

Safeguarding the Vulnerable: Pacific Solutions for Inclusive Social Protection

Summary Paper



Overview

About Women Leading and Influencing

Australia Awards [Women Leading and Influencing](#) (WLI) is an Australian Government initiative developing the skills, confidence, and connections of leaders to drive positive change in the Pacific region. An on-Award (in-Australia) and reintegration (in-Pacific) enrichment program, WLI offers a range of developmental leadership offerings to Pacific Australia Awards scholars studying at Australian universities and institutions. The program builds on the preceding Women's Leadership Initiative Pilot (2017–2022) to enhance support for WLI alumni returning home to the Pacific, and the role of men supporting women as change agents.

Introduction

In September 2025, WLI hosted an online [Learning & Networking](#) event which explored social protection in the Pacific region. The event was hosted for Australia Awards scholars and alumni from the Pacific and their families, as well as development colleagues in our region. This event brought together experts, practitioners, and government representatives to examine the evolving landscape of social protection in

the Pacific. It aimed to foster conversations on Pacific solutions for inclusive and sustainable social protection in the Pacific region. This included consideration of how different governments are strengthening their social protection systems to ensure they are inclusive and address vulnerabilities, as well as how governments are using social protection systems to help respond to the climate crisis and other shocks. The event featured a live expert panel discussion, audience Q&A, and break-out groups.

The Panel

Facilitated by **Melaia Waisale**, Acting Manager Research and Product Development, [Fiji National Provident Fund](#). The panel included:

- **Rachel Payne**, Deputy Team Leader, [Partnerships for Social Protection](#) (P4SP)
- **Tevita Tonga**, Chief Executive Officer, [National Retirement Benefits Fund, \(NRBF\), Tonga](#)
- **Veremo Muria**, Director of Social Protection, [Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection](#), (MWCSP) Fiji
- **Karen Bray**, Director of Pacific Economic Policy and Partnerships, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade ([DFAT](#)), Australia

Social Protection in the Pacific

Social protection has become a central pillar of inclusive development and resilience in Pacific Island countries. As communities across the Pacific region face intensifying challenges from climate change, economic shocks, and social inequalities, the need to safeguard vulnerable groups has become urgent and undeniable¹.

While traditional support systems such as *wantok*, *kastom*, and *kerekere* remain vital, they are increasingly strained by modern pressures like rising cost of living, growing rural-urban drift, frequent natural disasters and the influence of modern lifestyles. The vast majority of countries in the Pacific have invested in government-led social protection systems such as pensions, disability benefits, and child grants. For instance, Fiji has six schemes in place that aim to support people at different stages of life and when they are likely to need additional support. Kiribati's social protection schemes reach more than 95% of households and recently reported a significant drop in extreme poverty (by 75%), which it attributes primarily to its investments in social protection programs. In Samoa and Tonga, budget-financed schemes have been implemented to support elderly and disabled citizens, particularly in response to natural disasters, but these programs are often limited in scope and sustainability.

When we support people facing the greatest hardships through these kinds of systems, we're lifting everyone. It helps reduce poverty, build resilience, promote economic partner participation and social protection programs, ensuring no one is left behind. Building social protection systems that are flexible and responsive in a crisis is critical with climate change making disasters more frequent and more severe. The work we do together now as a Pacific community; sharing ideas, learning from each other, and strengthening deliver delivery – that's what's going to matter in the years ahead.

Karen Bray

Making stronger social protection systems

While many Pacific countries have made great progress in establishing and strengthening their social protection systems, the panel highlighted some opportunities to improve. This includes enabling more Pacific researchers to publish on the topic, helping to frame social protection narratives and policies based on local contexts.

Although there's a reasonable amount written about social protection in the Pacific, it's been dominated by external voices, i.e. development partners, so there's a real need for more research on social protection from the Pacific to be undertaken by people, organisations and research institutions from the region.

Rachel Payne

Tevita Tonga explained that in climate-vulnerable Tonga, the existing social protection system can deliver rapid cash assistance to those who need it most, when they need it most. However, a key challenge is ensuring

these systems can effectively reach households in the outer islands.

We are working on an integrated system where ministries, government ministries, and also the social welfare scheme, can share data in order to expedite response for when a natural disaster takes place. Another important consideration is Tonga is made up of many small islands, so transportation can be a problem. With cash assistance, it's fine because there are local banks existing in those smaller islands where we do cash transfers and stuff, but other assistances in the form in non-cash form, transportation can be an issue.

Tevita Tonga

According to Veremo Muria, for a small island state like Fiji, "fiscal space and coverage remain significant gaps, particularly for informal sector workers and the near-poor." He added that Fiji has carved out fiscal space for social protection expenditure through strategic financial management, targeted reforms, and technical support.

Understanding how traditional support systems fit with government systems

Government-led systems sit alongside community-based systems that have existed for thousands of years and are deeply rooted in Pacific culture.

Veremo Muria feels that a key unique strength of Pacific communities is the tradition of mutual care and traditional social protection mechanisms.

In Fiji, community networks, family support, and village leadership structures, such as Turaga-ni-Koro and Provincial Councils, have historically supported the most vulnerable.

Veremo Muria

For government-led systems, government and non-government stakeholders are increasingly exploring complementary approaches such as new forms of community-based support, disaster-responsive schemes, inclusive education and health services (including psychological care) that addresses the broader dimensions of vulnerability. These efforts reflect a growing understanding that safeguarding people in hardship requires more than financial aid – it demands systems that promote dignity, equity, and long-term resilience.

The Tongan government needs to involve local leaders such as village chiefs, church leaders, women's groups and give them ownership over their programs. At a community level, they know what's needed, particularly for vulnerable groups in their community. We can't just start implementing a system without listening to the people first.

Tevita Tonga

¹ Partnerships for Social Protection (2024). Evidence Review: Social protection in the Pacific and Timor-Leste. Partnerships for Social Protection, Sustineo and Australian Aid.

Enhancing social protection and climate-change resilience

Social protection plays an important role in helping countries respond to climate change. Not only do they reduce underlying vulnerability by providing ongoing, predictable support – providing an increased level of resilience to people – but social protection mechanisms can also be used to get money out to people quickly after a climate related shock or a disaster. For example, Tonga used its elderly and disability benefits to get cash to people after Cyclone Gita and the volcanic eruptions of 2022. Social protection can also help Pacific countries prepare for, and transition to, a more climate resilient future.

According to Veremo Muria, given Fiji's vulnerability to climate change, frequent natural disasters, and social economic challenges, it's crucial for Fiji to have a social protection system that can be leveraged during shocks, particularly for vulnerable households.

When a natural disaster hits, people can fall into poverty and start relying on harmful coping mechanisms such as selling the assets that they already have. Or they may start eating less, or withdrawing their children from school – just to survive. Social protection plays a crucial role in building resilience during steady times, so families don't have to resort to this.

Veremo Muria

Fiji's social protection systems aim to deliver this support by strengthening people's ability to withstand climate-related shocks (by providing timely cash transfers and assistance during disasters); incentivising climate adaptation (linking employment to environmental protection, particularly for women and youth in vulnerable communities); and providing employment opportunities and skills training in areas such as biodiversity enhancement projects. This approach aims to deliver vital employment opportunities while at the same time addressing climate-resilient needs.

Conclusion

Government-led social protection exists in many Pacific island countries, helping reduce poverty, build resilience, and boost economics. Opportunities to strengthen these systems include supporting Pacific-led research, involving communities in program design, and building robust systems for climate response.

Interested? Want to know more?

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info@wliprogram.org