



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

**SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN
AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE**

5 July 2024

SAVE THE CHILDREN AUSTRALIA

Save the Children welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. Our submission follows the key questions outlined in the Terms of Reference.

Save the Children is a leading International Non-Government Organisation (INGO) with a wide Indo-Pacific footprint and a 100-year history of working to protect children and advance children's rights around the world. In the Pacific, we operate through Country Offices in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and collaborate closely with programs in Fiji and Tonga. Our Pacific Regional Office provides technical and operational support to all our Country Offices and programs. It fosters collaboration and enables a platform to coordinate Pacific peer-peer learning exchanges and advocacy with key regional bodies.

Save the Children works with the Australian Government, development partners and the private sector to present and promote innovative, inclusive and child focused approaches to sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific. Our programs are designed to ensure children are safe, healthy, protected, and resilient to external shocks by addressing gaps in local health, education, child and social protection systems with integrated gender equality, disability, social inclusion, and climate change adaptation lenses.

For more information contact:

- Marion Stanton, Head of Government Relations, Save the Children Australia
- Kim Koch, Pacific Regional Director, Save the Children Australia

Background

The Australian Government's International Development Policy released in August 2023 aims to position Australia as a 'partner of choice' within the Indo-Pacific region. The policy emphasises statecraft, peace and prosperity, and bilateral partnerships to address the region's priorities through strengthened governance and economic development.

The 2024-2025 Federal Budget and some elements of the Pacific Development Partnership Program (DPP) process suggest a somewhat different approach. Consultation priorities placed an emphasis on large-scale infrastructure projects to support bilateral relations amid an evolving geo-political landscape. While we welcome the overall increase in funding for the Pacific, we have concerns that allocation prioritises immediate diplomatic and economic gains over short and long-term social development. Key social issues requiring critical interventions and investments include support to a burgeoning youth population, increasing quality inclusive education (particularly to address gender inequity), addressing endemic violence against women and children, and creating a framework for upholding children's rights in the context of increasing impacts of climate change in the region.

To align policy ambitions and international obligations and to build a more equitable and resilient Indo-Pacific region, Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the region needs to include more ambitious long-term interventions including additional and sustained funding of social infrastructure to support health, education and protection outcomes; address violence against women and children; support climate responsive social policies and planning; and foster inclusive partnerships with regional infrastructure. We strongly recommend a clear pathway for building capability of local organisations through addressing specific and varying levels of development of civil society organisations in specific Pacific Island countries.

Priority issues facing Pacific nations

Growing youth population and related education needs

The Pacific region is experiencing significant growth in its youth population with an estimated 20% aged between 15 to 24 years.¹ In some Melanesian countries (where youth is defined as being under 35 years) this figure pushes over 50%.² The youth bulge is expected to significantly impact areas such as healthcare, education, employment, and urbanisation over the next five years. In this context, three main challenges are hindering the development of young people in the Pacific:³

1. Disconnect between formal education goals and outcomes and inadequate investment in quality and inclusive education at all levels of education, including limited attention to skills that foster innovation and creativity
2. Lack of encouragement for critical thinking and civic engagement
3. Policy and programming disparity

The development of human capital of Pacific youth is critical for the social, economic and environmental advancement of their communities.⁴ Regional efforts are underway to address this priority issue with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) revising the Pacific Youth Development Framework (2014-2023) in 2024 with member countries.⁵ Additionally, the 2050 Strategy for Blue Pacific Continent, the overarching Pacific regional policy framework, highlights the importance of youth engagement in future economic development. It recognises the economic challenges leading to high unemployment and stresses the need for increased regional efforts to boost youth employment and entrepreneurship.⁶

Quality and inclusive education is critical for developing and maintaining human capital development across the Pacific. The Pacific Regional Education Framework (PACREF) 2018-2030 provides overarching guidance on how to ensure Pacific children are equipped with the knowledge and skills relevant to meet the objectives of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. However there are challenges that need to be addressed, especially in foundational learning. The latest Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) revealed that only 67% and 43% of grade 4 students are meeting grade level expectation for numeracy and reading, respectively.⁷ Across numeracy and reading girls performed better than boys highlighting the disparity between educational opportunity and outcomes and signaling potential for specific investments in student reading and learning programs. Save the Children also notes the limited investment in early childhood education, which is key to ensuring school readiness and the formation of strong foundations for learning and later achievement.

¹ <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/did-you-know/2021/08/stat-of-the-week-proportion-of-the-population-in-the-pacific-aged>

² In 2018, 7 out of ten Solomon Islanders were aged under 30 years of age. [Solomon Islands Youth Status Report 2018 | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\)](#)

³ 'Youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands', Aidan Craney, 2022, ANU available at <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/pacific/youth-fiji-solomon-islands>

⁴ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/pacific-youth-challenges-today-need-leaders-tomorrow>

⁵ <https://www.spc.int/updates/news/media-release/2024/05/pacific-youth-council-convening-identifies-priorities-for-youth>

⁶ <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf>

⁷ Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) Report 2021

Recommendations:

- Support Pacific governments to implement policies and programs to improve educational outcomes for boys and girls, with emphasis on foundational learning and innovation and critical thinking skills development throughout all levels of education
- Support Pacific governments to improve youth employment pathways and programs that support girls' transition from learners to leaders
- Create platforms for children and youth to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of responsibility and upholding their rights to participate in matters that concern them.

Pervasive violence in schools, homes, and communities

Save the Children's Pacific *Regional Child Protection Situational Analysis* highlights an alarming increase in various forms of violence against children in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu.⁸ Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu report the highest rates of violence against children in the Indo-Pacific region, with over 80% of children experiencing violent discipline by caregivers. In Fiji, both boys and girls face high rates of violent discipline at home, with an increase in violence noted by child protection professionals. In Papua New Guinea, violence against children at home is widely accepted, particularly in rural areas. The study found increased rates were due to COVID-19, increased migration, climate change and greater digital connectivity. Entrenched social norms and power dynamics continue to perpetuate high levels of violence in homes, schools, and communities, undermining children's rights to live free from harm, abuse and neglect. Children's testimonies reveal that violence, particularly sexual violence, remains a taboo subject, leading to underreporting and a lack of protection. The fear of violence is also affecting girls' attendance at school impacting education outcomes.

Further hindering girls' development in the Pacific are archaic and rudimentary legislative frameworks such as the *Islanders Marriage Act* in the Solomon Islands. First drafted in 1945, the Act allows boys and girls to be married at 15 years of age with the consent of the father (or mother) or caregiver. Save the Children continues to work closely with the Law Reform Commission and the Ministry of Home Affairs to advocate to increase the age of marriage from 15 to 18 years of age. However, more can be done by the Australian Government to ensure widespread consultation is undertaken across the Pacific to ensure the legislation reflects national development priorities and international human rights obligations upholding children's rights.

As is the case in Australia, online safety is emerging as a priority child protection issue requiring urgent attention and action. With the rapid growth of digital connectivity and lack of regulatory environment across the region, many Pacific countries are seeing an increase in cases of cyberbullying, cyber abuse, gender-based violence and exposure to inappropriate content. Limited data exists, but children and caregivers are reporting serious issues that require coordinated regional regulatory responses between governments, tech companies, online regulators and development partners.

Similarly, Save the Children is concerned at the number, and welfare of children 'left behind' as a result of the Australian Government's PALM scheme. There is substantial anecdotal evidence to suggest that where children are left with one parent or extended family, they are vulnerable to

⁸ Regional Child Protection Situational Analysis Pacific, Save the Children, 2024, available at: [Regional Child Protection Situational Analysis – Pacific | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#)

abuse, neglect, exploitation and risk further declines in school retention. It is unknown to what extent the economic benefits of the PALM scheme are reaching the direct beneficiaries or dependents of the workers. Save the Children continues to work closely with Pacific governments and DFAT to explore options to optimise the social outcomes of this scheme. However, more evidence is required to assess how the scheme is affecting socio-economic development outcomes of the Pacific nations participating in PALM and calls on the Australian Government to provide a formal review of the impacts of PALM and labour mobility schemes on the children indirectly affected or impacted.

Recommendations:

- Australia and Pacific governments prioritise reforms such as raising the age of marriage in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.
- Secure long-term financing for child protection systems to ensure inclusive, sustainable and effective prevention and response services, including referral pathways.
- Use evidence-based approaches, including the perspectives of children and youth, to develop prevention programs that engage both children and caregivers.
- Develop and support community-led campaigns – engaging men and boys - to challenge and change harmful social norms that reinforce violence.
- Undertake country-based assessment into the socio-economic impacts of PALM and other labour mobility initiatives.

Social protection mechanisms

The lack of safeguarding policy and legislative frameworks in the Pacific severely undermines social policy programs, including those that address children's developmental outcomes in health and education. Social protection policies, programs and settings provide regularity and predictability of support in high risk and volatile environments and strengthen the resilience of communities to respond to social, economic or environmental/climate shocks throughout their lifecycle.⁹ Traditional community assistance mechanisms (such as the *wantok* system in Melanesian countries) are proving insufficient under increasing social, economic and environmental factors (including increased climate related disasters), highlighting the need to incorporate a lifecycle risk approach into social sector reform.

Social protection, including regular and predictable cash transfers, tackles poverty at household levels. These programs improve food security, enhance access to healthcare and education, and contribute to a reduction in gender-based violence against women and girls. According to the World Bank, social protection cash transfers are cost-effective and have multiplier effects in local economies, and designing good social protection systems is critical to developing country governments.¹⁰

However, the implementation of social protection infrastructure varies across the Pacific region. Fiji has a comprehensive social protection system and Tonga has several programs, yet, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu require extensive development to deliver social benefits that are child-sensitive and shock responsive.

⁹ Child Sensitive Social Protection, Save the Children, 2020 available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Save+the+Children+Global+Child+Sensitive+Social+Protection+Approach+Paper_June2020.pdf/

¹⁰ The World Bank, 230.

Recommendations:

- Pacific governments strengthen sub-regional social protection policy and legislative frameworks to provide stronger safety nets for children, families and communities.
- Development partners build child-sensitive and shock responsive social protection, especially household payment schemes that alleviate stressors on households and ensure children have access to appropriate and nutritious food and education supplies.

Mainstreaming children's rights and voices into climate policy

Pacific children are at the forefront of the climate crisis. As a 'threat-multiplier', the impacts of climate change will exacerbate and intensify extreme weather events and related threats to health and well-being, education gains, food and water security, vector and water-borne diseases, livelihoods, infrastructure as well as physical and psychosocial health safety. Children are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to their unique physiological and developmental characteristics and require specific policy interventions to ensure access to essential services such as health, education and protection to mitigate growing risks.¹¹

The Pacific faces a number of challenges to support the development of child-sensitive climate policy responses:

Lack of disaggregated evidence on climate impacts on children

Save the Children research estimates that children born in the last year will face on average 2-7 times more extreme weather events than their grandparents – more climate-related disasters, heatwaves, droughts and greater food insecurity due to crop failures.¹² However, there is a lack of disaggregated data to fully comprehend the extent of climate impacts on children in the Pacific region.

Insufficient child-sensitivity in climate policies. Whilst most Pacific nations' climate strategies (Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs) do reference children or youth, only a few policies contain child-sensitive considerations (Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu).

Need to strengthen health and education infrastructure. A significant portion of health infrastructure in Pacific Island countries is vulnerable to climate impacts, with 62% of relevant buildings located within 500 meters of the coastline.¹³ Education systems and schools are also not adequately equipped to handle safety issues related to climate change, affecting children's attendance and participation.

Climate finance not child focused. Globally, there is a growing appreciation of the need for climate finance to address children's distinct needs and vulnerabilities however it is estimated that only 2.4% of Multilateral Climate Funds are responsive to children's needs.¹⁴ Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agree that the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance (NCQG) should deliver gender and child responsive outcomes. There is a

¹¹ Estimated that 88% of the global disease burden associated with climate change is borne by children under the age of five: "The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis", UNICEF, 2021 available at [The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis | UNICEF](#).

¹² Born into the climate crisis, Save the Children International, 2021, available at [Born into the Climate Crisis: Why we must act now to secure children's rights | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#)

¹³ Ibid 11.

¹⁴ Falling Short, Addressing the Climate Gap for Children, Save the Children, 2023

movement on the global level to facilitate greater participation of children and young people in climate decision-making.

Participation of Pacific children in climate action. The right of children to participate in decisions that concern them is a well-established principle under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Yet while there is growing political will there are few formal participation mechanisms to support the systemic integration of children's voices into regional climate dialogues.

There is a need for increased political and financial commitment to children and their rights within national, Pacific regional and global arenas. Save the Children has been instrumental in amplifying the diverse voices of children in state submissions for the International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory opinion on climate change. Through our offices in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, we facilitated platforms for children and youth from various backgrounds to collaborate with governments. These platforms allowed children to share powerful testimonials that informed written submissions. We continue to explore avenues to elevate children's voices on the global stage, including the ICJ. At the regional level, there is substantial opportunity to align with regional strategies such as the 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent to adopt a more inclusive approach to consultation processes.

Recommendations:

- Enhance data collection and research to better understand and document the impacts of climate change on children. This should include disaggregated data by age, gender, and other relevant factors.
- Support Pacific Island governments to incorporate formal participation mechanisms to ensure children's needs and rights are integrated into climate policy processes.
- Invest in strengthening health and education infrastructure to withstand climate impacts. This includes future-proofing schools to ensure children's safety and continuous access to education.
- Advocate for an increase in child-focused climate finance. Ensure new, additional, and adequate climate finance commitments that include funding for Loss and Damage are directed towards child-responsive initiatives.
- Establish mechanisms for civil society to participate in regional discussions to guide governance and implementation of Pacific focussed climate finance.

The role of civil society in humanitarian responses

The Australian Government's humanitarian response policies, practices and platforms are designed to adhere to the principles of neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence. It is essential that civil society is a key stakeholder and delivery partner in response to address the needs of the community, including children.

Australia's support to humanitarian crises must be in line with international guidelines that specific that humanitarian assistance should be primarily managed by community focussed organisations. This is to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness, particularly in scenarios where military may not adequately address the needs of minority groups and vulnerable populations, such as children and youth, across their diversities.

The Australian government has made an important investment in disaster risk reduction in the Pacific through its multi-year funding through Disaster Ready. Disaster Ready provides a wide-ranging footprint that agencies can utilise to reach those most in need in response. It is vital that this

existing investment and the extensive footprint of civil society actors is maximised to the greatest extent possible in times of crisis.

Improving Australia's support to the Pacific through strengthened procurement processes

Save the Children welcomes the Australian Government's ambition, outlined in the International Development Policy to improve flexibility, responsiveness and the greater focus on genuine partnerships and locally driven development. However, procurement processes and approaches to transparency need to be addressed to optimise innovation, competitiveness, localisation, partnership potential, value for money and ultimately the Australian Government's ability to deliver on its policy commitments, including in the Pacific.

Tender processes: releasing full proposal design documents

The move to a two-step tender process has been a positive development which encourages greater competition. However, in most cases, full proposal design documents are only released to shortlisted organisations. To enable stronger, more meaningful partnerships and allow for emerging competitors to gain experience it would be useful if the design documents were publicly available through Austender or on the DFAT website during or before the proposal comes to market. This additional information allows smaller organisations, non-government organisations, new market entrants and local organisations to pitch innovative solutions to managing contractors (MCs) to secure partnerships on large programs.

Releasing evaluations, mid-term reviews and other program documents regularly and on time will support competitiveness and innovation. Over the past five years, the number and type of documents available has slowed significantly. Organisations need to determine if they are competitive on a tender and therefore critical that documents are made available to support agencies adjust or improve their practices to improve competitiveness.

Give local partners contributing to designs access to the final product. Local partners are regularly consulted as part of design processes however the final designs are usually only released to shortlisted tenderers. Providing the final product to the local organisations who have provided their time and knowledge free of charge would assist those organisations to build their own capacity to participate more fully in delivering the Australian aid program and help provide social accountability to the delivery of design intentions by the successful tenderers.

DFAT encouraging/requiring partnerships proposals as part of procurement process. The new DFAT policy is pursuing deeper partnerships and localisation. We believe there is an opportunity through commercial consortiums and partnerships to drive this goal. The messaging and the incentives DFAT send in terms of encouraging partnerships and local connections from the start of a procurement is an opportunity to drive this strategic objective. Leveraging NGO relationships through commercial contracts could have potential to foster stronger relationships and shift perceptions of DFAT as a short-term partner.

Recommendations:

- Improve capacity of civil society in the Pacific to respond effectively in humanitarian crises.
- Enable broader participation, including of Pacific Island civil society groups, in the delivery of Australian aid and development programming by revising Australian Government procurement processes including: making design documents public through Austender or on DFAT website during or before the proposal comes to market.
- Release evaluations, mid-term reviews and other program documents regularly and on time to strengthen capabilities and competitiveness of organisations bidding for tenders.

- Ensure local organisations can access DFAT designs to strengthen their capacity, increase accountability mechanisms and drive the growth of organisations involved in the delivery of the Australian aid program.