

# Building together: civil society a key partner in delivering Pacific infrastructure

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Building quality infrastructure in the Pacific means going beyond a narrow focus on hard assets, to thinking about the ways that new infrastructure, and accompanying services, will contribute to lasting development outcomes. This requires sustained engagement with island governments, and with Pacific civil society and the local private sector, in the design, construction and management of infrastructure. Ultimately, there is no shortcut for quality.

Our new report, *Building Together: seven principles for engaging civil society to deliver resilient, inclusive and sustainable infrastructure in the Pacific islands*, argues competition to finance infrastructure projects in the Pacific islands should lead to lasting development outcomes, driven by local priorities. It also suggests civil society should be considered a key partner in the design and delivery of Pacific infrastructure.

Released last week at the [Australasian AID Conference](#) in Canberra the report is based on extensive research and consultations in Australia and the Pacific. It sets out seven key principles for policymakers to follow when designing new infrastructure. It is hoped that by adopting these principles, new infrastructure investments in the Pacific will grow local employment, support skills development, promote gender equality, and create more accessible infrastructure for people with disabilities.

The key driver of renewed investment in Pacific infrastructure is growing geostrategic competition in the region. However, there is also no doubt that Pacific states do have significant infrastructure needs. The Asian Development Bank estimates, for example, the Pacific will require US\$3.1 billion in infrastructure investment each year until 2030. Pacific island countries also have unique

infrastructure needs. Being among the most isolated states in the world, and especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, investments in resilient infrastructure can help mitigate intractable constraints on growth in the Pacific.

In recent times, major infrastructure initiatives have been announced. The United States, Australia, Japan and New Zealand have, for example, **initiated a major investment** in rural electrification in Papua New Guinea. The Australian government is **financing new telecommunications infrastructure** for Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and has committed to **a ten-year \$250 million bilateral infrastructure program** in the Solomon Islands. Australia, long the region's largest provider of development finance, has also established a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure bank dedicated specifically to Pacific island countries. The **Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific**, which uses a mixture of commercial loans and grant financing, represents a significant change in Australia's aid program to the region.

Taken together, these new initiatives represent an opportunity to consider, and promote, shared standards for quality infrastructure. Our report is intended to stimulate thinking about best standards for infrastructure investment in the Pacific.

The Australian government has focused on involving the private sector in delivering new infrastructure in the Pacific. The Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Alex Hawke, has, for example, suggested it is time for **Australian businesses to step up** in the Pacific. In addition to the private sector, our report suggests there should also be a focus on engaging and supporting civil society groups. Working with Pacific civil society in the design and implementation of new infrastructure is critically important for ensuring transparent decision-making; including in tendering and monitoring infrastructure. New infrastructure projects are also an opportunity to stimulate economic growth in the Pacific directly, through the creation of local employment opportunities, skills transfer and capacity development, and through partnerships with local businesses and civil society groups. Given their closeness to communities, civil society organisations can facilitate the engagement of people with disabilities, and women, in infrastructure planning and delivery, helping to ensure that priorities – and design features – are based on local need, minimise risks to marginalised groups, and benefit these groups in their delivery and beyond.

Typically, it is the actions taken by island governments themselves to manage projects, and to develop robust policy frameworks governing the use and maintenance of infrastructure, that are a key determinant of positive outcomes. This means development partners should be supporting the strengthening of infrastructure governance, the 'soft infrastructure' that accompanies construction of

hard assets. Often this also requires support for collaborative decision-making that includes Pacific civil society groups at regional, national and project levels. The Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO) was one of the partners consulted for this report. PIANGO executive director, Emeline Siale Ilolahia, told us it was critically important that new projects be driven by local priorities. “If we’re not careful these projects will be driven by the needs of the people proposing them, and the only beneficiaries will be the companies building them”, said Ms Ilolahia.

*“Building Together: seven principles for engaging civil society to deliver resilient, inclusive and sustainable infrastructure in the Pacific islands” was initiated by the Research for Development Impact Network (RDI Network) and co-produced by RDI Network and Pacific Connections (Australia). The report was co-authored by Wesley Morgan, Rebecca McNaught, Sally Baker, Fulori Manoa and Jope Tarai. The full report can be downloaded [here](#).*

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