation of the rural ICT by the communities, in partnership with University of the South Pacific and UNDP (funded by JICA).

PFnet also provides substantial information resources and news on its web site and is active in facilitating the flow of trusted news between communities. This is an important part of peace building in a nation torn by ethnic conflict.

PFnet is also working with stakeholders to help the government develop a national ICT strategy and has formed a partnership with Solomon Telekom to develop a complementary rural communications strategy. Through this partnership, PFnet receives sponsorship from both Telekom and Cable and Wireless

Spreading the Network

As of September 2004, seventeen stations have been established with at least six others scheduled or under funding negotiation. Later, PFnet plans to deploy as many as 25 remote email stations across the nine provinces of the country.

Now the system is in place, it is very simple to add any number of stations on a modular basis. For example, an NGO upgrading rural clinics, a bank implementing a micro-credit scheme, or an environmental group running an eco-tourist site, may all wish to include a communication component to their projects. Similarly, information providers such as radio stations or electoral monitors

can use PFnet to send dispatches and received reports from their staff in the field.



Doreen Savakana, the Operator of Solomon Islands' first rural email facility in Sasamungga, Choiseul, which has been operating since October 11th 2001.

PFnet will also prove crucial to small business entrepreneurs in fisheries or agro-forestry, for example, who need to maintain contacts with clients, suppliers and shippers. The standard equipment (including solar power) and installation costs are approximately USD \$8,000 in total, but once installed, there are very low running costs and no per-minute charges. The PFnet programme can supply the equipment and expertise for deployment, training and maintenance of the remote stations.

Contacts

For further information, contact the PFnet team and visit website: www.peoplefirst.net.sb

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Locations



As of September 2004, PFnet has established stations in:

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| - Sasamungga, Choiseul | sasamungga@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Pirupiru (Ulawa), | pirupiru@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Graciosa Bay (Santa Cruz) | kati@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Sigana (Isabel). | sigana@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Vanga RTC | vanga@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Silolo, North Malaita | silolo@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Kia Fisheries | Private project |
| - Hutuna, East Rennell | hutuna@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Pelau, Ontong Java | pelau@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Rarumana, Vonovono | rarumana@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Sa'a, Small Malaita | saa@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Seghe, Western Province | seghe@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Santa Ana, Makira | santaana@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Matamoana, Bellona | bellona@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Paoe, Choiseul | paoe@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Wagina, Choiseul | wagina@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |
| - Avuavu, Guadalcanal | avuavu@pipolfastaem.gov.sb |

Coming this year 2004: Tikopia, and more (see web site for update)