



The Political Economy of Accountability Ecosystems in the Pacific

Lisa Denney and Glenn Bond

May 2025

[While rising authoritarianism globally](#) suggests that accountable governance is not high on the list of political priorities in 2025, accountability has been wielded as a [reform priority for countries of the 'Global South,' including in the Pacific](#), for decades. It has also been recognised as a global priority in the [Sustainable Development Framework](#). Internationally supported initiatives have variously focused on either the 'demand' (citizen voice) or the 'supply' (government response) side of accountability, or on explicit attempts to combine the two through [sandwich strategies](#) and [social accountability](#) that focus on the relationship between citizens' and leaders and the ability to hold them to account. There has also been a stronger focus in recent years on [transparency and access to information](#). Yet, overall, many efforts to improve accountability have failed to gain traction on the ground. This has prompted a [process of introspection](#) within the accountability and transparency community to learn more purposefully from what has worked well and less well in this space.

Here, we highlight insights and lessons from one such effort that we have been involved in at the [Centre for Human Security and Social Change](#) (CHSSC), based at La Trobe University in Australia. Over the past two years, CHSSC has been working on a [UNDP](#) research project funded by the European Union (EU) that looks at [accountability ecosystems in the Pacific](#). The project seeks to better understand how these ecosystems work and why, with a view to developing approaches that can deliver better results. As part of the project, we undertook six country studies, working with national researchers in the [Federated States of Micronesia](#), [Kiribati](#), [Palau](#), [Solomon Islands](#), [Tuvalu](#) and [Vanuatu](#). We also prepared [a synthesis report](#) that analyses the constraints and opportunities across these Pacific Island states from a political economy perspective, and teases out potential ways in which policymakers and practitioners seeking to foster accountability might work differently taking those as their starting point.

One of [the strategies that we have identified is the importance of designing different accountability approaches in different settings based on an in-depth understanding of the underlying political settlement](#). In other words, approaches to strengthening accountability should not look the same across all times and places. They should be different depending on how power operates and how power configurations evolve over time in a given setting as a result of negotiation and contestation among different actors. This may sound strikingly basic – but it seems to be largely absent from donor-supported initiatives to date.

Shifts in the political settlement matter for accountability. As [Mushtaq Khan](#) has suggested, 'anticorruption is like any other law. It's ... a set of rules and how those rules are implemented depends on the distribution of power in society'. As the nature of the political settlement changes, so too do the mechanisms and processes that work to hold it to account.

What we found in our [Pacific research](#) is that, in countries where customary authority is seen as having political weight as a core part of the state (as is the case in [Vanuatu](#) and [Solomon Islands](#)), accountability initiatives are likely to have much more impact if they draw on the

legitimacy and influence of these traditional actors in their efforts to hold elected officials to account. This dynamic was less relevant in our other cases studies, depending on context. Within the [Federated States of Micronesia](#), for instance, it is relevant in the State of Yap, where customary authority is strong, but not relevant in the State of Pohnpei, where it is weaker.

Table 1.

	Dispersed	Power concentration	Concentrated
Broad	Broad-Dispersed <i>Elites incentivised to deliver broad-based, responsive governance, but struggle to deliver effectively and fall back on clientelism and populism.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Top-down institution-wide reforms unlikely- Focus on pockets of effectiveness and committed reformers- Strengthening investigation and prosecution capabilities while undertaking educative approaches- Connect non-state entities (Church and customary systems) with formal accountability institutions to share approaches and expand good practice- Engage with elites on issues <u>where</u> consensus possible- Support media and civil society to share information on accountability and impropriety	Broad-Concentrated <i>Elites incentivised to provide broad-based responsive governance and have ability to make and implement decisions accordingly.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Technical and financial support to accountability institutions more possible- Focus on expanding accountability to marginalised groups- Support investigation and prosecution of elites- Formal accountability institutions may be supported to engage across the ecosystem	
Narrow	Narrow-Dispersed <i>Elites lack incentives for broad-based responsive governance and instead compete among themselves for rents and perquisites.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Support pockets of effectiveness or reformers- Build coalitions across ecosystem to strengthen influence of those lacking power- Work with non-state entities (Church, customary institutions) to articulate their visions of accountability- Support advocacy by civil society, media and voices of marginalised groups- Support local communities to articulate their own visions and expectations of accountability to put pressure on elected representatives	Narrow-Concentrated <i>Elites lack incentives for broad-based responsive governance, so likely content with predatory rule.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Support accountability institutions to work in a cooperative and educative manner given investigation and prosecution not possible- Engage Church and traditional leaders to lead discussions in local communities to develop and articulate their own visions and expectations of accountability to be able to apply direct pressure on elected representatives- Connect local communities to expand networks and strategy sharing- Support civil society strengthening rather than advocacy given risks of harm	

In countries with broad-based constituencies of political support (there is greater space for civil society and media actors to play an effective role in accountable governance because there is a more direct relationship between public support and political mandates. This can be seen, for example, in places like [Tuvalu](#) and [Kiribati](#) (although here the challenge is of cultivating the small number of civil society organisations and media outlets). On the other

hand, where government authority has much narrower social foundations - in the sense that [elected officials cater to the needs of a small group of supporters](#), as in Vanuatu - approaches focused on civil society are likely to be less effective.

While this is still work in progress, our team has begun to flesh out what different accountability approaches might look like across a range of political settlements in the Pacific, building on the work on political reform and corruption by scholars such as [Khan](#) and [Tim Kelsall](#). The table below, [adapted from Kelsall](#), aims to capture what viable approaches to accountability might look like depending on:

- how power is organised (that is, whether power is concentrated or dispersed, which impacts the degree to which leaders can make binding decisions unilaterally or must act in concert with others); and
- how broad or narrow the social foundations are (which affects the distributional goals of leaders and the elite commitment to inclusive development).

The resulting potentially viable approaches to accountability are captured in each quadrant.

As **table 1** suggests, in contexts where social foundations are narrow and power is concentrated, there is little opening for engaging political elites on accountability. In these kinds of settings, strategies might instead focus on nurturing educative approaches, civil society strengthening rather than advocacy, and local level conversations on accountability that fly below the radar. By contrast, where social foundations remain narrow but power is dispersed, opportunities for civic advocacy increase. There is more leverage to support and learn from parts of the public service where good practice emerges,, with even some potential to foster pro-accountability coalitions. In contexts with broad social foundations and dispersed power, strategies likely to be effective shift again. Elites are incentivised to be responsive while they struggle to deliver. So in these settings, it could be fruitful to nurture pockets of institutional capacity among elites who are engaged in reform efforts, while working with civil society to develop more robust advocacy to hold government authorities to account. Finally, in contexts where social foundations are broad and power is concentrated, elites are likely to be more responsive and capable. This makes institutional strengthening approaches more feasible and investigation and prosecution more realistic. The point is that approaches to accountability should vary based on the nature of the political settlement.

At a time when [support for aid in general](#), and [support to governance](#) in particular, are under threat, being more precise about when different approaches to reform are likely to gain traction offers a tangible way of actioning the now nearly universal observation that '[politics matters](#)'. By thinking about how politics matters and how it plays out in different contexts, we will be better positioned to develop more relevant and effective accountability approaches that respond to political realities on the ground.

About the Authors

Dr Lisa Denney is the Director of the Centre for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia and a Research Associate with ODI.

Dr Glenn Bond is a Research Associate with the Centre for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University and has worked in senior roles for several INGOs.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice.

About the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice

The Thinking and working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) is a global network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers in development and global affairs committed to promoting more effective policy and practice. The TWP CoP works to foster more politically aware approaches to understand how change happens and why, translate findings and implications emerging from political economy analysis into operationally relevant guidance, encourage more flexible and adaptable ways of working, and provide evidence-based insights that can stimulate innovation, sharing and learning in international development and global affairs.

The TWP CoP is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and hosted by the International Development Department at University of Birmingham.

Visit our website: <https://twpcommunity.org/>

Subscribe to our Newsletter: <https://twpcop.substack.com/>

Get in touch:

Email: info@twpcommunity.org

Bluesky: [@twpcommunity.org](https://twitter.com/twpcommunity.org)

LinkedIn: [Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice](https://www.linkedin.com/company/thinking-and-working-politically-community-of-practice)

