Australian National University

USP
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

2025 PACIFIC UPDATE

TUESDAY 3 TO THURSDAY 5 JUNE
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC
JAPAN-PACIFIC ICT CENTRE
LAUCALA CAMPUS, SUVA, FIJI

SUPPORTED BY

PACIFIC RESEARCH PROGRAM
AN INITIATIVE OF THE AUSTRALIAN AID PROGRAM

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG
REGIONAL PROGRAMME
AUSTRALIA AND THE PACIFIC

#PacificUpdate

DEVELOPMENT POLICY CENTRE, AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

The Development Policy Centre is a think tank for aid and development serving Australia, the region, and the global development community. We undertake independent research and promote practical initiatives to improve the effectiveness of Australian aid, to support the development of Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands region, and to contribute to better global development policy.

The Centre was established in September 2010 and is based at the Crawford School of Public Policy in the College of Law, Governance and Policy at the Australian National University.

Website: devpolicy.anu.edu.au

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PACIFIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

The Development Policy Centre's work on Pacific migration is part of the Pacific Research Program (PRP), a consortium with the Department of Pacific Affairs (ANU) and The Lowy Institute. PRP is an independent Pacific-focussed research program that supports evidence-based policy-making in the Pacific and collaborative research relationships across the region. Its research covers geopolitics, regionalism, governance, economic resilience, gender, social inclusion and migration. The Program is co-funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the consortium partners' parent bodies.

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Josephine Singh, Executive Support

2025 PACIFIC UPDATE – TUESDAY PROGRAM

TUESDAY 3 JUNE

8.30am **Registration**

9.00am **Welcome and opening plenary**

Auditorium

Moderator: Dr Manumatavai Tupou-Roosen, Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Regional Campuses and Global Engagement), The University of the South Pacific

Welcome Remarks

Professor Pal Ahluwalia, Vice Chancellor and President, The University of the South Pacific

Welcome Remarks

His Excellency Mr Peter Roberts, Australia's High Commissioner to Fiji

Keynote address

Hon Baron Waqa, Secretary General, Pacific Islands Forum

Keynote address

A new approach to measuring the economic performance of the Pacific islands

Stephen Howes and Rubayat Chowdhury, Development Policy Centre, Australian National University

10.30am **Morning tea**

11.00am **Panel 1a: Regional integration and governance**

Auditorium

Chair: Tess Newton Cain, Sustineo

Why traditional media matters more than ever in shaping the Pacific's digital future
Prashanth Pillay, Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Alexander Rheeney, Pacific Media Assistance Scheme

Tuvalu's diplomatic preference: beyond the checkbook
John Augé, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Community rule and order making in Melanesia
Miranda Forsyth, Australian National University and Sinclair Dinnen, Australian National University

A Blue Pacific rules-based order: our rules, our home
Joel Nilon, Australian National University and Sione Tekiteki, Auckland University of Technology

Note: Bold text indicates the presenter/s where there is more than one paper author. If no names are in bold text all authors intend to present.

Panel 1b: Charting a new course for accountability ecosystems in the Pacific

Video Conference Room 1 (VCR1)

Chair: Maraia Vavaitamana, United Nations Development Programme

Lisa Denney, La Trobe University

Gregoire Nimbtik, Melanesian Spearhead Group Secretariat

Neelesh Gounder, The University of the South Pacific

12.30pm **Lunch**

1.30pm **Panel 2a: Gender and inequality**

Auditorium

Chair: Kushneel Prakash, University of Melbourne

Significance of youth awareness of domestic violence laws in PNG and the Pacific
Minetta Daniella Kakarere, University of Papua New Guinea

Dietary patterns of Indo-Fijians and their comparison to patterns of iTaukei (indigenous) Fijians
Naohiro Nakamura, The University of the South Pacific

Empowering I-Kiribati women through entrepreneurship: kindling Kiribati and the PPAC Programme (2022)
Mereoni Tavakaturaga, Josephine Kalsuak and Tarita Bartley, The Pacific Community (SPC)

Navigating pandemics: adaptation and resilience of redundant workers in Fiji Airways
Seone Lolesio, The University of the South Pacific, Emalini Bainivalu Nakabea, The University of the South Pacific, Amalaini Tikoduadua, The University of the South Pacific and Nacanieli Rika, Consultant

Panel 2b: Unspoken rules of politics in Vanuatu

Video Conference Room 1 (VCR1)

Uncovering voter motivations and the barriers and enablers to women's political participation

Chair: Wilson Toa, Balance of Power

Hon Marie-Louise Milne, Government of Vanuatu

Telstar Jimmy, Balance of Power

Vani Nailumu, Balance of Power

3.00pm **Afternoon tea**

2025 PACIFIC UPDATE – TUESDAY PROGRAM

3.30pm **Panel 3a: Social development**

Auditorium

Chair: Rachel Payne, Partnerships for Social Protection

Life in the Pacific islands: understanding determinants of life satisfaction in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga
Kushneel Prakash, University of Melbourne

The price of darkness: economic cost of energy poverty in Pacific Island countries
Siti Nur Rosifah, Australian National University

Living without electricity in urban communities in PNG: the case of 8-Mile Settlement
Loretta Dilu, University of Papua New Guinea

Standing firm against the tides of change: land tenure system in the Kingdom of Tonga
Holomesi Finau, The University of South Pacific and Digby Race, The University of the South Pacific

Panel 3b: Filling the gaps: Reshaping social protection research in the Pacific and Timor-Leste

Video Conference Room 1 (VCR1)

Chair: Shirleen Ali, Partnerships for Social Protection

Laisa Vereti, Pacific Disability Forum

Rufino Varea, Pacific Islands Climate Action Network

5.00pm **Close**

5.30pm **Cocktail reception**
Japan-Pacific ICT Centre Marquee
Hosted by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

WEDNESDAY 4 JUNE

8.30am **Registration**

9.00am **Gender and governance plenary**
Auditorium

Keynote address

Chair: Miranda Forsyth, Australian National University

Bel isi: a PNG public-private partnership responding to gender-based violence
Tovi Amona, Bel isi PNG

Keynote address
Chair: Henrietta McNeill, Australian National University

Pacific approaches to understanding and fighting corruption
Steven Ratuva, University of Canterbury

Grant Walton, Australian National University

10.30am **Morning tea**

11.00am **Panel 4a: Corruption in the Pacific: perceptions, trends and resistance**
Auditorium

Chair: Grant Walton, Australian National University

Passports, prosperity and problems: (counter) geopolitical narratives of corruption in Vanuatu's Citizenship by Investment Scheme
Henrietta McNeill, Australian National University

Money laundering mutual evaluations in the Pacific: an update
Michael Kabuni, Australian National University

Security cooperation and corruption in the Pacific
Teddy Winn, Winn's Consultancy Limited

Addressing corruption in the context of climate change
Rimon Rimon, Kiribati journalist and Pacific Anti-Corruption Journalists Network

Panel 4b: Climate and energy
Video Conference Room 1 (VCR1)

Chair: Natasha Turia, Australian National University

Framing social protection and climate change in the Pacific
Marita Manley, Talanoa Consulting and Rachel Payne, Partnerships for Social Protection

Assessing the role of natural soundscapes in enhancing tourist satisfaction and loyalty to Fiji's nature-based tourist attractions
Vikas Gupta and Ilisapeci Matatolu, The University of the South Pacific

The impacts of expanding the oil palm industry in Papua New Guinea: the case of Kairak Community, East New Britain Province
Melga Mevat, Pacific Adventist University

Energizing remote islands in Tonga with mini-grid solar systems
Paea-'i-Muli Tau'aika and Seone Soakimi Lolesio, The University of the South Pacific

12.30pm **Lunch**

1.30pm **Panel 5a: The future of work**
Auditorium

Inclusive, climate-resilient and digitally enabled labour markets

Chair: Lavenia Rokovucago, The Asia Foundation

Abigail Chang, Pacific Australia Skills

Vera Chute, Women's Entrepreneurs Business Council

Senimelia Seru, Fiji Disabled People's Federation

Mishael Chand, Cadmus

Panel 5b: Economic development
Video Conference Room 1 (VCR1)

Chair: Alyssa Leng, Australian National University

Challenges and issues in assessment of the economic impact of tourism: a Tongan case study
Semisi Taumoepeau, Auckland Institute of Studies

Social constraints on capital accumulation in Melanesian economies
Martin Davies, Washington and Lee University

The role of the enabling environment in the success of micro and small enterprises in small island developing states
Seone Soakimi Lolesio, The University of the South Pacific

Correspondent banking relationships – impacts and mitigation
Denton Rarawa and Rodney Kirarock, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat

2025 PACIFIC UPDATE – WEDNESDAY PROGRAM

3.00pm **Afternoon tea**

3.30pm **Panel 6a: Fiji economy**

Auditorium

Chair: Keshmeer Makun, The University of the South Pacific

Fiji's macroeconomic performance amid global and domestic uncertainty: progress, challenges and policy options
Janesh Sami, The University of the South Pacific

Economic development and poverty reduction: income and human capital nexus in Fiji
Rukmani Gounder, Massey University

Fiji's current development priorities

Elisha Mala, Acting Manager Policy Planning and Sectoral/Regional, Ministry of Finance, Fiji

The way forward for electoral reform in Fiji

Jon Fraenkel, Professor of Comparative Politics, Victoria University of Wellington

Panel 6b: The potential of AI in policymaking and development in the Pacific

Video Conference Room 1 (VCR1)

Chair: Ryan Edwards, Australian National University

Miranda Forsyth, Australian National University

Jope Tarai, Australian National University

5.00pm **Close**

5.45pm **Conference dinner**
Japan-Pacific ICT Centre Marquee
Hosted by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

2025 PACIFIC UPDATE – THURSDAY PROGRAM

THURSDAY 5 JUNE

PACIFIC MIGRATION WORKSHOP

Towards an inclusive future: strengthening Pacific integration through human mobility

8.30am **Registration**

Auditorium

9.00am **Welcome and opening plenary**

Auditorium

Chair: Charlotte Bedford, Australian National University

Keynote address

Pacific Mobility
Jan Hutton, First Assistant Secretary, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Keynote address

Solomon Islands labour mobility: achievements, outlook, and issues
Christina Marau, Solomon Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade

10.00am **Session 1: Socio-economic analysis**

Chair: Neelesh Gounder, The University of the South Pacific

Ko e kakai, íkai ko e palopalema: A social impacts study of temporary labour mobility in Tonga
Akosita Polota, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Tonga and **Kristy Ward**, Pacific Labour Mobility Support Program

Economic development and poverty alleviation in a Papua New Guinea: fishing island community through Pacific Labour Mobility Schemes
Keimelo Gima, The University of Papua New Guinea

Beyond dependency: MIRAB as climate resilience strategy
Masami Tsujita, National University of Samoa

Human mobility, demographic change and growth prospects in PICS
David Abbott, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat

11.30am **Morning tea**

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2025 PACIFIC UPDATE – THURSDAY PROGRAM

11.45am **Session 2: Reproductive health**

Achieving reproductive justice for Pacific labour mobility participants

Chair: Dolores Devesi, International Planned Parenthood Federation, Fiji

Lindy Kanan, Australian National University

Sera Ratu, Reproductive and Family Health Association of Fiji

Sarai Amataga, True Relationships and Reproductive Health

12.45pm **Lunch**

1.45pm **Session 3: Pacific diaspora**

Chair: Lisa Denney, La Trobe University

Trump's deportations to the Pacific Islands: diplomacy and risk
Henreitta McNeill, Australian National University

Understanding Pacific communities in Australia
Huiyuan (Sharon) Liu, Australian National University and Toan Nguyen, Australian National University

Navigating cultural identity and integration: the dualistic transition of Pasifika youth in Australia
Florence Hafoka-Kafoika, Alfred Deakin Institute for Globalisation and Citizenship

How sovereignty is exercised (or constrained) under the free association model
Mata Rakanui, Office of the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands

3.15pm **Afternoon tea**

3.30pm **Session 4: New developments**

Chair: Ryan Edwards, Australian National University

Narratives, information and immigration policy preferences
Alyssa Leng, Australian National University

2024 Pacific Engagement Visa scorecard: Papua New Guinea's experiences
Natasha Turia, Australian National University

Update on PIFS Pacific Regional Labour Mobility principles
Manisha Mudaliar, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and **Sachindra Singh**, International Organization for Migration

A preview of Pacific Labour Mobility Survey Wave Two
Dung Doan, World Bank and **Ryan Edwards,** Australian National University

5.00pm **Closing Remarks**

5.15pm **Kava and drinks**

ABSTRACTS

TUESDAY 3 JUNE

PANEL 1A: REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND GOVERNANCE

Why traditional media matters more than ever in shaping Pacific's digital future

Prashanth Pillay, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

This paper asserts that while the transition from traditional media (print and radio) to digital platforms has created more equitable and cost-effective citizen access to information and knowledge across the region, best-practice development initiatives must continue to engage with established Pacific media organisations, while also embracing the 'digital age'. As part of ABC International Development's research into the State of the Media in the Pacific, this paper draws on over 120 semi-structured interviews with media practitioners and allied stakeholders across 12 Pacific countries including Fiji and Solomon Islands to understand the role traditional and digital media play in the region.

Research findings showed that print media (including its online variants) and radio continue to set a quality journalism benchmark for audiences showing their importance as a public good. This is in part due to the overarching perception that traditional media, and its associated editorial values, largely remain untainted by online mis/disinformation narratives and have thus managed to preserve their credibility as the 'voice of truth'.

This paper concludes that development initiatives should acknowledge the complementarity between print, broadcast and online media because, now more than ever, the role of media as a public good needs championing. Discounting traditional media risks forgoing decades of history, culture and traditional values that have uniquely shaped the media's public interest role in each Pacific country. The Pacific media landscape provides a refreshingly compelling case of how traditional media is more crucial than ever in shaping the ethical compass of its digital future.

Tuvalu's diplomatic preference: beyond the checkbook

John Augé, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Tuvalu's decision to maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, despite China's growing influence and assertive diplomacy in the Pacific region, presents a unique case within the broader context of Chinese efforts to realign diplomatic allegiances of Pacific island countries.

Using process-tracing methodology, the research explores the multifaceted factors shaping Tuvalu's foreign policy decisions. Specifically, it assesses the extent to which Tuvalu's strategic objectives diverge from those of China, as well as how Tuvalu critically evaluates the nature and implications of China's foreign aid initiatives. The findings suggest that Tuvalu's decision is primarily driven by a combination of cultural affinity, longstanding historical ties with Taiwan and a calculated assessment of the potential strategic risks associated with aligning with China.

These factors collectively outweigh the economic benefits that might arise from shifting diplomatic recognition. The study further explores the cultural values underpinning Tuvalu's foreign policy, examines the historical connections solidifying its relationship with Taiwan, and evaluates the strategic concerns contributing to Tuvalu's cautious stance toward China's ambitions in the region.

Additionally, the research situates Tuvalu's foreign policy within the broader geopolitical context, considering the roles of external actors such as Australia and the United States in shaping Tuvalu's strategic environment.

By highlighting the complexities of small-state agency within the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Pacific, this study enhances our understanding of how nations like Tuvalu navigate the challenges of great power competition. It underscores that strategic decisions are shaped not only by economic factors but also by cultural, historical and security imperatives.

Community rule and order making in Melanesia

Miranda Forsyth, Australian National University and Sinclair Dinnen, Australian National University

The desire to create order and provide security is a defining feature of all societies. In Melanesia, which is where the fieldwork this paper is based upon, governance and security are largely provided for most citizens at the local level rather than by the state.

Sometimes these attempts at local ordering are remarkably successful, transforming once violent and unsafe neighbourhoods into peaceful areas where residents can sleep at night and commercial activities can thrive. Sometimes they can lead to normative changes, such as around the acceptability of domestic violence or, even, violence more broadly.

On the other hand, sometimes they act to reinforce the patriarchal authority of older male leaders, suppressing other voices, particularly that of women and youth.

These observations lead us to ask: how do governance and security arrangements at the local level emerge and take on the forms that they do? Why do some thrive, some never get off the ground, and others collapse?

Our research over the past four years has explored these questions through focusing on the creation of community laws, often called by-laws in PNG, the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Fiji. In this seminar, we share our insights from this research, using the concept of an 'adaptive cycle' — a framework that helps explain how complex social systems evolve through different phases. We show that rather than being a static condition, order emerges from a continuous process of order-making, entailing dynamic responses and adaptations to changing conditions in particular contexts.

A Blue Pacific Rules-Based Order: Our Rules, Our Home

Joel Nilon, Australian National University and Sione Tekiteki, Auckland University of Technology

Ongoing wars and conflict around the world expose how international law and norms can be co-opted. With the US pulling out yet again from the Paris Climate Agreement, and other international commitments, this volatility is magnified. And with the intensifying US-China rivalry in the Pacific posing the real risk of a new "arms race", the picture becomes unmistakable: the international global order is rapidly shifting and eroding, and the stability of the multilateral system is increasingly at risk.

In this turbulent landscape, the Pacific must move beyond mere narratives such as the 'Blue Pacific' and take bold steps toward establishing a set of rules that govern and protect the Blue Pacific Continent against outside forces. If not, the region risks being submerged by rising geopolitical tides, the existential threat of climate change and external power projections.

In this presentation, we contend that the advancement of the Blue Pacific Narrative would be strengthened through the establishment of a Pacific "rules-based order". We contend that consolidating the Pacific's vision, interests and priorities into a set of rules that underpin and frame the Blue Pacific Continent would not only serve to make the Blue Pacific Narrative and 2050 Strategy more concrete but that this would also reflect the next natural evolutionary step forward for Pacific Regionalism.

In addition, we also propose that the Ocean of Peace concept, as being led by Fiji and the Pacific Islands Forum, represents the ideal instrument through which a Pacific 'rules-based order' may be established and advanced."

PANEL 1B: CHARTING A NEW COURSE FOR ACCOUNTABILITY ECOSYSTEMS IN THE PACIFIC

Chair: Chair: Marine Destrez, United Nations Development Programme

Lisa Denney, La Trobe University

Gregoire Nimbtik, Melanesian Spearhead Group Secretariat

Neelesh Gounder, The University of South Pacific

Across the Pacific there is a growing web of accountability actors with a mandate to make governments and organisations accountable for governance and budgetary decision-making. A number of Pacific island countries have Ombudsmen, Independent Corruption Commissions, Special Prosecutors with anti-corruption mandates and Leadership Code Commissions. Alongside this, in all Pacific Island countries churches, civil society, the media and customary institutions also play a role in what are increasingly understood as 'accountability ecosystems'.

Accountable governance is hardly without formal champions. But despite this, many efforts to strengthen accountability fall into the trap of isomorphic mimicry — of building the formal architecture of accountability without delivering on its function of more accountable governance. In part, this is due to failures to engage with local understandings and practices of more relational forms of accountability, as well as the power and interests that shape how accountability plays out in practice.

This panel considers the accountability landscape and the opportunities and constraints for more accountable governance in the Pacific. Drawing on research in six country studies across the North and South Pacific (the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Palau, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu), this panel discusses the step change needed in accountability support. These findings will be brought into conversation with UNDP's EU-funded public financial management program, Vaka Pasifika and reflected on by a Pacific governance and economic expert with experience working across government and academia.

Facilitated discussion will consider:

- What political economy features shape Pacific understandings/practices of accountability?
- Whose power and interests are served by the status quo?
- Why have existing accountability approaches yielded limited results?
- Do Pacific accountability institutions need more funding — or just more independence?
- Is donor-driven accountability helping or hindering the Pacific's long-term governance capacity?
- What constraints and opportunities do Pacific Island states face in improving accountable governance?

PANEL 2A: GENDER AND INEQUALITY

Significance of youth awareness of domestic violence laws in PNG and the Pacific

Minetta Daniella Kakarere, University of Papua New Guinea

This study aims to unpack and understand what the young people in Papua New Guinea think of the issue of domestic violence. This is important because this section of the society are those who will be the agents of change or destruction in the years to come. The methods used in this research include interviewing and handing out questionnaires to young people aged from 13 to 25 years. Thematic analysis was also used to analyze all their responses.

Data indicated that out of the 250 young people who participated, 155 of them were aware of the laws around domestic violence and 85 out of the 155 shared this information with another person. This is a positive indication.

However, there is still work that needs to be done to carry out awareness raising in schools, churches and communities. As young people's awareness grows, along with their understanding of related laws and available support services, they will become empowered to seek assistance if they themselves are victims of domestic violence or to support friends, family and others. Importantly, individuals contemplating perpetrating violence might also weigh the potential consequences of their actions, further contributing to the reduction of intimate partner violence in PNG.

It is important that discussions about domestic violence laws and the support services available to victims are held in schools, given the amount of time young people spend there. Schools must take the initiative and collaborate with various organizations and groups to conduct awareness sessions for students and staff.

Dietary patterns of Indo-Fijians and their comparison to patterns of iTaukei (indigenous) Fijians

Naohiro Nakamura, The University of the South Pacific

This paper presents the findings based on a five-day dietary record of 72 Indo-Fijians in Fiji. The previous research on dietary patterns in Fiji mostly focused on iTaukei (indigenous) Fijians while Indo-Fijians have been overlooked. Hence, this research is one of the first in the country to analyse detailed dietary patterns of Indo-Fijians.

Fiji has undergone an increase in non-communicable diseases and citizens are being encouraged to consume locally-produced food items instead of imported food items, together with more fruit and vegetables. We find that Indo-Fijians rely more on imported carbohydrate sources such as rice and flour, while the consumption of locally-produced carbohydrate sources is limited.

Meanwhile, their major food group intake (carbohydrate, protein and fruit/vegetable) is somewhat balanced compared to iTaukei Fijians, whose diets are dominated by carbohydrate sources. For better nutrition intake recommendations and health-related policies in the country, we suggest integrating multi-ethnic perspectives into food consumption pattern analysis.

Empowering I-Kiribati Women Through Entrepreneurship: Kindling Kiribati and the PPAC Programme (2022)

Mereoni Tavakaturaga, The Pacific Community (SPC)

This abstract examines Kindling Kiribati's (KK) 2022 initiatives to foster women's economic empowerment in Kiribati through entrepreneurship, supported by the Pacific People Advancing Change (PPAC) Program. Recognizing the untapped economic potential of I-Kiribati women facing limited financial access and formal employment, KK implemented a ten-lesson entrepreneurship training program.

KK significantly expanded its reach, reportedly distributing 176 microloans averaging A$350 to women across Kiribati. These funds enabled women to establish or expand micro-enterprises in sectors like sewing, baking, and handicrafts. The program fostered a supportive community through weekly borrower group meetings for mutual aid and loan repayment.

Direct PPAC grant funding to KK was received. PPAC's focus on human rights and social development in Kiribati aligns with KK's goal of advancing women's economic standing. Improved collaboration could have amplified KK's impact through PPAC's network and advocacy resources, contributing to gender equality and empowerment.

KK's work, in conjunction with programs like PPAC, represents a vital step towards unlocking the economic agency of women in Kiribati. By providing business education, microfinance, and a supportive network, these efforts enhance women's financial self-reliance, cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets and contribute to sustainable community development within the Kiribati context.

Further research into the specific synergies between KK and the PPAC programme would offer a more comprehensive understanding of their combined impact on women's economic empowerment.

Navigating Pandemics: Adaptation and Resilience of Redundant Workers in Fiji Airways

Seone Lolesio, The University of the South Pacific, Emalini Bainivalu Nakabea, The University of the South Pacific, Amalaini Tikoduadua, The University of the South Pacific and Nacanieli Rika, Consultant

The COVID-19 pandemic had devastating effects worldwide, including in Fiji, where it severely impacted various sectors of the economy, particularly tourism and aviation. This led to widespread layoffs, including the unexpected unilateral termination of nearly 800 employees at Fiji Airways — over half of its workforce. This abrupt action shocked air travel stakeholders and the public, leaving many redundant employees caught off-guard, as few could have predicted this scenario. While some short-term financial relief was available, such as withdrawals from their Fiji National Provident Fund (superannuation) savings and support from family and friends, it often proved insufficient for long-term sustainability. The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic's duration further compounded their difficulties, making alternative income sources essential for survival.

Understanding how these workers adapted and coped with forced redundancies is critical, especially for qualified, well-paid individuals who had previously enjoyed job security.

This study aims to investigate the adaptation and resilience strategies employed by these workers in response to COVID-19 redundancies, focusing on:

(i) alternative employment and other income sources;

(ii) the capacity of airline workers with specialized skills to diversify their income;

(iii) relevant skills gaps and strategies for preparedness against external shocks; and

(iv) significant differences by demographic factors such as gender and age.

An online survey was conducted with redundant Fiji Flight Attendants Trade Union (FFATU) members. The study is qualitative, supplemented by basic quantitative analysis. Findings reveal that most redundant staff were ill-prepared to navigate this economic shock.

PANEL 2B: UNSPOKEN RULES OF POLITICS IN VANUATU

Uncovering voter motivations and the barriers and enablers to women's political participation

Chair: Wilson Toa, Balance of Power

Hon Marie-Louise Milne, Government of Vanuatu

Telstar Jimmy, Balance of Power

Vani Nailumu, Balance of Power

In December 2024, Balance of Power, in collaboration with the Vanuatu Department of Women's Affairs and the Australian National University, launched its research report, *Unspoken Rules of Politics in Vanuatu – Uncovering the Motivations of Voters in Vanuatu Elections*. This ground-breaking locally led study was based on country-wide community consultations seeking to uncover the attitudes and behaviours driving voter patterns in Vanuatu — which has seen only seven women elected to parliament since independence. Simultaneously, its methodological approach fostered first-ever community-level conversations and debates around these drivers. One month after the release of the research, Vanuatu went to the polls in a general 'snap election', which saw one woman, Marie-Louise Milne, elected across the 52 seats.

In this panel presentation, core members of the research team will discuss why this research is both critical and novel in the Vanuatu context, and will describe the unique methodology that was able to generate broad community engagement, including discussions around issues that have hitherto remained 'unspoken', particularly with regard to attitudes towards women in political leadership. The team will also discuss how the publication and socialisation of the research is now functioning as a catalyst for broader debate around governance and leadership in Vanuatu, and the overt and tacit norms around women's leadership legitimacy.

The second part of this panel will be a Q&A with Vanuatu's only female Member of Parliament, Marie-Louise Milne. Linked to the research and with an introduction on women's overall performance in national elections to date, the conversation will explore the barriers and enablers faced by Milne in her election journey, and the broader lessons that can be gleaned to shift norms and behaviours that prevent women from exercising leadership in the political domain.

PANEL 3A: SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Life in the Pacific islands: understanding determinants of life satisfaction in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga

Kushneel Prakash, University of Melbourne

To date, little research has focused on happiness and wellbeing in Oceania-Pacific region populations compared to its developed neighbours of Australia and New Zealand. The World Happiness Report contains data on happiness around the world for over 150 countries, but none are from the Pacific Island nations. This leaves a massive gap in our understanding of life satisfaction and happiness in these island nations.

We base our analysis on the recent Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) by UNICEF that has been undertaken in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. The survey includes question on happiness and life satisfaction in these three countries, which makes this survey as the only household representative survey to contain this information for these countries. Results on life satisfaction scores measured on 0-10 scale shows rather high values of life satisfaction in the Pacific.

We find that Tonga has an average life satisfaction score of 8.51 followed by Samoa on 8.37 and Fiji on 7.67. These average life satisfaction scores are remarkably high and above world average of 5.27 from the Gallup World Poll. These headline data alone suggests that there is more to the life satisfaction puzzle than we know. This study uses a range of econometric techniques to test various demographics differences and determinants of wellbeing in the Pacific.

Findings from this study are expected to allow policy makers, civil society groups, non-government organisations and researchers to evaluate where the wellbeing inequities exist and what could be done to improves people's wellbeing in the Pacific.

The price of darkness: economic cost of energy poverty in Pacific Island Countries

Siti Nur Rosifah, Australian National University

Energy poverty is a major economic constraint in Pacific Island Countries (PICs), limiting productivity, job creation and income generation. While urban centres have seen improvements in energy access, rural communities — particularly in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu — continue to rely on expensive and inefficient energy sources

such as kerosene, biomass, and diesel generators. The high cost and unreliability of electricity create significant economic barriers, increasing business operational costs, limiting industrial expansion, and reducing agricultural and fisheries output.

This paper examines the economic costs of energy poverty in PICs, focusing on the financial burdens on households due to high energy expenses, the inefficiencies faced by businesses struggling with unreliable electricity and the broader macroeconomic implications, including constrained GDP growth, restricted digital connectivity and dependence on imported fossil fuels. Using data from UNDP, the World Bank and national energy reports, alongside case studies from Vanuatu and PNG, the study estimates the economic losses linked to inadequate energy access. It evaluates whether renewable energy solutions — such as solar mini-grids, biofuels, and micro-hydro systems — can offer a cost-effective and sustainable alternative.

The paper argues that energy poverty is a structural barrier to economic development in the Pacific. Without targeted policy interventions, PICs will continue to face slow industrialization, economic stagnation and limited resilience to global and climate shocks. Addressing energy poverty is not just an infrastructure challenge but a crucial step toward unlocking economic opportunities and sustainable development in the region.

Living without electricity in urban communities in PNG: the case of 8-mile Settlement

Loretta Dilu, University of Papua New Guinea

This Pacific Update presentation will highlight the author's recent academic research project that investigated the electricity access challenges in urban communities in PNG and present the latest findings. It will examine access issues in urban areas, focusing on safety, health, education and economic impacts to inform policy improvements, especially in informal settlements.

Using qualitative methods such as non-random sampling and snow ball technique, the study explores the electricity access challenges 8-mile settlement residents, coping strategies and implications of off-grid living, revealing limited access reasons often linked to service inadequacies rather than personal choices. It exposes infrastructure and land tenure complexities leading to financial struggles and safety concerns, disrupting daily life and business operations, prompting alternative energy use and increased expenses. Electricity shortages hinder business viability and education, with community efforts and government interventions addressing access gaps but posing safety risks. Land recognition issues exacerbate the problem, hindering utility expansion and individuals' access to essential amenities.

The focus of this presentation is on presenting the findings of this research project and highlight the need for further research on related issues like water supply connections in informal urban communities. This is a timely research topic, where the data and analysis will be of interest to policy makers in the electricity and public service delivery space and other respective stakeholders. Overall, comprehensive solutions involving government, infrastructure improvements and community involvement are needed to address these socio-economic challenges effectively.

Standing Firm against the tides of Change: Land Tenure in Tonga

Holomesi Finau and Digby Race, The University of the South Pacific

The Kingdom of Tonga stands out among Pacific nations for its preservation of land tenure since the establishment of its constitution in 1875. Despite its significance, scholarly exploration of land access, development and tenure has been limited in part due to cultural sensitivities of the topic. Land ownership in Tonga is dominated by the Crown and the 'nobles', leaving many 'commoners' uncertain about the security of any land development and their future. The 'commoners' are advocating for changes to the existing land tenure system, to meet the needs of their contemporary livelihoods.

This study contributes to existing literature by incorporating recent data and perspectives of various stakeholders in Tongatapu area on the land tenure system. The data were collected through in-depth interviews utilising both structured and unstructured questionnaires. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data were examined thematically. This article presents a review of the global context of land tenure and the specific characteristics in Tonga, before presenting an analysis of the different perspectives of land tenure in Tonga.

The key findings indicate that the majority of the study's informants favour maintaining the land

tenure system for social stability and cultural preservation. A minority of the participants advocated changes to promote development and equal representation among land owners. It recommends fostering dialogue and awareness on this issue among Tonga's society, and reviewing the land tenure system to better align with current pressures of socio-economic growth and climate change.

PANEL 3B: FILLING THE GAPS: RESHAPING SOCIAL PROTECTION RESEARCH IN THE PACIFIC AND TIMOR-LESTE

Chair: Shirleen Ali, Partnerships for Social Protection

Laisa Vereti, Pacific Disability Forum

Rufino Varea, Pacific Islands Climate Action Network

In recognition of the limited publications related to social protection in the Pacific and Timor-Leste compared to other regions, Partnerships for Social Protection (P4SP) and Sustineo undertook an Evidence Review in 2023-24.

As the first study of its kind in the region, it highlighted existing knowledge, gaps, and the sources of available evidence. The study aimed to identify critical knowledge gaps for future research.

Key findings include:

1. Social protection discourse is dominated by external voices, except when discussing informal mechanisms.

2. Inclusion and climate change are recognised, but areas like climate-resilient social protection and humanitarian response remain neglected.

3. There's a lack of regional evidence on good practices, especially concerning intra-household dynamics and gender, disability and inclusion.

4. The interaction between formal and informal social protection needs further exploration.

5. More evidence on the economic returns of social protection in the Pacific is required.

Following an overview presentation, a talanoa with panel members will delve into the key findings —particularly related to gender, disability, social inclusion, and climate change. It will highlight Pasifika perspectives on these issues and discuss how we can amplify Pacific voices in related discussions.

While the conversation will focus on social protection evidence, it is also relevant to those interested in enhancing Pacific ownership and voice in research more broadly.

WEDNESDAY 4 JUNE

PANEL 4A: CORRUPTION IN THE PACIFIC: PERCEPTIONS, TRENDS AND RESISTANCE

Passports, prosperity and problems: (counter) geopolitical narratives of corruption in Vanuatu's Citizenship by Investment Scheme

Henrietta McNeill, Australian National University

Money laundering mutual evaluations in the Pacific: an update

Michael Kabuni, Australian National University

Security cooperation and corruption in the Pacific

Teddy Winn, Winn's Consultancy Limited

Addressing corruption in the context of climate change

Rimon Rimon, Kiribati journalist and Pacific Anti-Corruption Journalists Network

Over the past decade, responses against corruption have been ramping up in the Pacific. Pacific Island nations — including Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and more recently Tonga — have introduced dedicated anti-corruption agencies, with others promising to take greater action in the years to come. At the regional scale, in 2020 Pacific Island political leaders promised to tackle corruption by signing the Teieniwa Vision, which was in turn endorsed by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2021.

Against this backdrop of increased commitment, this panel will highlight key trends on corruption and the fight against it in the region.

It will showcase research that examines:

1. The way corruption in Vanuatu's citizenship by investment scheme have been framed by Western media;
2. The findings and relevance of money laundering evaluations in the region;
3. The intersections between efforts to combat corruption and security cooperation; and
4. The ways corruption can exacerbate the effects of climate change.

In doing so, presenters will highlight the complex nature of recent anti-corruption trends, corruption perceptions and opportunities for and resistance to change.

This panel was organised by Associate Professor Grant Walton and Dr Henrietta McNeill with support from the ANU's Asia Pacific Innovation Program.

PANEL 4B: CLIMATE AND ENERGY

Framing social protection and climate change in the Pacific

Marita Manley, Talanoa Consulting and Rachel Payne, Partnerships for Social Protection

Climate change can intensify inequalities and disproportionately affect women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities and other vulnerable people.

The Pacific islands are severely impacted by climate change, as their unique geographic and cultural characteristics make them particularly vulnerable, leading to severe consequences for ecosystems, communities, livelihoods and cultural practices.

In the context of climate change, social protection has an increasingly important role to play in bolstering resilience, supporting sustainable and inclusive economic growth, and promoting a "just transition".

Partnerships for Social Protection (P4SP), an Australian Government program, is conducting a research study examining the intersection of social protection and climate change policies and programs in the Pacific region.

The study will explore the role social protection can play in reducing vulnerability, responding to shocks, and in achieving the UNFCCC goals of adaptation and mitigation, and facilitating a just transition. Using examples from the Pacific, the study will propose a model for conceptualising the role of social protection in the context of climate change and identify the short-to medium-term priorities for the region.

The session will present the initial findings emerging from the research and is intended for social protection and climate policymakers and practitioners working in the Pacific region.

Assessing the role of natural soundscapes in enhancing tourist satisfaction and loyalty to Fiji's nature-based tourist attractions

Vikas Gupta and Ilisapeci Matatolu, The University of the South Pacific

This study examines the influence of natural soundscapes on tourist satisfaction and loyalty at nature-based tourist attractions (NBTAs).

By examining the causal relationships between tourists' attitudes toward natural soundscapes, cognitive and affective image, loyalty and satisfaction, the study highlights the importance of auditory elements in developing stronger tourist connections to natural environments. Using a mixed methods approach, interviews with the stakeholders are directed to refine the measurement variables, followed by quantitative data collection from 359 foreign tourists visiting NBTAs across Fiji utilizing convenience sampling.

To explore the influence of perceived tourist attitude and affective & cognitive image of soundscapes on tourist loyalty & satisfaction, the data was analyzed utilizing Structural Equation Modelling. Results revealed that perceived tourist attitudes towards natural soundscapes significantly influence cognitive and affective images, further influencing tourist loyalty. Satisfaction also mediated the association between loyalty and cognitive image.

Furthermore, findings uncover that although emotional engagement with natural soundscapes is vital in developing loyalty, cognitive perceptions alone are insufficient to drive satisfaction. It also provides implications for tourism stakeholders, emphasizing the necessity to produce immersive, emotionally appealing involvements and encourage positive attitudes towards natural soundscapes to boost tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

The impacts of expanding the oil palm industry in Papua New Guinea: the case of Kairak Community, East New Britain Province

Melga Mevat, Pacific Adventist University

The global palm oil sector is experiencing rapid expansion driven by escalating global demand for edible oils and biofuels. With developed countries facing land scarcity, the oil palm industry has expanded into Papua New Guinea, notably in East New Britain. Various impacts have been researched but there is little knowledge on how indigenous communities in PNG are successfully addressing the impacts of oil palm expansion.

The main aim was to explore how the Kairak Indigenous community adapt in addressing impacts of oil palm expansion while continuing to engage in oil palm production. A qualitative, ethnographic case study approach is deployed, with tok stori and observation employed to further investigate patterns reported through a quantitative survey and individual interviews. These methods were used to find out how people address the impacts of expanding oil palm.

The comparative analysis confirmed the validity of the findings.The findings underscore substantial development implications. Socially, the industry triggers land disputes, community fragmentation, and cultural erosion. Economically, it brings about unequal benefit distribution and dependency. Environmentally, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and water pollution are observed.

These issues exemplify broader development challenges that PNG experiences, where economic activities often entail social and environmental trade-offs. Emphasizing the importance of balancing economic growth with social equity and environmental sustainability, the paper advocates for addressing these implications by using indigenous peoples' experiences to formulate policy frameworks that promote sustainable practices.

Energizing remote islands in Tonga with mini-grid solar systems

Paea-'i-Muli Tau'aika and Seone Soakimi Lolesio, The University of the South Pacific

This study examines the recent installation of mini-grid solar systems on the remote islands of Niuafo'ou, 'Otea (Vava'u), and Mo'unga'one (Ha'apai) in Tonga.

Prior to the installation, these islands relied heavily on kerosene and individual household generators, limiting electricity access for basic devices such as battery-powered radios. The research reviews feasibility studies conducted before deployment, assessing energy demand, solar resource potential, and the technical and economic viability of mini-grid solutions.

While a comprehensive impact assessment is pending, early evidence suggests that mini-grid systems are reducing reliance on fossil fuels, improving energy access and enhancing economic opportunities.

This study concludes that solar mini-grids offer a sustainable and scalable solution for energy security and socio-economic development in remote island communities, with the potential for wider adoption across the Pacific Island communities.

PANEL 5A: THE FUTURE OF WORK

Inclusive, climate-resilient, and digitally enabled labour markets

Chair: Lavenia Rokovucago, The Asia Foundation

Abigail Chang, Pacific Australia Skills Partnership

Laisa Bulatale, Fiji Women's Rights Movement

Daniel Tagivakatini, Ministry of Employment, Fiji

Anju Mangal, Pacific Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity

Fiji stands at a critical juncture in defining its future of work. The convergence of labour mobility, digital disruption, climate change, disaster risks and demographic shifts is reshaping the way Fijians access employment and economic opportunity. This panel will examine how Fiji can build a labour market that is inclusive, adaptive, and future-ready, while also offering lessons for other Pacific Island countries.

Using Fiji as a case study, this session will draw together diverse perspectives from government, civil society, the private sector and regional development actors. It will explore how education, skills development, migration pathways, and green and digital investments can be better leveraged to support dignified, climate-resilient work. The panel will also discuss how policies can respond to the growing care economy, informal labour challenges, and disaster-related employment disruptions. It will include reflections on regional training partnerships, labour mobility schemes and Counter-Trafficking in Persons safeguards.

Questions include: How can social protection and care systems evolve to support the future workforce? What investments are needed to prepare youth for climate and digital jobs? How can policy and programming address gender and disability disparities? What innovations are needed to manage migration and workforce gaps?

The discussion will spotlight practical strategies and experiences from across sectors to inform a collective Pacific response to the changing world of work.

PANEL 5B: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Challenges and issues in assessment of the economic impact of tourism: a Tongan case study

Semisi Taumoepeau, Auckland Institute of Studies

This presentation is based on data analysis works carried out by the author in Tonga during 2024, supported by the Tonga Statistics Department and the Tourism Ministry. It is hoped that the challenges and issues experienced by the author in this report will help other South Pacific destinations in carrying out their respective assessments of tourism economic impact reports.

Tourism is one of the main pillars of economic growth and development for many islands in the region. As COVID-19 recedes, tourism to the South Pacific shows signs of rebounding. However, the Pacific's tourism recovery is highly variable. The lack of comparable tourism statistical and economic data between destinations in the region means it is currently impossible to adequately monitor and track the direction of tourism growth. Nor is it possible to generate uniform comparable data on tourism's economic impact and assess its contributions to meeting sustainable development goals.

Data analysis includes key characteristics of the tourism industry, and the Tourism Satellite Account requirements as set out by the UN World Tourism Organization International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics 2008. The ability to generate local income out of visitor expenditures varies substantially between different economies or islands/regions. Also, locally the ability to generate local income out of visitors' expenditure varies substantially between different operations. The overall results from the analysis are showing signs of the industry rebounding back.

Social constraints on capital accumulation in Melanesian economies

Martin Davies, Washington and Lee University

In many Melanesian economies, particularly the Pacific Islands and Papua New Guinea, formal capital accumulation and private savings remain low despite opportunities for growth. This paper explores how informal institutions — especially the wantok system of kinship-based obligation — shape savings behavior and constrain capital formation. We build an overlapping generations (OLG) model where intertemporal savings decisions are affected by social taxation and status utility. Two regimes are analyzed: a traditional wantok regime, where savings are taxed by kin obligations, and a modern regime, where financially included individuals can hide savings from relatives. A no-wantok benchmark represents the standard fully funded model.

Under constant relative risk aversion (CRRA) preferences, we derive closed-form solutions for savings and simulate macroeconomic dynamics. Results show that strong kinship obligations function like a wealth tax, depressing capital accumulation and steady-state output. However, if individuals gain utility from generosity or social status, the adverse effects are partially offset. Both wantok regimes yield lower steady-state capital stocks than the benchmark, with the traditional regime having the most severe constraint.

Comparative statics highlight how preference parameters — risk aversion, the social tax rate, and status weight — influence long-run outcomes. Policy implications stress the importance of culturally sensitive interventions. Savings mechanisms that align with kin obligations, such as community funds or commitment accounts, may be more effective than individualist approaches. While the wantok system provides vital social insurance, it entails economic trade-offs. Thoughtful policy design is essential to promote capital accumulation without undermining social cohesion.

The role of the enabling environment in the success of micro and small enterprises in small island developing states

Seone Soakimi Lolesio, The University of the South Pacific

An enabling environment is widely recognized in global studies as a crucial factor that positively influences the performance and success of micro and small enterprises (MSEs). Although there is substantial research on this subject across various countries, there is a notable gap in studies focusing on small island developing states such as Fiji.

This paper aims to address this gap by exploring the direct relationship between the enabling environment and the success of MSEs in the municipality of Nasinu in Fiji. The study examines five key determinants of the enabling environment: government policy/support, safe/secure environment, NGO/civil society support, infrastructure and market access.

A survey involving 330 MSE owners and managers was conducted, using a quantitative approach on a Likert scale. Data analysis was performed using Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with ADANCO 2.3.3 software. The results confirmed a significant direct relationship between the enabling environment and the success of MSEs through the five determinants.

Correspondent banking relationships – impacts and mitigation

Denton Rarawa and Rodney Kirarock, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat

In recent years the flow of remittances from the steady outmigration of Pacific Islanders, both migrants and those working on labour mobility schemes, has increased substantially. There have also been increases in financial flows relating to trade and services. Almost all of these financial flows need to be facilitated through the global financial system. This means through correspondent banking relationships (CBRs).

CBRs are therefire vital for many of the Pacific's smaller national and regional banks that often lack both an adequate network of partner or 'correspondent' banks around the world and the necessary resources to provide a fully comprehensive set of financial services to their customers themselves. This is where correspondent banks are essential.

However, the expansion of money laundering and the financing of terrorism, often through small banks in less well regulated jurisdictions, has resulted in correspondent banking relationships in the Pacific becoming subject to extensive (and costly) regulatory oversight to mitigate risks the of these activities. Many international correspondent banks have therefore de-risked their operations by closing their correspondent relationships with small Pacific banks.

Money Transfer Operators (MTOs) have been particularly affected by this de-risking because of their cash-intensive business model often serving remittances. The loss of these CBR facilities has been very damaging to Pacific Island economies and add to the costs of sending remittances.

This presentation will explain and discuss regional efforts to mitigate this challenging issue through a recently activated World Bank funded project for seven Pacific Forum Island States.

PANEL 6A: FIJI ECONOMY

Fiji's macroeconomic performance amid global and domestic uncertainty: progress, challenges and policy options

Janesh Sami, The University of the South Pacific

We critically assess Fiji's macroeconomic performance following the 2024-2025 budget, ongoing political challenges, and the recent trade war between the United States and its major trading partner economies. We examine major progress, failures and highlight existing as well as future policy challenges. We find that while Fiji's tax revenue has improved, several other indicators show a mixed picture, and effects are yet to be realized. Based on our analysis, we suggest some important policy recommendations for the upcoming 2025-2026 budget to effectively address existing challenges and build economic resilience.

Economic development and poverty reduction: income and human capital nexus in Fiji

Rukmani Gounder, Massey University

Health and education are critical aspects of human capital development needed for people to reach their potential as productive members of the society. These factors are vital to enhance the nations socio-economic development. Empirical analysis based on the monetary and non-monetary models evaluate the impact of education and health for poverty reduction applying Fiji's Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2013-2014 dataset. Estimated results of monetary model show that years of education, younger household heads and the number of children have positive impacts on the household's total income. Female household heads income levels are lower than their male counterparts. Non-monetary aspects imply that education has a positive impact on health prevention activities while those living in rural areas have a lower income level. A renewed focus on socio-economic policy by government is crucial to reduce the households' poverty levels.

The way forward for electoral reform in Fiji

Jon Fraenkel, Professor of Comparative Politics, Victoria University of Wellington

Fiji has experimented with numerous electoral systems since independence; a divisive first-past-the post system using communal-and 'cross-voting' rolls; an entirely ethnicized system based strictly on

race; and a preferential voting system designed to induce 'moderation' which failed dismally. The latest electoral law provides an open list proportional representation system that was used in elections in 2014, 2018 and 2022, but this has been criticized for its confusing Soduku-style ballot paper which features only numbers, without names or party symbols; it's the 'big man' or 'rock star' syndrome which makes party fortunes dependent on having a popular leader with nationwide appeal; the fact that some MPs can get elected with less votes than candidates who fail to get elected; and because the single national constituency of 55-members ensures that MPs do not represent any specific geographical area within Fiji.

As Fiji launches a new review of the country's electoral legislation, this paper looks at the options for reform inside and outside of the 2013 constitution.

PANEL 6B: THE POTENTIAL OF AI IN POLICYMAKING AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC

Chair: Ryan Edwards, Australian National University

Miranda Forsyth, Australian National University

Jope Tarai, Australian National University

This panel will discuss the opportunities and challenges of the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for policy making and development in the Pacific Islands region. A number of substantive examples will be worked through, including Dragonfly Thinking as an AI powered framework for thinking through complex problems.

THURSDAY 5 JUNE

SESSION 1: SOCIO-ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

Ko e kakai, íkai ko e palopalema: A social impacts study of temporary labour mobility in Tonga

Akosita Polota, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Tonga and Kristy Ward, Pacific Labour Mobility Support Program

The Tonga Social Impacts study on Temporary Labour Mobility examines the social implications of labour migration for the people and communities of Tonga. The report found that labour mobility is associated with both positive and negative social impacts. It is important to note that labour mobility is part of a life journey, and causes neither positive nor negative outcomes. Instead, impacts can be improved or exacerbated depending on the level of support available to each individual. The idea of personal choice — Fili Fakafo'ituitui — recurs throughout the report. The report identified three clear benefits from labour mobility that come with the appropriate support structures. On the other hand, five key challenges that may be exacerbated during labour mobility are explored.

Overall, the main positive of labour mobility for Tongan participants is improved socio-economic status. The main negative impact is uneven labour mobility gains primarily due to gender discrimination and inadequate support services. The report recommends that, to maximise the benefits and to minimise the challenges, focus must move from addressing problems to supporting people through multi-pillared support structures. The current focus on solving problems should shift to supporting people through a holistic Pacific-Australia and Pacific-New Zealand community of care.

Economic development and poverty alleviation in a Papua New Guinea: fishing island community through Pacific Labour Mobility Schemes

Keimelo Gima, University of Papua New Guinea

Economic development is about improving lives of people and hence giving them new lease of confidence in life. In contrast economic growth deals with statistical collection and interpretation. Rightly, Dudley Seers argues that addressing of key issues like poverty, unemployment and inequality must feature prominently in addressing economic development. These are among the basics of human life and are reflected through having access to good drinking water, to other basic services like schools, clinics, transportation, owning and living in a decent housing etc. On Moukele, a fishing island community in the National Capital Province of PNG, the main source of livelihood is fishing. Unfortunately, income from fishing is not stable and hence creates instability and disruptions in their lives. However, the weekly remittances from young people working in Australia and New Zealand under Pacific Labour Mobility (PLM) schemes stabilizes the income and eases the pain of some families. Through their spending a wider community benefits to a lesser extent.

Additionally, replacing the poutas (make shift houses or shacks) by permanent houses creates better security and comfort zones. The daughters and sons of Moukele under PLM schemes also buy essential assets like outboard motors and fiberglass dinghies. These assets increase both the income

earning opportunities of their respective families and help them in ferrying their drinking and cooking water from the mainland that is about 20 kms away. At the end of the day, this creation and enhancement of the comfort and security of families reflects some significant aspects of economic development.

Beyond dependency: MIRAB as climate resilience strategy

Masami Tsujita, National University of Samoa

MIRAB refers to an economic model based on migration (MI), remittances (R), foreign aid (A), and aid-funded public sector bureaucracy (B). Introduced in the mid-1980s by New Zealand economist Geoff Bertram and geographer Ray Watters, it describes how small island states in the Pacific sustain their economies, primarily through international migration-driven remittances and foreign aid. Over time, however, MIRAB has taken on a more negative connotation, emphasizing dependency, vulnerability and unsustainable development. As Pacific labour mobility schemes expand and remittances rise, debates over the MIRAB model, its reliance on external sources and its sustainability have resurfaced. This renewed focus has led some economists and aid agencies to advocate for the adoption of more sustainable models that foster long-term growth in the Pacific.

This paper challenges the prevailing discourse of Pacific vulnerability with reference to Samoa. Despite concerns about MIRAB's sustainability, remittances and foreign aid to Samoa have remained steady for 40 years. Rather than fostering vulnerability, the MIRAB model, when integrated with the customary land system, enhances Samoa's resilience. Customary land allows coastal residents to shift their homes inland permanently or temporarily as needed, a process supported by remittances. Foreign aid, meanwhile, funds climate-resilient infrastructure at both national and grassroots levels. Together, remittances and aid directly and indirectly strengthen Samoan families' adaptive strategies in response to environmental challenges and climate change.

Human mobility, demographic change and growth prospects in PICS

David Abbott, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat

Human mobility is an important socio-economic factor in the development of many Pacific Island countries (PICs); Samoa and Tonga have seen high levels of family-related migration and low population growth rates since the 1970s. Fiji has experienced steady levels of migration since the late 1980s. North Pacific Countries have had opportunities to migrate to the USA since the signing of their Compacts of Free Association (COFA) in the 1980s, with Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue having similar opportunities with New Zealand. Short-term labour mobility (primarily seafarers) were a feature in Tuvalu and Kiribati in the 1970s through to the late 2000s, and Fiji's UN Peacekeepers were a feature for many years.

However, in the last five or so years attention has increasingly turned to the impacts of the short-term labour mobility programmes on the labour force of many PICs. The New Zealand Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) schemes are now the principal options for labour mobility, while the New Zealand Pacific Access Category (PAC) and Samoa Quota visas together with the new Australian Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV), along with family visas are now the principal long-term/permanent migration options. In addition, Tuvalu has a special migrant visa option to Australia under the Falepili Treaty.

Migration in all its forms is therefore having an impact on the demographics of many PICs; this presentation, a component of the PIFS initiated Socio-economic assessment of human mobility, discusses the impacts of human mobility on the recovery and growth prospects of PICs.

SESSION 2: REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Achieving reproductive justice for Pacific labour mobility participants

Chair: Dolores Devesi, International Planned Parenthood Federation, Fiji

Lindy Kanan, Australian National University

Sera Ratu, Reproductive and Family Health Association of Fiji

Sarai Amataga, True Relationships and Reproductive Health

Tens of thousands of Pacific people are currently in Australia, New Zealand and other countries working on temporary visas. One aspect of the labour mobility journey which to date has not received adequate attention is sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). SRHR covers a range of topics including maternal health, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), access to contraception, abortion services, protection from

sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), and education on safe and healthy relationships.

Access to comprehensive and high-quality sexual and reproductive health information and services saves lives. However, when labour mobility participants leave home to work abroad, they may face several intersecting social, legal and geographical barriers to accessing this care. This includes lack of information, stigmatising attitudes, financial and language barriers, along with geographical or social isolation — often further compounded by power imbalances and restrictions on their entitlements within host countries. In the absence of coordinated systems to ensure their health and wellbeing across all stages of the migration journey, labour mobility participants are at increased risk of poor health outcomes such as STIs, HIV, unintended pregnancy, SGBV, and violations of their human rights through exploitation, abuse and trafficking.

This panel will explore the welfare and wellbeing of Pacific people engaging in labour mobility through a focussed discussion on their sexual and reproductive health and rights. The audience will gain an understanding of sexual and reproductive health trends and gaps for Pacific labour mobility participants in Australia, with a discussion on the obligations of sending and host countries. Panellists will discuss current challenges, along with solutions and opportunities for governments and civil society to better support the health and rights of all labour mobility participants. The panellists hold expert knowledge spanning SRHR, community education, Pacific migration, research and policy advocacy.

SESSION 3: PACIFIC DIASPORA

Trump's deportations to the Pacific Islands: diplomacy and risk

Henreitta McNeill, Australian National University

This presentation delves into the international dynamics of criminal deportations under the Trump administration, with a focus on the geopolitical implications and diplomatic interactions with Pacific Island nations. During Trump's first (and now second) term, the United States intensified its deportation efforts, causing widespread apprehension across the Pacific.

These deportations, a sovereign right, profoundly impacted bilateral relations as punitive measures were employed to pressure states into accepting deported individuals without considering the broader consequences. Pacific Island nations expressed concerns over socio-economic and security challenges posed by deported individuals, highlighting the lack of support mechanisms for reintegration.

Without proper reintegration support, there are risks for national and regional security. However, the critical lack of funding and support from deporting states exacerbates tensions between states. This presentation underscores the urgent need for diplomatic engagement and robust appropriate support for receiving countries that considers socio-economic impacts and ensures sustainable reintegration for deported individuals.

Understanding Pacific communities in Australia

Huiyuan (Sharon) Liu, Australian National University and Toan Nguyen, Australian National University

Enhancing regional integration by promoting freer movement in the Pacific has emerged as a compelling strategy for fostering regional prosperity. Yet, the social and economic integration of the Pacific diaspora in Australia — a key destination for Pacific migrants — remains relatively underexplored beyond basic population statistics.

In this research, we analyse Australian Census data to explore the characteristics of the Pacific diaspora, focusing on age structure, labour market outcomes, geographical distribution, gender gaps and the second generation. We limit our focus to people born in independent Pacific states with ancestry from the region (including Fijian Indian) to exclude expatriates' children and we compare Pacific diaspora outcomes with those for migrants from Western and other (referred to as 'non-Western') countries. This study helps inform the unique challenges and recognizes the contributions of the Pacific diasporas within the broader Australian context.

Navigating cultural identity and integration: the dualistic transition of Pasifika youth in Australia

Florence Hafoka-Kafoika, Alfred Deakin Institute for Globalisation and Citizenship

Pasifika youth in Australia frequently encounter a complex process, which I term the 'dualistic transition,' as they navigate the tension between their cultural identity and the demands of integration into Australian society. This transition involves balancing collectivist cultural values, which emphasise community, family, and shared

responsibility, with the individualistic norms that are prevalent in Western society. The conflicting expectations arising from these cultural paradigms can present significant challenges for Pasifika youth, particularly during their transition from adolescence to adulthood. While Western society tends to prioritise personal achievement and independence, Pasifika cultures place greater emphasis on interconnectedness and collective well-being. This dissonance can generate feelings of confusion, frustration, and isolation, particularly when external support systems outside of the immediate family do not adequately align with or meet the needs of their collectivist values. Consequently, Pasifika youth may struggle to reconcile these competing frameworks, leading to potential disruptions in their social and personal development.

My studies will investigate the interplay between the dualistic transition for Pasifika young people and how this dynamic influences or impacts their involvement in the criminal justice system. Understanding how these youths balance cultural obligations with societal expectations is crucial for uncovering the root causes of their overrepresentation in the justice system. The tension between maintaining cultural identity and adapting to Western individualism can sometimes lead to behaviours that conflict with societal norms, potentially resulting in criminal justice involvement.

Given these challenges, my research will emphasise the importance of early intervention through a collaborative approach involving institutions, families and community organisations. By incorporating Pasifika epistemologies throughout my work, I aim to provide a relational framework for Pasifika youth, fostering a deeper understanding of their cultural values and societal expectations. This collaborative model will address underlying issues, reduce criminal justice involvement and promote long-term positive outcomes for Pasifika communities.

How sovereignty is exercised (or constrained) under the free association model

Mata Rakanui, Office of the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands

The people of the Cook Islands are fearless, resourceful, explorers of the vast Pacific Ocean. They are true Polynesians connecting directly back to the finest seafarers of the Pacific. The peopling of Polynesia was a stunning achievement! Cook Islanders and people of the Pacific have a strong sense of self-reliance, curiosity, a spirit of exploring new opportunities. The Cook Islands gained independence in 1965 under a self-governing in free association model with New Zealand. Sixty years later, ideas of greater sovereignty, self-determination, and independence are increasing. Although there is some research, there still exists a gap in knowledge and processes of increased individual sovereignty under the current free association model with New Zealand. In particular, how is the free association model exercised or constrained for the Cook Islands and its people. Further research is essential to clarify strategic outcomes and potential effects of the relationship with New Zealand and its Pacific neighbors.

My research will look at building on the works of preeminent Pacific researchers including Ron Crocombe (1995), Jeffrey Sissons (2005) and many more. Its aims are:

1. To investigate some advantages and disadvantages for the Cook Islands under the free association model with New Zealand; and
2. What are the effects on Cook Islands migration under the free association model?

SESSION 4: NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Narratives, information and immigration policy preferences

Alyssa Leng, Australian National University

Exposure to quantitative information about immigrants or narratives around the costs and benefits of immigration can alter people's immigration policy preferences.

Using a survey experiment with a representative sample of over 5,000 respondents in Australia, we find substantial and contradictory misperceptions across the number, origins and labour market attributes of immigrants. Most respondents prefer less immigration overall, but favour increased high-skilled immigration. Support for increased immigration rises by 4.5-7 percentage points when respondents are shown narratives on how immigrants can help improve housing affordability.

Conversely, highlighting the perceived negative impacts of immigration on housing affordability reduces support for increasing or maintaining current immigration levels. Providing quantitative information on immigrants' characteristics generates smaller increases in support for more immigration than narratives. For immigration from Pacific Island countries, exposure to quantitative information increases support for relaxing visa requirements but there is no evidence that narratives have any effect.

2024 Pacific Engagement Visa scorecard: Papua New Guinea's experiences

Natasha Turia, Australian National University

When Australia embarked on its landmark migration policy in June last year, called the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV), it was received with Pacific-wide interest. Over 56,000 people registered in the inaugural 2024 PEV ballot round, but there were only up to 3,000 lucky winners randomly selected.

Twelve months later, and what's the PEV's scorecard? Securing the elusive job offer remains a major challenge of the application process with only around 100 visas granted.

From surveys conducted among Papua New Guinean PEV winners, applying offshore for jobs is extremely difficult in a market where employers have very little awareness and appetite for the PEV. More can be done on the Australian side.Recommendations include radical reforms like granting a 6-month conditional visa to those who have met all other visa requirements, excluding the job offer. And, establishing a designated jobs portal, directly connecting PEV winners to registered employers.

Update on PIFS Pacific Regional Labour Mobility principles

Sapai Matariki, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Sachindra Singh, International Organization for Migration

Labour mobility has been a crucial aspect of the Pacific region's economic landscape since the early 2000s. However, it has also highlighted challenges, including the loss of skilled workers and the socio-economic impact on families. In 2020, Forum Trade Ministers endorsed labour mobility as a standing agenda item and directed the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) to undertake a comprehensive assessment of regional and sub-regional labour mobility arrangements.

This assessment led to the proposal of the development of the Pacific Regional Labour Mobility Principles (PRLMP), which aims to create a balanced approach to labour mobility that benefits both sending and receiving countries. The PRLMP focuses on several key principles including Economic Benefits, Worker Welfare, Social Impact and Capacity Building. PIFS is continuously working with members and non-members of the PACER Plus agreement in developing the PRLMP.
In this context, PIFS and IOM propose a joint presentation on the PRLMP developed by PIFS with support from IOM and International Labour Organisation (ILO).

The presentation will provide a timely update on the PRLMP's progress, key findings, and next steps. This session will be particularly valuable for policymakers, researchers, and development practitioners seeking insights into regional labour mobility reforms. Attendees will gain a deeper understanding of the PRLMP's role in shaping Pacific labour mobility and the pathways available for governments, international organizations, and stakeholders to collaborate in strengthening policies and protections for Pacific workers and their families.

A preview of Pacific Labour Mobility Survey Wave Two

Dung Doan, World Bank and Ryan Edwards, Australian National University

The Pacific Labour Mobility Survey (PLMS) was the first large-scale, representative, independent data collection effort covering all three labour mobility schemes and multiple sending countries. PLMS Wave One took place from November 2021 to March 2023, covering more than 2,000 Pacific Australia Labour Mobility and Recognised Scheme Employer workers in Australia and New Zealand and more than 4,000 households in Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu.

A final report was published in 2023, and the underlying worker, household and individual datasets are all publicly available for anyone to use.

Since Wave One commenced, the Pacific Labour Scheme and the Seasonal Worker Program were merged into the PALM scheme, the PALM and RSE schemes reformed, and the number of workers in the longer-stay stream grew from a few thousand to over 18,000 (now stabilising at around 14,000). Since a major program change in June 2023, the number of PALM short term workers has declined from over 20,000 to 13,315 in December 2024.

PLMS Wave Two will be conducted in 2025 and 2026. It will allow us to build the time series, examine trends and cover some exciting new topics and additional participating countries, such as Fiji and Samoa.

This presentation provides an overview of recent labour mobility trends, a preview of PLMS Wave Two and some initial insights from consultation visits thus far.

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