

Cultivating Inclusive Agriculture in the Pacific

Summary Paper



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 March 2026, WLI hosted an online [Learning & Networking](#) event which explored inclusive agriculture 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, government representatives, and community leaders to explore the intersection of gender, disability, and agriculture in the Pacific. The event highlighted inclusive practices, lived experiences, and promoted dialogue on how to build equitable and resilient agricultural systems. The event featured a live expert panel discussion, audience Q&A, and break-out groups.

The panel

The event was facilitated by

- Nanise Kuridrani Tuqiri, Director of Fisheries, Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry – Fiji
- Taaloga Apa, Senior Program Manager, Women in Business Development Inc. – Samoa
- Vitila Vuniwaqa, Owner, Veas Organic Farms – Fiji
- Dr Rupantri Raju, Environment, Climate, and Resilience Manager, PHAMA Plus Program – Fiji
- Jane Bastin-Sikimeti, Director, Climate Resilient Agriculture and Food Security, DFAT

Cultivating inclusive agriculture in the Pacific

Women are the backbone of agriculture in the Pacific, driving food production, sustaining rural economies, and building climate resilience. In countries like Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Fiji, 40–67% of rural women are actively engaged in farming ([FAO, 2023](#)). Yet despite their central role, women continue to face entrenched barriers to land ownership, finance, training, and leadership. These barriers are even more severe for women with disabilities.

In agriculture, this translates into restricted access to land, tools, markets, and decision-making spaces, effectively sidelining them from opportunities that could transform their lives and communities. Despite ongoing challenges, inclusive agricultural programs are proving that transformation is achievable, demonstrating how targeted support can aid marginalised groups to thrive as entrepreneurs, leaders and agents of change.

A cross-cutting development issue

According to DFAT's Climate Resilient Agriculture and Food Security, rising global food insecurity will be a long-term challenge, with climate change placing increasing pressure on already stressed food systems including agriculture, fisheries and the broader food system.

With many households in the Pacific region dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods, investing in agriculture is an effective way of addressing chronic food insecurity and contributing to broader poverty alleviation and economic stability.

Jane Bastin-Sikimeti from DFAT's Climate Resilient Agriculture and Food Security, highlighted how inclusive agriculture in the Pacific is a cross-cutting development issue, intersecting with climate change and resilience; food and nutrition security; livelihoods and poverty reduction; economic growth; and health and social protection. She stated that inclusive agriculture is a regional and domestic priority for Australia and the Pacific and acknowledged that Pacific leadership and expertise on inclusive agriculture is vital, not only for Australia, but for the wider global community.

If women had the same access to resources as men, they could increase yields by 20–30%, significantly raising total agricultural output and helping reduce global hunger.

– Jane Bastin-Sikimeti

Outlining DFAT's guiding key principles for integrating gender, disability, and social inclusion into climate-resilient agriculture and food security programs, Jane listed the following objectives:

- Recognise the knowledge and agency of women, people with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalised groups.
- Ensure programs adapt delivery so people with disabilities can participate and benefit directly.
- Understand access to and control over resources: look beyond nominal involvement to who actually controls land, income, and assets.
- Look beyond individual participation: support collective action, especially women's groups and farmer organisations.

- Address systemic barriers: engage across the value chain, not just production, and consider time burdens, division of labour, and social norms.
- Recognise local organisations as drivers of resilience: work with local groups, including OPDs and women's networks.
- Do no harm: integrate safeguarding and conflict sensitive approaches.
- Support access to climate resilient technologies: Ensure women and marginalised farmers have equitable access to technologies, including digital and climate smart tools.

Structural inequality in the Pacific region's agriculture sector

Currently, structural inequalities, social norms, and infrastructural gaps limit the participation and benefits of marginalised groups in the Pacific region's agriculture sector.

Discussing existing structural inequality, Environment, Climate, and Resilience Manager at PHAMA Plus Program, Dr Rupantri Raju, noted how Pacific women working in agriculture often undertake unpaid and undervalued work, while men more often control market engagement, income, and core decision-making. Pacific women also have limited access to resources and opportunities in the agriculture sector and face restricted land ownership and financial support, fewer training opportunities, and under-representation in leadership roles.

High absenteeism and staff turnover among women employees in agri-businesses is often linked to domestic violence and family pressures, which limits productivity and business growth.

– Dr Rupantri Raju

Dr Rupantri Raju drew attention to other challenges including the impact of Pacific youth seeking overseas employment, creating labour shortages for remaining farmers. Young people who do stay are often eager to use technology in farming, but face limited access to technologies, finance and advisory services, and have restricted influence over land use decisions, which remain dominated by older farmers. Consequently, Pacific youth represent an underutilised source of labour and innovation in the region's agriculture sector.

Encouraging Pacific youth participation in agriculture

Regarding youth-focused projects in Samoa, Senior Program Manager at WIBDI, Taaloga Apa, shared that she felt many youth programs emphasise skills training or entrepreneurship but fail to address structural barriers like land access, inheritance rights, or migration pressures.

Without secure access to land or long-term income streams, young people may abandon agriculture for urban or overseas opportunities.

– Taaloga Apa

She added that 'Short-term projects risk being unsustainable if they don't connect youth to family-based farming systems or provide pathways to leadership roles in village governance'. And successful models 'are those that link youth to family enterprises, where they can innovate while still rooted in traditional systems'.

Supporting Pacific farmers with disabilities

The panel unanimously acknowledged that while people with disabilities are already involved in agriculture in the Pacific, their contributions are often invisible and/or constrained by many obstacles including both physical and social-attitudinal barriers — as well as limited access to financial support and information and services in accessible formats.

Farmers with disabilities are among the most excluded, facing barriers in physical access to land, tools, and markets, as well as social stigma. — Taaloga Apa

Vitila Vuniwaqa, who owns Vees Organic Farms in Fiji, shared how she struggled to access financial and disability-friendly support and services, and that in her opinion, there's a lack of training and spaces for farmers from marginalised groups to support and learn from each other.

Start-up costs are a huge barrier for farmers with disabilities. I faced a lot of struggles to get started [as an organic farmer] financially and continue to 12 years on. There isn't any targeted financial support for people with disabilities. — Vitila Vuniwaqa

Regarding integrating disability inclusion into agricultural policies and programs, Vitila advises: 'Centering on providing dedicated support; ensuring staff are trained in providing disability-friendly services; and collecting disaggregated data so support services can be tailored'.

Empowering local communities

Taaloga Apa spoke about how WIBDI's approach to inclusive agriculture practices aims to be community and family-centred, highlighting that involving community members and acknowledging Fa'a Sāmoa — a traditional way of life encompassing culture, language, and social structure — is vital and can minimise issues such as introducing technologies or models that don't fit with Samoa's land or culture.

Agriculture is not just an economic activity in Samoa, it is a way of life, deeply tied to family, culture, and identity. To cultivate equity, we must ensure that women, youth, and people with disabilities are not left behind in this journey," says Taaloga Apa, adding that "while women-only initiatives empower women by providing training, resources, and visibility, they can unintentionally create tension within families.

In Samoa, decision-making is often collective, and excluding men or youth from agricultural projects can lead to resistance or undermine sustainability. Some women report difficulty in scaling their enterprises because they lack family support or access to land controlled by male relatives. The lesson is that women's empowerment must be integrated into family and village structures, not isolated from them.

Conclusion

Inclusive agriculture in the Pacific is both possible and underway, driven by Pacific leadership, local innovation, and strong community values. The challenge now is to scale and systematise these efforts so that women, youth, and people with disabilities can fully realise their rights and potential within resilient, climate-smart agricultural systems. In order to do this, there needs to be collaboration between governments, private sector, NGOs, OPDs, and research institutions to develop and scale inclusive technologies, services, and policies; inclusive agribusiness must be family-centered; community-based frameworks work best when they respect traditional knowledge and cultural practices; marginalised groups — women, youth, and people with disabilities — must be engaged as decision-makers and co-designers, not only beneficiaries. Finally, the 'Pacific way', which is grounded in family, culture, and land, offers lessons for the whole world on how inclusivity can be cultivated organically.

Interested? Want to know more?

Find more information on Australia Awards Women Leading and Influencing and how you can get involved:

 www.wliprogram.org

 info@wliprogram.org

Useful Links

- [IVC Performance Story original version Inclusive-Agriculture-Value-Chains-FINAL-approved-9Mar.pdf](#)
- [Performance Story Summary Inclusive Value Chains](#)
- [Inclusive Agribusiness Guidance Note – Welcome to PHAMA Plus Program](#) (both accessible and non-accessible versions)