EUROPEAN UNION

PUBLIC FINANCE MANAGEMENT HUMAN-INTEREST STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC

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Introduction

The enchanting Pacific region has always been a source of inspiration, and within its diverse cultures and challenges lie compelling stories of resilience and hope. In this special feature, we present six Human-Interest stories from media professionals in four different Pacific Island Countries (PICs) that focus on the role of government in managing public funds, i.e. public finance. These stories ask questions about the good use of such monies, in fulfilling the desired futures of ordinary people and businesses in the Pacific. Specifically, they raise the level of scrutiny that people in PICs should have on how governments collect and distribute public monies through the public finance management (PFM) system[1], which includes the annual government budget cycle.

These stories were crafted during and after a training on public finance management media coverage supported by the European Union through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Vaka Pasifika Project. They not only shed light on the challenges faced by the Pacific communities but also highlight the crucial role of media in holding governments accountable. These stories therefore act as a reminder of the power of non-experts, such as journalists, to engage with the big questions: are public funds used well to benefit ordinary people, addressing the pressing needs of the Pacific, such as climate change, natural disasters, and economic growth?

These stories resonate deeply with the broader challenges faced by the Pacific, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the mission of the UN and UNDP in the region. PICs grapple with unique issues such as remoteness, vulnerability to natural disasters, and limited revenue sources. Despite these challenges, governments bear the responsibility of ensuring the efficient

1. PFM refers to the processes whereby governments collect and distribute resources within their jurisdictions. The annual budget cycle is the key perpetuating process, and includes the steps of planning, budgeting, budget implementation (expenditure), reporting and accounting, monitoring and evaluation, auditing, and legislative oversight. Good PFM systems produce results that are economical, efficient and effective (principles called the “3x Es” of PFM). Good PFM systems rely on important building blocks , including good macroeconomic and fiscal projections, proper legislative and institutional frameworks, results-oriented planning and budgeting approaches, and conducive performance and information management.

utilization of public finances, meaning plans and budgets should strongly translate into targeted public service delivery objectives. The PFM Human-Interest stories emphasize the importance of media as the fourth estate, holding governments accountable for their financial decisions, especially in the face of climate change, natural disasters, and environmental degradation.

- Yvette Issac's stories shed light on the hopes and struggles of islet communities in Tuvalu adapting to rising sea levels, and accessing funding for their basic safety and livelihoods. Her stories emphasize the need for governments to move beyond commitments to concrete actions, especially addressing transportation challenges brought on by climate change.

- Leah Luwonbu's narrative highlights justice and equity in public disaster preparedness, focusing on equal access to evacuation centers for people living with disabilities. The story advocates for the broader need for inclusive policies and programmes that do not miss out on the most vulnerable, and thereby emphasizes the importance of respecting the economic rights of every citizen.

- Ian McDonald's stories focus on justice for taxpayers' money, scrutinizing government procurement plans and the equitable allocation of funds destined for the development of grassroots communities. These narratives emphasize the need for transparency (and hence more accountability) and efficiency in public spending, ultimately benefiting the livelihoods of ordinary citizens.

- Dale Lima's story showcases the big, positive impacts of the strategic use of public funds for the benefit of rural small businesses in Papua New Guinea. It underscores the significance of financial incentives, encouraging economic productivity and contributing to both private and public sectors.

While these stories bring critical issues to light, challenges persist in systematic, regular, and dedicated media coverage of PFM in the Pacific. The lack of qualified journalists and focused coverage hampers the effective scrutiny of government financial decisions. However, there are opportunities for improvement.

Strengthening media capacities and adopting a systematic approach to PFM coverage can empower readers to effectively understand and assess governments' good use of public funds. By demanding transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity in financial decisions, citizens can actively contribute to accountable governance.

UNDP Pacific's commitment to supporting PFM media professionals through the Vaka Pasifika Project is paving the way for informed, accountable, and transparent public finance management in the Pacific. As we move forward, these stories serve as beacons of hope, inspiring readers and promoting public interest and activism. Together, we can foster a better understanding of PFM issues, contributing to the welfare of all communities in the Pacific.

About

About the Project

Pacific Island Countries (PICs) boast “big ocean” economies, with young and mobile populations and highly resilient and adaptative societies. Past and recent investments have however fallen short of developing diverse economies offering inclusive services and opportunities, resilient to external shocks and the increasing pace of climate disasters. While the scale of Pacific economies does not allow them to respond to all these challenges alone, public investment and revenues would gain from empowered officials accountable to keep basic service delivery and development priorities in mind while driving fiscal decisions.

The “Accountable Public Finances to serve Pacific people – Vaka Pasifika” project targets documented challenges in the oversight and accountability of public finance in the Pacific. It aims at providing a platform for Pacific experts, decision-makers, and thinkers to design tailored solutions. These solutions can then be supported by the project through funding and technical assistance. The project also provides opportunities for civil society and the media to better understand and engage with public finance cycles and for governments (central/local) to consult and engage with citizens on the budget. The Vaka Pasifika project is funded by the European Union until 2026. The project builds on the results of the “Strengthening Public Finance Management and Governance in the Pacific” (PFM) project implemented with the support of the European Union between 2018 and 2022.

Vaka Pasifika roughly translates to “Pacific Way” – vaka is a maritime term which refers through the Pacific to various sea vessels.

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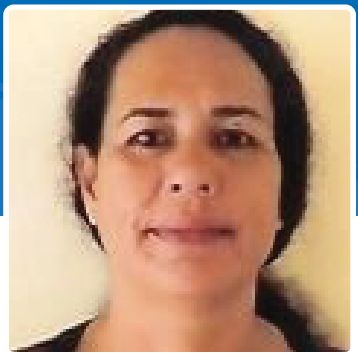


Yvette Tepaula D'Unienville

Senior journalist - Tuvalu Broadcasting Corporation

I am Yvette Tepaula D'Unienville, a senior journalist at the Tuvalu Broadcasting Corporation. I have dedicated over a decade of my career to Radio Tuvalu news since joining the Tuvalu media team. In 2014, I earned my BA in Journalism, Language, and Literature from the University of the South Pacific (USP) and was honored with the Pacific Island News Agency (PINA) Best Pasifika News Story Award.

Throughout my tenure, I have extensively covered topics such as fisheries, climate change, meteorology services, environment, and disaster-related stories. I report on Cabinet and parliament meetings and beyond these areas, I have written compelling stories concerning health, education, sports, trade, and other issues of interest. My goal is to shed light on these subjects, fostering positive changes for the betterment of the lives of the people in Tuvalu.

SWIMMING AGAINST THE SHARKS AND RAYFISH TO GET FOOD FROM FALE ISLET

Toluono Tusela, a 39-year-old male living on the island of Nukufetau, along with other men on his island, has managed to escape the sharks and strong currents when they wade or walk through water to reach the islet of Fale and perform their traditional daily chores.

His life, and that of the other men on the island, would be safe if the bridge connecting the main settlement and Fale islet had been built. Mr. Tusela and most of the Nukufetau population live in the main settlement of Savave on Nukufetau island, but the nearest islet, known as Fale, serves as the base for their livelihood. It is where traditional food crops like pulaka (similar to taro but larger) are grown for each family, along with piggery farms, chicken farms, coconut, and toddy trees.

Every morning and afternoon, Mr. Tusela, like other men on his island, has to wait for low tide to cross from the main settlement to the islet of Fale to feed their pigs, cut and collect toddy juice, and tend to their pulaka plantations before hurrying back to the main island while the tide is still low.

"However, there were times when I had to attend community events or celebrations, or when I was out fishing, and then it got too late to go to Fale islet because the tide was in. But I had to feed my pigs, so even if it was dark, I had to go to Fale islet. It is very risky to cross at high tide. Nowadays, the current is getting stronger and stronger, but what can we do? We must go to Fale islet to get food and drinks for our family. So, we put pig food in unused suitcases to float and wade through the water to get to Fale islet."

"I've seen with my own eyes men older than me get swept away by the current, and many times I have come across sharks and ray fish when I swim to Fale islet, but thankfully, they have never attacked."

"Despite the risks, we still have to cross to the nearest islet of Fale to get food, toddy drinks, and pulaka for my family, cutting down expenses on food and sugar, which are very expensive in shops nowadays."

In an incident in the 90s, an islander named Mr. Iosefa Fonotapu was found dead in the sea area between the main island and Fale islet. Islanders and relatives believe the current was too strong, and he drowned.

On Fale islet, there are also wells that people on the island can use during droughts. During droughts, Mr. Tusela's wife and children cross to Fale islet to use the wells there for bathing and washing clothes while tank water at home is saved for drinking and cooking.

"I always worry about them when they go to Fale because they have to wait for the next low tide to come back to the main settlement, and if they miss it, the water will be high when they return."

As climate change takes its toll on these tiny islands, it also contributes to the dangers of crossing from the main settlement of Savave on Nukufetau island to Fale islet. Island Magistrate Mr. Teisio Faiaki said, "Nowadays, the space between the two islands has enlarged as cyclones get more intense and encroach on the coastal areas of both sides. Years back, it used to be around 70 meters wide; now it's about 100 meters wide," added Faiaki.

In its session in August this year, Parliament approved the motion raised by the new Nukufetau representative to Parliament, Honorable Panapasi Nelesone, for

a bridge to be built on Nukufetau island to connect the main settlement Savave to the nearest islet, Fale.

When presenting the motion, Honorable Nelesone said, "Building a bridge or crossing between the main settlement Savave and the islet of Fale has been a long-standing need that has been raised many times by former representatives to Parliament from his island but was always declined by past governments. It is a priority in the Island Strategic Plan 'Te Kaufata' and has also been a priority for the former member for Nukufetau, the late Honorable Fatoga Talama."

In support of the motion, Health Minister Hon. Isaia Taape said it is about time this bridge is built to ensure safe crossing for the people on the island from Savave to Fale islet to get food products and protect their health from getting wet all the time they cross to and fro Fale islet.

Minister for Work and Infrastructure Hon. Ampelosa Tehulu supported the motion and said it is an important infrastructure that the Government must fulfill for the safety of the lives of the people on the island traveling to and fro the islet.

"If there is a bridge, we do not have to wait for low tide, nor will it be dangerous for our wives and daughters to go to Fale islet and feed the pigs when we (men) are engaged or busy with other island activities," said Tusela. "We need to pay regular visits and work long hours in our pulaka plantation and our other farms instead of hurrying to return to the main settlement while the tide is still low."

In an interview, Honorable Nelesone emphasized that "there is an urgency for the bridge to be built; there is almost nothing on the main island that people need to live on; everything they need is on that islet, including crabs, and it is closer than the other islets. The many times the motion was raised in parliament since the 80s justify the need of my people for the bridge to be built."

"It is a gender issue as well. For families that do not have a man, women can just walk on the bridge to Fale to get coconuts, feed the pigs, or catch crabs. There are also health risks associated with getting wet from walking or swimming to the islet and then working for many hours in damp clothes at Fale islet before returning to the main settlement."

Parliament will dissolve in November this year. Secretary of Finance, who is also currently Acting Secretary to the Government, Mr. Taufia Patolo, said the motion for the bridge had been approved by Parliament; therefore, the Government has committed to it, but it is up to the Government when it will be fulfilled. He said there are a lot of things to do and prepare in the process. "It is not budgeted for

in the National budget being prepared for next year; however, the Government will work together with donor partners to get funding to build this development," added Patolo.

Ms. Siulai Fioana Elisala, a Tuvaluan who is the Project Management and Implementation Support Specialist (Consultant) at the World Bank Suva office, said the development is still in the early stages. Normally, in the process of preparations, a feasibility study needs to be carried out by a Geotechnical team to properly investigate and survey the site. "The information will assist in decision-making on the type of bridge and the most suitable design to be used, and in making a cost estimate for the project, taking into account proposed engineering advice for the design and structural design of the bridge," added Elisala.

Honorable Nelesone said he will continue to push the government about the need of his people for a bridge to be built to ease crossing and transportation from the main island to the islet, improve food security, and protect the health and safety of Nukufetau people. "I will also continue to remind the government that it is all about the life of the people on my island, and it must find donors to fund that need."

NUKULAELAE ISLAND TAKES THE LEAD IN PROVIDING SAFE HOUSES FOR FAMILIES ON THE ISLAND

After many years of worry and running around whenever a cyclone wave surge flooded the island, families on Nukulaelae Island now live safely in safe houses built by the Nukulaelae Kaupule (Local Government). Nukulaelae has a population of 568, according to the Tuvalu Population and Housing Report 2017. During past cyclones, wave surges have often swept onto land, flooding the island. There have been instances when unexpected wave surges suddenly swept onto land during normal weather.

While the Climate-Proof House project for the government is still in the preparation stage for the proposal, the island of Nukulaelae has taken the lead in providing safe houses for each family on the island due to flooding and other natural disasters that have affected families on the island. This project is a top priority for the island to fulfill in the Island Strategic Plan – Kafoa III.

The island uses its share of $100,000 from the Community Vessel Day Scheme (CVDS) money from the government every year to fund labor costs for this major project, while housing materials for the project are borne by the Government Special Infrastructure (SI) Fund of $200,000 per year for each island. Every year, the government distributes $100,000 from the revenue the country annually receives from the vessel day scheme to each island to assist with their developments.

Secretary of the Nukulaelae Kaupule (Local Government), Mr. Collin Namoliki, said, 'To date, 18 houses have been successfully built under the Island's Safe Housing Scheme, and thirteen families have already moved in. The Safe Housing Scheme started in the year 2019; 67 houses for families on the island were approved by the Island Falekaupule (the highest decision-making body for the island comprising heads and elders of families on the island) to be built under this scheme.'

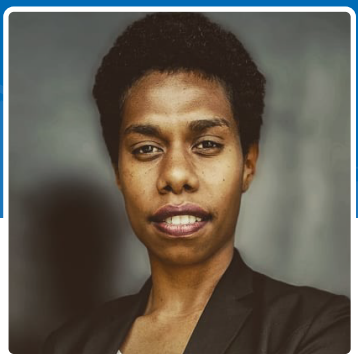
The new safe houses are of concrete structure and raised about 5 meters from the ground, with three bedrooms including a master bedroom, bathroom and toilet facilities, and a kitchen. Families on the island are thankful to the government for the Community Vessel Day Scheme and the Special Infrastructure Fund that has enabled the island to build safe houses for them. The head of one of the families that have moved into the new houses, Mr. Auega Fauila, said he now feels safe in his new home; he sleeps well at night knowing he no longer has to worry about running somewhere else when a wave surge floods his island. 'This new house is very safe for me and my family. I do not have to worry about seawater from waves flooding my house. I do not have to worry about my children and how to get them somewhere safe; we are safe in our new home,' said Mrs. Afelina Lupeni.

Tuvalu's Climate Change Director, Mrs. Pepetua Latasi, said climate change has led to changes in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and changing patterns. These changes are projected to continue for many decades to come, with further impacts on people and ecosystems. 'With the intensity of cyclones, cyclone surges will be higher; hence, there is a great need for our people to build houses that are more resilient to natural disasters. Building houses that are raised off the ground, such as the Nukulaelae Island Safe Houses scheme, is a critical response to minimize damages and impacts of storm surges. What Nukulaelae is doing is building houses that are stronger against natural disasters, especially flooding and inundations from storm surges and king tides,' added Latasi.

The main challenge to the project in the past years was the delay of housing

materials getting to the island, worsened by the lockdown of borders in the past two years due to Covid. However, although the work in the past years was done on a voluntary basis without pay, the men never gave up until now there is CVDS funding to meet labor costs for the project. 'Now the work is running smoothly and without delay as we now order in bulk, so the housing materials are readily available on the island for building 8 houses in a year,' said Namoliki. The Nukulaelae Island Kaupule, which is the working arm of the Island Falekaupule, is overseeing the project, while heads of the two main villages on the Island, Pepesala and Nukualofa, are in charge of work for the housing scheme as well as the list of families to have their houses built under the scheme, added Namoliki. The island has 49 more safe houses to be built under this scheme. A second phase has also been approved by the island to include a few families that were not on the list of the first phase. 'Even though there are other projects that the island has to achieve this year, including the construction of its Community Hall that is underway in the capital, this project of safe houses for families on the island is the number one priority and ongoing until all safe houses approved by the Falekaupule have been built,' added Namoliki.

The ISP is aligned with Te Kete - National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2021-2030, a broad national planning framework in which all subordinate island strategic plans, sector and corporate plans, annual plans, and budgets are aligned so they all follow the path towards achieving the country's national vision. Other islands in Tuvalu are using their CVDS funds and Government SI fund to fulfill developments of priority in their ISPs but not safe houses.



Florence Leah Lowonbu

Journalist, TV News Anchor - National Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC)

My full name is Florence Leah Lowonbu, but most people know me as Leah Lowonbu in the media. I currently work for the National Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC) as a Journalist, TV News Anchor, and the main host of the breakfast show called the Vanuatu Morning Show. I am also the weekly host of the STRET TOK program, where I interview leaders such as the Prime Minister about developments in the country. I have over seven years of experience as a journalist, and people throughout the country appreciate my work. I have received three awards: two from VBTC and one from the Media Association of Vanuatu. I live in one of the rural communities outside of Port Vila town on Efate Island. My future goal is to continue upskilling myself in the media profession so I can continue to contribute positively to the media industry of Vanuatu and the region. I firmly believe that media plays a very important role in development and guides leaders to make better future decisions.

MEETING THE URGENT NEEDS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: A CALL FOR IMPROVED PUBLIC FINANCE MANAGEMENT

Olen community, a mere five-minute drive from Port Vila, is home to Helen Tamata, a determined woman with a disability and a member of the Women Weather Watch program initiated by the Non-Governmental Organization Action Aid. Despite receiving early warnings during the devastating cyclones, Judy and Kevin, Helen faced significant challenges at the evacuation center. In a recent interview with Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC), she highlighted the pressing need for standard evacuation centers catering to the specific requirements of people living with disabilities.

"For those of us relying on wheelchairs for mobility, evacuation centers pose critical challenges. Many lack basic amenities like accessible toilets and proper bedding," Helen expressed. "Sleeping on the floor becomes daunting, especially when rain seeps in. Navigating the space and reaching the restroom require constant assistance."

A rapid assessment by the disability cluster following the cyclones confirmed the urgent necessity for evacuation centers tailored to the needs of people with disabilities. The crucial question remains: will the government allocate the necessary funds to upgrade these centers before the next cyclone season strikes in November?

According to the Ministry of Justice, there are no specific government funds earmarked for disability-related disaster response. Recent discussions involving the disability community and stakeholders led to an agreement: the government must construct two model evacuation centers in Port Vila and Lugainvill by 2024. This proposal was considered during the National Sustainable Development Goal forum earlier this year.

However, addressing the needs of people with disabilities requires more than just governmental commitment. Ginette Morris, the social welfare and disability coordinator, emphasized the necessity for collaboration. "The government alone cannot meet the needs of people with disabilities. We require cooperation between civil society, International Non-Governmental Organizations, and government partners," Mrs. Morris stressed.

In 2023, the government allocated approximately 20 million Vatu for the Disability Desk, primarily for administrative purposes. This allocation leaves limited resources for actual center construction or upgrades. Post-cyclone disaster responses, specifically for disability-related issues, fall under the Protection and Gender Cluster, with funds and relief supplies sourced from Non-Governmental Organizations.

Examples of evacuation centres used during recent Category 5 TC Lola.

Action Aid's assessment following the recent category five cyclone revealed a disheartening truth: many people with disabilities never make it inside an evacuation center. This could be due to the absence of accessible centers or the preference to stay in familiar surroundings. Presently, evacuation centers, often large community halls, church buildings, schools, or concrete homes, lack essential facilities such as toilets. Helen emphasized the need for health workers within these centers to assist people with disabilities.

Vanuatu, as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, is obligated to ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights for individuals with disabilities. The 2020 National Census reported that about 14.7% of the population, more than 60,000 people, have disabilities. This includes over half of the population aged 60 and above who reported having a disability, emphasizing the urgency of addressing their unique needs.

Despite political instability, Ginette Morris remains hopeful for strong commitments from the government and stakeholders to construct standard evacuation centers that cater to the needs of people with disabilities. Moving forward, it is imperative that the government's promises translate into tangible improvements, ensuring that individuals with disabilities in Vanuatu have access to safe and comfortable evacuation centers during times of crisis.

Image of Helen Tamata at her home in Olen area

Dale Luma

Business Editor - Post Courier

Hello, my name is Dale Luma, and I am from Papua New Guinea. I currently serve as the Business Editor at Post Courier, a prominent publication under Post Courier is South Pacific Post Ltd, a subsidiary of News Corp. My educational background includes a bachelor's degree in Literature with a minor in Journalism and Public Relations from the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). I completed my tertiary education in 2018 and embarked on my professional journey in 2019 when I joined The National newspaper as a business reporter. I dedicated three years to working with the print media company, covering a diverse range of business topics, including banking, mining, petroleum, and agriculture.

In 2023, I transitioned to Post Courier, where I assumed the role of Business Editor. My primary responsibility involves overseeing comprehensive coverage of various business sectors, providing in-depth insights and analysis. As a Business Editor, I am committed to delivering accurate and compelling stories that resonate with our readership. Through my work, I aim to inform and educate the public about crucial economic developments, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the business landscape in Papua New Guinea.

STIMULUS FOR SMES THROUGH THE NATIONAL BUDGET

In a country where 80 percent of the population still lives in rural areas, and a large portion remains unbanked, access to capital is a challenge, especially when it comes to starting a business. This makes it hard for someone with entrepreneurial spirit to start up, grow, reinvest, and further develop his or her business idea.

Papua New Guineans are business-driven people, and this can be noticed with the small informal table markets on the roadsides, manned by what Papua New Guineans term 'Table Mama' and 'Table Papa.'

To graduate from that into a micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) and further into a small and medium enterprise (SME) and beyond, is a far cry given the challenges relating to access to capital and finance in the country. And for those who were lucky to graduate into MSMEs, sustaining their business is still an issue. This is the story of David, a trade store owner, Delly, a PMV operator, and Teng, who also runs a Public Motor Vehicle (PMV) service. All three have always struggled to access that extra capital to further invest in their small businesses and to expand them.

The issue has always been accessing a credit facility designed specifically for MSMEs with low interest and reasonable repayment terms, depending on the commercial banks' criteria.

However, a wind of change came in the year 2019, which culminated in a change of government with the main agenda of developing the PNG economy, entailed in the slogan “Take back PNG and Make it the Richest Black Christian Country.”

With that motto, one of the government's main policy objectives to drive their

economic growth agenda was the development of MSMEs. Realizing the reluctance of commercial banks to provide finance to MSMEs, the government, through its yearly National Budget, earmarks K200 million to be allocated as security with banks in the country to run soft lending credit facilities for startups and MSMEs, and corporates as well. The government initially partnered with two banks in PNG, namely BSP Financial Group (BSP), the largest bank in the South Pacific, and the National Development Bank (NDB). BSP was given K100 million, and NDB received K80 million.

For David, Delly, and Teng, this was a much-needed initiative that they had been waiting for. Finally, their government was doing something to support them and other hard-working MSMEs in the country. Even sweeter for them, they were the first three to access finance under the K80 million facility managed by the NDB.

Says David: “I have been running my small trade store in my village for the last 10 years without any banking, but when I sent my application to the NDB, they approved it. With the loan, I will buy a new truck.” Delly recounts: “The four per cent interest for the loan is low. I want to thank the Prime Minister for the credit facility.” “I am obtaining the loan to re-fleet my existing fleet of buses. The price of a bus is very high,” according to Teng.

To ensure that the government continues to fund the MSME program, banks present reports to the Department of Commerce and Industry, the ministry responsible for the sector, on how much each bank issues in loans to applicants under the credit facility and how many people are benefiting from it. With the progress of the program, the government is now looking to partner with other banks and financial institutions to expand the program and reach a wider audience.

The media in the country also play an important role in terms of transparency, with the banks communicating their progress in implementing the government's MSME program through interviews and press releases of news articles, in addition to their normal reporting to the government.

Though the program is a work in progress, the government’s agenda in promoting MSMEs is gaining momentum, with public funds being earmarked from the National Budget to be accessed by the people in a program that, in the end, contributes to the economy at large.

Significantly, as MSMEs grow successfully and become bigger, they enter the corporate tax system, which means eventually more revenue for the government

to spend on much-needed goods and services to the benefit of all people in Papua New Guinea, and especially to the benefit of the large rural population. The media will continue to cover the funding and implementation of the MSME program to ensure accountability for public finance by all stakeholders.

Ian McDonald Kaukui

Senior journalist - Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC)

I am Ian McDonald Kaukui, a senior journalist currently working at the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC). I graduated with a Certificate in Journalism and Media Studies from the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE), now known as Solomon Islands National University (SINU). I am a dedicated reporter with a passion for educating and informing the public about critical issues such as climate change, economics, politics, education, and sports. Additionally, I actively contribute to advocating for gender issues and the rights of women and girls. My hobbies include watching football and staying updated with TV news.

GOVERNMENT'S $SBD 6M TOWARDS HONIARA 2023 PACIFIC GAMES CLEAN-UP QUESTIONED

As the clock is ticking down for the 17th 2023 Pacific Games to be hosted in the Solomon Islands from 19th November to the 12th of December, the much-debated $6 million allocated to the Honiara City Council for clean-up work in preparation for the Games is still under question regarding whether it truly serves its intended purposes.

Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, leader of the ruling party Democratic Coalition Government for Advancement (DCGA), launched the Government's Safe and Green Games strategy in March this year. As part of the strategy implementation, the government allocated a sum of $6 million from taxpayer money among the 12 wards, with each Ward Councilor entitled to $500,000.

The first objective of the Safe and Green Games is to provide a safe and secure environment in the host city and support the Government in successfully hosting the 2023 Games. This includes ensuring a peaceful environment with high visibility in terms of security personnel. The second objective is to beautify the capital city by engaging in a clean-up campaign involving everybody to achieve a long-lasting legacy beyond the Games.

Secretary to Prime Minister Dr. Jimmy Rogers confirmed that the fund is to be delivered in 5 tranches, with the final one to be paid just before the Games' official opening. Reactions continue to mount up and are varied because some Wards have cooperated well with the Ward Councilors in carrying out the work, while for others, little has been done despite receiving the funds.

James Tuamae from the Vavaea ward said that now that three tranches have already been paid, he expects 70 percent of the work to have already been completed in each of the wards, but that is not the case. He mentioned a lack of

coordination between his ward councilor and the community and questioned where the money was spent. Mr. Tuamae added that only a few people are engaged with the councilor, but their work output is very small.

Meanwhile, his Ward Councilor, Ezra Fo'oro, said he has done some clean-up in his ward but noticed that people didn't realize that 60% of the work should be done by the community, while 40% comes from funding assistance. He emphasized that the funding assistance from the government should only cater to the remaining 40% of the work, with the community being responsible as the owners of their community. Mr. Fo'oro mentioned that there are still some patching-up work that needs to be done before the opening of the games next week.

In contrast, Mataniko Ward, situated along the Mataniko River, is one of those that put the money where it was supposed to be. Its Councilor, Clement Terewauri, expressed his satisfaction with the funding assistance, which significantly helped his communities engage in a first-time community clean-up campaign. He stated that three tranches of payments were already made and went straight to the communities as appreciation for their work. He added that they only have a few more tasks left to complete before the opening ceremony of the Games.

Mrs. Jane Bana, a community member from Mataniko Ward, praised their Ward Councilor for bringing them together to carry out the work. She mentioned that the funding, though not substantial when compared to the population, helped many of them put food on the table and recognize the importance of cleaning their environment. She emphasized the health benefits of cleaning and its attraction for visitors. Mrs. Bana mentioned that they conduct clean-ups every week since the launch of the Safe and Green Games and will continue until the Games.

Lawrence Makili, Chairman of the Lord Howe Settlement, which falls under the Mataniko Ward and is situated beside the river mouth, expressed disappointment when his community was not included in the clean-up campaign. He highlighted the importance of continued funding assistance for maintaining cleanliness and proper waste management in the city.

Meanwhile, HCC Acting Clerk, Jefferson Patovaki, emphasized that the Clean and Green Games is the responsibility of everyone and appealed to various organizations and individuals within Honiara town boundaries to help keep Honiara clean before the Games.

HCC Director for Waste Management, George Bogese, encouraged Honiara residents and visitors to dispose of rubbish properly and reminded businesses and houses to clean up to 7 meters from their premises.

One of the well-known advocates for a clean environment in Honiara City, Judah Suimae, who runs a volunteer organization known as 'Friends of The City (FTC),' stressed the importance of coordinating the work on the ground. He emphasized the significance of character building for the next generation to maintain the cleanliness of the city and surrounding environment.

As observed, most of the wards are intensifying their clean-up efforts this week in anticipation of the Games' opening next weekend.

CDF'S NEW TURN TO IMPACT LIVES

With the recent plan to develop a new Constituency Development Fund (CDF) policy in the Solomon Islands, the public at large is looking forward with hope to benefit equally from developments in rural areas.

The Constituency Development Funds are public funds directly allocated every year from the National Budget to elected Members of Parliament for use in their electorates within their respective constituencies. This is controversial because Members of Parliament are normally elected to approve the national budget, share information with their constituencies, and check on the way funds are used by the government, not distribute the funds themselves.

As elsewhere, the question of whether the CDFs represent an effective use of development expenditure in the Solomon Islands is a topic of much discussion. Regarding general perceptions of CDF allocations, most citizens, especially voters, question the fairness of CDF expenditure across their constituency. The majority claim that CDFs are not fairly distributed.

It has become commonplace for Members of Parliament and their supporters to be considered the strongest advocates, while donors and civil society groups largely view CDFs as political slush funds detrimental to development. The amount available to individual MPs in the Solomon Islands now hovers somewhere between SBD 8 and 10 million (USD 1–1.3 million) per annum. CDFs currently constitute around one-third of the development budget, or between 10 and 15 percent of total budget outlays.

Over the past decade, public policy scholars and government officials have become increasingly interested in the use and operation of CDFs. However, there is little publicly available information on CDFs and their operation in the Solomon

Islands. Formal research into how CDFs are managed in practice and their impact on local development is necessary to extend the limited evidence base.

The Constituency Development Fund (CDF), aimed at developing each of the 50 constituencies in the Solomon Islands, is guided and handled by each constituency with influence from each Member of Parliament. Historically, only project proposal applications from Members of Parliament under the CDF have been approved, leaving those with unsuccessful candidates with hardly any projects. Doubts about the fund's credibility arise when producing reports publicly, showcasing where the money is spent and who actually benefits from it.

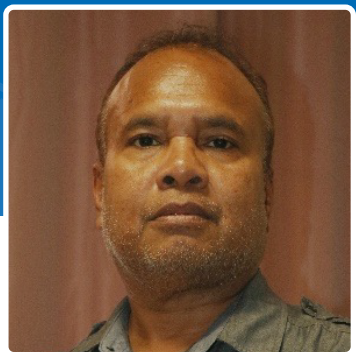
In some cases, legal action is taken, and individuals from the constituency office may end up in prison for misappropriating substantial sums of money meant for projects after all requirements have been completed by the recipients in the constituency. Such issues could be addressed through further investigation into the reports.

Additionally, since Members of Parliament have signatory authority over the funds, they can use the money however they please. This system has persisted for many years until 2021, when the Ministry of Rural Development engaged a new Permanent Secretary, Samson Viulu. Dr. Viulu, a young man with a doctorate, was well aware of the system and immediately worked on changing it by developing a new policy for the fund.

After conducting assessments, the ministry decided to create a new policy called the Constituency Development Fund Policy. The ministry compiled the bill and submitted it to the cabinet for approval before it is tabled in Parliament. Fortunately, the Cabinet has already agreed with the bill, and it is now ready to be tabled in Parliament before the end of the current year.

Once the new bill passes in Parliament and becomes a policy, it will remove the signatory authority of Members of Parliament from the fund, leaving it in the hands of the constituency development committee. The new policy will also specify areas where the money should be spent, especially in various sectors like agriculture, fisheries, health, tourism, and others, along with the processes and criteria to access the fund. Retirement processes will also be made available to the public since it involves public money.

The action taken by the new Permanent Secretary has been widely supported by the majority of the population, as it gives hope that once the bill is passed in Parliament, positive changes will occur in rural areas. Most people hope for significant improvements to address the economic challenges in the Solomon Islands, particularly concerning the lack of infrastructure, high unemployment, and a limited private sector, all of which pose significant development challenges. It is well-known that the country heavily relies on development assistance, while governance challenges limit state effectiveness.



Ongerung Kambes Kesolei

Radio host - The Ongerung Show

I'm Ongerung Kambes Kesolei, commonly known as Kambes. With over 15 years of experience in the media industry, I've immersed myself in various platforms, including print, radio, and television. My passion for writing led me to pursue a career in journalism after spending nearly two decades in science-related fields. My journey into the media world began as an editor and reporter for Tia Belau, Palau's oldest newspaper. Today, I host my own weekly radio show, The Ongerung Show, dedicated to exploring Palau's rich culture and history. Additionally, I serve as a panelist on the current affairs television program, Kausischakl, offering insights on critical issues facing our nation.

In 1989, I earned an Associate Degree in Liberal Arts from the Micronesian Occupational College (now Palau Community College). My work extends beyond Palau's borders, with contributions to prominent regional online publications such as the Guam-based Pacific Island Times, Fiji's Island Business, and The Guardian. Delving into a diverse range of topics, including politics, economics, tourism, the US military, cryptocurrency, culture, the environment, and climate change, I aim to bridge the gap between understanding and action, fostering a more engaged and informed Palauan society.

ILLUMINATING RESILIENCE IN PALAU'S BATTLE AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

In the global context, gender-based violence (GBV) persists as a formidable public health crisis, affecting women and girls universally. Despite age, race, or socioeconomic status, 31% of women aged 15-49 in Palau experience intimate partner violence, surpassing the global average (World Bank, 2023). Addressing this, Palau enacted the Palau Family Protection Act (FPA) in August 2010, underlining the government's commitment to combat family violence comprehensively.

Bill No. 8-147, SD2, HD2, introduced the FPA, a crucial legal instrument offering protection and effective remedies against family violence. Comprising three main sections, including a short title, legislative findings, and amendments to Title 21 of the Palau National Code, the FPA recognizes family violence as a serious crime against society.

In this landscape, the Ministry of Health and Human Services (MHHS) spearheads GBV-specific initiatives. The PAL: COVID-19 Response for Affected Poor and Vulnerable Groups Project, with a $209,000 USD budget over two years, is implemented by the MHHS's Division of Human Services. This project, facilitated by service providers BANGO and SKO, stands as the sole initiative in Palau with specific GBV outputs.

However, challenges in public finance management (PFM) have surfaced, impacting institutions crucial to combating GBV. Notably, the Palau Courts, responsible for protection order petitions and case monitoring, faced a budget reduction of $20,000 USD in the FPA Victims Assistance Fund in 2020.

The broader PFM mechanisms shaping the fight against GBV in Palau are evident in state budget allocations. The 2024 budget allocates $3,975,000 USD to the Judicial Branch without specific provisions for GBV judicial processes. Similarly,

the MHHS, with a total budget allocation of $13,872,885 USD, lacks identifiable specific allocations for GBV, constituting approximately 1.5% of the total MHHS budget.

In this complex financial landscape, Stella Fixico emerges as a symbol of resilience. Her journey, marked by abuse, unexpected pregnancies, and abusive marriages, culminated in her triumphant graduation with an Associate of Science Degree in Community and Public Health at the age of 50.

Stella's transformation from victim to hero gained momentum during her volunteer work at the Palau Red Cross Society. Overhearing a conversation about family abuse related to the PAL: COVID-19 Response Project, she found a platform to share her story. This unexpected turn led to a profound decision to empower others facing similar challenges.

Her courageous step into the public sphere was not without hurdles. In Palau's close-knit society, where private struggles often stay within families, Stella's decision to share her story exposed societal taboos. Yet, supported by her daughters and mother, she emerged as a vocal advocate against GBV.

Stella's story resonates with many who have faced abuse, prompting an outpouring of support and acknowledgment. Her collaboration with the Advocacy Group for Gender-Based Violence has further amplified her impact, reaching traditional women's groups and community organizations, as well as radio and television audiences.

In the few months since her public revelation, Stella has become a hero, not just

for herself but for countless individuals suffering in silence. Her impact is tangible, as evidenced by the heartfelt response from her community.

Sylvia Kloulubak, program manager of the Advisory Group on Gender-Based Violence, recognizes Stella's significance in delivering a powerful message to the community. Kloulubak emphasizes the importance of breaking the silence surrounding GBV, challenging societal stigmas that have historically kept such issues under wraps.

As Stella continues her mission, volunteering at the Palau Red Cross Society and envisioning a sanctuary for victims of violence, the role of PFM becomes crucial. The integration of gender perspectives in PFM systems will not only ensure sustained funding for GBV interventions but also catalyze mobilization to end GBV.

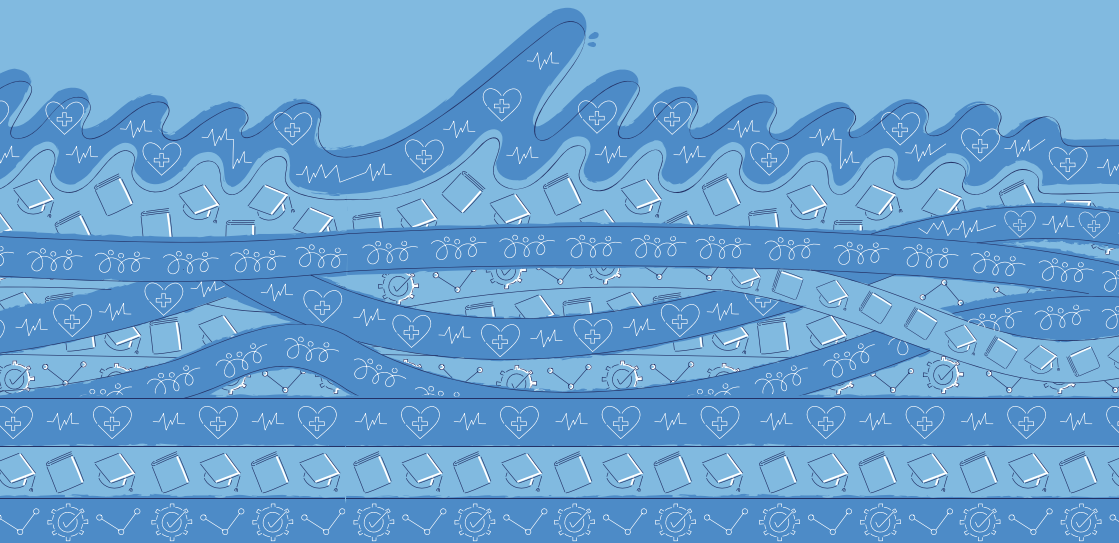
The PAL: COVID-19 Response Project serves as a prime example, showcasing the need for institutionalizing national mechanisms to fight GBV through sustainable financing processes. Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) emerges as a tool that, if implemented, could significantly increase allocations to GBV in Palau.

Stella Fixico's heroic journey stands as a testament to the power of resilience and the collective efforts needed to combat GBV. As Palau navigates the complex financial landscape of PFM, Stella's story illuminates the path forward—a path that integrates finance, advocacy, and the unwavering spirit of individuals like her in the pursuit of a violence-free society.

Empowering Pacific Communities Through Informed Action

In the vibrant tapestry of the Pacific, these Public Finance Management (PFM) Human-Interest stories illuminate the resilience, challenges, and aspirations of its people. Media professionals in the Pacific are not mere storytellers; they are champions of accountability, justice, and equity. Their narratives, supported by the UNDP Pacific's Vaka Pasifika Project, echo the voices of communities, urging for transparent, efficient, and equitable use of public funds.

These stories serve as a call to action, urging governments to translate promises into tangible results, especially in the face of climate change, natural disasters, and economic uncertainties. The challenges outlined—limited media coverage, lack of transparency, and accountability loopholes—highlight the pressing need for collective efforts. Strengthening media capacities, fostering systematic coverage, and demanding accountability are crucial steps towards a brighter, more sustainable future for Pacific nations.

Through the Vaka Pasifika Project, the European Union's commitment shines as a beacon of hope. By investing in informed journalism, citizen engagement, and responsive governance, we pave the way for resilient economies and empowered communities. As these stories continue to inspire, they also serve as catalysts for change, fueling a rising tide of public interest and activism.

In the Pacific Way—a way of unity, respect, and shared purpose—lies the potential for transformative progress. As we celebrate the victories and acknowledge the challenges, let us forge ahead, embracing the lessons of the past and the opportunities of the future. Together, through informed action and unwavering determination, we can build a Pacific where every citizen's voice is heard, every community thrives, and every public fund is a catalyst for positive change.