

Leave no-one behind: social protection reducing poverty in Kiribati



Young girls play on a fallen tree trunk in the lagoon in Marakei, Kiribati

Photo Credit: P4SP/Sarah Francis

by Ruth Cross Kwansing

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“Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life.”

Nelson Mandela’s **powerful words** resonate deeply and underscore the significance of a historic achievement we’re thrilled to share from Kiribati.

Last month, the **Poverty and Inequality in Kiribati report** was released, based on our latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) results. It revealed something truly remarkable: over 19,000 I-Kiribati citizens have been lifted out of poverty. This monumental effort has seen our national poverty rate plummet by nearly 75% and extreme poverty effectively eliminated across our islands.

This isn’t the arbitrary luck of campaign promises. It’s the result of faith, determination and extremely hard work. Despite facing the immense challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and global economic turbulence, Kiribati is delivering on key priorities outlined in its **20-year Vision**. We set out to grow economic wealth and leave no one behind, and these results demonstrate solid headway against the challenges of poverty and economic inequality.

So, what defines poverty? Globally, extreme poverty is benchmarked by the World Bank’s international poverty line: living on less than US\$2.15 per person per day, a threshold indicating that basic survival needs cannot be met. (The new international poverty line has **since been updated** to US\$3.00 per person per day, but the US\$2.15 per person line was in place at the time the HIES analysis was completed.)

Now, what does this really mean in Kiribati? It demonstrates a fundamental shift in people’s lives. It means fewer children are going hungry or missing school. It means more families have access to clean water, electricity and transport. Most profoundly, it means that more I-Kiribati, wherever they live, have the vital resources to live with dignity.

So, how did Kiribati achieve this remarkable turnaround?

It's a story of strategic reinvestment in our own people. Over the past 15 years, we have been able to significantly expand the fishing revenue generated from our nation's Exclusive Economic Zone. Revenues reported at \$43 million in 2010 are now up to \$210 million in 2024. These ocean resources belong to all I-Kiribati, and our government has been unwavering in its commitment to ensuring these national treasures directly benefit all citizens through a range of initiatives, including the copra subsidy, social protection programs and other poverty alleviation tactics.

Since 2019, we've more than doubled spending on our Senior Citizens Allowance (SCA) and launched vital new programs like the Support Fund for the Unemployed (SFU) and the Disability Support Allowance (DSA). With a net annual investment of \$50.4 million across these initiatives, Kiribati has emerged as the largest investor in [social assistance programs in the Pacific region](#) over the past five years, relative to the size of our economy. While our own resources have been crucial, we're extremely grateful for the vital technical and budgetary support from the Australian Government, which has significantly aided the delivery of these essential programs.

The SCA has always been the bedrock of our social protection system, designed to improve the quality of life for our elders. In a move reflecting our deep cultural respect, the government more than tripled the benefit level in 2020 to \$100 per fortnight, benefiting 9,500 elderly I-Kiribati citizens. This payment goes far beyond a simple allowance; it's empowerment. The SCA reinforces their positions, allowing our senior family members to financially contribute to their households and remain active, dignified participants in their communities, ensuring they are never a burden but continue to be pillars of support.

The SFU, which supports the unemployed, now counts some 54,000 beneficiaries, with nearly 95% of the population living in a household with at least one SFU recipient. Currently, the SFU is a program with one of the largest coverage rates (as a share of the population) in the Pacific region. The SFU ensures that dignity is not determined by employment status alone. Given that formal job opportunities are limited in our country, it acts as a vital safety net, cushioning families from the traps of extreme poverty.

Finally, our DSA solidifies a commitment first made in 2013 when Kiribati acceded to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We demonstrated our dedication to these values by introducing the DSA in 2019. This additional allowance provides vital financial support, recognising the unique challenges faced by people with disabilities, thereby ensuring greater inclusion and dignity within our society.

It is important to recognise that, while these social protection programs come at a cost, they still utilise only a fraction of the total fishing revenues. What truly sets Kiribati apart is our powerful and deliberate commitment to reinvesting the wealth generated from our national resources directly into the hands of our own people.

This isn't just good economics; it's visionary leadership in action. By strategically delivering income to those with the least and targeting individuals in greatest need, our government is actively building a more inclusive economy and strengthening the very fabric of our society. The HIES results confirm this success, showing the most significant consumption growth among poorer households, making Kiribati a standout as one of the most equitable societies in the Pacific. That is something we can be proud of.

While we celebrate these gains, we also recognise that our work isn't done. The HIES results show that approximately 7,000 people still live below the national poverty line. A significant portion, nearly 42%, reside in South Tarawa, with another 28% in the Southern Group of islands. These are communities facing immense pressure on basic services and housing, underscoring where our future support will be most critical.

Furthermore, around 23.6% of our population lives just above the poverty line, making them highly vulnerable to falling back into hardship from a single shock, be it a health emergency, a climate-related disaster or job loss. This signals that while our policies are effective, we must continue to invest to safeguard the remarkable progress made over the past five years.

As Minister for Women, Youth, Sport and Social Affairs, I am grateful for the role of our ministry in delivering this service. However, it's important to note that programs under the ministry are just one part of facilitating the results of this vision. These remarkable accomplishments are a testament to the dedication and collaborative spirit across the entire government of Kiribati, and it's a triumph we can all own and celebrate together.

I am now even more inspired by the resilience, strength and unwavering determination of the people we serve. This progress isn't solely a result of smart policy; it's a testament to the everyday choices and tireless efforts of families striving for a better life. Our journey to lasting prosperity is far from over, but with continued investment in inclusive policies and by faithfully directing our national wealth back into the lives of our people, we will continue to build a Kiribati where every person truly matters and no one is left behind.

Author/s:**Ruth Cross Kwansing**

Ruth Cross Kwansing is Minister for Women, Youth, Sport and Social Affairs in the Republic of Kiribati.

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