Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of the Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.

June 2024

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry into Australia's responses to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.

This submission draws on our experience as researchers conducting large-scale popular political attitudes surveys in the Pacific. We believe Australia's responses to the priorities of Pacific Island countries should be informed in part by what ordinary Pacific peoples identify as their own priorities. Here we present popular survey data that in part responds to the terms of reference to the inquiry, and which we believe would be useful for the Committee.

The conduct of large-scale, nationally representative popular attitudes surveys is relatively new in the Pacific region, which remains the only region not covered by systematic global democracy and values surveys such as the Global Barometer surveys and World Values Survey. As such, there is a lack of popular attitudinal data examining how ordinary Pacific citizens prioritise issues important to them. This is a significant gap in our knowledge of the region, as until now we have not had a systematic and robust way to assess popular attitudes towards democracy, political participation, and key political issues.

Survey data presented here is based on the findings of two Pacific Attitudes Surveys (PAS)[1] conducted in Samoa in 2021 and Vanuatu in 2023. In 2018 the authors commenced a large-scale survey program designed to address the data gap in the region and build a locally owned research network to gather attitudinal data from across the Pacific. Conducted in partnership with research institutions in survey countries, the *Pacific Attitudes Survey* adapts the globally recognised Global Barometer survey to ask around 190 questions designed to gauge the views of respondents on a wide range of political, social, security, development and geo-political issues. New question modules designed specifically for Pacific contexts build on core Barometer modules, allowing for international comparability.

Assessing popular attitudes in the Pacific is notoriously difficult, reflecting challenges in terms of updated census data in some countries, the costs and complexities of operationalising nationally representative surveys in the region, and a political tendency to overlook the importance of gauging public views on policy issues. The survey findings offer a useful complement to understanding the degree to which donor policies align with the popular development priorities as identified by Pacific islanders themselves.
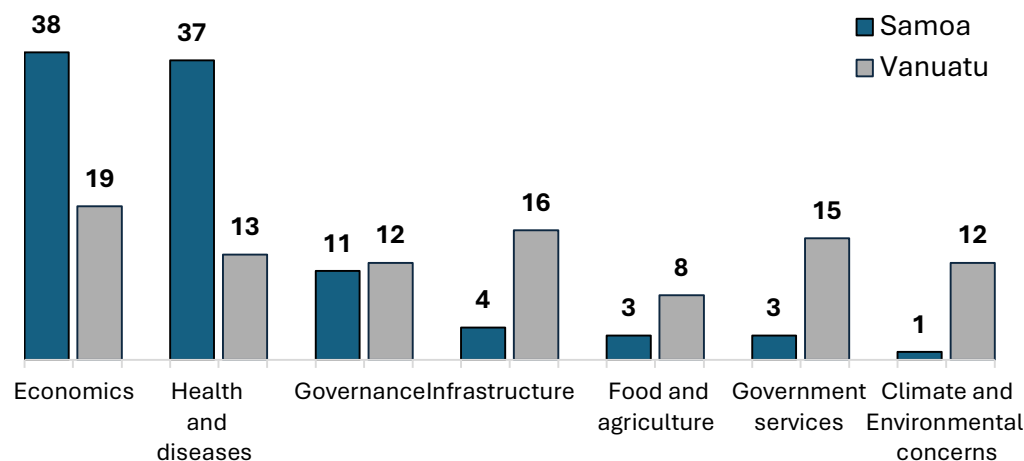
Response to the terms of reference

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[1] The PAS comprises 191 questions set out in 21 thematic modules and covers a broad range of topics including attitudes to democracy, national identity, tradition, leadership, governance, development, climate change and international relations. The survey is nationally representative and allows for statistical breakdowns between age, gender, urban-rural location, and education. The *Pacific Attitudes Survey* (PAS) was conducted in Samoa in late 2020 and early 2021 (Leach et al. 2022). The second iteration of the survey, PAS: Vanuatu, was conducted in 2023 (Mudaliar et al. 2024).

1. Identify the key priorities for Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.
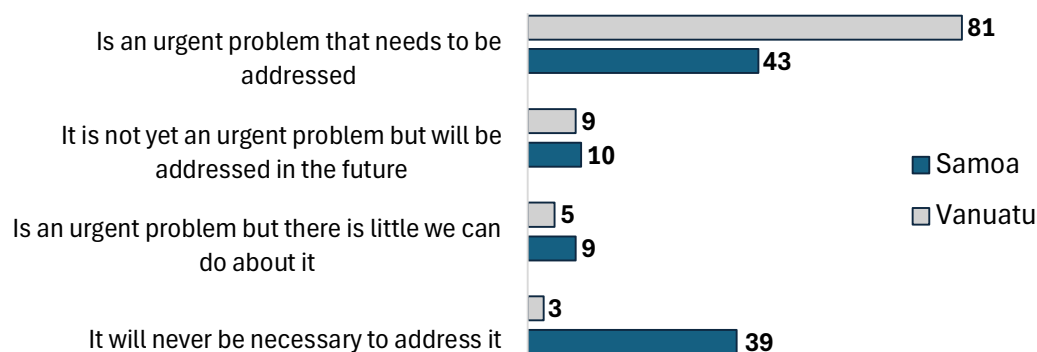
The Pacific Attitudes Survey asked respondents several questions about their development priorities. One of these asked respondents in Samoa (2021) and Vanuatu (2023) to identify the most important problem for their national government to address. In both Vanuatu and Samoa, economic concerns, such as incomes, employment and the general economic management of their country were listed as the highest priorities (Figure 1).

Figure 1. What is the most important problem for government to address?

Importantly, climate change was identified as an urgent issue in both Vanuatu and Samoa (Figure 2), though this was more strongly evident in Vanuatu This finding is discussed in more detail below.

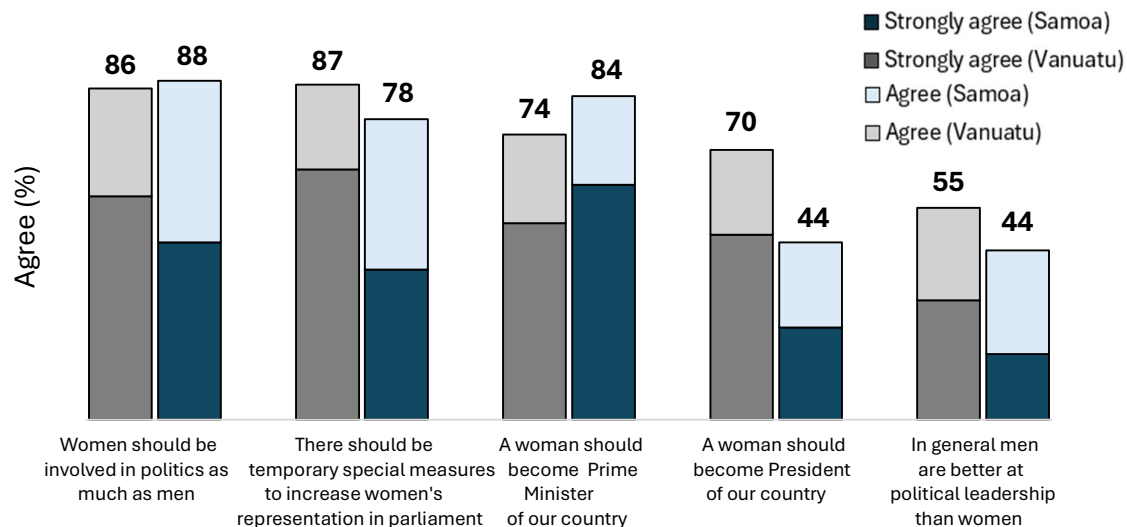**Figure 2. Climate change ... (%)**

2. Assess Australia's engagement in the Pacific and alignment of initiatives and policies with the identified priorities of Pacific Island nations.

By engaging with Pacific Island nations Australia rightfully responds to the priorities as identified by national governments in the region. However, a lack of reliable data on popular attitudes toward key policy issues makes it difficult to assess how Australia's engagement efforts resonate locally. Ensuring that Australia's priorities in the Pacific are aligned with popular concerns is important to build deeper levels of support within local communities and provide opportunities for further policy responses which may have gone unnoticed. Below we present data of relevance to specific development priorities (climate change, gender, labour mobility), and wider popular perceptions of the influence and contribution of external development partners. Broadly, our findings suggest there is public support in Pacific countries for activities that are the focus of Australia's regional engagement, particularly in areas of gender, climate change, and labour mobility.
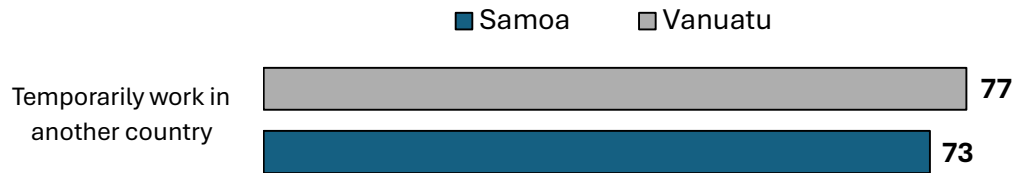
For instance, a major component of international donor and regional level funding is targeted at women's participation within politics in the Pacific. Figure 3 reflects popular support for women's participation in politics in both Vanuatu and Samoa. Results suggest that while a majority of respondents support increased participation of women in-principle (including temporary special measures to increase representation), powerful social norms of political leadership still favour men.

Figure 3. How much do you agree with the following? (%)

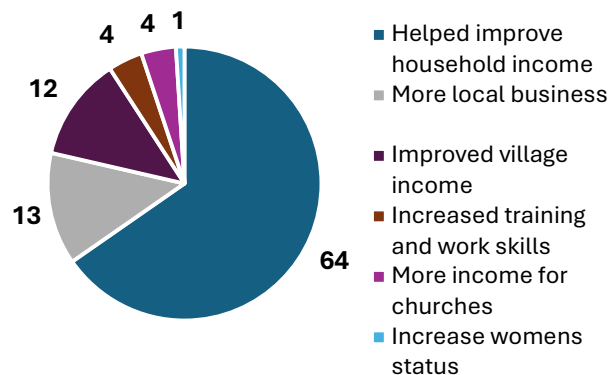The *Pacific Attitudes Survey* has also collected attitudinal data on key policy initiatives in the region. For example, we gauged interest in working overseas temporarily. Respondents in both Vanuatu and Samoa showed strong willingness to move temporarily for work (Figure 4) suggesting Australian support for such schemes is well regarded.

Figure 4. "How willing are you to temporarily work in another country" (%)

■ Samoa □ Vanuatu

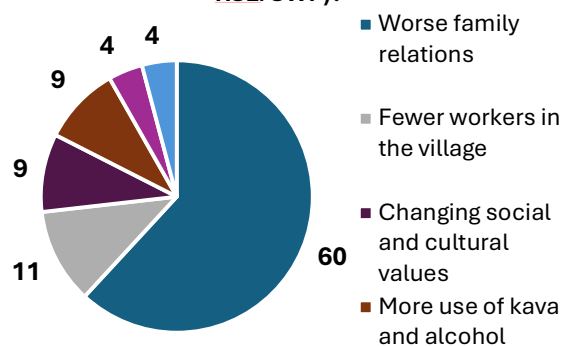Temporarily work in another country: Vanuatu **77**, Samoa **73**

The PAS asked respondents to reflect on positive and negative social impacts that labour schemes have on Pacific communities (Figures 5 & 6). Overall, however (Figure 7), our research in Vanuatu suggests there is a strong net positive regard for labour mobility programs at both the national and community levels.
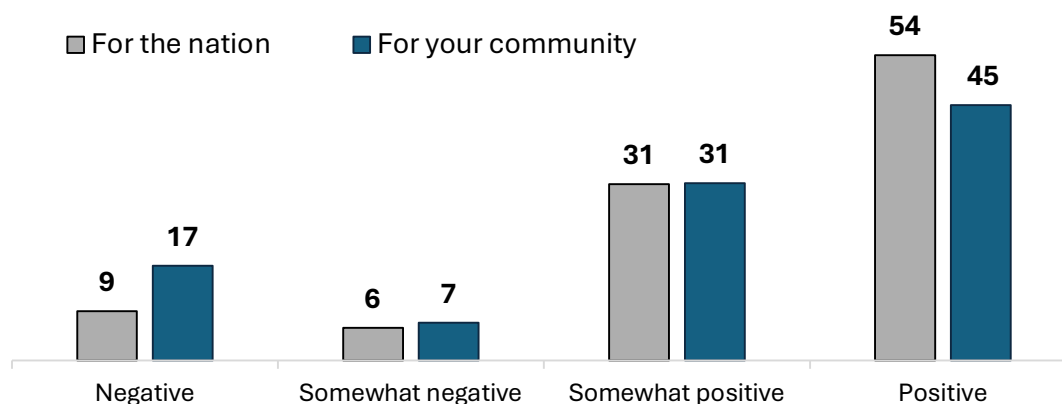
Figure 5. "Thinking of the positives, what do you think is the most positive aspect of labour mobility schemes (e.g. RSE/SWP)?

Values: 64, 13, 12, 4, 4, 1

Legend:
- Helped improve household income
- More local business
- Improved village income
- Increased training and work skills
- More income for churches
- Increase womens status

Figure 6. Thinking of the negatives, what do you think is the most negative aspect of labour mobility schemes (e.g. RSE/SWP)?

Values: 60, 11, 9, 9, 4, 4

Legend:
- Worse family relations
- Fewer workers in the village
- Changing social and cultural values
- More use of kava and alcohol

Figure 7. "Do you think labour mobility schemes have been a positive or negative...." (%)

□ For the nation ■ For your community

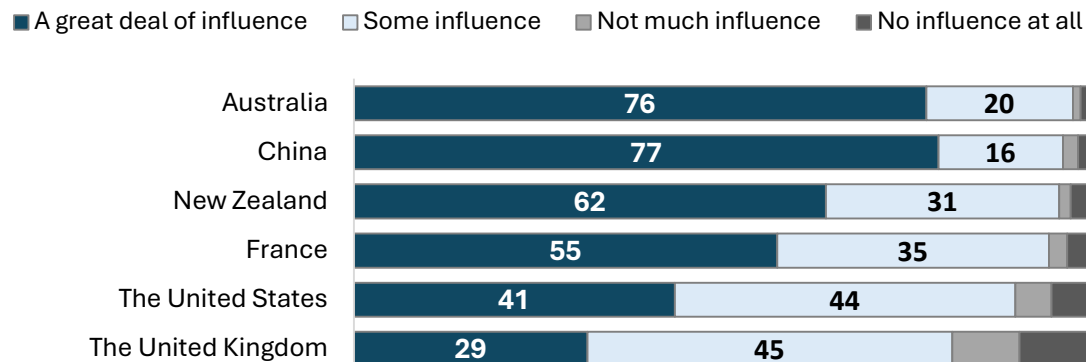|	Negative	Somewhat negative	Somewhat positive	Positive
For the nation	9	6	31	54
For your community	17	7	31	45

The PAS also gauges respondent attitudes to different development partners active in the Pacific, including Australia. Our questions suggest a significant degree of popular support for Australia's
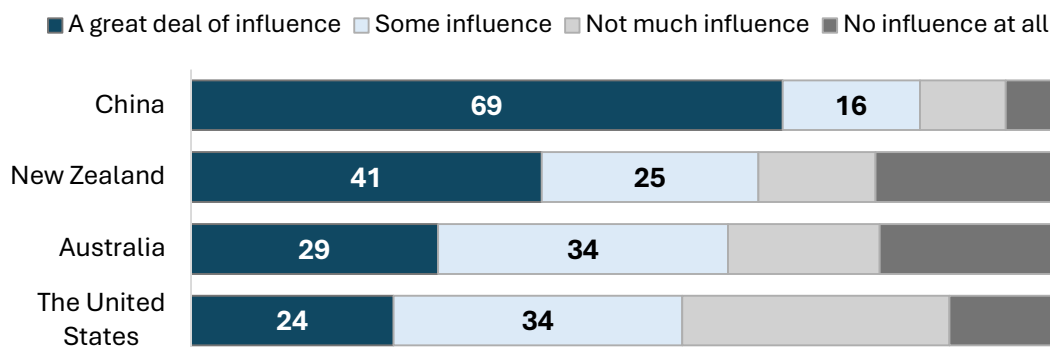
engagement with survey countries, implying that Australian assistance broadly aligns with national priorities.

For example, our surveys assessed popular perceptions of international influence in the region. Notably, Australia was generally perceived to have a high level of influence in Vanuatu (Figure 8) and, to a lesser degree, in Samoa (Figure 9).

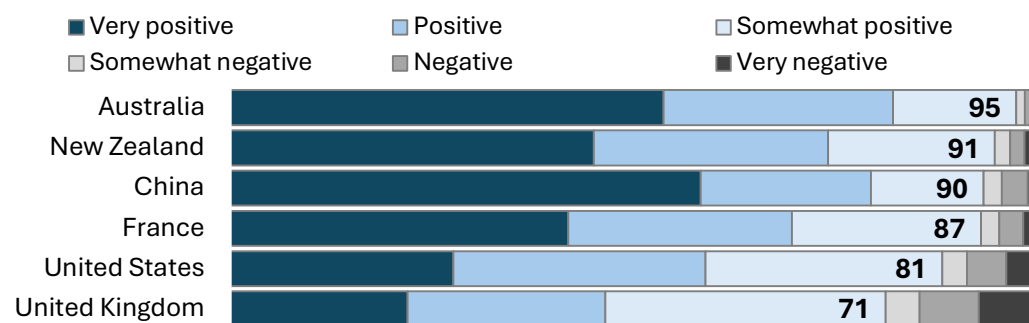**Figure 8. How much influence do the following countries have on Vanuatu? (%)**

■ A great deal of influence　□ Some influence　■ Not much influence　■ No influence at all

Country	A great deal of influence	Some influence
Australia	76	20
China	77	16
New Zealand	62	31
France	55	35
The United States	41	44
The United Kingdom	29	45

Figure 9. How much influence do the following countries have on Samoa? (%)

■ A great deal of influence　□ Some influence　■ Not much influence　■ No influence at all

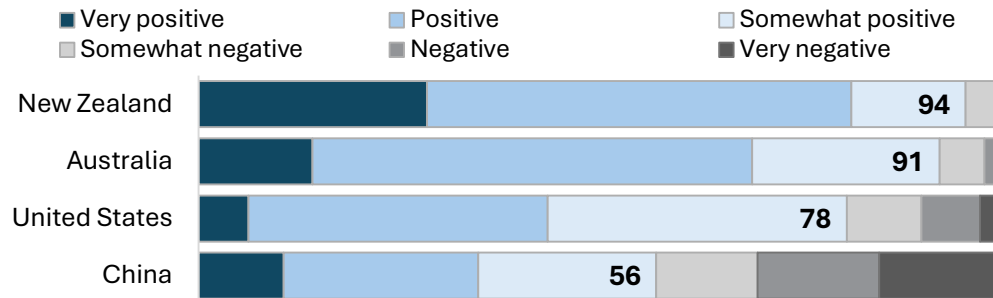| Country	A great deal of influence	Some influence
China	69	16
New Zealand	41	25
Australia	29	34
The United States	24	34

Furthermore, Australia's influence is widely considered a positive one (Figures 10 & 11).

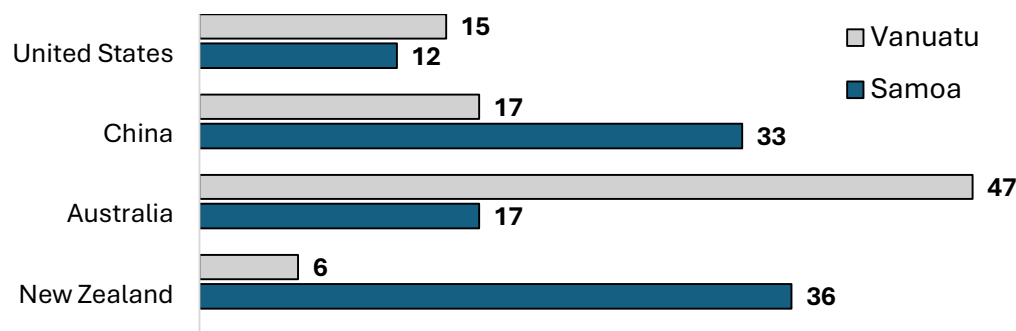**Figure 10. How positive or negative is the influence of .... on Vanuatu? (%)**

■ Very positive　■ Positive　□ Somewhat positive
□ Somewhat negative　■ Negative　■ Very negative

Country	Total positive
Australia	95
New Zealand	91
China	90
France	87
United States	81
United Kingdom	71

Figure 11. How positive or negative is the influence of.... on Samoa (%)

Legend: Very positive | Positive | Somewhat positive | Somewhat negative | Negative | Very negative

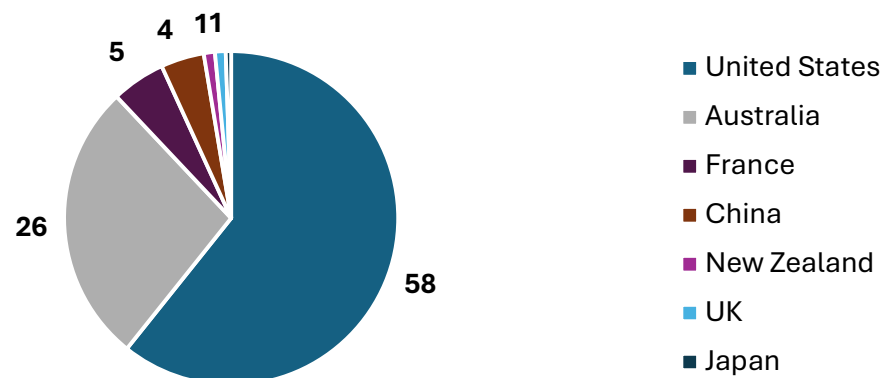| Country	Value
New Zealand	94
Australia	91
United States	78
China	56

We also sought to assess how external countries were perceived as models of development in survey countries (Figure 12). Findings indicate Australia is the preferred model in Vanuatu, but follows New Zealand and China by a significant margin in Samoa.

Figure 12. Which country should be a model for our own country's development? (%)

Country	Vanuatu	Samoa
United States	15	12
China	17	33
Australia	47	17
New Zealand	6	36

In Vanuatu, we asked which country the government should prioritise for security agreements (Figure 13). Notably, the United States emerges strongly as a preferred security partner. This contrasts against the stronger performances of Australia, China (and in Samoa, New Zealand) in terms of general influence perceptions and as preferred models for national development.

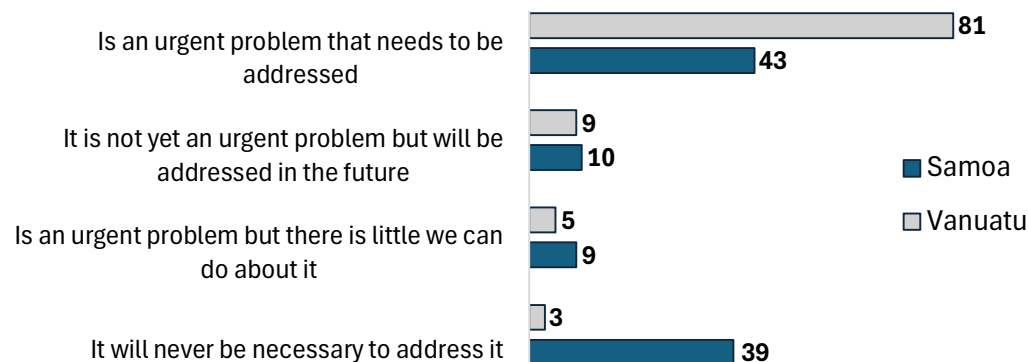**Figure 13. Which country should we prioritize for security agreements? (Vanuatu - %)**

Country	Value
United States	58
Australia	26
France	5
China	4
New Zealand	11
UK	
Japan	

3. Assess Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation responses in the Pacific.

The *Pacific Attitudes Surveys* included a dedicated module designed to assess attitudes to climate change and expected policy responses. Inclusion of this module in our surveys reflects the significance of climate change as an existential policy issue in the Pacific. Australia's role as a significant development partner on climate issues is an important one, but also remains controversial, because of regional concerns about Australia's support for fossil fuel exports.
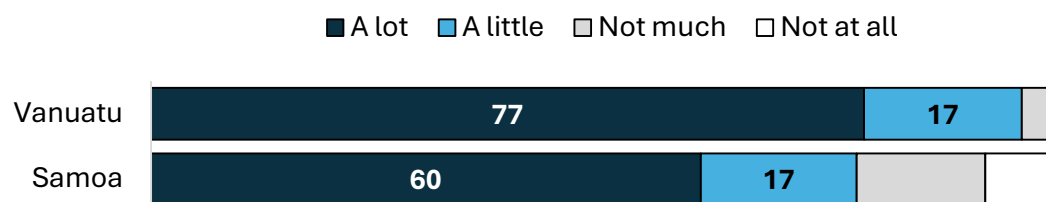
As would be expected in the Pacific, most respondents in both Vanuatu and Samoa labelled climate change as an urgent problem that must be addressed, though this was more strongly evident in Vanuatu (Figure 14). This suggests that in cases like Samoa popular awareness of climate change may be lower than previously assumed, indicating that a more nuanced approach must be taken when discussing climate change and in making assumptions about the views and level of engagement of average Pacific Islanders (cf. McLeod et al. 2019).

Figure 14. Climate change … (%)

Both in Samoa and Vanuatu a majority of respondents reported that they felt as though climate change was affecting life in each country significantly (Figure 15).
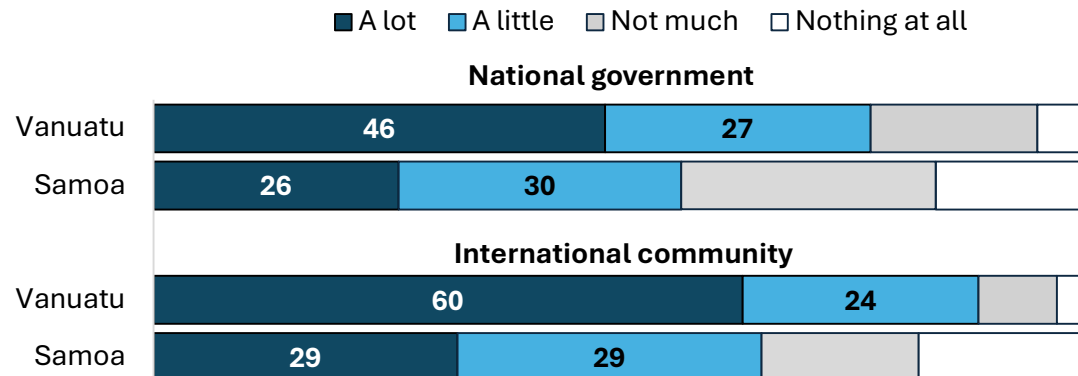
Figure 15. How much, if at all, do you think climate change is affecting life in Vanuatu / Samoa today?
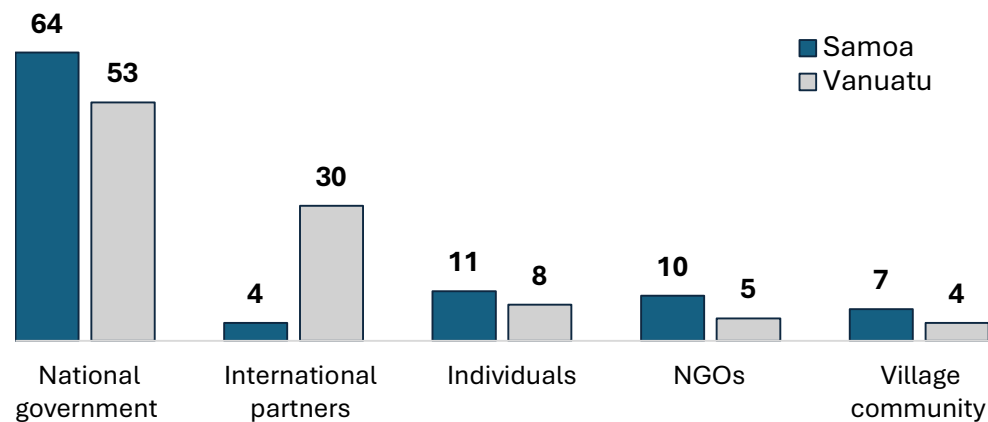

We also gauged respondent perceptions of national government and international community efforts to address climate change (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Do you think the national government / international community is doing enough to address climate change?
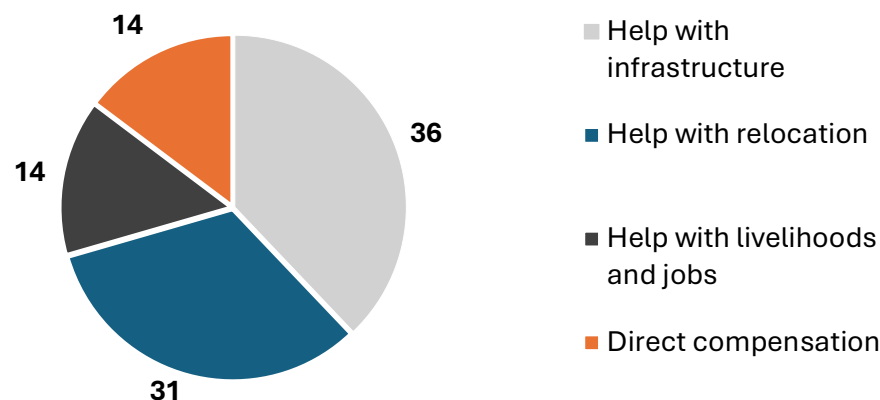

Legend: ■ A lot ■ A little ☐ Not much ☐ Nothing at all

National government

	A lot	A little
Vanuatu	46	27
Samoa	26	30

International community

	A lot	A little
Vanuatu	60	24
Samoa	29	29

Figure 17. Who should help your community combat the effects of climate change? ... (%)

Legend: ■ Samoa ☐ Vanuatu

	National government	International partners	Individuals	NGOs	Village community
Samoa	64	4	11	10	7
Vanuatu	53	30	8	5	4

However, when asked who should help your community to combat the effects of climate change (Figure 17), respondents felt their national governments should take the lead, though a significant minority in Vanuatu supported international partner action. In terms of specific support (Figure 18), respondents in Vanuatu preferred assistance in the form of help with infrastructure, and with relocation.

Figure 18. What sort of support to help communities adapt to climate change would you like to see?

4. **Strengthen People-to-People Links and Partnerships including through well designed development programs.**

The absence of nationally representative, popular political attitudes surveys is a significant knowledge gap that limits our understanding of politics and society in the region, and the development priorities of Pacific peoples. Accounting for popular attitudes on issues like democracy, gender, development or climate change has the potential to challenge accepted policy wisdoms and open new possibilities for scholarly debate and public policy engagement.

In our experience, conducting large scale attitudinal surveys in the Pacific is challenging. Survey work is complicated by the complexities of undertaking representative surveys in highly diverse country contexts, and the cost of implementing national surveys. However, support for such surveys provides an important source of data that can usefully inform policy efforts of national governments in the region and external partners like Australia by highlighting the priorities of Pacific communities themselves.

We would encourage further donor support for the conduct of locally-owned, national attitudinal surveys to underpin public policy development. This should include funding to build the capacity of Pacific islands governments, researchers and civil society organisations to undertake complex surveys and, more importantly, analyse and interrogate survey findings to inform policy advocacy and development.

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