Assessing the Inclusion of Civil Society Organizations in the COVID-19 Decision Making of Pacific Island States

NDI

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Acknowledgements

About NDI

National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations and parliaments, safeguarding elections, and promoting citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government. With staff members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies. NDI began working with civil society and women activists in the Pacific Islands in 2015. NDI's programming goal in the Pacific Islands is to support inclusive and citizen-centered governance by advancing domestic election monitoring efforts, strengthening civil society, enhancing government transparency and accountability, and raising awareness on barriers to women's political participation.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have a critical role to play in both supporting governmental efforts to mitigate the social, economic, and health-related harms of COVID-19, as well as holding the government accountable to ensure policies and public services are inclusive and do no harm. The governments in Pacific Island Countries (PICs) have taken laudable steps to address the multiple, interconnected consequences of the pandemic, especially in quickly passing measures to mitigate economic shocks and restricting travel from beyond their borders to reduce transmission. However, they also have missed opportunities to leverage the expertise and connections that CSOs could offer to pandemic-focused relief efforts, particularly in terms of addressing the social impact of the virus.

To provide insight into how the non-governmental sectors in the PICs have been involved in governments' efforts to respond to the pandemic, NDI consulted a total of 75 representatives from CSOs and governments, as well as individual political and civic activists from Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. NDI collected primary data through an online questionnaire and in-depth interviews with key informants in March-April 2021. The primary data collection was supplemented with desk research on opportunities and challenges for CSO inclusion. The key findings were compiled and shared with CSOs and activists who attended a regional online forum to share information about successful strategies and reflect on ongoing challenges. The forum included a deliberative discussion on specific recommendations for governments and civil society across the region on how to effectively consult and collaborate with one another to address the impact of the ongoing pandemic, and to draw lessons for strengthening governance in the future. This report is the culmination of this work.

Organizations consulted as part of this assessment reported that they had to make rapid, difficult adjustments to their operations and engagement with beneficiaries at the onset of the pandemic. The most common impact noted by CSOs across the region was that members and volunteers participated less in their activities due to health concerns. Travel restrictions also made it difficult for CSOs to reach out to their beneficiaries, particularly those in far-flung areas, which left vulnerable groups with fewer services at a critical time. Some organizations indicated that activities have been adjusted, rescheduled, or completely cancelled, which in some cases resulted in a "loss of momentum" or reduced funding. By restricting in-person meetings, limiting funding opportunities, and creating a need for internet-based communications that far outstrips countries' current technology infrastructure, the pandemic has left both CSO beneficiaries and staff members more vulnerable.

As the initial shock subsided, CSOs started to find creative ways to respond to the pandemic by raising public awareness of protection measures, distributing aid and personal protective equipment (PPE), and fostering community resilience. Some CSOs reported feeling a need to provide emergency services and spread awareness about the virus, which led them to rapidly pivot

toward humanitarian relief and COVID-19 awareness raising to fill the gaps left by government responses to the pandemic. More than a year after the pandemic started, CSOs in PICs are still shaping roles for themselves to address the effects of the ongoing crisis. The necessary shift of CSO activites—from capacity building and advocacy for human rights and good governance, to humanitarian and relief activities—will likely have long-term effects and will require time and donor support to help CSOs reclaim their work in advocacy spaces.

Some organizations have leveraged their strong ties with their local communities to adopt a participatory approach to their work and engage with their government. Organizations from Kiribati, Fiji, PNG, and Solomon Islands mentioned that they were consulted by the government since the beginning of the pandemic on topics related to COVID-19, including health, the economy, and the pandemic's impact on vulnerable populations. Most often, CSOs have been consulted by the government or a ministry. In terms of government consultation regarding economic recovery, only a few activists mentioned that civil society was consulted on this issue at the time of the survey. Most organizations also reported being unaware about whether their governments' economic plans have specific strategies for marginalized groups and those most affected by COVID-19. Many civic activists consulted via the survey and the regional forum believe that their governments could do a better job at communicating about the importance of getting vaccinated, and feel as though CSOs could give pertinent advice to officials in this regard, given their broad networks and connection with beneficiaries.

CSOs across the region call for a broader and more systematic inclusion in governments' responses to the ongoing pandemic. Governments across the region have taken advantage of the possibility to amplify official messages and reach specific population groups with support from CSOs to provide health services, humanitarian relief, or psycho-social support. However, the overall lack of systematic consultation on policy development in the COVID-19 context represents a missed opportunity. Efforts to understand in detail the challenges that specific segments of the population face would help make government responses to the pandemic more inclusive, and therefore more effective. However, despite CSOs' capacity and expertise, they are largely still not seen as a public policy resource.

Though this report has focused on PIC government inclusion of CSOs in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these lessons apply to strengthening democratic governance in the region beyond the current crisis. Creating and maintaining strong relationships between CSOs and the government will lay the foundation not only for addressing future crises, especially ones related to climate change, but also for driving a continuous effort to make our societies more transparent, accountable, and inclusive. The pandemic has underscored the need for robust dialogue and partnerships between all sectors of society, with a particular need to center the voices that represent those left most vulnerable by economic, political, and social shocks. In particular, as PICs begin to pivot toward a post-pandemic world, normalizing collaboration between governments and civil society will prove fruitful for building more resilient societies to weather future storms.

| Introduction

Along with the rest of the world, the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) are currently grappling with the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though many PICs have avoided high COVID-19 infection rates and have begun vaccinating their citizens, fragile systems have resulted in vulnerable populations being further exposed to health, economic, and social threats. In responding to the multiple challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic, PIC governments can leverage the skills of a diverse set of stakeholders to ensure that they are meeting the needs of all citizens, especially vulnerable and marginalized groups. One such key stakeholder group is civil society.

Now more than ever, CSOs have a critical role to play in both supporting governmental efforts to mitigate the social, economic, and health-related harms of COVID-19, as well as holding the government accountable to ensuring policies and public services are inclusive and do no harm. Over the course of the pandemic, there have been clear opportunities for CSOs to take on a more active role as partners in government efforts to address the wide-reaching effects of the pandemic, particularly for vulnerable populations. Across marginalized communities, NDI has witnessed the desire to act and effect positive change over the course of the crisis. However, evidence on the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable groups remains scarce,[1] which raises grave concerns about the ability of these communities to make up lost ground to achieve the equality and dignity they deserve.[2] The empowerment of women, young people, and other marginalized groups is critical for "building back democratically" in the wake of the pandemic, and a thriving civil society sector is key to ensuring their equal and active political participation. In fact, CSOs already have experience in implementing social protection and public health initiatives in different communities.[3] Therefore, CSOs not only serve as the direct bridge to citizens, particularly those traditionally marginalized by the government, as a trusted source of information, supplies, and services; CSOs also advocate on behalf of citizens to the government, hold the government accountable, and ensure that their concerns are being addressed transparently and equitably.

PIC governments have taken laudable steps to address the multiple, interconnected consequences of the pandemic, especially in quickly passing measures to mitigate economic shocks and restricting travel from beyond their borders to reduce transmission. However, they also have missed opportunities to leverage the expertise and connections that CSOs could offer to pandemic-focused relief efforts, particularly in terms of addressing the social impact of the virus. The lack of CSO inclusion in some government actions has become an especially pressing issue in recent months, as some island nations

---

1   Susan Cook, Carolyn Hooper and Emma Shields, *Synthesis of COVID-19 impacts on the Pacific*, Allen + Clarke, April 2021.

2   NDI, *Sustainable Pandemic Recovery Depends on "Building Back Democratically": Global Analysis and Priority Actions*, March 2021, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/COVID%20RECOVERY%20BRIEF%20FINAL%20MARCH%20 2021.pdf.

3   Vinay Bhargava, "Engaging Civil Society Organizations to Enhance the Effectiveness of COVID-19 Response Programs in Asia and the Pacific," *Asian Development Bank: The Governance Brief*, Issue 42 (2021), https://www.adb.org/sites/ default/files/publication/689831/governance-brief-042-civil-society-covid-19-asia-pacific.pdf.

have faced the dual challenges of sharp increases in COVID-19 cases and vaccine hesitancy. To address these new concerns, as well as more long-standing ones related to restrictions in market access and gender-based violence, among others, PIC governments can take proactive steps to include CSOs as full and equal partners in the implementation of COVID-19 recovery measures.

To provide insight into how the non-governmental sector in the PICs have been involved in governments' efforts to respond to the pandemic, NDI consulted a total of 75 representatives of CSOs and governments, as well as individual political and civic activists from Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. NDI collected primary data through an online questionnaire and in-depth interviews with key informants in March-April 2021. The primary data collection was supplemented with desk research on opportunities and challenges for CSO inclusion. The key findings were compiled and shared with CSOs and activists who attended a regional online forum to share information about successful strategies and reflect on ongoing challenges. The forum included a deliberative discussion on specific recommendations for governments and civil society across the region on how to effectively consult and collaborate to address the impact of the ongoing pandemic, and to draw lessons for strengthening governance in the future. This report is the culmination of the efforts outlined above.

Background on the Pacific Islands

The twelve PICs[4] cover an expansive geographic area, home to not only a diverse array of cultures, traditions, and histories, but also to one of the world's most essential environmental ecosystems. While each country has unique circumstances and localized politics, the PICs share some challenges. For example, when taken as a whole, the Pacific Islands region can be described as having weak democratic institutions, opaque and unaccountable government processes, and transactional politics driven by kinship and money, which ultimately undermine the potential for partnerships between government and citizens, as well as the development of a strong sense of citizenship. Another regional challenge stems from the urban-rural divide in these archipelagic states, which exacerbates tensions between national and sub-national governance structures. Finally, social foundations largely built upon patriarchal values (with the exception of Palau, which has a matriarchal society) have resulted in the underrepresentation of women, youth and other vulnerable and marginalized groups in political life. As a result, women-led and youth-led civil society and citizen priorities are not systematically represented in policy processes and dialogues. Critically, the Pacific region also has the world's lowest levels of women in parliament, and the highest rates of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Women typically perform a greater share of unpaid care and domestic work, and have much more restrained access to the labor market and to social protection.

However, there are considerable differences between countries that must be taken into account when analyzing the impact of government policy on development and recovery, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though a nuanced, hyperlocal analysis of government response to COVID-19 is beyond the scope of this paper, which seeks to provide an broad overview of regional trends, it is worth briefly noting some examples of where PICs diverge in terms of governance practices and social conditions. For example, Nauru, Palau, RMI, and Tuvalu stand out for having free access to government information, as well as freedoms associated with the press, civil society advocacy, and expression. By contrast, Kiribati and Samoa do not have a legal framework in place to protect the public's right to know about government actions, and Kiribati's criminalization of defamation has had a chilling effect on free expression in the country.[5] Fiji, PNG, and Solomon Islands fall somewhere in the middle, for they experience issues in safeguarding freedoms in practice even when they are protected by law. Countries also vary widely in terms of governance structures—FSM and Tuvalu have no formal political parties, while many others have loosely structured or weak ones that shift alliances regularly. The history of conflict in some countries is another source of difference, with Fiji, PNG, and Solomon Islands still contending with intergroup tensions that weaken overall social cohesion.

---

4   The 12 countries are the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.
5   United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and Pacific Community, *Human Rights in the Pacific: A Situational Analysis*, 2020, https://hrsd.spc.int/sites/default/files/2021-07/HRSD%20SIT%20ANALYSIS%20FINAL%20Revised%20version%2012%20july%202021%20web.pdf.

COVID-19 in the Pacific Islands: Government Responses and Impact

Though PIC governments' responses to the pandemic have varied over time and from country to country, there are clear regional trends. This section will review government responses in terms of economic, access to information, health and social policies.

Economic Measures and Recovery Policies

Containing the spread of COVID-19 in the Pacific Islands has resulted in economic slowdowns, product shortages, spikes in unemployment, and sharp contractions in government revenue alongside mounting government debt, as it has around the world.[6] Though inflation rates have remained steady, and international development aid flows have helped make up the difference, there is widespread concern that commerce, trade, and investor confidence will take years to fully rebuild.[7] Additionally, because many businesses in PICs rely on cash rather than capital or credit, the majority of existing businesses have had to close, which also greatly lessens the feasibility of a quick recovery.[8] Finally, the sudden drop in tourism, which comprises a large portion of some PICs' GDP, may also take a while to return to pre-pandemic levels.[9] As a result of these considerable obstacles to recovery, all PICs have taken steps to cushion their countries from these economic shocks, such as by providing "stimulus package[s], liquidity injections and unemployment assistance."[10] Donors such as Australia and the Asian Development Bank have stepped in to assist with funding PICs' economic stimulus packages, vaccine distribution, and general aid provision, which underscores the lack of PIC government resources to fund economic recovery on their own.[11]

---

6   David Abbott and Steve Pollard, "How to Get from Response to Recovery in the Pacific," DevPolicy Blog, August 28, 2020, https://devpolicy.org/how-to-get-from-response-to-recovery-in-the-pacific-20200828/.

7   Ibid.

8   Ibid.

9   Dan McGarry, Sheldon Chanel and Emmanuel Samoglu, "Deserted Islands: Pacific Resorts Struggle to Survive a Year without Tourists," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/03/covid-coronavirus-deserted-islands-pacific-resorts-struggle-to-survive-a-year-without-tourists.

10   Katherine Shen, "The Economic Costs of the Pandemic for the Pacific Islands," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 9, 2020, https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/economic-costs-pandemic-pacific-islands.

11   Asian Development Bank, "ADB Provides $12.2 Million Assistance for Tonga's COVID-19 Response," June 26, 2020, https://www.adb.org/news/adb-provides-12-2-million-assistance-tongas-covid-19-response; Maea Lenei Buhre, "Many Pacific Islands are Untouched by COVID-19. Its Arrival Could Be Disastrous," *PBS NewsHour*, May 7, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/many-pacific-islands-are-untouched-by-covid-19-its-arrival-could-be-disastrous.

Access to Information Policies and Free Expression

As a whole, PICs have successfully carried out different strategies to keep the public informed about COVID-19 transmission rates, vaccine distribution, and new policies. An illustrative example comes from the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government, which regularly updates a comprehensive website that collects all information related to COVID-19 at home and abroad.[12] However, some PICs have been grappling with a pervasive "infodemic"[13] in spite of these awareness-raising efforts, which threatens to undermine the success of their ongoing vaccine rollout.[14] Even though several PICs[15] have already received hundreds of thousands of vaccines through the COVAX Facility and bilateral agreements, there are concerns that more must be done to educate and encourage all citizens to actually receive the vaccine. Gaps in information access about the virus and governments' responses to it has created a vacuum that has generated vaccine hesitancy[16] in a few countries,[17] and led to a spike in sorcery-related accusations in PNG specifically.[18] Government campaigns to combat misinformation and disinformation would benefit from the expertise and local connections of CSOs, especially in reaching marginalized groups and those without internet access. To overcome negative perceptions about vaccines, gaps in information access, and the logistical difficulties of inoculating populations in PICs, partnerships with CSOs are clearly needed.

Emergency Public Health Policies

PIC governments' emergency public health policies have had to contend with issues of access and long-standing health concerns. In terms of access, PICs struggled to collect and distribute enough personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers even at the beginning of the pandemic, when there were very few cases in the region.[19] COVID-19 testing capacity, particularly due to the lack of testing kits, is also dangerously low, with only a few countries able to carry them out locally rather than shipping samples abroad.[20] These resource-related challenges are compounded by health concerns and cultural practices that make Pacific Islanders more susceptible to fatally contracting COVID-19.

12 Papua New Guinea Joint Agency Task Force, "National Control Centre for COVID-19," https://covid19.info.gov.pg/.

13 Matt Richtel, "W.H.O. Fights a Pandemic Besides Coronavirus: An 'Infodemic,'" *The New York Times*, February 6, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/health/coronavirus-misinformation-social-media.html.

14 Benjamin Lokshin, *The Pacific COVID-19 Infodemic: Challenges and Opportunities in the Pacific's Response to an Online Information Crisis*, The Asia Foundation, 2020, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-Pacific-COVID-19-Infodemic_Jan4.2021.pdf

15 Fiji, Kiribati, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu

16 Hugh McClure, "How Conspiracy Theories Led to COVID Vaccine Hesitancy in the Pacific," *The Guardian*, May 12, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/13/how-conspiracy-theories-led-to-covid-vaccine-hesitancy-in-the-pacific.

17 Less than half of Solomon Islanders are willing to get a vaccine when it becomes available. NDI, *Solomon Islands' Road to Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic*, August 2021, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Solomon%20Islands%20Public%20Opinion%20Research%20Report.pdf.

18 Mala Darmadi, "Fears that sorcery-related violence is on the rise due to COVID-19," *ABC News*, April 6, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/radio-australia/programs/pacificbeat/fears-sorcery-violence-is-on-the-rise-due-to-covid-19/13290126.

19 Buhre 2020.

20 Buhre 2020; Prianka Srinivasan, Bethanie Harriman and Evan Wasuka, "As more Pacific countries record COVID-19 cases, some governments are rethinking their coronavirus strategy," *ABC News*, November 12, 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-13/how-has-pacific-avoided-coronavirus-covid-pandemic-cases/12875316.

For example, the Pacific Islands has the "world's highest levels of Type 2 diabetes and is home to eight out of the 10 most obese countries," due to those same healthcare access issues described above.[21] The threat of severe weather-related events can also weaken PIC governments' ability to effectively prevent and address the pandemic's health impact. In April 2020, a category 5 cyclone hit the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga, displacing over 150,000 people across the islands.[22] About a thousand Vanuatu citizens were forced to live in evacuation shelters after the cyclone hit the islands of Espiritu Santo and Pentecost.[23] Though this did not initially lead to an outbreak of COVID-19 because there were no reported cases on the island, another severe cyclone occurring now, when Fiji and PNG are combating a rising outbreak, could prove disastrous.

In terms of government responses to these challenges, examples from a few countries prove useful. Many governments imposed a "State of Emergency" to authorize expanded executive powers to contain the virus, which included the creation of lockdowns and curfews to discourage transmission. Many countries, like FSM, developed rapid response frameworks to create quarantine facilities, train first responders in health protocols, and increase testing capacity.[24] Out of all of the PICs, Fiji has had the broadest and most restrictive government response in terms of health policies. After the first confirmed case, the government instituted "reinforced detection measures, restrictions on movements and gatherings, closures of schools and certain types of businesses (e.g. cinemas, gyms, etc.), [and] a nationwide curfew and lockdowns of affected areas."[25] Following the increase in positive cases, the Fijian government announced in early June 2021 that people who do not follow COVID-19 regulations will immediately receive a fine.[26]

Social Protections and Repatriation Policies

Globally, the pandemic has disproportionately impacted women, young people, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people, and others marginalized due to their race or ethnicity, as well as the ways in which these identities intersect.[27] However, as seen in other countries around the world, PIC governments have faced obstacles in addressing the heightened challenges marginalized communities face. Many of the difficulties PIC governments have faced in addressing the ripple effects of the pandemic stem from long-standing gaps in social service provision and weak social safety nets.[28] Thus, governments had a weak base to build on when COVID-19 hit, and have seen already existing challenges related

---

21 Buhre 2020.
22 Kayly Ober and Stefan Bakumenko, "Issue Brief: A new vulnerability: COVID-19 and tropical cyclone Harold create the perfect storm in the Pacific," OCHA ReliefWeb, June 3, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/issue-brief-new-vulnerability-covid-19-and-tropical-cyclone-harold-create-perfect.
23 Ober and Bakumenko 2020.
24 Asian Development Bank, "Federated States of Micronesia," COVID-19 Policy Database, https://covid19policy.adb.org/policy-measures/FSM.
25 Asian Development Bank, "Fiji," COVID-19 Policy Database, https://covid19policy.adb.org/policy-measures/FIJ.
26 Koroi Tadulala, "Parliament passes laws against COVID-19 breaches," *FBC News*, June 4, 2021, https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/covid-19/parliament-passes-laws-against-covid-19-breaches/.
27 NDI 2021.
28 Abbott and Pollard 2020.

to the provision of services and support for vulnerable groups get exponentially worse.[29] While it is only recently that PICs such as Fiji and PNG have begun to experience direct health impacts from the pandemic from a sudden spike in cases, fragile systems in these countries as a whole have resulted in vulnerable populations being further exposed to health, economic, and social threats. Among the vulnerable groups affected by the pandemic, young people have been severely impacted, as they have experienced major disruptions in their education and diminished employment prospects.[30] Economic and educational hardships have also fallen disproportionately on women as a whole, who were already burdened by limited job opportunities, as well as the responsibility of child rearing and home schooling. In general, women have borne the brunt of these negative effects, as they struggle with income loss and food insecurity. The pandemic has also dramatically increased incidents of SGBV, often referred to as the "shadow pandemic," due to stay-at-home requirements that have further restricted women's already-limited freedom of movement, as well as the added financial and emotional stress of navigating the pandemic, which can then lead to more violence.[31]

Repatriation also has proved to be a difficult issue for PIC governments to solve over the course of the pandemic. By and large, citizens who were living abroad at the start of the pandemic have been stranded in their host countries, due to closed borders in PICs. Some countries, like Palau and Tonga, began repatriating citizens as early as the summer of 2020, and Vanuatu has repatriated the highest number of citizens.[32] Others, like FSM and RMI, have struggled to do so, with the first wave of Marshallese citizens heading home in early 2021.[33] The uneven progress in repatriation has become a point of contention among citizens with family members stranded abroad, especially as PICs face pressure to reopen for tourism to recoup lost income.

---

29 Ibid.

30 NDI 2021.

31 UN Women, "The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19," https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19.

32 Hugh McClure, "COVID-19—the Pacific response: 11 Februrary," Asia & the Pacific Policy Society, February 11, 2021, https://www.policyforum.net/covid-19-the-pacific-response-11-february/.

33 Anita Hofschneider, "Micronesians Wait Their Turn as Other Pacific Islanders Head Home," *Honolulu Civil Beat*, February 8, 2021, https://www.civilbeat.org/2021/02/micronesians-wait-their-turn-as-other-pacific-islanders-head-home/.

| Discussion of Research Findings

With this context in mind, this section will cover the findings of NDI's CSO survey, interviews, and regional online forum. While the previous section outlined the general characteristics of the PIC governments' responses to combat the pandemic, this section will take a deep dive into the specific opportunities and challenges that CSOs have faced in withstanding both the pandemic itself and in navigating their governments' responses to it. Additional information on the ways CSOs participated in raising awareness, providing emergency relief, and contributing to policymaking around COVID-19 regulations will also be covered. All quotes from participants have been left unattributed—the anonymity of this research allowed CSO members to speak freely and without fear of retribution.

Organizations consulted as part of this assessment reported that they had to make adjustments to their operations and engagement with beneficiaries at the onset of the pandemic. On the whole, the pandemic significantly affected the work of all organizations consulted. The most common impact noted by CSOs across the region was that members and volunteers participated less in the activities due to health concerns. Travel restrictions also made it difficult for CSOs to reach out to their beneficiaries, particularly those in far-flung areas, which left vulnerable groups with fewer services at a critical time. A number of participants in the survey indicated that activities have been adjusted, rescheduled, or completely cancelled, which in some cases resulted in a "loss of momentum" or reduced funding. As one participant from PNG said, "Our fundraising events were either cancelled or deferred… [and] sometimes there is a need to cut some work hours, [in order to] provide paid accommodation to clients." In countries where movement restrictions and social distancing requirements have become a permanent fixture, CSO operations related to training and facilitation sessions have largely moved online. Participants commented that their organizations have been able to increase their online engagement, with Zoom being the most used platform for meetings. However, infrastructure access issues, which manifest in poor internet connectivity, and time zone differences have made running online events difficult.

Where in-person activities have still been possible, CSOs have adjusted their offices to turn them into "friendly COVID-free spaces," where community members could come to attend events with less worry of infection. CSOs also sought to provide guidance to community members on how to prevent the spread of the virus. As one CSO staff member in PNG described, "Our facilitators…received a COVID-19 full training from our Health Department before conducting our programs," which allowed them to carry out this work. Another activist in Fiji stated that their organization's policies have been adjusted to be in compliance with COVID-19 guidelines, including placing "restrictions on the number of participants attending meetings." They also said that they had to reduce the number of attendants of its regular and annual general assembly to comply with COVID-19 regulations. Though these efforts to host in-person activities are important to maintain their links with the community and peer organizations, the limits on attendees have nonetheless made it more difficult for CSOs to carry out their work.

By restricting in-person meetings, limiting funding opportunities, and creating a need for internet-

based communications that far outstrips countries' current technology infrastructure, the pandemic has left both CSO beneficiaries and staff members more vulnerable. Survey participants explained that the delayed projects and lack of incoming funds have led to staff layoffs, at a time when economic insecurity has exponentially increased. Furthermore, as one participant in PNG described, "beneficiaries were left confused as they were faced by challenges of no longer receiving services, particularly the ongoing peace education, dialogues, counselling, referrals and, most importantly, not receiving any COVID-19 awareness." One example relates to how reduced CSO staff and capacity has directly impacted the lives of a vulnerable group. Women and girls require strong advocates for gender-responsive government budgeting during the pandemic, especially in light of the ways in which COVID-19 has worsened the high rates of SGBV in some PICs by limiting access to resources and forcing women to stay in close proximity to their abusers. One participant from PNG said, "The [government] should provide grants for civil society's to support victims affected by domestic violence during this pandemic by way of a safe haven at a safe house, case documentation, legal representation and medical assistance."

As the initial shock subsided, CSOs started to find creative ways to respond to the pandemic by raising public awareness of protection measures, distributing aid and PPE, and fostering community resilience. Some CSOs reported feeling a need to provide emergency services and spread awareness about the virus. They rapidly pivoted toward humanitarian relief and COVID-19 awareness raising to fill the gaps left by government responses to the pandemic. For Samoa, for instance, the devastating impact of the 2019 measles outbreak that killed 80 people is still vivid in people's minds. Being able to draw on the lessons from this recent crisis meant that both the government and the public were able to mobilize efficiently to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus. In an effort to address the economic impact of shutting the country down, the government provided support for the heavily-affected businesses in the tourism sector; however, individuals who lost their jobs and people from marginalized communities received little assistance from the government. CSOs identified this gap and were able to address some of the most pressing community-level needs, including the distribution of food and PPE, in some cases with funding from international donors such as UN agencies.

In Vanuatu, a high level of engagement from civil society led to public recognition for its efforts, which in turn boosted activists' motivation. At the same time, however, CSOs' actions in the country have been curtailed by limited resources to reach out to rural communities. In Fiji, by contrast, a number of CSOs have implemented initiatives independently from the government thanks to their ability to mobilize resources, in the areas of distributing PPE, rations, and goods to communities; supporting home gardens; distributing water, sanitation, and hygiene kits to vulnerable communities; providing psycho-social counseling; supporting vaccination campaigns; countering misinformation; and conducting research on vaccine hesitancy.[34]

A few CSOs stated that they continue to divide their attention between COVID-19 response-focused work and issue-based advocacy on human rights or corruption, while others hope to return to their core mission soon. As one CSO staff member in Fiji said, "We have been more focused on humanitarian work, but soon are planning to restart our work in the area of youth and political engagement, security and good governance." More than a year after the pandemic started, CSOs in PICs are still shaping roles

---

34 Roneel Rohendra Kumar and Nilesh Lal, *Determinants of COVID-19 Hesitancy in Fiji*, Dialogue Fiji, August 2021.

for themselves to address the effects of the ongoing crisis. The necessary shift of CSO activites—from capacity building and advocacy for human rights and good governance, to humanitarian and relief activities—will likely have long-term effects and will require time and donor support to help CSOs reclaim their work in advocacy spaces.

Views on how effective governments have been in addressing the public health and safety issues arising from COVID-19 are mixed, and CSOs call for a deeper and consistent inclusion in governments' response to the ongoing pandemic. Some activists considered their country's government to have been neither efficient nor inefficient, while others indicated that the government has not been efficient in the measures taken. At the time of the survey, many countries were in the process of developing vaccination strategies, yet many activists reported that they did not know if such a strategy was developed in consultation with non-governmental actors. Furthermore, only a few activists in Vanuatu, Fiji and RMI mentioned that the strategy is publicly available. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and steps by the government to address it, is also a considerable source of concern for most of the activists consulted, many of whom consider that their government was not effective in mitigating economic shocks. Only activists in Fiji and PNG said that they were even aware of the government's plans to support and rebuild the economy, which speaks to the general gap between governments and civil society in communicating financial recovery plans.

Similarly, activists believe that their governments could do a better job at communicating the importance of getting vaccinated, and feel as though CSOs could give pertinent advice to officials. As an activist from PNG stressed: "there is not enough awareness reaching down to the bulk of the population on the importance of vaccination. In PNG more than 80% of the population lives in rural areas and little has been done on the awareness of the receiving of the vaccine. The government is taking for granted that everybody knows what a vaccine is and what COVID-19 is. Therefore, people are reluctant to receive vaccines because they are not made aware of them. Therefore, more and effective awareness needs to reach the people."

In terms of government consultation regarding economic recovery, only a few activists mentioned that civil society was consulted on this issue. The organizations also reported being unaware about whether their governments' economic plans have specific strategies for marginalized groups and those most affected by COVID-19. These responses echo research conducted by the International Budget Partnership (IBP) on the degree of accountability in managing COVID-19 funds from March to September 2020.[35] For example, even though Fiji scored high on the level of transparency in the creation of its "COVID-19 Economic Stimulus Package," IBP found that there was "limited" to "minimal" transparency in the implementation of the package, as well as "limited" oversight of implementation and "minimal" public participation.[36] PNG, by contrast, only scored high on the amount of macroeconomic and aggregated budget information provided on its funding package; the country received a score of "limited" or "minimal" in almost every other category.

---

35 Among the PICs, only PNG and Fiji were included in this research. For details, *see* International Budget Partnership, "Managing Covid Funds: The Accountability Gap," https://internationalbudget.org/covid/.

36 Ibid.

Less than half of CSOs surveyed were consulted by the government about COVID-19 policies. Organizations from Kiribati, Fiji, PNG, and Solomon Islands mentioned that they were consulted by the government since the beginning of the pandemic on topics related to COVID-19, including health, the economy, and the pandemic's impact on vulnerable populations. Most often, CSOs have been consulted by the government or a ministry. While a few mentioned consultations initiated by the national COVID-19 Committee (in Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and PNG), this seems to be the exception, not the rule—otherwise, local authorities or parliaments have been the initiator of consultations. Though most Fijian CSOs consulted by the government reported that they spoke about COVID-19 in the context of marginalized groups during their consultation, the majority reported that only "some points" they made were included in policies. In terms of consultation topics, security, rule of law, and elections in the context of COVID-19 had not been included in any of the government-CSO meetings reported by survey respondents.

Given that some organizations have specifically leveraged their strong ties with their local communities to adopt a participatory approach to their work, the lack of broader consultation with them in the COVID-19 context represents a missed opportunity. As a participant from PNG explained, "CSOs are always an effective communication portal to the community due to existing networks and partnerships...These groups can also be utilized as implementers for introducing new activities and or modelling to achieve desired community consensus or buy-in." In an environment marked by pervasive misinformation and a high degree of vaccination hesitancy,[37] activists from across the region lament that governments do not sufficiently leverage the social trust of the non-governmental sector, as a participant from Samoa explained: "It is a missed opportunity for the government to not work with CSOs, which have goodwill and close ties with local communities. Chiefs and local councils with influence and strong community ties are also not being utilized by the government."

To illustrate this point, the case of Fiji speaks to missed opportunities in cultivating a healthy collaboration between the government and CSOs. For their part, government officials reported that CSO engagement in Fiji was initially challenging and limited, as the government focused primarily on reducing the risk of virus transmission. Gradually, communication and engagement with civil society increased to the point of CSOs being co-opted to raise awareness and engage with local communities, as well as supporting the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MoHMS) and other agencies to manage telehealth initiatives, support data management in clinical teams, conduct interviews for contract tracing, provide psychosocial support, run blood drives, organize goods donation drives and food distribution, and assist public information centers. However, some human rights organizations in Fiji reported feeling sidelined by the government and complained that their potential was not fully utilized. A few CSO representatives reported fearing repercussions if they made public statements or attended events that could be perceived as criticism of the government, and were concerned about the progressive deterioration of the relations between some CSOs and the government in the last few years. In their view, this has made partnership difficult in Fiji, especially when the government and CSOs have clashed publicly over relief distribution, particularly regarding a food shortage that is quickly becoming a crisis, and other COVID-related policies.

---

37 NDI, August 2021.

Given this tense context, a forum participant noted it was encouraging to see an increased willingness from the Fiji MoHMS to work with CSOs, and called on the government to enlist help of CSO and faith leaders in the vaccination campaign. Recognizing that the worst part of the crisis might be still ahead, the participant called on CSOs, the government, and other interested or affected parties to come together to work in synergy toward the common goal because: "Fiji's example shows CSOs have been crucial in relief and as a communication channel to the grassroots. In some places CSOs have greater reach than the government. A concerted, coordinated, and collaborative response is needed because this virus is not going away anytime soon. Pacific Island countries are virus free, for now. One mistake, and they could be overwhelmed. Fiji is a good example, and more recently New Zealand. Both countries thought they had [overcome] the virus, until it returned with a vengeance. The work is not over yet. Far from it."

For another example, in Solomon Islands, the National Disaster Management Office and other committees are responsible for coordinating the crisis response. As a government official noted, "reaching rural and remote communities is a huge challenge; CSOs have stronger ties here and provide an opportunity." A particular concern is supporting women's economic empowerment as part of economic recovery efforts, especially given the recognition that measures to address impacts of the pandemic were not initially gender-sensitive. Efforts to understand in detail the challenges that specific segments of the population face would help make government responses to the pandemic more inclusive, and therefore more effective. However, despite CSOs' capacity and expertise, they are still not seen as a policy resource. As one participant from Marshall Islands noted, "[that] NGOs are credible development partners is news to many government departments who still see NGOs as voluntary community organizations. Those that have started to appreciate the inclusive participation component of decision making have included NGOs in the process but those that do not still slave on with incompletely informed decisions."

Recommendations

Civil society has an important role to play in raising awareness on existing social inequalities, which are exacerbated in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. CSOs can be an asset for the government as partners with considerable community outreach, analysis, and policy development skills. Recognizing CSOs as full and equal partners in policymaking will allow governments to tap into their critical insight and expertise. There are also steps that CSOs can take to improve their relationship with their governments and forge innovative pathways to inform government decisions, as well as enhance the quality of their own work during the pandemic and beyond. This final section will thus cover recommendations for governments and CSOs, which can also inform the work of the international community, to address the short and long-term effects of the pandemic in the Pacific Islands.

Recommendations for Governments

- **Undertake transparent and inclusive strategic planning and implementation processes to overcome the current challenges and fight the short and long-term consequences of COVID-19.** To plan effectively, PIC governments can take an inclusive approach in their stakeholder consultations, which would include relying on the expertise of CSOs to communicate the needs of marginalized groups as critical partners in COVID-19 recovery efforts. As part of efforts to address the impact of COVID-19, considerations for increasing citizens' information access, particularly around the planning and implementation of relief, and mainstreaming feedback mechanisms from the public and other sectors, are critical to ensure that pandemic measures leave no one behind, and target first those furthest behind.

- **Prioritize transparency and strengthen information integrity through effective communications and countering disinformation, especially by leveraging partnerships with CSOs and church groups to educate citizens.** Sharing information and collaborating with CSOs can help governments better understand how information flows on the ground, supplement fact-checking efforts, and provide direct educational outreach to local communities. To counter the spread of disinformation and misinformation about COVID-19, governments can begin by understanding exactly what kind of falsehoods are spreading, who is spreading them, and through what channels of communication. This baseline analysis is critical to understand the unique dynamics at play in each PIC, especially because COVID-19 disinformation and misinformation often draw heavily on the local context of pre-existing political issues and social tensions.

- **Build cross-sector relations and trust with civil society organizations and traditional structures.** Governments can establish inventories of CSOs and their areas of expertise, build collaborative relationships and understanding before a crisis, and formalize pathways for quick engagement in responses to future crises, such as joint scenario simulations. This approach

could also prove beneficial to addressing the ongoing crisis, as CSOs could engage communities to support compliance with public health measures, support home-based case and early detection in vulnerable populations, use their networks to further vaccination support, and support COVID-19 safety measures in rural and traditional social structures. By working with CSOs, governments can create links with traditional and religious institutions to reach target populations, such as those in isolated and rural areas, and get buy-in for government policies.

Recommendations for CSOs

- **Explore collaboration opportunities and partnerships with peer organizations to maximize impact.** Collective action is critical to ensuring that the multiple, interconnected aspects of the pandemic are fully addressed.[38] CSOs can foster collaboration by leveraging existing national and regional networks to share knowledge, information, and good practices to help multiply their effectiveness and overcome the internal resource constraints that have been worsened by the pandemic. Greater coordination can also help ensure that different organizations are not duplicating work or competing for resources. The Pacific Islands Association of Non-governmental Organizations (PIANGO), a regional CSO network that catalyzes collective action and facilitates coalition building, may also help to fill this gap. National coalitions in the PIC, such as the Marshall Islands Council of Non-Governmental Organizations (MICNGOS), also have a pivotal role to play in galvanizing local CSOs to collaborate more effectively.

- **Consider ways to specialize in one area to contribute as experts in a particular field and inform and support government efforts.[39]** In many PICs, CSOs tend to be small organizations that carry out a diverse set of activities, from policy advocacy to emergency relief, to respond to competing, pressing needs in their communities. As a result of this broad, generalist focus, they are often stretched too thin, in terms of staff capacity and resources, to make a significant impact in any one area of work. For example, choosing advocacy as a specialization and learning how to draft policy proposals for the government's consideration would greatly increase a CSO's added value as a partner in policymaking beyond simply filling a seat at the table for the sake of representation. The experiences of women's crisis centers throughout the region illustrate the importance of focusing on specific goals. Here, their specialization in gender-based violence allowed these organizations to pivot more easily to advocate for gender-responsive COVID-19 policies from their governments, while also continuing to provide services to women seeking assistance.[40]

38 Aaron Azelton, Rachel Mims and Michelle Atwood, *A Practical Guide for Civil Society Organizations during a Crisis*, NDI, 2020, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/A%20PRACTICAL%20GUIDE%20FOR%20CIVIL%20SOCIETY%20ORGANIZATIONS%20DURING%20A%20CRISIS%20%20English%20%281%29.pdf.

39 For a step-by-step guide on assessing organizational capacity and developing a new strategy, *see* Azelton et al. 2020.

40 UN Women, "Across the Pacific, crisis centers respond to COVID-19 amid natural disasters," June 10, 2020, https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/feature-pacific-crisis-centres-respond-to-covid-19-amid-natural-disasters.

- **Conduct political process monitoring to promote transparency and accountability around COVID-19 relief measures.** CSOs interested in government accountability issues should seek support to develop tools to monitor and report on government planning, decision making, and policy implementation around COVID-19. Specifically, an increased ability to implement political process monitoring will allow CSOs to collect, compile and conduct evidence-based analysis on political processes, develop and disseminate findings, and use findings to advocate for and influence reform.

- **Be creative with the approach of requesting information from government officials**. Where possible, CSOs can contact officials directly. With this approach, they can build a constructive relationship and receive helpful information even if it is not published on official websites. They can also invite government officials to participate in panel discussions, allowing for face-to-face follow up that would not be possible otherwise.

- **Utilize websites or social media platforms to publish findings from monitoring efforts.** CSOs can utilize their websites or social media pages as open data sources for sharing data gathered from the monitoring of government response efforts, such as COVID-19 budget allocations and spending. Open-source data systems allow for transparency, accountability, and citizen participation on a different level. These platforms also provide the information in a more accessible and digestible format.