

Bridging the divide: building Pacific agency in the AI era



Chuuk Lagoon, the Federated States of Micronesia

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by David Hua and Peter Brimble

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Artificial intelligence (AI) promises to be a powerful catalyst of social and economic development for Pacific Island countries. It has the potential to support solutions to long-standing challenges critical to their survival and development such as cultural preservation, disaster preparedness and sustainable resource management. However, they must first strengthen their digital capabilities and governance frameworks if they are to successfully realise the transformative benefits of AI while safely managing its risks. Without these foundations, the Pacific **risks being left behind** in the AI era with growing digital, social and economic divides.

The countries of the Pacific face a heightened vulnerability to AI risks because of their geographic isolation, small populations and economies, and susceptibility to climate change — ranging from discriminatory bias and privacy erosion to AI-enabled online harms and the carbon footprint of AI. Yet, the region is currently ill-equipped to safeguard against AI harms. It lacks the institutional, regulatory and technical foundations to shape the trajectory of AI to ensure alignment with its unique context.

No Pacific Island country **has yet published** a national AI strategy although **Fiji** and **Papua New Guinea** are making progress on developing theirs. National AI strategies outline priorities, goals and intended actions for how AI should be developed, used and regulated. Achieving a clear vision of how the benefits of AI can be inclusively obtained and advance the national interest requires grassroots engagement with local communities to ensure sensitivity to the population's needs and concerns.

Most Pacific Island countries lack the enabling regulatory environment to support the adoption and governance of emerging digital technologies. There is a marked absence of comprehensive legal frameworks in the critical areas of data privacy, intellectual property, consumer protection and cyberactivity. Targeted law reform is needed to create safeguards, accountability and alignment with societal values with respect to the development and use of AI.

Building the AI talent pipeline and uplifting public digital literacy is crucial for building a strong foundation of localised AI knowledge and expertise. Currently, public understanding of the risks, benefits and practical applications of AI is limited. Investment in AI upskilling and education will be key to empowering Pacific communities to have agency in their engagement with AI and influence over their digital future. This will ensure that public use of AI is responsible and productive and its benefits safely realised, and that communities are not left behind when there are major advances.

Regional coordination will be vital to advancing AI initiatives that address shared challenges and promote inclusive development across the region. This will require interoperable governance, including common technical standards and policy frameworks, to support the cross-border uptake of AI and effective regulation of transnational issues. However, this needs to be balanced with ensuring policy flexibility in the localised context of each Pacific island country, as countries' diverse characteristics make a homogeneous approach to AI policy difficult. Governments must also be mindful of how the region's limited resources should be pooled and actions prioritised to maximise the cost-effectiveness of outcomes.

Efforts to support the cross-border uptake of responsible AI have been limited and mostly one-off in nature, rather than being driven by a sustained long-term vision and strategic collaboration. It would be mutually beneficial for the countries of the region to cooperate on knowledge sharing and the identification of best practices in the use of AI in key sectors such as agriculture, tourism and healthcare. Two entities that are well-positioned to facilitate this are the [Pacific Islands Forum](#) and the [Pacific ICT Ministerial Dialogue](#), a regular meeting of ICT ministers focused on collaborative efforts toward digital transformation. As at the time of publication, there is no regional entity dedicated to convening on AI issues and neither of these bodies has announced any statement, agenda or joint strategy relating to AI for the Pacific.

Without targeted action, the Pacific will struggle with responsibly adopting AI at scale and is likely to become a passive consumer of AI solutions that do not reflect local perspectives and needs. Consequently, the region is likely to experience more than its share of the risks, and less than its share of the benefits, of AI.

Most Pacific Island countries have understandably been focused on uplifting their fundamental digital capabilities as progress on digital transformation and ICT infrastructure still remains a key issue. However, individual Pacific Island countries will struggle with assembling the required technical expertise and financial resources to address these national and regional AI challenges effectively. The coming years represent a critical window of opportunity to support action to create a responsible AI ecosystem and prevent a growing AI divide in the Pacific. This

challenge and the growing need for regional AI capability-building initiatives has been **recognised by the Government of Australia**, which is focusing some of its foreign aid and development efforts on supporting locally appropriate approaches to safe and effective AI in the Asia-Pacific region. Similarly, the **Asian Development Bank** is working to help build the capacity of Pacific states to deploy responsible AI solutions that drive inclusive development.

The AI Asia Pacific Institute's report on the *State of AI in the Pacific Islands* stresses that effectively building the AI capacity of the region demands the creation of a Pacific Islands AI Technical Assistance Facility to support the region in key areas. First, developing and implementing national and regional AI strategies. Second, modernising and harmonising regulatory frameworks to facilitate responsible cross-border AI adoption. Third, cultivating regional collaboration to advance mutually beneficial AI initiatives. Finally, building the AI talent pipeline and public AI literacy to enable productive AI use. Through providing technical expertise, policy advice and partnership-building such a facility can cultivate the capacities needed to secure the region's AI agency.

Bridging the AI divide will require empowering the Pacific Islands with the technical and governance foundations needed to navigate the AI era. Addressing national and regional AI issues will be critical to ensuring the Pacific can safely and effectively harness the new technology in a way that truly reflects their local needs and values.

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