

# Social protection in an unpredictable region

by Hilman Palaon

9 September 2025



Woman carrying supplies to her house in Tonga

*Photo Credit: DFAT/Connor Ashleigh*

I still remember a question asked during the [2023 Australasian AID Conference](#), where I spoke on the panel *Cash Transfers and Social Protection Programs: South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific*. “What is the best social protection program a country can introduce?” someone asked. My response was, in brief: “It depends on the government’s priorities.” Now, as more countries — particularly in the Pacific — look to advance their social protection agendas, it seems timely to revisit that conversation.

One notable initiative for assessing and supporting efforts to improve social protection in the Pacific and Timor-Leste is [Partnerships for Social Protection \(P4SP\)](#), supported by the Australian Government. In reviewing their work, I’ve gained deeper insights into [what’s happening across the region](#) — and the lessons that can inform future policy and program design.

Every country in the Pacific Islands region, and Timor-Leste, [has some form of formal social protection system](#), though they are often under-recognised globally. Despite progress, social protection spending in the region remains below Southeast Asian and global developing country averages. However, over the past two decades, governments have increased investment, with [social assistance spending nearly doubling](#) and coverage expanding. While systems are still evolving, countries are addressing immediate needs and placing greater focus on the rising impacts of climate change.

Across the Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste, social protection is playing an increasingly important role in reducing poverty and helping communities withstand shocks. These programs address the region’s key challenges — isolation, economic fragility and deep-rooted inequality — using approaches that are adaptive, disaster- and climate-responsive and focused on protecting those most at risk. Furthermore, five key priorities have emerged as central to the region’s focus.

First, in most countries, social protection systems are still in their early stages,

primarily focused on addressing poverty and inequality. Papua New Guinea is establishing foundational systems to combat high levels of poverty, while Solomon Islands is focusing on community-based models and maternal-and-child health initiatives through cash transfers and food assistance. Fiji is implementing targeted cash transfers, food security programs and social assistance. In Tuvalu, the focus is on strengthening basic services, particularly for remote communities. Kiribati has **nearly eliminated extreme poverty** by reinvesting fishing revenues into inclusive social protection programs.

Second, countries with ageing populations and high youth unemployment face distinct social protection challenges. Across the region, social protection systems are gradually **evolving to become more inclusive**. Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Samoa have progressively introduced demographically targeted benefits such as child and family support, age pensions, disability allowances and unemployment benefits. Age pensions and disability support are the most widely adopted mechanisms across these nations. Kiribati has responded to rising unemployment with targeted benefits, Nauru is reforming pensions and developing youth-focused programs, Timor-Leste has introduced veterans' benefits and Tonga has expanded child and family assistance.

Third, the region's economies, many heavily reliant on informal work, require programs that are non-contributory and flexible. Fiji is working to extend coverage to informal workers, while Nauru balances economic volatility with targeted investments in infrastructure, education and youth empowerment. In the Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia, migration and fragmented services shape the context, with social protection increasingly linked to health services and youth employment.

Fourth, cultural and social norms matter deeply. They help shape social protection programs so they reflect local values and bring communities closer together. In Samoa, gender equity is at the heart of policy, with community and church networks playing a vital role in delivering inclusive programs. In Kiribati and Tuvalu, traditional support systems are key to ensuring social protection efforts are culturally relevant and foster a strong sense of community.

Finally, given the region's climate vulnerability, social protection is increasingly seen as crucial for disaster risk reduction. Tonga has shown how social protection can be rapidly mobilised after crises. Vanuatu and Kiribati are focusing on linking social protection with climate resilience, while Tuvalu emphasises climate adaptation as a national priority. In the Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia, climate risk is central to social protection efforts aimed at community resilience. Fiji has integrated **anticipatory cash assistance** for cyclones into its national social

protection system, strengthening its capacity for proactive disaster response.

Moreover, the region emphasises the importance of sharing best practices to develop more inclusive and effective social protection systems. PNG can look to Fiji as a model for expanding social assistance transfers to better support vulnerable groups.

Despite progress in the region, achieving **Universal Social Protection (USP) 2030** remains a significant challenge. USP aims to ensure that all individuals, regardless of age, employment status or background, have access to basic income security and essential services throughout their lives. To achieve this, nations must develop inclusive systems that provide comprehensive coverage.

The Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste have made significant progress in advancing social protection, laying the groundwork for achieving USP. Their journey is far from complete. Nonetheless, the region's focus on integrating climate change resilience into social protection programs offers valuable lessons for the global community.

Admittedly, social protection systems in the region still face urgent challenges, including limited institutional capacity, geographic isolation and an over-reliance on donor funding. Fragmented systems, political instability and infrastructure limitations further hinder progress.

Because of its small population, the region is less supported by donor-funded programs and investments, especially in digital systems supporting social protection delivery and oversight. Yet, the principle of social protection for all should equally apply to this region.

These findings reinforce the response I gave at the 2023 conference: social protection needs to be context-specific, tailored to each country's unique realities, demographic changes, institutional capacity and development priorities. For nations facing complex challenges, such as limited resources, geographic isolation or vulnerability to climate change, collaboration is key. Governments must engage with a broader network of stakeholders, including donor nations, international institutions and regional partners, to enhance capabilities and design programs that strengthen social protection systems, ensuring they are resilient, inclusive and sustainable.

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