



Thinking and working politically in the Pacific: A political settlements and institutional capabilities analysis

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Abbreviations and acronyms

APTC	Australia Pacific Training Coalition
CDF	Constituency Development Fund
COFA	Compacts of Free Association
DSIP	District Services Improvement Program
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
FFA	Forum Fisheries Agency
GDP	gross domestic product
KPH	Kumul Petroleum Holdings
LNG	liquefied natural gas
MP	member of parliament/elected representative
PASP	Pacific Australia Skills Platform
PALM	Pacific Australia Labour Mobility
PIC	Pacific Island country
PLS	Pacific Labour Scheme
PNA	Partners to the Nauru Agreement
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PSIP	Provincial Services Improvement Program
Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4	quadrants 1–4 of the PSA 2x2 framing
RSE	Registered Seasonal Employers
SITESA	Solomon Islands Tertiary Education and Skills Authority
SWF	sovereign wealth fund
TAFE	technical and further education
TVET	technical and vocational education and training
TWP	thinking and working politically
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
VDS	Vessel Days Scheme
WRP	Work-Ready Pool

1. Introduction

This paper is about change in governance and state and/or institutional capability in Pacific Island and archipelagic countries. It considers how reform-oriented public officials, leaders, donors and academics who seek to “think and work politically” on policy and development in these contexts might engage more effectively with these change processes. To date, despite extensive commentary on broad tendencies, there exist few theoretically informed, but programmatic and policy-oriented, accounts of institutional change across Pacific Island countries (PICs).

The paper considers how the (pre and post)colonial legacy in PICs has shaped governing arrangements and institutional capabilities. It uses a political settlements analysis (PSA) (Khan, 2010; Kelsall et al., 2022) to describe enduring but nevertheless shifting political and social relations in PIC contexts. It shows how these political and social features interact to form settlements and create pacts across connected levels, generating institutional and organisational capabilities to link remote populations with opportunities across the Pacific. These connections need to function across dispersal and distance at national and subnational/outer island scales (but see Craig and Porter, 2014; Haque, 2023). They also need to work at the level of what the Pacific Islands Forum¹ – the region’s main intergovernmental organisation – calls the Blue Pacific Continent, which comprises world-expanding pacts and mobility, as the Pacific scholar Epeli Hau’ofa’s “Sea of Islands” (1994) identified. The paper also adds an institutional and political perspective to Hau’ofa’s definition by highlighting both continuity and change.

Section 2 provides a brief background to the Pacific context. **Section 3** explains that “pacting” to build institutional connectivity has been a feature of Pacific politics and economies for generations, and remains a core aspect of regional and local engagement. **Section 4** maps new drivers of change (including rising geopolitical competition, resource rents, labour and other mobility, and tradition or *kastom*)² in Pacific political settlements. In PICs that have “competitive clientelist” settlements, these changes are deepening the inherent challenges; elsewhere, they are weakening what have been more “programmatic” political settlements.

Section 5 applies a PSA to significant political and economic examples in Pacific development. This includes looking at how political settlements affect PICs’ ability to engage in labour mobility, education and resource management. These examples illustrate how different political settlements shape institutional capabilities, and are also affected by wider drivers of change. **Section 6** concludes with suggestions on how reformers and regional partners might approach these shifts and their implications, with a view to creating more programmatic pacts and productive connectivity.

Appendix 1 describes PSA in greater detail.

¹ <https://forumsec.org/pacific-islands-forum>

² *Kastom* refers to the adaptation of (changing) traditional institutional modes to (changing) colonial and capitalist modes over generations (see Akin, 2013).

2. The Pacific context

The Pacific region covers around a third of the globe. Although it is one of the world's most diverse and dispersed regions, the nations within it share a set of political, economic and social challenges. From volcanic and atoll islands to larger archipelagic and “continental” island states such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), New Caledonia, Solomon Islands (SI) and Vanuatu, PICs are sometimes sparsely (yet sometimes very densely) populated. They present extremes of scale (Utz, 2020), with land making up just a part of what are enormous oceanic territories, strategically important and rich in resources. These PICs also have expansive connections, as people across the region have for millennia navigated and created durable political, social and economic links and opportunities. **Here, the ocean itself acts both as a stimulus and as a means to move beyond fragmentation and separation.** For all PICs and their societies, the ability to manage these extremes of scale and connectivity remains crucial to development and security.

In governance and institutions, the former colonial and postcolonial powers (mainly France, the UK and the US) have created a legacy of special arrangements/pacts and of hybrid institutions that combine elements of Westminster-based, presidential and *kastom* structures.³ The PICs have always been diverse, ranging from monarchies and foreign military bases to independent island archipelagos, and hybrids of these forms.⁴ Almost all PICs entered into postcolonial agreements, treaties or other pacts, in many but not all cases combining security with migration and market access. Such pacts and arrangements have been crucial to enabling or constraining state capacity in collective action (or “grasp”) capability and delegation (or “reach”) capability (Mann, 1984; Fukuyama, 2007), enabling access to economic connections, regional public goods and subnational services. States have limited and often patchy reach in what are, sometimes literally, “islands of effectiveness.”⁵ In some locations, the obstacles of scale, distance and dispersal, and the challenges of extending state authority and services, mean there are “areas of limited statehood,”⁶ where citizens and resources are governed by means of hybrid institutional and resilient *kastom* (Allen, 2018).

Most PICs are now diverging from the colonial legacy in their political settlements and institutional arrangements. International factors are driving this process: rising natural resource and geopolitical rents, access to regional (metropolitan) labour markets, diaspora voting and influence, and the emergence of new regional governance and geopolitical alliances. Domestic factors are also influencing change: resurgent tradition, the emerging representation of women and the personalisation of leadership through patronage – and especially service delivery directly by and through politicians, effectively bypassing the formal public service (Craig, 2020).

Domestic governance and institutional arrangements may not be the most important factors in determining Pacific development outcomes, however. Bertram (2004) has convincingly argued that

³ The Westminster and presidential systems are government structures or frameworks underpinning hybrid Pacific governments.

⁴ New Caledonia, for example, falls somewhere between being a French overseas *collectivité* and an independent nation.

⁵ Levy (2012) coined this phrase in describing the “patchy” outcomes when some parts of a governance system work well while others do not. In the Pacific context, “patchiness” might also refer to some archipelagic countries being governed more effectively than others (see also Levy, 2022).

⁶ The literature on areas of limited statehood is important for parts of the Pacific (see, for example, Dinnen and Allen, 2015; Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018).

level of integration with metropolitan patrons is the main driver of development outcomes, with institutions at best secondary, if not peripheral. After over 50 years of “good governance” development in the Pacific, with very patchy results, it is worth examining whether any specific modes of governance are indisputably better or worse for the region’s development, and why we should be alarmed about current shifts in the nature of domestic political settlements. Some patrimonial departures from good governance have contributed to economic opportunities (although these are arguably no less sustainable than many donor-driven alternatives) and brought their own forms of accountability – for instance some Community Development Funds (CDFs) in the Pacific and off-budget development flows in Timor-Leste. This paper also focuses on the contribution of regional institutional arrangements (including regional pacting and integration) to development processes.

The paper discusses how specific features and drivers have created different political settlements across PICs, by extending PSA to show how different political settlements enable different institutional and organisational capabilities – an area that presents some of the most important challenges for Pacific Island peoples.⁷ These challenges include (i) the state’s ability to “pact” durably and credibly to create and institutionalise developmental collective action at various scales (international, national and subnational) – what we call “institutional grasp”; and (ii) the ability of the state and citizens to reach “upwards” (to connect into regional public goods opportunities, especially for economic and social connection, labour/migration/mobility, education and resource management) and “downwards” to remote islands and villages, enabling the state to delegate authority, deliver services and allow citizens to connect with wider opportunities.

3. Political settlements analysis in the Pacific context

3.1. Introduction to political settlements frameworks

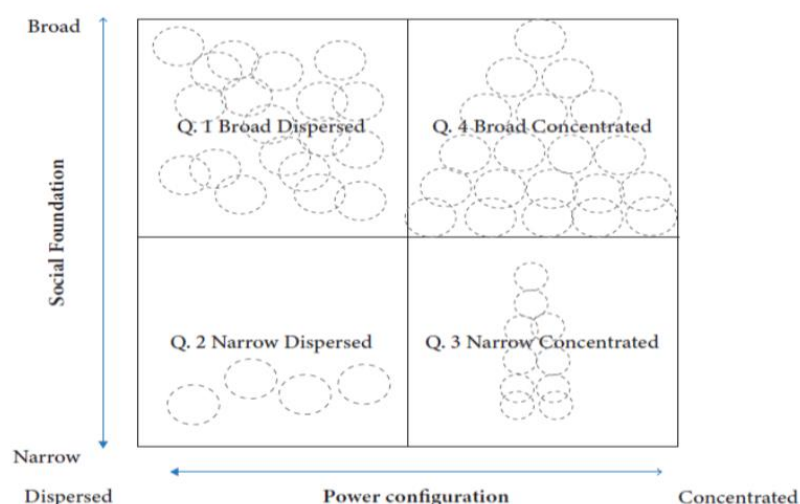
Over the past 15 years, PSA has been used to develop an understanding of how different structures of political power, social relations and inclusion shape institutional capabilities (e.g. Khan, 2010; Kelsall et al., 2022). (See Appendix 1 for a detailed description of the basic approach and practical application.) PSA focuses on the national and subnational levels, and in particular sectoral programming or project contexts. It has been applied to compare various types of state and political settlements, to identify the ways in which different settlements enable and constrain development programmes and outcomes. With a few exceptions, however, PSA has not been systematically applied in the Pacific, especially in terms of regional capabilities for collective action.

⁷ This consideration of the institutional and organisational capabilities of different political settlements is only partially developed in the literature on political settlements (Khan, 2010; Craig and Porter, 2014; Kelsall, 2016) but it seems crucial. Fukuyama (2007) emphasised the centrality of collective action and delegation in Pacific governance. This paper expands these terms to link with Mann’s analysis of state power, its concentration and its expansion over sovereign domains and civil society (Mann, 1984). “[S]tate autonomy, of both despotic and infrastructural forms, flows principally from the state’s unique ability to provide a territorially-centralized form of organization” (p. 185). “The [modern] state penetrates everyday life more than did any historical state” (p.189), which affords it the power to “penetrate and centrally co-ordinate the activities of civil society through its own infrastructure” (p. 190) . This state also has infrastructural powers of reach across and into society: ‘the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm’ (p. 189).

PSA considers how elite competition, bargaining and pact-making interact with underlying social, cultural and informal power structures and practices. Over time, and in the absence of conflict-related crisis, elite political and economic competition and relations with broader society give rise to institutions that may be centralised or local, formal or informal. At the heart of a political settlement is some aspect of a pact or bargain: a set of arrangements that might be expressed in a formal agreement (e.g. a security pact or a political party's policy platform) and/or in the distribution of state and social power and resources in ways that are politically sustained and eventually become institutionalised or eroded. In contexts where state and capitalist relations are emerging under conditions of patronage that shape or define civil society, political settlements represent a mix of formality and informality, grounded both in international geopolitics and in informal and indigenous institutions and socially accepted norms and traditions⁸ – or what in some parts of the Pacific is called *kastom*.

As Kelsall et al. (2022) outline, political settlements can be seen as having two dimensions: the extent to which political power is concentrated or dispersed; and the nature of social formations or “foundations” that underpin politics, whether broad (inclusive or fragmented) or narrow and exclusive. Figure 1 presents the global political settlement quadrants, and this paper considers the PICs through this lens.

Figure 1. Political settlements: Core elements



Source: Kelsall et al. (2022), p. 54.

3.2. The power configuration: Concentrated or dispersed?

PSA considers how elites contest pacts over political power and collective action, and how these arrangements are achieved and exercised. This is the “power configuration” (Kelsall et al., 2022, p. 20). The axis presented in Figure 1 shows how power is concentrated among different (but centrally

⁸ “Informal institutions like patron–client allocative rules, and informal adaptations to the ways... formal institutions work play a critical role in bringing the distribution of benefits... into line with the distribution of power” (Khan, 2010, p. 1).

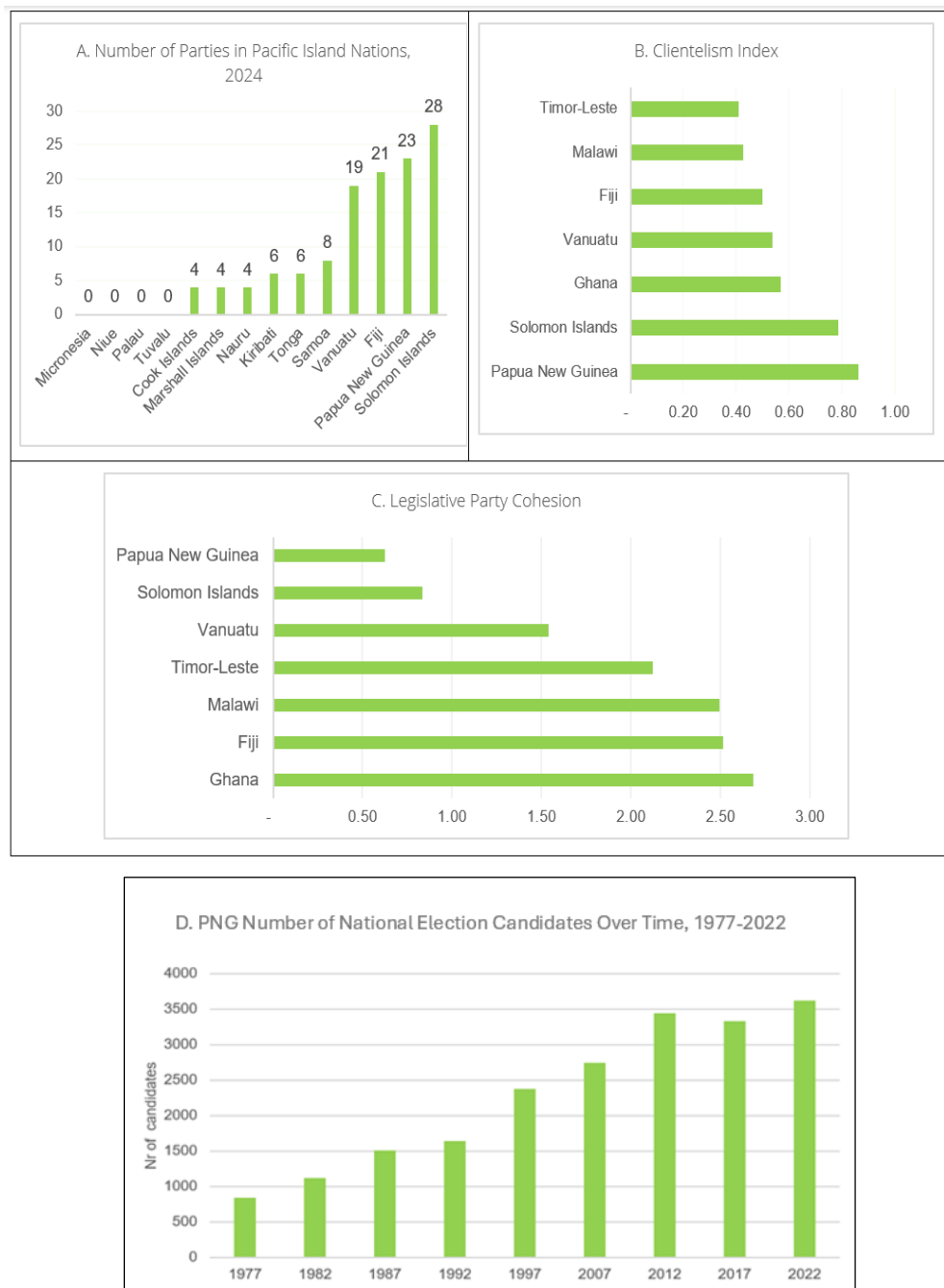
powerful) actors and locations (as in Q3 and Q4 countries); or dispersed across many factions (as in Q1 and Q2 countries). In Pacific contexts, these might be islands, clans or kinship groups.

Intensive concentrated power might be configured through a monarch (previously in Tonga), an authoritarian leader (previously in Fiji), aggregated/hierarchical and/or consensus-building structures of traditional power across archipelagos (Polynesia, Kiribati's Maneaba system (Uakeia, 2013)), stable and programmatic political parties (such as Samoa's Human Rights Protection Party) or a strong functional bureaucracy (currently in Tonga). Concentrated power is also supported across PICs by extensive international budgetary support and programmatic commitments to education, health, legal and justice arrangements, especially in the Pacific Compacts of Free Association (COFA) and other "free association" countries (Cook Islands with New Zealand), and in hybrid arrangements such as those in New Caledonia/French Polynesia. At one extreme, this includes atolls that host foreign military bases. Such concentrated power structures have some ability to generate and sustain elite pacts, collective action in government and sustained programmatic policy commitments. But they may also facilitate the abuse of power by a small elite that rules via patronage with little formal accountability. Some Pacific countries (e.g. Fiji, Tonga) have experienced Q3 authoritarian arrangements. More have experienced Q4.

Political power may also be dispersed (as in Q1 and Q2 countries). Highly dispersed configurations draw on the power of leaders of diverse parties, often individuals or patrons, each with their own power base and interests, and perhaps in different parts of an archipelago. They may represent different ethnic, religious, regional or caste groups; and they may form political parties, some united by authority, some with a few local members with no shared policy programme. In these cases, power is contested, negotiated and renegotiated among loose coalitions of individuals and patrons, and weak and fluid parties.

Such dispersed politics are prevalent in much of Pacific Melanesia. For example, PNG has more than 800 language groups dispersed across distance, terrain and ocean, and enormous numbers of parliamentary candidates clustered in many parties (see Figures 2 and 3). Where dispersed populations act within a postcolonial Westminster system, there may be frequent votes of no confidence in the parliament, as seen in Vanuatu, and increasingly in other PICs. Such circumstances challenge collective action capability (among political parties and politicians that are highly volatile and mobile), in a context of short time horizons for pacts and investments.

Figure 2. Political parties, clientelism, legislative party cohesion and candidates in national elections in PNG, 1977–2022



Source: Reproduced from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset.

Power in dispersed political settlements is assembled across or divided between short-lived clusters of patrons, all competing to dominate central agencies and local councils.⁹ Yet these same dispersed formations (especially those with fragmented but inclusive social foundations) and their volatile pacts

⁹ See, for example, World Bank (2023a, chapter 1) for data demonstrating PNG's social and political fragmentation.

may promote the inclusion of a range of political actors, regions and groups – and avert the rise of authoritarian, single-party rule.

Ability to concentrate power varies widely across PICs. In some countries, multiple political parties or government alliances with a weak concentration of power have been described as “small fish swimming [together] in the shape of a shark” (to seem larger) (Corbett, 2015). In other PICs, longstanding (concentrated) single dominant party, military/security, colonial or royal rule structures and institutions now seem vulnerable to rapid change. As the recent history of Samoa shows, previously stable and programmatic parties and systems with a concentrated power base can quickly become fragmented and unstable (Tinetali-Fiavaai, 2025).

The degree of stability of dispersed power configurations is an important factor affecting the credibility of sustainable pacts and policy commitments (see Barma et al., 2012). In dispersed power configurations, it is difficult to get coalitions of diverse politicians together for collective action. Such fragmentation is often institutionalised in the overlapping roles and rivalries of central government agencies, in the challenges of maintaining cabinet cohesion in Westminster systems and in policy and in resource allocation for infrastructure and services. Political pacts in dispersed power configurations are typically based on personal loyalty and MPs’ “provisioning” for patronage.¹⁰

In the Pacific, political concentration and “grasp” (collective action) capability can also be crucial in enabling “reach” (including delegation) capability. The latter refers to the state’s ability to “reach down” and delegate its authority, regulate resources and extend services to dispersed and remote populations. In many Q4 PICs, for long periods since (sometimes partial) independence, states have been able to do this reliably and programmatically, with stable policy commitments and budgets reinforced by pacts and strong social commitments. Education (discussed in Section 5) is one context where this capability has been crucial; in others, including in tourism and transport infrastructure, it has also been significant. Reach capability in a multi-scale regional context also refers to the ability to “reach up,” to take advantage of the regional opportunities and capabilities in the three key areas we examine in Section 5: labour mobility, education and resource management. These areas also require consistent and durable pacting to obtain the necessary resources and enable the mechanisms (including civil society and diaspora community and connectivity) that allow the reach into labour markets to gain traction. Again, Q4 states have typically benefited from this pacting, whereas in Q1 states this capability has been patchy.

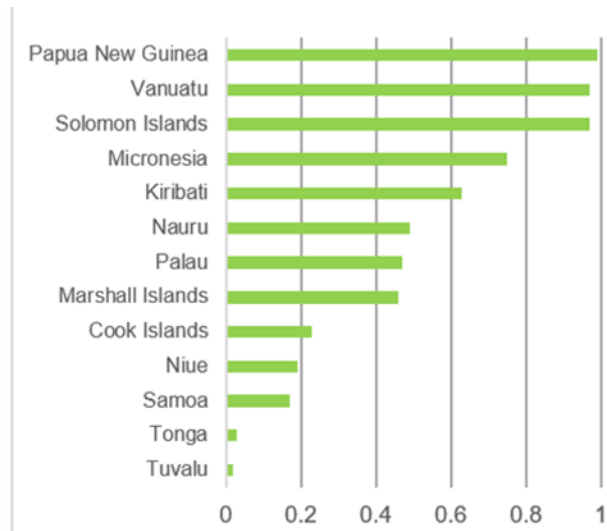
3.3. Social foundations: Broad or narrow?

Two dimensions influence the social foundation (the y axis in Figure 1): the extent to which social groups are diverse and dispersed and the extent to which the power configuration means such groups are included or excluded from governance and the provision of services. Social foundations across PICs may be broad and inclusive (including many clans, language groups or different islands) or narrow and exclusive (dominance of a small noble elite, or one island, ethnic group, village or clan).

¹⁰ This analysis of provisioning pacts is crucial to the argument made in the present paper (see Slater, 2010; Craig and Porter, 2014).

Social arrangements can be highly *segmented*¹¹ among multiple small groups, as in much of Melanesia (i.e. PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu). This can produce political and institutional faultlines along which social relations can become exclusive, with competition between different groups driving dispersed configurations of political power (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Linguistic diversity across Pacific Island countries



Source: Reproduced from Greenberg's Linguistic Diversity Index.

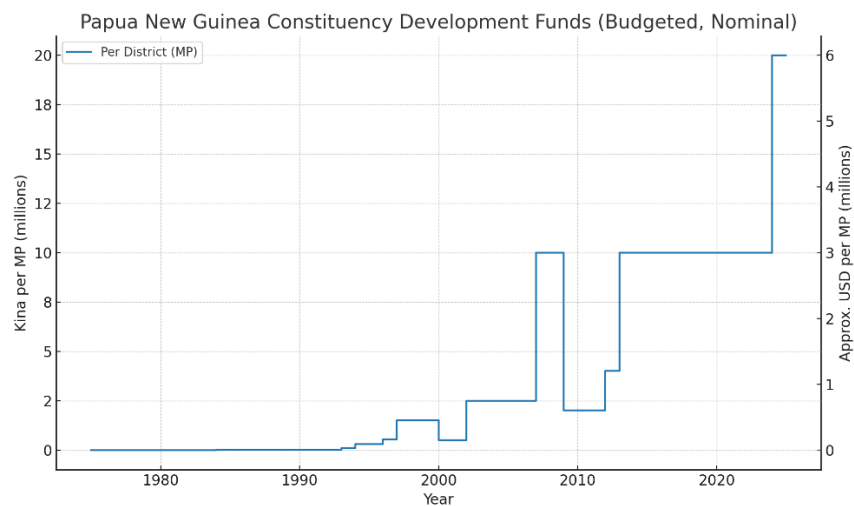
In Q1 Melanesia (PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu), highly segmented social foundations interact with dispersed political arrangements at both the national and the local scale. Local politicians compete in electoral constituencies that usually span many small groups, each with specific and competing or exclusive expectations of patronage. MPs must then distribute the spoils of office locally, or face (as many do) rejection at the next election. These local demands are not met programmatically and inclusively by centrally coordinated agencies, such as in the health and education sectors. Rather, patronage-based services involve small projects (e.g. a school classroom for education) or simply handing out money on a cash or project basis. Elected officials in Q1 countries have powerful incentives to seek funding for personalised, unaccountable expenditures – and often get it.

Q1 competitive clientelism involves multi-scale institutional arrangements and pacts. These countries, with broad social foundations and dispersed power configurations, struggle to achieve the institutional capabilities – “collective action” and “delegations” (Fukuyama, 2007) – that enable programmatic (Q4) governments. Elected leaders have few incentives to form pacts and parties around national programmatic policy (collective action within parties or across the cabinet or executive). Frequent instability in the form of votes of confidence means significant state resources are allocated (and kept off budget) with only short time horizons. Q1 PICs struggle to provide services and delegate authority in nationally consistent ways across distance and diverse territories and populations. They also find it difficult to provide consistent intergovernmental financing and engage in

¹¹ A segmented society is “A social system comprising numerous relatively small autonomous groups who generally regulate their own affairs, but who periodically come together to form larger groups and... may collectively appear to be a single large community. Segmentary societies tend to be agricultural societies living in small discrete areas of a larger identifiable territory” (Darvill, 2008).

other “delegation” of institutionally aligned mandates, funding and function – namely, rules, roles and resources. Instead, politicians have incentives to create political pacts at the national and local levels that support patronage and reward clients on an exclusive basis. These are known as “provisioning pacts” (Slater, 2010). There are powerful incentives to join the government when political opposition is weak. Provisioning pacts notoriously lead to patronage with limited accountability, delegating through devices like CDFs (see Figure 4), and local statutory authorities staffed exclusively by personal supporters. The case studies in Section 5 and case areas in Section 6 demonstrate some of these weaknesses in labour mobility, education and resource revenues.

Figure 4. Competitive clientelism in PNG: Rise in CDFs for MPs



Source: Papua New Guinea national budget documents and supplementary budget announcements.

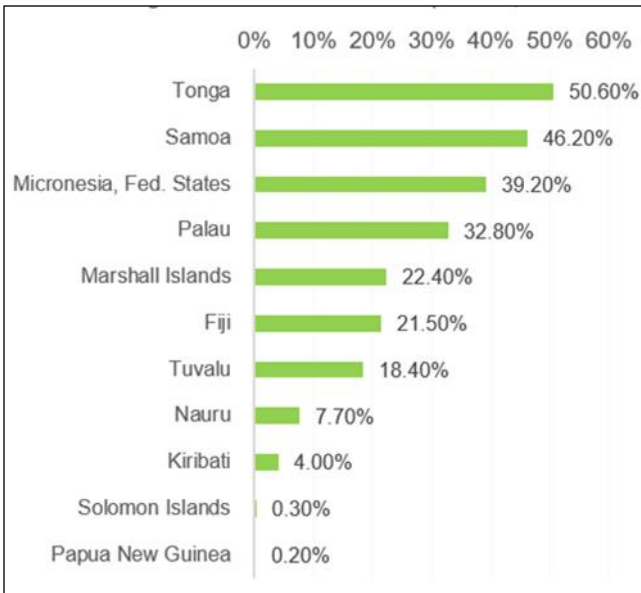
“Patchy” pacting and outcomes arise in highly segmented and dispersed social and political contexts, such as in the remote islands and villages of Melanesia. The state’s regulatory and service delivery reach capabilities depend on the personalised provision pacting capabilities of competitive clientelist MPs. Practical outcomes (e.g. infrastructure, services, inclusion in labour mobility) are inconsistent (Levy, 2012, 2022), and one patron may have far greater access to resources than another. At the same time, resource management itself is largely determined at the local scale, where customary authority faces global-scale interests. In resource enclaves in “areas of limited statehood” (Levy, 2012), local ability to achieve collective action can be fragmented as a result of interests intervening at the national level and recruiting local factions (Allen, 2018). This is where collective action (grasp) and effective delegation (reach) are most needed – but often least available – to manage exploitation and provide security. But, as Case 3 in Section 5 shows, rising collective clientelism is undermining accountability and state capability.

The “reach down” capability of competitive clientelist states thus presents a challenge. The political settlement and institutional arrangements in Q1 contexts powerfully shape outcomes on a location-by-location, leader-by-leader, sector-by-sector basis. Case 1 on labour mobility in Section 5 illustrates the effects of this “patchiness.” Pacific Q4 states face the same challenges but come to them enabled by more programmatic government. Q3 PICs can also extend organisational and institutional reach;

Q2 contexts are less likely to be programmatic in relation to services. These capability factors are crucial to performance in, for example, labour mobility (see Case 1 in Section 5).

Finally, the ability of Q1 countries to “reach up” into regional opportunities, and to connect across the region at a population level, is also powerfully circumscribed. As Figure 5 shows, compared to other PICs, Q1 countries have tiny diasporas, as well as very limited mobility in areas ranging from education to labour markets to tourism.

Figure 5. Diaspora as a share of the national population, 2020



Source: World Bank (2023b).

Figure 1 illustrates that the combination of the power configuration and the social foundation provides the framing for a PSA. Table 1 shows that contemporary PICs’ political settlements fall largely into two categories: competitive clientelist political settlements (Q1 in Table 1) and programmatic government (Q4). This has not always been the case: Q2 and Q3 PICs have experienced dominant parties, monarchy, military rule and rule as foreign military bases. The remainder of the paper focuses mainly on Q1 and, to a lesser extent, Q4 PICs.

Table 1. Political settlements in the Pacific

	Power configuration: Dispersed	Power configuration: Concentrated
Social foundation: Broad	Q1: “Competitive clientelist” or “clientelist pluralist” states: PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu ➤ Great linguistic and other diversity, geographically segmented populations ➤ Regular elections, with many groups and locations represented ➤ Multiple fluid parties, agglomerating personalised/patriarchal patronage, with limited policy basis for party differentiation ➤ Frequent votes of no confidence incentivising patronage and shifting party allegiances ➤ Governing coalitions in “provision pact,” providing resources for patronage: “small fish swimming in the shape of a shark” ➤ Limited credible commitment to programmatic party policy and budget to state service provision ➤ “Patchiness” in services and regulatory capability	Q4: “Programmatic government”: Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Cook Islands, COFA states¹² (Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Palau), “unincorporated” US territories (Guam, American Samoa) ➤ Social foundations in hierarchical/geopolitical traditions translated into the national state ➤ Postcolonial pacts and arrangements (Cook Islands, Niue, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, US COFA free association agreements, Tuvalu’s Falepili Union treaty with Australia) ➤ Stronger collective action/credible policy and budget commitments (through well-resourced and programmatic executive), and “reach” capability of the state ➤ Few nations have fully programmatic political parties (e.g. Marshall Islands has no parties) ➤ Broadness of social foundations limited in Q4 by unequal gender representation
Social foundation: Narrow	Q2: Patrimonial factional government representing some social groups, with others excluded: Solomon Islands pre-conflict, parts of PNG Highlands, Bougainville pre-conflict, New Caledonia? ➤ Can be predatory, one ethnic or elite group dominating others ➤ Can be plural, with multiple small/medium parties representing small constituencies, forming coalitions ➤ Ensconced factional elites controlling rents ➤ Fiefdoms at local or regional level ➤ Least stable settlement: vulnerable to civil wars ➤ Influence of gangs, warlords, militias, tribal fighting, vulnerable to violence/coups	Q3: Single dominant/hegemonic party with national power base, or dictator rule, authoritarian/royal strongman, military command structure: previously Tonga under royalty/feudal rule, Fiji under military government, regional oil states, remote island and atoll military bases ➤ Institutionalised one-party regime, either predatory or benevolent ➤ Concentration of power in a long-term elite ➤ Can be developmental: Singapore’s protection pact (expanding to include diverse populations) or predatory/extractive ➤ Emphasis on private (elite) goods with some particularist and public goods ➤ Some ability to build state capacity and selective rule of law; may use repression to maintain exclusion of multiple external groups

¹² On freely associated states, see Dionne and Sparling (2022).

PSA is usually undertaken at a national level, but in the Pacific it is better conducted at the regional level. As suggested above, the small PICs' capacity to make strategic pacts has been crucial. The concentration of power has been supported (arguably dominated) by special arrangements, such as US COFAs in much of Micronesia, New Zealand's pact with Cook Islands and ongoing colonial arrangements in French Polynesia/New Caledonia.

This context has seen islands grouped into archipelagic PICs, with treaties and compacts, budget support and access to regional public goods such as education, resource management (notably tuna), international mobility and remittances. Historically, various kinds of political settlement have had different access to or derived different benefits from these regional public goods. As geopolitical competition, climate change and contestation over scarce resources are accelerating in the region, it will be crucial that the PICs can act collectively to re-navigate and negotiate such pacts in ways that create stable opportunities and security arrangements – as well as being able to draw on pooled, region-wide analytical, regulatory and logistical capabilities and technologies of resource management (as in fisheries).

Of course, regional-level competitive clientelism (e.g. Australia or China competing for allegiance and directing strategic rents and aid towards political elites) may prevent the strengthening of wider collective action capabilities in PICs. Such international competitive clientelism also enables the same dynamics at lower levels of scale, within Pacific societies and their internal political arrangements. From Q1 to Q4 contexts, these resources might not be channelled into PICs' programmatic budget allocations. Rather, they can support political actors in unsustainable ways, as these actors compete to support clients in contexts where communal interest is highly dispersed.

4. Drivers of contemporary change in Q1 and Q4 PICs

This section identifies various drivers of change across Q1 and Q4 PICs. Most of these are long-established. They are currently shaping political settlements, as well as disrupting and augmenting diverse pacts and challenging existing rules, roles and resources. One such factor is dependence on aid, which is nothing new in the Pacific. Resources from rising pacting competition and other rents are likely to change PICs' politics and governance. This is making it increasingly likely that PICs will adopt more characteristics of rentier states, enhancing or undermining their respective institutional and organisational grasp and reach capabilities. It is not clear how these changes will affect development outcomes.

This section focuses on the drivers of change that are related directly to the three case areas set out in Section 5, showing how the political economy of aid, resource management and labour mobility is shifting.

4.1. The multi-polar world reshapes collective action and pacting – boosting aid

As Sora (2022) notes, "[t]he strategic value of the Pacific to larger powers lies in its huge ocean territories and the utility of being able to traffic and base military assets in Pacific countries." Not since World War II has the international order been so contested, with so many new possibilities for alignment and connectivity (Korybko et al., 2022). The Pacific has become more "crowded and

complex," with the emergence of multiple actors and competing regional clientelist arrangements (Taylor, 2019). China's security pact with Solomon Islands (Gunia, 2022), the leaders of Cook Islands signing a pact with China without any national or international consultation (Armstrong, 2025; Srinivasan, 2025) and, most remarkably, Azerbaijan's Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with New Caledonian independence leaders (Selvaratnam, 2024)¹³ show the scope of change in Pacific pacting.

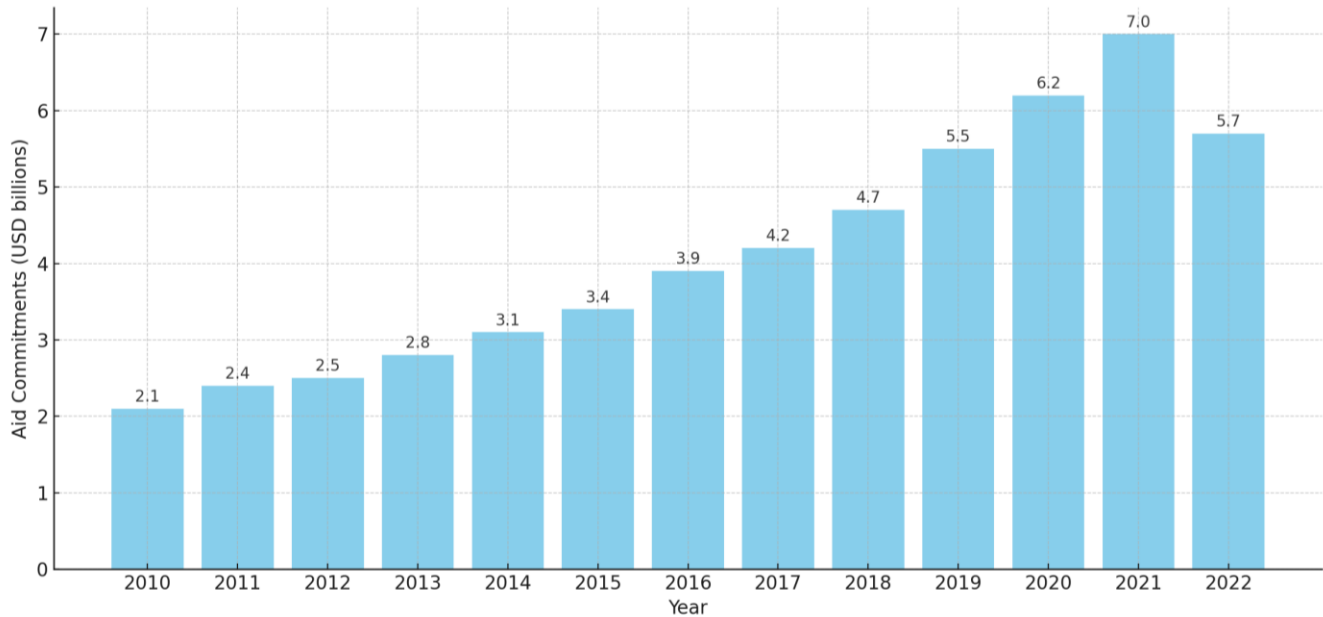
Responding to rising contestation, Australia, China, Japan and the US, the main international powers in the region, have refocused their aid, trade, diplomatic and security interests towards the Pacific. They are engaging in regional economic pacting that underpins labour mobility¹⁴ and have taken a more prominent role in regional affairs and institutions. Examples include Australia's 2018 Pacific Step Up, the US Pacific Pivot (Sora, 2022), New Zealand's Pacific Reset, the UK's Pacific Uplift, Indonesia and its Pacific Elevation and Japan's commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific" in its *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019*. Over the past 15 years, and especially more recently, aid and strategic rents have been on the rise: dramatic changes in US commitments will alter this situation again. As Figure 6 shows, growth in aid commitments has been most spectacular in Melanesia – i.e. in a Q1 context – although this has declined again since Covid-19.

Rising international aid throughout the early 2020s has served as a strategic or geopolitical rent (Auty, 2007) across political settlements (see Figure 7). Like other rents, strategic rents tend to concentrate power at the political apex of the rentier states they support and transform, especially where these are personally and politically targeted rather than programmatic. In the case of Chinese aid to Solomon Islands, accusations of elite capture are increasing and are contributing to political instability and rioting in Honiara; this is reopening internal geopolitical tensions that, in recent history, have driven civil war. Such trends are also present in Q4 contexts: in Fiji and Tonga, leaders have been persuaded to take on "burdensome debt commitments... while the implementation of strategic projects, and perceptions of increased corruption in relation to large-scale infrastructure projects being carried out by Chinese state-owned enterprises" (Sora, 2022, p. 163). Meanwhile, managing contractors in Australian and Chinese aid do not enhance, and indeed often bypass, the programmatic capabilities of national government agencies and companies (see Figure 8).

¹³ The article quotes independence leader Roch Wamytam as saying. "All parliaments around the world enter into partnership agreements."

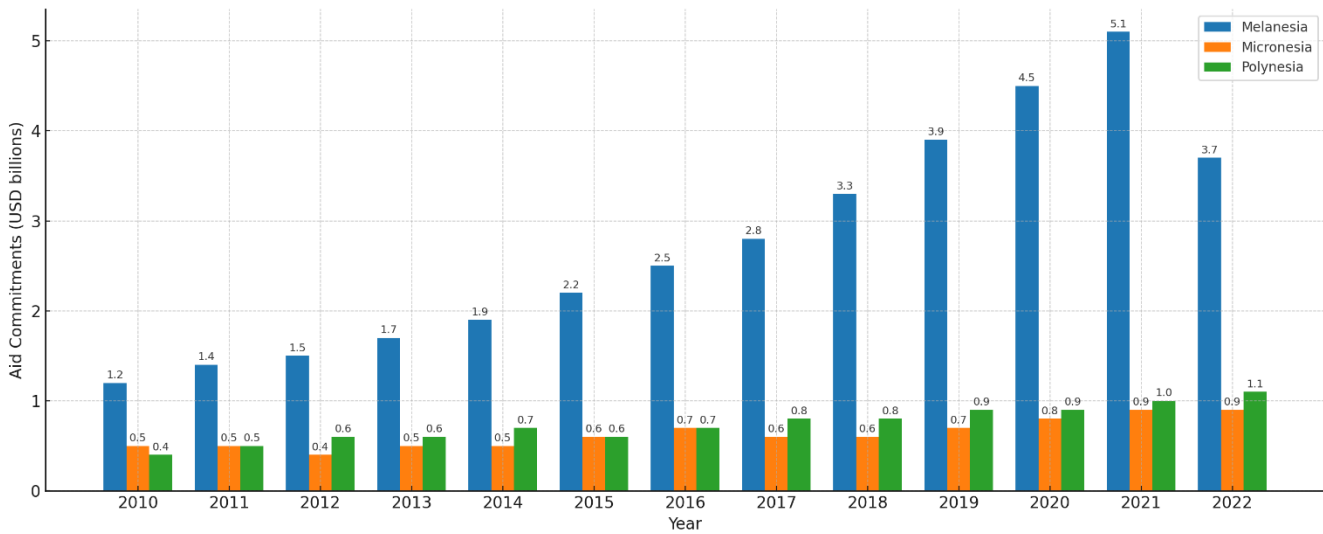
¹⁴ Under the expanded Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) (PACER Plus): see <https://pacerplus.org/pacer-plus/components/labour-mobility-arrangement>

Figure 6. Total aid commitments to Pacific Island Forum countries, 2010–2022



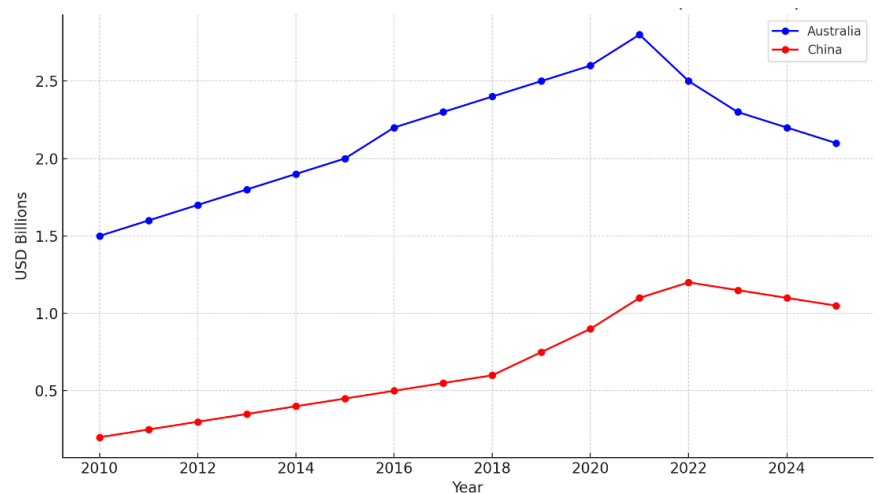
Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

Figure 7. Annual aid commitments by region, 2010–2025



Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map

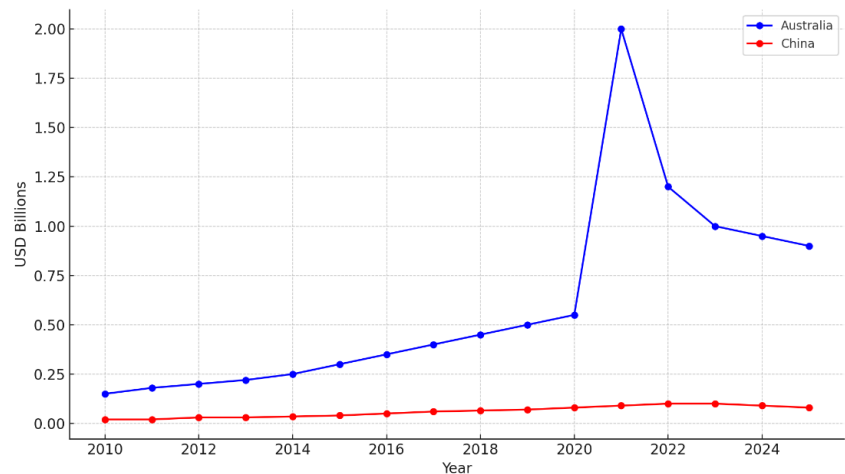
Figure 8. Australian and Chinese aid commitments to Pacific Island Forum countries, 2010–2025



Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

Well-designed regional and bilateral pacts that are attuned to PICs’ needs can indeed support programmatic government and Pacific-scale capabilities in education, training, labour mobility and resource management. As Figure 9 shows, Australian aid is increasingly oriented to budget support, and, at the time of writing, was developing such pacts and programming. Meanwhile, competition could improve the quality of some international aid. Tuvalu’s Falepili Union Treaty with Australia,¹⁵ addressing climate change, mobility and migration, is a good example, as are New Zealand’s free association pacts.

Figure 9. Budget aid support commitments to Pacific Island Forum countries, 2010–2025



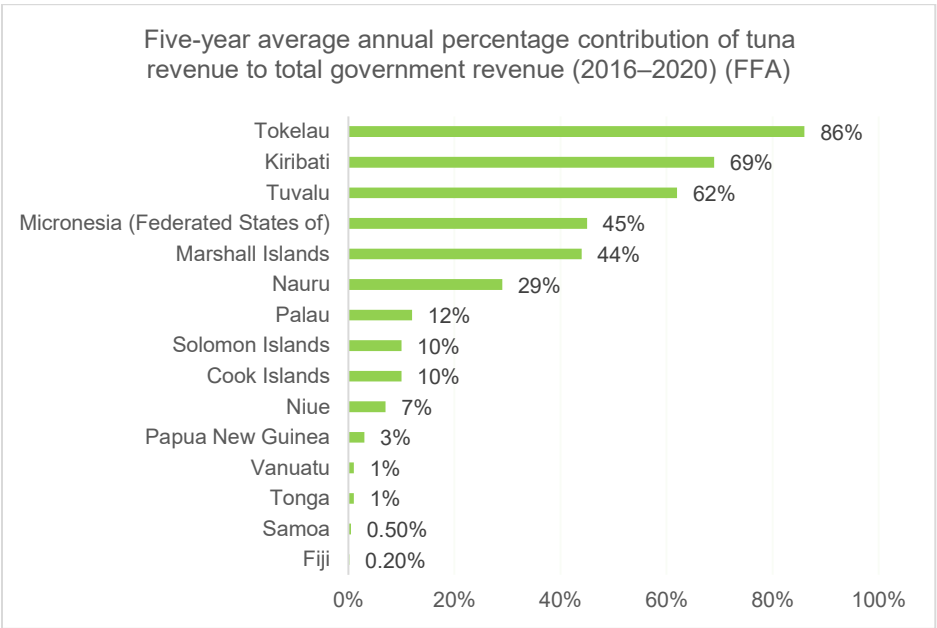
Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

¹⁵ See <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/tuvalu/australia-tuvalu-falepili-union-treaty>

4.2. Natural resource rents shaping institutions: Emergence/deepening of Pacific rentier states

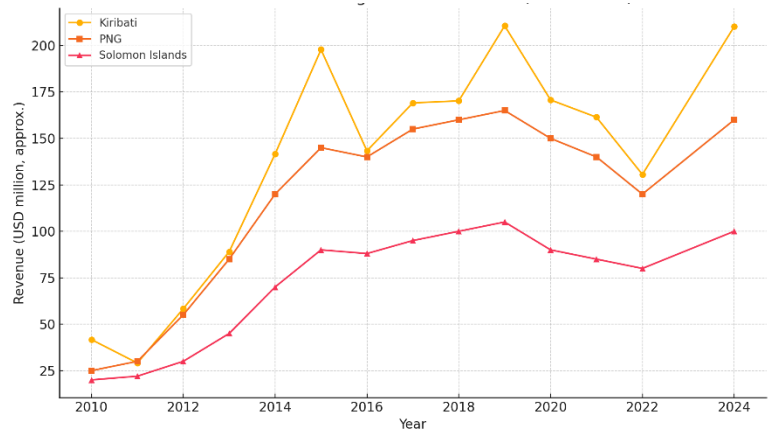
Resource rents are also rising, and are increasingly significant in PICs' finances. The reshaping of PIC states into rentier states is enabled by the often-powerful interplay of resource and geopolitical rents. In this context, China has for some time dominated resource extraction in the Pacific (Nicholas, 2021), contributing to the growth of resource rents. Rising geopolitical and resource rents work in tandem to reinforce rentier state political settlements and institutional change.

Figure 10. Rising rents among Parties to the Nauru Agreement countries: Tuna fisheries



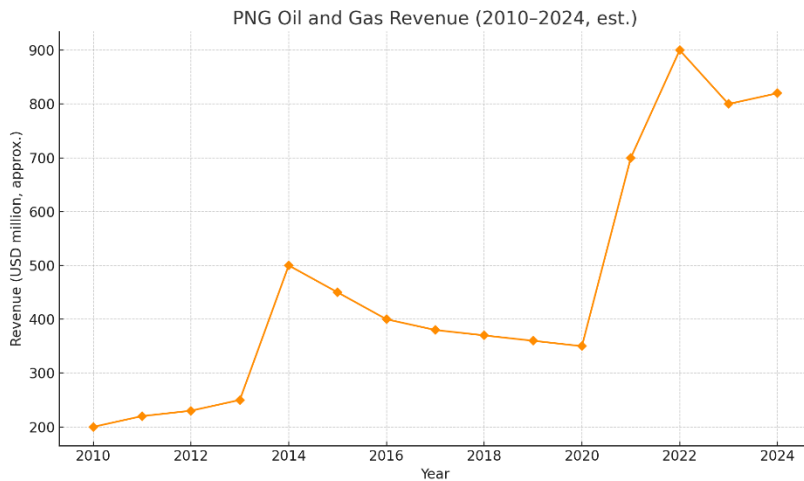
Sources: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map; World Development Indicators; Pacific Data Hub (<https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/pacific-islands-and-tuna-fishing>).

Figure 11a. Parties to the Nauru Agreement-derived fishing licence revenue, 2010–2024



Source: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

Figure 11b. Estimated oil and gas revenue in PNG, 2010–2024



Source: PNG budget documents.

Strategic rents work alongside rising resource rents to reinforce rentier state institutional arrangements and outcomes. Barma et al. (2012) offer insights into the impact of resource revenues on different kinds of polity, leading to different development outcomes. In non-Pacific Q4 states (e.g. Norway) with programmatic governments and/or strong dominant parties, rising resource rents can be progressive. Elsewhere, resource and geopolitical rents are commonly viewed as a “resource curse.”

Globally, rising rents are often crucial to sustaining specific political pacts (Barmer et al., 2012, p. 47).¹⁶ In Q1 states, with rent-based centralisation of power at the top, potential leaders have compelling incentives to direct rents towards pacting and building coalitions, and towards “politicians’ patronage at lower levels of scale” in provision pacting (Slater, 2010, p. 18). In these contexts, provision pacts increase political competition in an already fragmented polity. “With extraordinary rents accruing to the state, public office or access to those in public office becomes the most valuable commodity in a resource-dependent country’s political economy” (Barma et al., 2012, p. 48). Meanwhile, provision pacts comprising fragmented parties and independent MPs are constantly being revised and, as stated earlier, Westminster-based systems are apt to collapse in votes of no confidence. This both drains fiscal resources and demonstrates less credible commitment to policy. These pacts often promote investment in capital goods, which are easily turned into patronage and projects but rarely invested in maintenance.

Such provisioning pacts may be formally institutionalised through mechanisms such as CDFs. They may also be expressed through overt patronage: allocating ministries to politicians who expect to have access to rents (see Craig and Pak, 2011). CDFs, currently significant in Q1 Pacific countries (PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu), as well as in Tonga, represent a new horizontal layer connecting central

¹⁶ Barma et al. (2012, p. 47) note, “Rents... are a political currency. Natural resources generate significant windfall revenues for the state, which in turn are a valuable prize for those who control and have access to political power. They can play an outsized role... because the political deals struck—between governments and developers on the one hand, and between the state and society on the other—can be contingent on rents being extracted and distributed in specific ways.”

government with constituencies via patronage, but with barely any oversight. In Q4 states, such as Tonga, CDFs and other financing mechanisms are subject to regular individual and overall audit by central agencies.

Programme budgets are undermined not only because leaders appoint unqualified cronies to top government positions, but also because local politicians pressure the government for patronage funds. Formal institutions meant to deter clientelism, such as ombudspersons, anti-corruption commissions, auditors-general and public expenditure and financial accountability programmes, remain in place (Haque, 2023). However, they face increasing competition, institutional repurposing and layering, and displacement by a set of more powerful informal institutional arrangements at every level, since patronage attracts increased financing (Pierson, 2004; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; also Craig and Porter, 2014 for historical institutional analyses). For example, PNG's CDF, the District Services Improvement Program (DSIP) (closely followed by the Provincial Services Improvement Program (PSIP)), started out under a parallel donor budget aimed at supporting formal subnational government structures, but patrons (aided by the DSIP's independence from government services) captured it and turned it into a funding channel requiring little or no accountability. Here, the patronage "layer" of PNG governance is enjoying increasing returns while formal service delivery commitments have been static for decades, contributing a low share of gross domestic product (GDP) (World Bank, 2023a). Similar forces are present in Solomon Islands, where political imperatives to capture rents and distribute them among patrons and their clients are strong. This further limits the potential for effective policy-based implementation: because MPs can use CDFs to reward supporters, they have little incentive to improve the overall management of public finances.

The fact that MPs seek such resources means there are active incentives for political instability and fragmentation around votes of no confidence, and even electoral violence. **Further, patronage-based resourcing and recruiting for labour mobility (as discussed in Case 1 in Section 5) are affecting states' ability to "reach" into and compete in international labour markets.**

Such rentier state institutional arrangements (CDFs, competitive clientelism) are not confined to Q1 PICs. Even in what have been the most stable Q4 contexts, such as Samoa and Tonga, dominant parties and their longstanding patronage orientations have seen their power (and patronage) displaced by more fluid arrangements. With party structures changing and patronage relations becoming more significant, power configurations are shifting rapidly between dispersal and concentration at different levels. Outcomes include increasingly diverse political contests that undermine the concentration of power (Veenendaal, 2021), as well as deep collective action challenges (horizontal and vertical) in delegating resources and authority. This is taking place within a wider international context of political fragmentation and the personalisation of political power (Pildes, 2021).

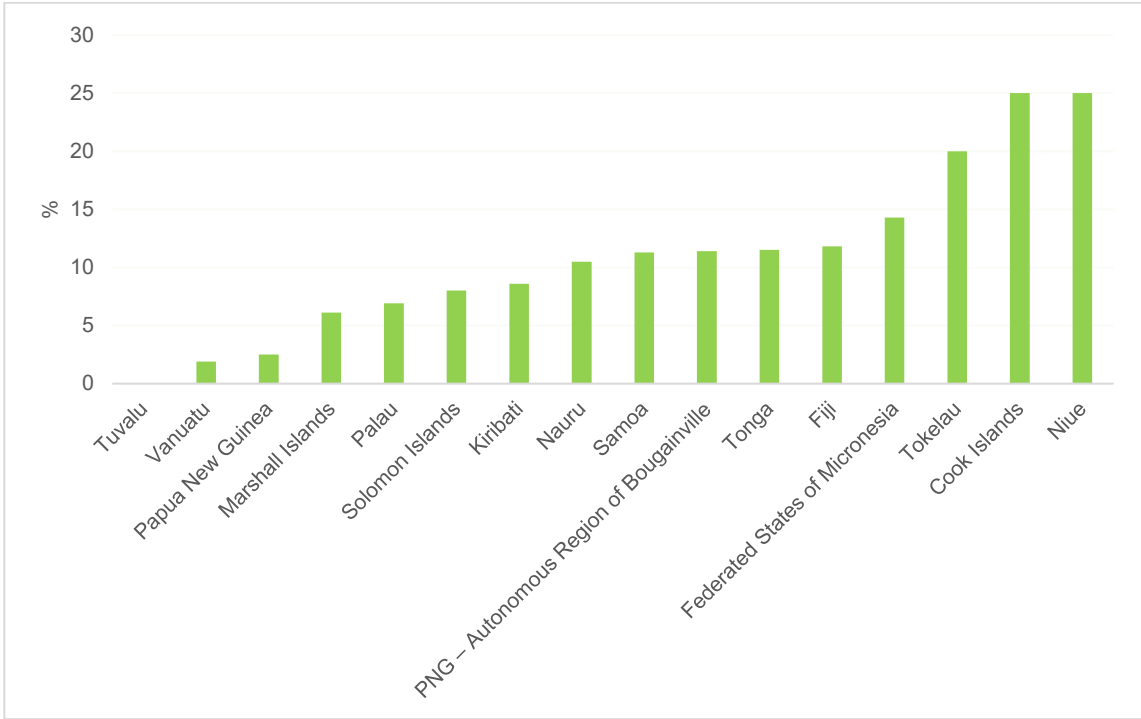
4.3. Gender, tradition, politics and governance

Pacific governance has long been characterised by an interplay between tradition and colonial institutional forms (Crainey, 2022). However, the colonial legacy is being reshaped and hybridised, and institutionally converted and layered, by resurgent tradition/custom, or *kastom*. The courts are significant institutions in these contests between tradition and modernity, especially in relation to land tenure, political regulation and dispute resolution. The Q4 cases of Samoa, Kiribati and New Zealand

are powerful and compelling in this regard. A wider role for tradition can potentially expand political inclusiveness and civil society, and ground political systems in social orders. However, Q4 countries will still need to maintain the collective action grasp and delegation reach required for inclusive and representative hybrid service delivery involving local and *kastom* institutions – while avoiding the risk that political dispersal will generate conflict.

Gender relations have gone on to evolve since the disruption imposed by colonial governance. Some countries have retained matrilineal or matriarchal political elements at varying levels (Jolly, 1997). Even countries with few women elected or appointed to higher office are seeing changes, although these are not always positive: Fiji's 2022 election saw a shift away from dominant party rule but a drop in the number of women MPs. Overall, women's representation in national parliaments remains tiny, especially but not only in Q1 countries (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Women's inclusion in politics, 2024



Source: Pacific Women in Politics (accessed 20 April 2025).

Better representation of women can broaden the political power configuration in ways that enhance legitimacy, inclusion and diversity, while reducing fragmentation and conflict. Some countries (especially metropolis-connected French Polynesia and New Caledonia) have strong quota-based female representation. Even Vanuatu (where women represent only 2% of MPs) has reserved seats for women in its provincial and two municipal assemblies (although the all-male Council of Ministers has rejected a proposal for such quotas in the national parliament). On the other hand, in the (complex and varied but notable) structures of Q1 Melanesian patronage, resources tend to flow down through “bigman” to “little boy” arrangements. This reinforces patriarchal relations and excludes women leaders from the main sources of patronage, making it harder for them to achieve the same kind of

high-profile leadership roles as men. The gendered control of rents is important in the political economy of patronage, especially as such rents become more important.

There is rising representation of women at senior levels of the executive, with appointments usually based on merit – which means women are able to demonstrate capability. Women rise more rapidly in more programmatic Q4 contexts. In Samoa and Fiji, women hold 44% of senior roles in public service; in Tonga and Tuvalu, women hold 38% and 32% of senior government positions, respectively (Pacific Women, 2022). In Q1 PNG, the education and health ministries are also moving in this direction. But, as Masta and Jackson (2024) note, across the Pacific, “decades of investment in gender equality programs have seen only modest gains. Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership and politics and rates of domestic violence remain stubbornly high.” Social norms are entrenched and power is concentrated within male-dominated patronage networks. Meanwhile, Q1 competitive clientelist states face difficulties with patrimonialism and patriarchy that women leaders will also need to confront. And gender equity in executive leadership is no guarantee that a country will not slip towards Q1 status. Nevertheless, in the bigger and longer-term picture, women’s increased presence in PIC political settlements compels attention.

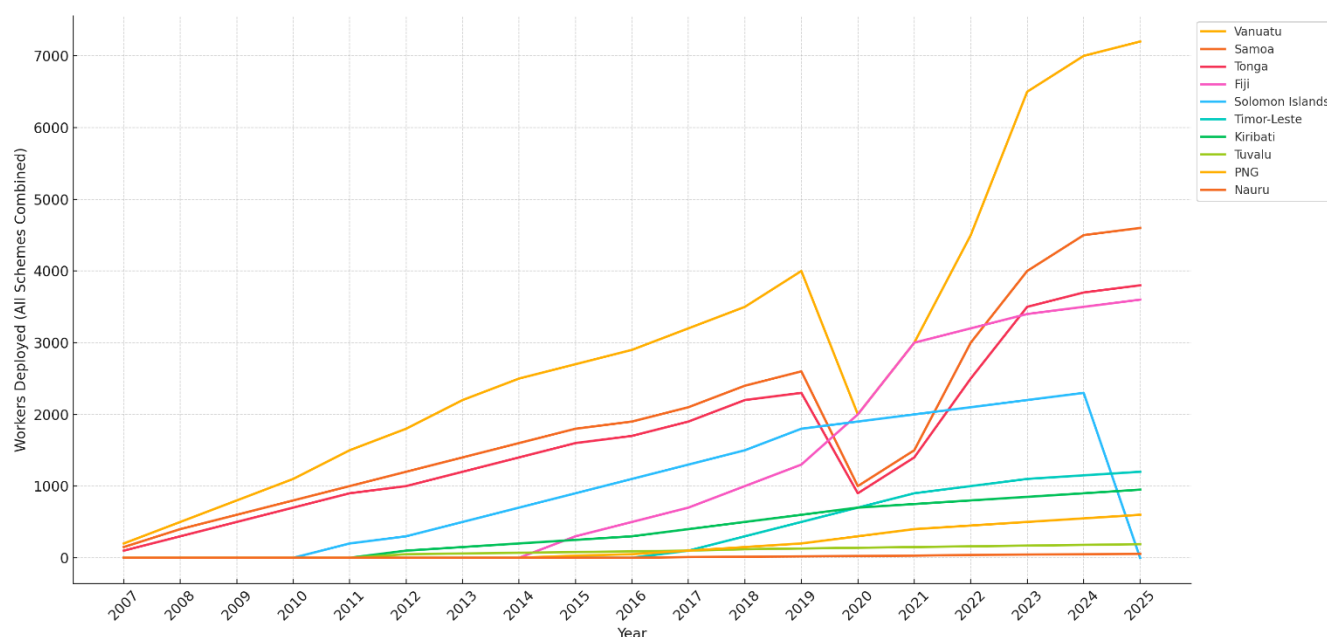
Education and labour mobility programmes funded by the governments of Australia and New Zealand are marked by a high level of gender equity. For instance, women accounted for almost half of Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) graduates, and Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) longer-term residency training programmes allow participants’ family members to accompany them.

4.4. Rising labour mobility, remittances and migration opportunities

While rising rents drive Q1 clientelism without necessarily strengthening programmatic state capabilities, increasing remittances is likely to have a hugely beneficial effect. In all political settlements, remittances stabilise finances and build a fiscal base that is independent of aid and debt, thus enabling the functioning of programmatic institutions. Remittances supplement the incomes of over half of all Samoan households and over 80% of those in Tonga, contributing 44% of the latter’s GDP. As such, access to regional labour markets forms an important part of local, national and regional pacting in much of the Pacific.

Short-term, “circular” migration and mobility have long been crucial to PIC economies (Craig et al., 2014). Such mobility is expanding as a result of PACER Plus regional economic pact commitments with regard to labour markets. In late 2024, there were 40,000 seasonal and longer-term workers in Australia sponsored by PALM and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS), and 20,000 in New Zealand under the Registered Seasonal Employers (RSE) scheme. Long-term PALM/PLS workers sent home an estimated AU\$168 million in remittances between July 2018 and May 2023, while short-term workers sent a monthly average of AU\$1,061, in a region where the annual income of up to half of all households is around AU\$1,000 (Conroy, 2023). Figure 13 shows recent trends in labour mobility.

Figure 13. Labour mobility deployments to Australia and New Zealand from Pacific countries, 2007–2025



Sources: Australian and New Zealand labour mobility programme data.

These opportunities expand mobility and connectivity, increase remittances and enhance educational opportunities (World Bank, 2023b). These factors can counter the role of rents in politics, providing broad-based income that is removed from patronage. However, gaining access to these opportunities is competitive. In addition, given the diversity of internal capabilities in PICs, participation in labour mobility schemes is not evenly distributed. In Tonga and Vanuatu, for instance, around 10% of the eligible population is enrolled in the RSE and PALM schemes; Solomon Islands and PNG have only 0.6% and 0.02%, respectively.

Case 1 in Section 5 takes us deeper into the ways in which Q1 competitive clientelism hinders labour mobility in PNG and suggests how current programming could enable better outcomes by working “with the grain” of competitive clientelism in Pacific labour mobility.

5. Political settlements in practice: Three case studies

Rising geopolitical and resource rents, regional labour mobility and educational opportunities are crucial issues for PICs and their political settlements. This section uses three cases to explore the sector-specific impact of political settlement arrangements, as well as developmentally significant opportunities for programmes that can “think and work politically” in these sectors.

Rising rents are changing institutional arrangements, driving competitive clientelism in Q1 countries and creating new institutional layering of patronage and programmatic governance in Q4 contexts. These changes are not comprehensive, however: even in the most competitive clientelist Q1 countries, with patches of governance (resource rents in PNG and Solomon Islands), there are areas where progressive reformers are pushing back and creating programmatic strength.

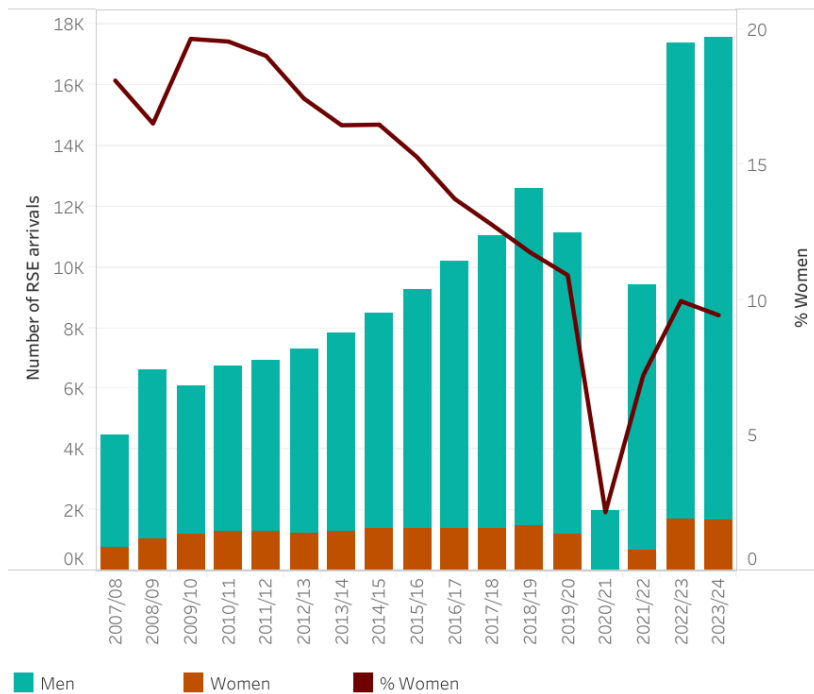
This section presents three cases

- that matter in the bigger picture – not at the project or even at the national scale but showing serious political economy and institutional change;
- where strong national political incentives (and also local/community interests) contribute to the functioning of the system at the national level, rather than just at the level of a regional strategy or agenda;
- where regional commitment and capability can build on national and subnational capability;
- where the Blue Pacific Continent/mobility/pacting can work (but faces clientelism challenges in some locations);
- where flows of revenue and opportunity to local levels are sustained and incentivised;
- where competitive clientelist (Q1) patronage and subnational delegations can be managed (or, conversely, where they threaten to overwhelm);
- where national capability is crucial to regional success, but where (as in the case of Melanesian countries) such capability is weak, and where there might be benefits from having a subregional Melanesian focus; and
- where co-production across different levels of scale is possible.

Case 1: Labour mobility and migration

Labour mobility and diaspora communities have provided a natural experiment in the Pacific for decades. The 1990–2015 neoliberal era saw a return in Australia and New Zealand to unskilled, short-term and circular Pacific agricultural labour mobility, with no training opportunities or provision for migrant family members. By mid-2024, there were 48,404 Pacific workers in Australia and New Zealand on Pacific temporary programmes: Australia's PALM, which has short-term and (since 2024) longer-term (up to four years) options, and New Zealand's RSE scheme. This is a huge and unprecedented opportunity, especially for Q1 countries. The labour programmes include explicit and active commitments to gender equity. However, as Figure 14 shows, the gendered outcomes remain heavily skewed towards men as overall numbers increase. This points clearly to current gendered limits on the potential of Pacific migration.

Figure 14. RSE arrivals by sex, and percentage share of women, 2007–2024

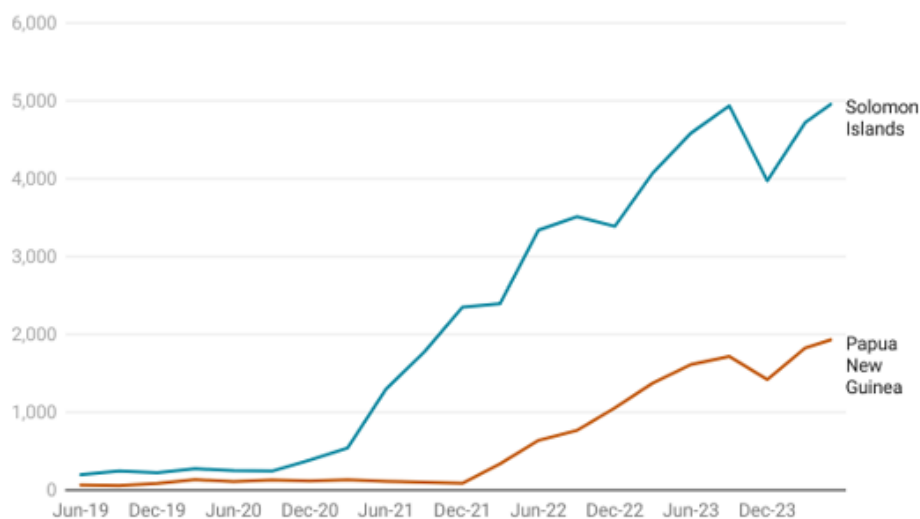


Source: Bedford (2025).

Q1 countries face obstacles in competing for access to regional labour market opportunities. Success depends on many actors at multiple levels working together, which Q1 countries can find challenging. As illustrated in Figure 15, (Q1) Vanuatu and Solomon Islands have succeeded in generating an “island” of effective collective action around labour mobility. PNG (also Q1), however, has struggled. As Turia (2023) notes, “of the total 48,000 visas issued under the schemes in 2022-2023... PNG received only 1,459 visas. It has 3% of the total, yet based on country population alone, it should be able to... fill the entire labour quota of these schemes.” The challenges are at several levels, each indicating some consequence of competitive clientelist dominance, again at subnational, national and transnational scales.

There are crucial differences in political settlements and how they delegate authority and reach down into local villages and up into regional employment opportunities. All countries involved in seasonal worker programmes have created national Work-Ready Pools (WRPs) of candidates who have already met passport and health checks requirements, among others. Typically, the WRP is located in a central agency: the Ministry for Internal Affairs Overseas Employment Division (Tonga) or the Department of Labour Employment Service Unit (Vanuatu). Most PICs also allow either direct recruitment by employers in Australia and New Zealand or recruitment via private employment agencies (Vanuatu and Solomon Islands). Solomon Islands allowed direct recruitment agents for PALM in 2023, and the following year was one of the three main Pacific labour-sending countries. Overseas employers were able to deal directly with agents, with no interference by MPs. **This enhances the reach of local arrangements both down to localities and up into regional opportunities.**

Figure 15. PALM workers from Solomon Islands and PNG, June 2019–May 2024



Source: Turia (2023).

Competitive clientelism and labour mobility in Papua New Guinea

In PNG, competitive clientelist arrangements dominate at every level. The WRP is based in the Treasury because the Treasurer – the leader of an important coalition partner party – sought to exert personal control over recruitment. The selection of sending hubs and potential workers and the establishment of connections with employers are mediated centrally. Communication with hub coordinators – especially regarding Australian employers’ specific needs – is also selective.

Subnationally, competing patrons – MPs and provincial governors – have exclusive rights to local recruitment of candidate migrant workers, prohibiting private recruitment (Turia, 2023; Curtain and Howes, 2024). When launched in 2019, the decentralised Regional Recruitment Hub model was positively received (ibid.). By 2024, there were 20 such hubs, with a potential total of 119, one for each province and district across PNG. Many such hubs essentially comprise an individual with a mobile phone with the MP’s permission to select candidates from loyal parts of their constituency. Some hub coordinators have formal contracts and (rarely) backing from the provincial budget: others rely entirely on competitive CDF financing, which arrives unpredictably, often pre-committed at an MP’s discretion. Thus, the hubs are not a part of programmatic local government, nor are they specialist labour market recruiters. Some have demonstrated extraordinary entrepreneurial (and, in PNG, competitive) capability. But outcomes are uneven: several hubs, despite offering many documented candidates, have yet to result in any international deployment.

Provincial governors with significant resourcing and well-connected district MPs (East Sepik, Enga and Jiwaka provinces, Madang district) have been able to send constituents to the WRP. Otherwise, the recruitment reach of this model is limited: beyond these locations, most workers have come from areas around the national capital. Elsewhere, PNG’s extremely dispersed population and expensive connectivity (only one provincial capital has a road to the main capital) means that potential candidates incur very high expenses in obtaining police and medical clearance, a passport and pre-departure training. While the standard practice across the region is for individuals to meet their own

travel costs, in PNG the hubs support these costs, so far through PSIP/DSIP funds (namely, CDFs; Kabuni, 2023) or internal revenue. In this difficult context, there is virtually no programmatic funding. A World Bank programme is currently seeking to fill this resourcing gap, working directly with innovative regional hubs in a pilot project that could improve their reach both upwards and downwards, and enable more direct relations with employers. Hub coordinators in such a relationship need both to maintain the “brand” of their location and workers and to develop partnerships based on specific employers’ demands for specific skills, fed back to the hubs.

These arrangements, grounded in local competition, are struggling to compete regionally. Growth in PALM and RSE was rapid after the Covid-19 pandemic, but since then competition between sending countries for unskilled labour opportunities has increased, with those seeking such openings including independent international backpackers and Australian labour market agents. In direct recruitment by employers in Australia and New Zealand, worker quality is crucial. PNG’s system largely precludes direct recruitment, and the quality of potential workers is not prioritised, especially as the country’s electoral cycles strongly incentivise direct patronage based on local and national political loyalty. This does not lead to a focus on recruitment and quality. Only a small number of hubs recruit on merit, choosing candidates with the necessary soft and other skills.

Labour mobility arrangements reach down into recruiting contexts but can be constrained by several scales of patronage, while their reach up into regional opportunities is also limited, in this case by issues related to connectivity and quality, both related to competitive patronage control. PNG will not achieve its target of sending a cumulative 8,000 overseas workers by 2025 (Turia, 2023).

Case 2: Education and the diaspora as elite patronage or as a regional public good?

Across the Pacific region, education is a great enabler of mobility and connection over distance. It holds the promise of diasporic benefits, over and above the returns from short-term, unskilled circular labour migration. Australia’s close Q1 partners (Solomon Islands, PNG) have the world’s smallest diasporas, with especially restricted migration options. Meanwhile, at a regional political settlement level, like other donors Australia is practising a weakly pacted competitive clientelism in much of its aid in the education sector, which lacks grasp capabilities in generating collective action and co-production with Q1 educational institutions. This approach also lacks reach down into Q1 countries’ youthful populations with meaningful educational opportunities. Changing this will require recognising that education that enables skilled migration is a regional public good, best co-produced programmatically; and that Q1 countries and their young people need better (i.e. less competitive clientelist) support *at regional, national and subnational scales* to access it.

In recent decades, Australia and New Zealand have implemented ambitious programmes to attract international university students, with the explicit aim that graduates will take up permanent residence. These students are, however, “for the most part from middle- or higher-income countries and from families who can afford the high fees involved. This cost excludes most students from Australia’s near neighbours” (Curtain and Howes, 2022). Over the past 16 years, the average share of all student visas of applicants from Pacific countries and Timor-Leste has been 0.6%. For PNG, the share has been 0.3%. These numbers are low partly because Australian educational aid in Q1

countries has been stuck in a patchy, competitive clientelist mode at the regional level – a stickiness and patchiness from which these countries are only now beginning to emerge.

China is competing to be an elite patron at the regional scale – and Australia is gradually upping its game. In 2024, China provided 30 full-time tertiary scholarships, up by 50% from 2023. To combat this rising competition, Australia is expanding the provision of elite scholarships, offering “record-breaking” numbers of scholarships for Solomon Island students to study in the country (Iroga, 2024). Added to the existing 48 scholarships for two or more years are another 50 short-term scholarships, establishing “the largest cohort under the Australian Awards in Solomon Islands history”.¹⁷ These regional awards are aimed at elite students; in the programme’s entire history, a total of 550 Solomon Islanders have participated.

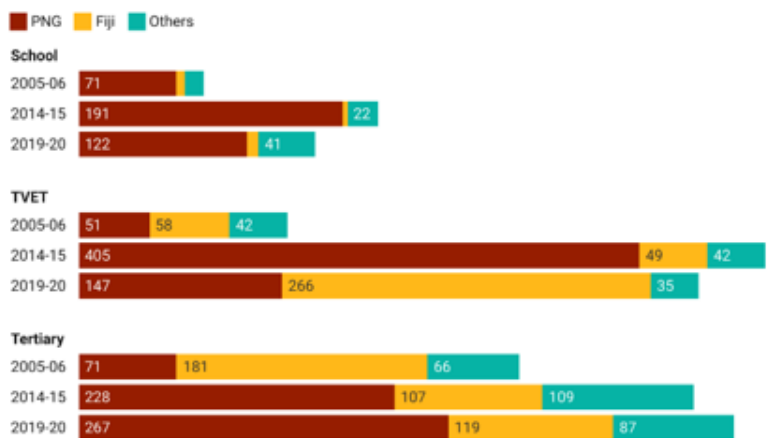
Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in Australia should offer an important pathway for skilled Pacific people. But such training in the Pacific region rarely meets Australian competencies. Australia’s response has been an offshore (i.e. located in PICs, not in Australia) training facility, APTC, which has produced around 1,000 graduates a year (48% of them women) across the region, with Australian-accredited qualifications, but this has done little to strengthen and co-produce TVET education programmes at the scale of a regional public good.¹⁸ Relatively few APTC graduates (a best estimate of below 10%)¹⁹ have obtained work in Australia (although the PALM labour mobility scheme supported this later in the APTC programme). Curtain and Howes (2022) argue that the “low numbers of students from Australia’s near neighbours highlight a major gap in its relations with these countries” (see Figure 16). “More aid-funded scholarships are only a part of the answer. The APTC can do much more to help its appropriately qualified graduates to migrate as skilled workers with their families to Australia.” The authors also argue that large resource extraction companies operating in both Australia and PNG should be funding more scholarships at TVET and tertiary institutions beyond the APTC. This shortfall seems to be a matter of will and resource commitment, but also innovative partnerships and co-production. Figure 16 shows the number of Australian student visas granted in the three education sectors (school, TVET and tertiary) from 2005 to 2020.

¹⁷ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/solomon-islands/development-assistance/australia-awards-in-solomon-islands>

¹⁸ <https://aptc.edu.au/>

¹⁹ Data from APTC reporting by ChatGPT5.

Figure 16. Australian student visas granted to PNG, Fiji and other Pacific countries including Timor-Leste



Source: Curtin and Howes (2022).

Australia is now expanding its role as a programmatic regional public good provider of skills training. The APTC programme finished in March 2025 and is being replaced by the Pacific Australia Skills Platform (PASP), which sets out to form partnerships in PICs to strengthen skills systems to be responsive to national and regional labour market priorities and to improve access and participation.

Important policy shifts have also led to the provision of onshore training opportunities in Australia. Long-term (up to four years) PALM workers can now bring their family members with them and enrol them in Australian schools. Workers can participate in generic and job-specific training that offers possibilities beyond the strictly circular mobility involved to date. In care for elderly people, Solomon Islanders are now able to obtain “preparatory skill set training” at APTC’s Honiara campus (APTC Media, 2023). In Australia, employers can enrol 500 workers to complete a Level III Certificate in Individual Support (Ageing) with registered training organisations, with 120-hour vocational placements in Australia or Fiji (SIBC, 2024). This level of training is also possible in agriculture, hospitality management, car mechanics, construction and meat processing (to Level IV) (RWM, 2023). These qualifications offer real prospects of residency in Australia.²⁰

The scope of these Pacific connections could be expanded. Nursing or teaching trainees at the Solomon Islands National University could connect with Australian technical and further education (TAFE) and university training for at least a part of their instruction. Here, national education capability needs to link up with regional capability in contexts where internal political settlements are crucial to competitive clientelist politics.

Scholarships and clientelism in Solomon Islands

Q1 Solomon Islands has internal issues with scholarships, related to competitive clientelist political settlement arrangements. Around 45% of the national education budget is spent on just 1,000 elite

²⁰ “Australia is committed to investing in quality Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) that leads to better job opportunities for Solomon Islanders. Australia is proud to be Solomon Islands’ nambawan economic development partner, and we will continue to create more jobs, and improve access to job opportunities for Solomon Islanders... expanding Australia’s TVET training program to equip Solomon Islanders with in-demand skills, not only for their communities but also to open doors to employment opportunities abroad” (SIBC, 2024).

scholarships, meaning that less than 2% of students account for nearly half of the education budget. These scholarships are spread across many areas and institutions, in both Solomon Islands and the region (University of Papua New Guinea, University of the South Pacific), with a few in Australia in areas of activity recognised in the National Education Plan.²¹ Despite controversy, frequent reports of abuse and donor concerns, these scholarships and their funding seem politically sacrosanct, protected in their own Statutory Authority (Solomon Islands Tertiary Education and Skills Authority, SITESA) and absorbing an institutional layer of the national budget that is both separate from the national education budget and not included in budget recurrent estimates.

In competitive clientelist terms, these scholarship arrangements are a form of elite (rather than mass) clientelism (see Craig and Pak, 2011). They are insulated from direct personalised allocation by the layering of resourcing, rules and roles of SITESA as a statutory authority. But these scholarships are also subject to direct elite clientelism, as there is separate funding of an additional SI\$20 million (US\$12 million, or around another 15% of the national education budget) for 200 of the 1,000 scholarships allocated directly by constituency MPs – four each – as a part of the national education budget (COESI, 2020). These funds are in addition to the country's existing CDFs, and form another institutional layer in its competitive clientelism, with limited grasp and reach. Clientelism across educational opportunities means these are not allocated on merit, which in turn implies poor returns on such investment. It also reinforces patrimony and patriarchy: the allocation of scholarships to girls has been falling (ibid.). But connecting these scholarships with co-produced, programmatic learning at regional training institutions (nursing and care for elderly people, engineering, teacher training) could create layers of opportunities beyond local patronage and elite clientelism. Such innovations might sustainably enable the connection and co-production of the quality education the Pacific needs.

Case 3: Resource revenues and management – tuna, oil and gas

Resource management – and its rising rents – is a central (if asymmetric) element in Pacific economies. Geography and geology are uneven here: one island might have a fishery or forestry resource, or a mine that generates vast revenues, while the next has nothing comparable. Fish move in and out of marine territorial limits, so, although access to fishing is a regional public good, it does not guarantee any benefit to local fishing communities. Meanwhile, control of resources rarely rests with local actors: resource rents are typically collected or allocated at higher levels, although local fishing communities may demand a share of royalties or revenues. Generating equitable returns requires arrangements – pacts and institutions – that both reach up to international contexts and down through national and subnational contexts to local places and people. Without this, Q1 capability and outcomes in service delivery and regulation will be patchy.

PICs have the world's richest tuna grounds, with total catch amounting to 55% of the global catch (Aqorau and Sokimi, 2019). As fish move beyond the scale of national maritime territories, two regional agencies, the Pacific Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) and the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA), have developed a unique complementary institutional infrastructure geared towards the resource they manage. Observers claim “the FFA is no doubt the singular most successful achievement of the Pacific

²¹ <https://www.sitesa.gov.sb/display/opportunity>

Islands Forum and a testament to the value of regional cooperation to the people of the Pacific. PICs are infinitely more economically secure because of the FFA” (ibid.).

The PNA is a coalition of eight PICs, including PNG, managing the world’s largest sustainable tuna purse seine fishery.²² Its regionally developed and resourced management and institutional arrangements monitor fish stocks, allocating and regulating fishing activities through a Vessel Days Scheme (VDS), whereby registered vessels bid for days. Sustainable fishing practices include high seas closures, controls on Fish Aggregating Devices and 100% observer coverage on purse seine vessels. The fisheries are monitored by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, a regional research and policy agency, with major donor funding. While the PNA is under pressure from some members to move beyond its conservative management regime, fish stocks are faring comparatively well under its guidance. Incentives build on members’ real interests and rights to control fishery (PNA, 2018) and to choose how they secure rents, with “use or trade” options. The benefits accrue to national governments, not to regional agencies.

Significantly enhanced rents flow to island governments, with impacts of the kind that would be expected in the Pacific. In short, this means the increased resourcing of patronage, more centralised decision-making, greater dependence on relationships with the capital and political programming focused on providing resources for outer islands. But through these arrangements, and as a regional public good, Pacific nations have been able to project their territorial rights into the complex wider region, enabled by a transparent set of economic, political, social and scientific mechanisms. In a rare example of multi-scale economic arrangements and governance, regional powers have provided various kinds of support, but the framework has essentially been set by Pacific nations for Pacific nations, based on their direct interest in and access to resource revenues.

The PNA is a sturdy example of co-produced regional management of a public good, generating significant rents for members. But how do these rents affect government revenues and expenditures when they arrive in Q1 rentier states, and in Q4 states facing impacts on their political settlement from resource rents? To answer these questions, we look at the effects in two distinct contexts, Kiribati (Q4) and PNG (Q1). We also compare PNG’s experience of tuna fisheries and their rents with its other natural resources and extractives industries.

Use of PNA resources in Kiribati

In Kiribati, PNA revenues have transformed public finances:

“In 2011, Kiribati’s fishing license revenue was just \$29.1 million (17% of GDP), but by 2015, revenue had risen to \$207.1 million (91% of GDP). Over the same period, general taxes increased by just \$17.5 million and other revenues by \$8.7 million. Overall, fisheries revenue accounted for 85% of total revenue growth between 2011 and 2018... Prior to 2012, the Budget was regularly in deficit, [with] ongoing drawdowns on Kiribati’s sovereign wealth fund (SWF). 2013 saw significant surpluses and contributions to the SWF, with a cash surplus flowing onto the government balance sheet” (Webb, 2020, p. 6).

²² <https://www.pnatuna.com/>

There was an increase in numerous expenditures, with central MPs' allocative power expanding in relation to local island council budgets. This included considerable investment in marine infrastructure and air transport, with a bias towards certain constituencies and against cautious cost-benefit analyses. But the most significant rise in spending came in the form of a "mass clientelist inclusive redistribution": Kiribati's copra subsidy scheme pays a per kilo bonus to anyone delivering copra to the capital. "The increase to the per kilogram price guarantee is the single largest spending decision by the government in the post-VDS period,²³ costing \$86.1 million 2016–2018" (Webb, 2020, p. 8). The tuna revenue also funded more public sector salaries. Together, these measures increased cash incomes and saw an "additional \$62.4 million... sent to the outer islands, representing an additional annual income of between \$2,000 and \$2,500 per outer island household" (ibid., p. 18). As Webb further notes (pp. 18–19), "[I]t is unlikely that the government (or any development partner) would be in a position to mobilise similar volume of direct payments to outer islands as rapidly as the copra price adjustment."

Assessing the impact on poverty and institutional arrangements is less simple. Some of the Kiribati population lacks access to land or a sizeable crop. But 37 of the 44 elected seats in parliament come from islands that receive the subsidy, and "the current copra price is now considered the 'new normal'" (Webb, 2020, p. 20). So far, the increased revenues have politicised fisheries rents and made them a form of semi-programmatic mass patronage. But they have not led to a rapid expansion of new, competitive clientelist layers of expenditure and institutional development, as with CDFs, statutory authorities and commercial entities that function as fiefdoms for political rentiers.

Resource rents in PNG: Programmatic reform and clientelist resistance in tuna and oil and gas

The same cannot be said for the impact of resource rents (including tuna revenues) in PNG, as evidenced by experiences in both tuna and oil and gas revenues. Until recently, PNG's central government had limited control over statutory authorities' internal revenues. For instance, the National Fisheries Authority and the National Forestry Authority have historically enjoyed considerable autonomy. The latter has been accused of being captured by loggers, with the acquiescence of central patronage. The Fisheries Ministry has long been under the purview of the United Resources Party, whose leader, as the minister for state-owned enterprises and a central coalition partner, also oversees PNG's huge oil and gas rents. The Fisheries Authority has been resourced by windfall PNA resources, which increased from some US\$20 million in 2010 to around US\$158 million in 2023. In the midst of this boom, it came under scrutiny for expanding "impact projects" in areas beyond its expertise (funding a scanner for a highland province with no coastal access, for example) and for using its own revenues, for example for a board meeting held in Rio de Janeiro, with family members accompanying board members on the trip. In a Q1 competitive clientelist, resource-rich setting, the Fisheries Authority became a political and patrimonial trophy that reinforced the concentration of rentier power within a provision pact. As a mode of collective action, grasping rents, generating accountability and delegating resourcing, it was a failure. It was not, however, immune from reform.

²³ The PNA VDS sets an overall Total Allowable Effort limit on the number of days per year fishing vessels can be licensed to fish in PNA Exclusive Economic Zones.

Moves led by a reforming finance minister and permanent secretary to centralise statutory authorities' revenues into the national consolidated fund met with strong resistance. This included a 2019 High Court case that ruled the reformers' 2017 Public Money Management Regularisation Act "unconstitutional, invalid and ineffective" (OC PNG, 2020). Reformers later responded with the Non-Tax Revenue Administration act of 2022 (The National, 2023), which compels statutory authorities to present budgets and project ambitions to the Department of Finance "from time to time" and to remit surplus revenues on pain of 15-year prison terms for offenders. The 2022 Act, which promises to contribute US\$140 million to the consolidated fund, has been praised by the Asian Development Bank: "PNG has become heavily reliant on revenue from its natural resource sector and is wisely embracing policy reforms to allow the government and statutory bodies to transparently and accountably share nontax revenue" (Galves, 2023).

These reforms show that, under certain circumstances, reformers can achieve public good changes even within a strongly competitive clientelist state. The reforms do not, however, touch revenue from resource investments, including PNG's crucial mineral sector (The National, 2023). Kumul Petroleum Holdings (KPH) is PNG's fully owned national oil and gas company, receiving public revenues from PNG's first liquefied natural gas (LNG) project. It is a commercial enterprise, and, while its assets are not public, its sole shareholder – the incumbent prime minister – concentrates rentier power in appointing the board. While expenditures or asset acquisitions are included in plans presented to the prime minister and approved by the cabinet, KPH can retain (and set aside) the funds and not pay dividends to the state, even though they account for as much as 2.7% of annual GDP (see Box 1).

Box 1. PNG potential fiscal revenue from rising LNG prices

LNG prices were at record highs in 2022, but only little additional revenue might reach the government budget. Realized LNG prices were above US\$14.00 per mmBtu (millions of metric British thermal units) in Q2 2022—their highest ever level—which surpasses the US\$11.00 per mmBtu achieved at the end of 2018. Spot prices are even higher, reaching US\$16.44 per mmBtu in July 2022. KPHL is a commercial enterprise that holds the government's 16.8 percent share of the PNG-LNG project. KPHL shares are held for and on behalf of the state by the Kumul Petroleum Trustee, who is the person who holds the office of Prime Minister. KPHL received around US\$339 million from PNG-LNG in 2021 and is estimated to receive over US\$890 million in 2022 (Table 4). These funds come via GloCo (PNG-LNG Global Company LLC) operated on behalf of all PNG-LNG partners by ExxonMobil PNG Ltd. The dividend that the government received from Kumul Petroleum in 2021, however, amounted to only US\$85 million, and Kumul Petroleum is budgeted to transfer only US\$113 million in 2022. The funds retained by Kumul Petroleum would be equivalent to 1.0 percent of GDP in 2021 and 2.7 percent of GDP in 2022. Neither GloCo nor KPHL publish its annual reports or financial statements, and the absence of this information is the largest gap in understanding the finances of the PNG-LNG project.									
US\$, millions	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022*
Total PNG-LNG revenues minus costs	3,192	2,134	927	1,849	2,164	1,793	485	2,018	5,326
Kumul Share (16.8% shareholding)	536	358	156	311	364	301	81	339	895
Kumul dividend paid to Government of PNG (US\$ millions, kina millions)	168 (414)	103 (286)	64 (200)	94 (300)	137 (452)	74 (250)	87 (300)	85 (300)	113 (400)
Difference	-368	-255	-92	-217	-226	-227	5	-254	-782
Difference (% GDP)	-1.6	-1.2	-0.4	-1.0	-0.9	-0.9	0.0	-1.0	-2.7
* Estimated based on six-month performance									

Source: World Bank (2023a, p. 34).

Retained funds can be set aside in private (offshore) companies or trust funds. There is little reporting on these funds – nor do their expenditures appear in the budget. The prime minister appoints the minister for state-owned enterprises and the minister for petroleum, making extraordinary resources available to a small inner circle, which uses these to assemble governing coalitions and secure support during elections and votes of no confidence. These institutional mechanics mean that vast revenues can be kept off budget and used to fund – and exacerbate – PNG’s competitive clientelism. The challenges arising from this level of competitive clientelism cannot be overstated. PNG looks increasingly like a failing petrostate, ridden with clientelist control over resource revenues. Any project attempting to go against this grain, from national down to district and local government, will struggle.

In terms of donor recognition of these issues, the high point so far has been the World Bank’s 2023 Country Economic Memorandum (see Box 1) (see also Horscroft and Craig, 2021). Meanwhile, the modality designed to enable civil society to develop collective action and social accountability regarding resource rents and public finances, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), seems toothless, unable to generate public debate or accountability over PNG’s extensive resource wealth.

6. Conclusions and implications

Our analysis points to challenges for Pacific reformers and donors. Key drivers of change identified in Section 4 – increasing geopolitical rivalry, rising resource rents, personalisation of power and political fragmentation – are creating a political, economic and institutional context that is favourable for competitive clientelism. While this is playing out differently in each polity, the trend is powerful. On the other hand, the “programmatisation” of regional education, labour mobility and regional fisheries management, along with patchy institutional reform, indicates other possibilities. The following paragraphs highlight the most salient concerns.

The Melanesian Q1 states are the most vulnerable. They are struggling with collective action and delegation, and these difficulties are growing. Meanwhile, almost all Pacific Q4 countries appear vulnerable to institutional drift towards Q1 status, and the weaknesses in terms of collective action and inclusive service delivery that Q1 status embodies. Q4 countries, especially those without powerful postcolonial pacts and connections to regional metropolises, appear vulnerable to shifts towards a more dispersed configuration of political power, based in national and local competitive patronage, and its resourcing through rents and provision pacts.

Rising resource rents threaten institutional integrity (though not necessarily development outcomes), especially in the face of intensifying geostrategic competition. Increasingly, PICs are facing the prospect of becoming rentier states. Increased rents flowing from natural resources and regional powers will fuel further competitive clientelism in Q1 Melanesia, which also presents the conditions for the development of such clientelism: astonishing diversity and segmentation; rents generating a huge share of state revenues; a colonial institutional legacy that is vulnerable to votes of no confidence; a deep blurring of executive and legislature mandates; and the world’s largest CDFs already in place. In Q4 states the outcome is less certain. Here, the question is whether increased resource rents and pacting will be used to increase state reach or be captured by the elite. Q4 institutions may not be

sufficiently strong and independent to prevent this from happening. That said, countries such as Cambodia show that, in the short to medium term at least, such arrangements may not necessarily drive down development outcomes (Hing and Kruij, 2025).

1. **Melanesian (Q1) island states – PNG, Solomon Islands (definitely) and Vanuatu (possibly) – which have long been characterised by weak coalitions and personalised competitive clientelism, face the greatest challenges.**

The competitive clientelist states of Melanesia (especially PNG) could be seen as heading down a pathway towards full-scale rentier statehood (see Barma et al., 2012), except for a few “islands of effectiveness,” where leverage by reformers and civil society could help make resource management institutions work better. There are also risks and tendencies in Q4 institutional contexts. Currently, rents from natural resources and strategic location are at an all-time high, and appear to be expanding as new actors in an increasingly multipolar global order disrupt *Pax Americana* postcolonial settings. New resource rents are being distributed according to uneven and changing rules. Strategic pacts have always been a major part of Pacific history, as have multipolarity and significant resource rents, but the reach and scale of these developments seem new, as the way they align with existing tendencies towards resourcing patronage (e.g. through CDFs) is ominous.

2. **More Q4 states may become sites of institutional weakening and conversion that will see them facing similar challenges.**

If these more capable and centralised states fail to provide public services effectively, reliably and equitably, then MPs may exert pressure to increase funding directly to and through them.

This is typically seen as a step on the slippery slope away from programmatic politics to clientelism. We suggest that understanding the ways institutions change as political settlements shift towards Q1, Q2 and Q3 would require a whole book rich in case studies and attention to specific contingencies of place and history. The conversion of PNG’s DSIPs and district development authorities into patronage modalities offers a clear and instructive case.

But Pacific diversity also presents other options. Q4 Kiribati (Case 3) demonstrates this, showing that less personalised forms of mass clientelism are possible, sending resource and other rents down to the local level via a national subsidy on copra production (Auty, 2007). Many other possibilities are likely to emerge in coming years, such as in Tuvalu and Fiji,²⁴ and across other Melanesian states.

²⁴ Fiji’s journey around Table 1 is interesting and worthy of further study. For the first 17 years after independence, Fiji was a solidly Q4 state, led by the country’s first prime minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. Power was held – and jealously guarded – by the chiefly political elite based in the eastern islands of Bau and Lakeba. Following the two Sitiveni Rabuka-led coups of 1987, Fiji turned overnight into a Q3 authoritarian, military state. While a new constitution was being negotiated in the 1990s, Fiji remained borderline Q3/Q4, where it arguably stayed until 2006, when Frank Bainimarama engineered the first of his military coups. Although Bainimarama was soon ousted, he was reinstated as prime minister after a series of legal battles. He then won the 2014 election. Under Bainimarama, Fiji became solidly Q3, ruled in an authoritarian manner, with one dominant and hegemonic party (Fiji First). This lasted until 2022, when Rabuka’s People’s Alliance Party won the election. To take and hold power, Rabuka had to negotiate a tripartite coalition, meaning that political power became less concentrated overnight. Since then, the country has moved leftwards, from Q3 towards Q1. The question is whether Fiji is making its Melanesian political shift – from being a centralised state (as under Ratu Mara and Bainimarama), where leaders were able to carry out agreed priorities and deliver effective collective action, to a diffused Q1 political system with decentralised power spread among factions and groups. Is Fiji beginning to look like Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, and less like Tonga?

3. At every scale, PICs face challenges in achieving collective action to concentrate power and reach upwards and downwards to take advantage of opportunities and patronage from competing regional powers.

As rents rise and as elite pacts compete among themselves, many PICs may well experience the weakening of collective action capability. The credibility of policy commitments could decline and formal accountability through an independent executive and judiciary²⁵ – not strong now – may be further diluted. Internationally, political and economic actors who wish to co-opt rents could become expert at avoiding legislation on resource rents. This would weaken the formal and consistent reach of the state, and lead to increasingly patchy service delivery and institutional capability outcomes. The Pacific's many outer islands will continue to face issues with the state's capacity to extend itself.

6.1. Considerations for future engagement

The political and institutional developments described above appear **asymmetrically across the Pacific, with the greatest weaknesses emerging fastest in a subset of nations**. Donors should thus respond in a similarly context-specific manner. These changes are happening fastest and with most profound effect in Q1 countries, visible in the absence of effective *internal* collective action capability and reach of the state in the control of resources and the huge rents to which they enjoy increasing access. Arguably, they also have the patchiest service delivery, law and justice across their territories, and the most significant areas of limited or patchy state presence in urban, rural and remote locations.

These countries also share important *external* weaknesses. Perhaps most importantly, they share the characteristics of limited connectivity and integration across the Blue Pacific:

- Q1 countries typically face the greatest challenges in integrating into regional pacts and arrangements that drive development outcomes.
- They have the smallest international diasporas (as a proportion of the population, and in absolute numbers) of any Pacific countries, thus depriving them of vast benefits (education, remittances, etc.).
- They receive the lowest amounts of remittances per head of population, and, because their pacts with regional hegemony have been so narrowly based, they have the most limits on opportunities to access regional and metropolitan labour mobility, migration, or education and training opportunities.
- They also have the lowest rates of urbanisation, meaning that the costs of providing services to dispersed and segmented outlying populations are the most profound.
- PNG (and, until recently, Solomon Islands) also has regionally low participation in the Pacific's most important connectivity tool: labour mobility. As our case of labour mobility demonstrates, they may also lack the internal national capability to reach into regional public goods arrangements.

²⁵ The judiciary is one area that could provide some checks and balances. Examples would be property rights and environmental concerns as the role of tradition and gender in law framing and administration strengthens, as it has in Samoa and New Zealand.

6.2. Prioritising Q1 Pacific nations and their regional linkages: Officials, donor partners and civil society can act in three thematic areas

Thematic area 1: New benchmarks for programmatic pacts enabling connection. As the New Caledonian independence leader Roch Wamytam said, commenting on the MoU his movement had signed with Azerbaijan (which at the time of writing was at war with Georgia, France's ally in the region), "All parliaments around the world enter into partnership agreements" (see Selvaratnam, 2024). Rising geopolitical competition in the Pacific has the potential to generate more programmatic pacts, enabling the kinds of arrangements this paper has suggested for regional education, labour mobility and migration. Australia's Falepili Union Treaty with Tuvalu and its Pacific Engagement Visa initiative are significant markers in the region. These arrangements could provide credible entry points for people seeking employment in ways that do not simply enable competitive clientelist and rentier arrangements.

Thematic area 2: Access to regional public goods. The regional public goods frameworks this paper has proposed could be understood more programmatically across the region. Regional and PIC leaders' programmes and hegemons' foreign policies could deepen understandings, expectations and actions to strengthen Q1 and climate-vulnerable Pacific nations' participation in regional public goods, especially labour mobility. They could also better link Q1 countries to education and training connections that enable diaspora formation, remittances and other extended relationships across the region. Labour mobility and education provide many plausible entry points for those wanting to "think and work politically" in these contexts.

Thematic area 3: "Thinking and working politically" with political settlements and institutional arrangements and their implications for service delivery and regulatory capability – working with (or, helping reformers go against) "the grain" of PIC political settlements. Regional partners could prioritise engagements in Q1 countries that bolster the kinds of programmatic national/subnational capabilities and regional links that have helped Q4 countries maintain collective action and institutional stability and extend state reach to deliver services equitably. They could support reformers within governments (like the PNG finance secretary) seeking to bring resource revenues into the public purse or to keep them there. They can work in Q4 PICs in ways that do not accelerate competitive clientelist institutional change, for example by strengthening delegation and collective action at national and subnational levels, with budget support linked to programmatic outcomes in areas including education and labour mobility. They could approach these relationships across different programmes, but with a consistent approach to strengthening programmatic capabilities, and not doing things that will create both parallel aid systems and patronage conversion of programmatic systems. If relationships are sufficiently strong and respectful, this could include attention to and transparency regarding the distribution of larger resource rents, and agreements on shared resourcing/co-production based on open and transparent assessments of government commitments (and, if possible, resources).

6.3. Practical steps for national government, regional agencies/fora and donor support seeking to “think and work politically” in this context

A first practical step is to expand access to regional public goods – especially connectivity and labour mobility – and to establish new benchmarks for programmatic pacts, including more programmatic forms of service delivery. The following case areas illustrate how this might be pursued.

Case area 1. In labour mobility, capitalise on competition among regional donors to enhance opportunities, and continue to prioritise this policy area, safeguarding and building on the significant progress in recent years. Growth here has been spectacular, but uneven and perhaps short-lived (given the exceptional funding related to Covid-19). This major progress needs to be maintained in the face of competition from international backpackers but also to be most available where it is most needed: in Q1 countries with limited diasporas and remittances (PNG, Solomon Islands). Next, **help PICs develop modalities that enable subnational recruiting agencies to interact with real market players in receiving countries**, without restrictive mediation by state actors and politicians at national and subnational levels. In PNG, these arrangements should include supporting regional hub coordinators to act more as agents, connecting directly with potential employers. Elsewhere, it means using labour market and mobility agencies based in receiving countries and closely attuned to sectoral needs. In both cases, national labour mobility units can facilitate connections – but not control them once they are established.

Case area 2. In education, expand and institutionally enable a focus on bilateral and regional co-production of skills and qualifications that will enable mobility. Deepen onshore professional and trade training beyond care for elderly people and into nursing and other skilled trade possibilities, using partnerships with Q1-based institutions (such as Solomon Islands National University and the various nursing colleges in PNG). Make scholarships more diverse and significant, and less related to elites, and include subsidies for more young people from Q1 countries to attend shorter-term international courses in trades and professional areas, and grants to enable the private sector to recruit workers it can train, expanding the list of areas where this is already underway (e.g. care for elderly people, meat processing).

Case area 3: Co-production of resource governance. This will be the most challenging area for reformers and donors alike. Any real progress towards transparency and raising revenues will depend on political actors and the most senior officials collaborating to strengthen capabilities in this area: as in the case of PNG’s tuna revenues, this is likely to require iterative action over time, and a coalition of reformers whose efforts may place them at odds with the political leadership’s control over rents. It will involve being selective about which fights are worth picking. External agencies can often support these efforts only from some remove. However, if relationships are sufficiently strategic, strong and respectful, and reflect genuine interest among political leaders – such as about the creation of transparent and sustainable sovereign wealth arrangements – some co-production of these capabilities involving international and national leadership may be possible. Building regulatory capability and critical awareness within the state and society should fall to national leadership, possibly with the involvement of regional agencies. Perhaps these actions could start by acknowledging the difficulty of reaching into this space, and the failure of “information for markets and

civil societies” models (e.g. EITI) to produce compelling outcomes, and by asking the tough questions about where the money actually goes and about the sustainability of the resource.

6.4. Broader considerations

These considerations are based on a shift in overall stance in relation to international engagement.

1. **Make (or at least make the case for) strategic choices/engage in prioritisation.** Resume and expand engagement in Q1 competitive clientelist PICs (see Figure 1). Focus on areas where Q1 countries struggle to reach into transnational/regional public goods opportunities, and their ability to reach up into regional opportunities, especially labour mobility, diaspora formation and education.
2. **Focus on Q1 PICs in areas where competitive clientelist arrangements at national and subnational levels are inhibiting local participation in merit-based opportunities to access regional public goods.** Identify areas (e.g. labour mobility in some Q1 locations) where subnational agencies lack the resources to effectively connect with central funding, or where they have been captured in ways that mean their capabilities are more related to patronage than to service delivery.
3. **Focus on Q1 PICs in areas where rents are being captured by elites in non-transparent ways, and comment on these in published reports and documents,** as the World Bank did in its 2023 PNG Country Economic Memorandum. Do more to enable civil society to submit such activities to scrutiny, going beyond reporting on the bare information in which EITI-related entities currently engage. It may not prove possible to submit major rentier elements to public scrutiny (as in PNG, where corporate structures are deliberately used to exempt oil and gas revenues from view). But there will be areas of effectiveness (perhaps in the treasury or finance ministry) where reformers have a clear sense of how expenditure, procurement or other aspects of public financial management could be improved. Do this with an immediate eye on the political aspects, including the head of state’s trust in and delegation to the treasury or finance minister.
4. **Focus on areas where PIC states have weak ability to delegate through programmatic government policy and expenditure.** Develop service delivery pacts and programmatic relationships with Q1 Pacific governments that use support (including more loans and sectoral budget support within a wider domain of transparent budgeting) to incentivise national government capability in service delivery, as opposed to delivery by parallel donor systems and contractors.
5. **Work with regional institutions and local officials, civil society and researchers to develop PICs’ understandings of political settlements, resource curses and strategic aid rentier state-producing processes.** Here, the focus would be on building institutional capabilities. PIC leadership should have the opportunity to be informed of possibilities to resist competitive clientelist arrangements, to identify alternative modalities and to strengthen programmatic state/party capabilities to counterbalance clientelism.
6. **With PIC and regional officials, civil society and academics, conduct a baseline assessment of the impact of their respective political settlements on their country’s development.** Identify areas where there are significant gains and risks, and stimulate debate on these. Based on this assessment, monitor PICs’ political settlements over the next decade, and map (what will inevitably

be the patchy, possibly unstable and reactive) directions any shifts take. Use PSA and historical institutional analysis to assess the programming contexts, to determine:

- whether shifts are achieving collective action capabilities among agencies and at central and subnational/island levels, which are best able to deliver services in a nationally consistent way;
- whether states are seeing the rise of patronage and unequal, uncoordinated and unsustainable service delivery;
- whether such shifts are leading to greater capability to connect with regional public goods.

7. **Frame a review of donor support to Pacific countries and its impact on political settlements and institutional/service delivery capabilities over the past decade.** Following Auty (2007), identify more closely and critically the ways in which types of aid are (and are not) contributing to national and subnational capability or are in fact driving governance towards patrons and away from credible public scrutiny. Deepen institutional understandings of how, for example, managing contractor models perform, and of what they can and cannot do in these circumstances. In this process, develop a risk assessment tool/management protocol about likely areas of programme weakness, and the ways particular modalities can work to mitigate these.
8. **Develop well-grounded co-production models in areas of core service delivery engagement.** Deepen institutional understandings and memory of the ways co-production can work in the region – including international, national and local capabilities – and build in policy development processes around emerging models and good practice. Identify cases of good practice and “islands of excellence” within the region and work alongside PIC officials to identify ways in which these could be relevant to their own situation. Identify characteristics of successfully co-produced outcomes in the region and understand the historical and institutional processes through which these have come about. Remember that islands of excellence emerge often in unpredictable ways, perhaps because of the activities of extraordinary reformers. These conditions cannot be simply replicated, but a policy discourse that acknowledges and works with timing, people and institutional reform opportunities would help, as a part of a reform discourse, network or invisible college of people “thinking and working politically” in these ways.
9. **Focus on programmes informed by political settlements to build programmatic international, national and subnational capabilities in key strategic development areas: regional mobility, education and diasporas.** Make these a key priority in geopolitical and strategic pacting, and in the policy and public pronouncements of national leaders and governments. Set out deliberately to build on and expand progressive agendas, such as Australia’s PALM scheme and Pacific Engagement Visa arrangements. Work on where existing models have underreached (e.g. APTC) and find ways where co-production of metropolitan-level skill capabilities is leading to employment in regional economic centres and nations. Create a series of reform and co-production cases of PIC contexts and experience in these key areas and seek to introduce these into programme and project design.
10. **Work with regional institutions to deepen understanding of the ways free association compacts and similar colonial/postcolonial arrangements have made a difference in all the above areas, and**

pilot approaches that deploy some elements of these (following aspects of, for example, Tuvalu's Falepili Union Treaty).

Appendix 1. Political settlements analysis in international development contexts: Some working possibilities related to Pacific infrastructure

PSA has become an increasingly significant tool in development practice in the past 15 years. This analysis examines the balance of power among elite groups as they relate to the underlying institutional “rules of the game” and social foundations that determine how political and economic benefits are distributed. Mushtaq Khan’s (2010) foundational work defines a political settlement as a configuration of power that is consistent with the institutional framework and that shapes what kinds of governance arrangement are possible. Kelsall and colleagues further stress that political settlements are dynamic, evolving through elite bargains; and are reactive to shocks, rather than being fixed structures (Kelsall, 2016; Kelsall et al., 2022). In its approach to institutions, PSA emphasises how formal rules (e.g. constitutions, laws) co-exist with informal norms and patronage networks. This paper explores the relation between political settlements and institutional capabilities in a new way.

In terms of the relevance of PSA for development practice, a distinctive element is its focus on “feasibility (best fit) over design (best practice)” and working “with the grain” of the wider settlement (Levy, 2014). The approach suggests that development interventions are more likely to succeed if they align with the incentives and capabilities of those in power, rather than simply transplanting blueprint “best practice” institutions. This has informed the **thinking and working politically (TWP)** paradigm, which embeds political economy analysis into programme cycles – diagnosing context, identifying reform champions and adjusting strategies in response to shifting power dynamics (Wild et al., 2017). By mapping actors, interests and institutions, TWP helps define entry points where a programme can build coalitions for change or strengthen pockets of effectiveness within an otherwise weak settlement.

Applying these orientations in project contexts requires innovation and a commitment to learning before and during projects about how institutional and political factors combine around specific interventions, and to working with politicians in ways that incentivise and institutionalise accountability and sustainability, for instance in the infrastructure context, from commitment to maintenance rather than through just providing capital. For example, in Q1 competitive clientelist contexts (Figure 1 in the main report), the development of infrastructure hinges on actors at multiple levels of scale, with fragile delegations. Real pacting emerges from bargains among ministers, provincial governors, politicians, clan leaders and contractors – actors whose incentives and influence rarely align neatly with official procurement rules or long-term sustainability.

Under competitive clientelist arrangements, there are strong incentives for short-term rent capture, and for the exploitation of modalities like CDFs, which maximise patronage possibilities and tend to minimise formal accountability. If political actors expect to capture infrastructure rents (jobs, subcontracts, diversion of funds from projects to handouts for supporters), they may prefer small, discretionary contracts that offer more room for rent-seeking than do tightly specified multiyear contracts with performance audits and oversight. This preference reinforces a “build, neglect, rebuild” process of provision (PRIF, 2013). That being said, longer contracts often pass through centralised

procurement systems, which might be vulnerable to manipulation or reversion to political control (Tetra Tech, 2022).

Donors need to set out to learn how to engage the “soft and socio-political infrastructure” of governance that emerges from political settlements. This means a programmed orientation on how their role in designing performance-based contracts can build with the informal networks, patronage ties and unstated political performance expectations that govern project approval, implementation and maintenance. Understanding the personalised nature of political settlements – whereby clans, business elites, ministers and MPs enact short-term, fractious pacts – can make it possible to design and sustain adaptive models that navigate patronage constraints and build incremental credibility.

Here, analysis of bigger picture political settlements and political economy analysis enable a different approach to national and local pacting and contracting, one in which recalibrating towards local-scale processes to generate policy and political feedback is necessary but not sufficient. In this context, “working politically” in Pacific infrastructure means pairing hard engineering and financing with an equally rigorous approach to PSA in its everyday local manifestations. It means simple activities like mapping actors, incentives and capability, analysis of pacting and contracting, and sustained support for rules, roles and resources that can support sustainability in these contexts.

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