

New Australian International Development Policy Commonwealth Local Government Forum Submission

Background

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum brings together cities and local government, local government associations and ministries with responsibility for local government from across the 56 countries of the Commonwealth. It focuses on advocating for local decentralisation and good local governance; strengthening local capacity and policy; and building a network for exchange of learning, sharing good practice and policy research. CLGF's programmatic work is decentralised to regional teams across the Commonwealth, and CLGF Pacific is one of the leading providers and facilitators of, technical support and capacity building for local government institutions and practitioners in the Pacific region. Since 2000 CLGF Pacific has been focusing on the promotion of local democracy and good governance in the Pacific in line with the Aberdeen Principles on Local Democracy and Good Governance.

Based in Suva, CLGF Pacific works with national and local government and other stakeholders in the Pacific region to achieve these aims in a practical way. CLGF Pacific partners with central governments, provincial governments and city, town and outer island councils in Ten Pacific Island countries (Cook Islands, Kiribati, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) in its regional capacity building activities. CLGF also engages with Local Government organisations in Australia and New Zealand, as well as the Australian Volunteers Program, in support of activities in Pacific Island Countries (PICs).

CLGF Pacific has made notable progress in improving the way local government operates in the region, specifically in achieving meaningful outputs in the key areas of promoting sustainable urban development through programs and projects focussing on advocacy, leadership development, accountable structures and systems, enhancing service delivery, policies, institutional strengthening, building resilience and gender mainstreaming. We have received Australian government ODA funding in the past, particularly for the Commonwealth Local Government Good Practice Scheme, Women in Local Government project and under the Pacific Leadership Programme.

CLGF Pacific exhibits a clear Pacific identity and as a membership organisation, possesses a unique and extensive network of advocates for local government and has developed trusted working relationships with ministries responsible for local government, elected leaders and senior officials of local governments, together with the private sector, other development partners and other like-minded organisations operating in the region¹.

Key Challenges, Risks and Opportunities for Australia's development assistance.

As identified in the Terms of Reference, the challenges brought by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, often exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and creating further marginalisation, need to be at the forefront of development actors' work in the Pacific.

These challenges are particularly manifested at the local and community level, and impact significantly on local governments upon which there are high levels of expectations to deliver services.

¹ Regional organisations, development partners and academia including Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, UN ESCAP, UN Habitat, UNDP, UNCDF, UN Women, European Commission, Australian National University, University of Melbourne, Monash University, EAROPH, ICLEI Oceania and Home in Place Housing Services.

CLGF's submission will focus on the role of local government in addressing the challenges of the current development environment in the Pacific; highlighting the importance of localisation in ensuring the development is led by local people and reflects the needs and specificities of local communities; and identifying a range of opportunities available to the Australian government by factoring in sustainable urbanisation and particularly the role of local government in Australia's new International Development Policy.

Rapid urbanisation in the Pacific has also put significant pressure on governments at all levels to deliver adequate services. Nearly one-quarter of Pacific Islanders live in urban areas, a figure roughly half the global average. By 2030 this urbanisation level is projected to increase to a third of the region's population. New data suggests that projections have underestimated urban growth across many Pacific Island countries. As a result, policy makers are having to play catch-up, with wide-reaching consequences.²

CLGF, working with other Commonwealth partners and the Government of Rwanda, developed a Call to Action on Sustainable Urbanisation for the Commonwealth. Developed through a consultative process and including the voices of Pacific members, the Call to Action demonstrated the importance of sustainable urbanisation to achieving the SDGs and addressing the climate emergency. The Call also highlighted the potential contribution of the Commonwealth's networks to promote a multi-level and multi-disciplinary approach to ensuring sustainable and liveable cities and towns to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population. Commonwealth Heads of Government in June 2022 reiterated their commitment under SDG 11 to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, and resilient. To this end, the Declaration on Sustainable Urbanisation was agreed. This declaration underscored the intrinsic value of sustainable urbanisation to harness structural transformation for the world's urban populations. While the COVID-19 pandemic reversed some gains made in urban development and exposed systemic inequalities creating new vulnerabilities, it also created new opportunities to address social inclusion and cushion the urban poor from social-cultural and economic shocks.³

The Pacific Urban Forum

A further opportunity exists in respect to the Pacific Urban Forum (PUF), a regional event presenting a platform for urban stakeholders to debate what creates a sustainable urban future for the Pacific. Held every four years, the PUF brings together various urban stakeholders with diverse backgrounds such as national and local governments, policy makers, urban development practitioners and urban planners, civil society organizations, traditional leaders, local and international academia, private sector, development partners, among others.

Following the adoption of the Pacific New Urban Agenda (PNUA) and a renewed recognition of the many opportunities and challenges for the Pacific, the PUF aims to develop action plans, provide recommendations for urbanisation strategies and elicit voluntary commitments from different stakeholders in order to successfully anchor and implement the PNUA. The PUF provides the opportunity to:

- Raise awareness of the role of Pacific cities and towns for achievement of national and regional policy frameworks and agendas;
- Increase action and engagement amongst relevant stakeholders for implementation, review and monitoring of the PNUA;

² Trundle, Alexei. [Why cities are key to sustainable development in the Pacific Islands | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](https://www.weforum.org) October 2022

³ Communiqué of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2022, Para 106

- Improve the mechanisms for collection and exchange of knowledge and data on sustainable urbanization in the Pacific through open and accessible platforms for debates, sharing lessons learnt, best practices and good policies;
- Develop new partnerships to support an enabling environment for urban development in the Pacific;
- Be a call for action and define coordinated inputs for the next Asia Pacific Urban Forum and the World Urban Forum.

The first PUF in 2003 gave rise to the Pacific Urban Agenda (PUA) which was endorsed by the United Nations ESCAP Commission in 2004 and by the Pacific Island Forum Leaders in 2005. The PUFs in 2007 and 2011 reaffirmed commitments to the PUA, with the fourth PUF held in 2015 adopting the Pacific New Urban Agenda. The fifth PUF, focussing on *“Accelerating the implementation of the New Urban Agenda to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in the Pacific”* was held in July 2019 in Nadi, Fiji, and attended by over 200 participants from 25 countries, including high level representation from 13 Pacific Islands countries.

PUF5 also saw the establishment of the Pacific Partnership for the New Urban Agenda, recently re-branded the Pacific Urban Partnership (PUP)⁴, where eight organisations working on urban issues in the Pacific are collaborating to accelerate the implementation of the Pacific New Urban Agenda through a multi-stakeholder partnership. The partners include:

- United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)
- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia-Pacific (UNESCAP)
- Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF Pacific)
- ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI Oceania)
- Eastern Regional Organisation for Planning and Human Settlements (EAROPH)
- Home in Place
- Monash University Sustainable Development Institute
- University of Melbourne Centre for Cities

In 2021 the partnership organized a Virtual Pacific Urban Forum which further defined the workplan of the partnership and the priorities for the Sixth Pacific Urban Forum ([link to documentation](#)) Since 2019 the PUP has been actively contributing to local, regional and international forums on sustainable urbanisation.

Local government:

- is the level of government that has the most direct relevance to people’s daily lives, dealing with practical, day to day issues that directly affect people
- delivers many basic services like sanitation, water, primary health, health care, education and waste management, local economic development, amongst others, that are priorities for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, New Urban Agenda, etc.
- Provides an accessible way for citizens to participate in the local decisions that impact on their access to services, economic opportunities, and services
- is the ‘first help’ level of government that is expected to respond the impacts of natural disasters caused by climate change, sea level rise, drought and the recent COVID 19 pandemic
- has the local knowledge and experience
- has a critical role to play in addressing the impact of global climate challenges at the local level

⁴ Website: www.pacificurbanpartnership.org

As stated by the then Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Rt Hon Enele Sopoanga, at the Pacific Urban Forum in July 2019 - *“there are no solutions that are not local solutions.”* In summary, local problems must be addressed through local solutions supported by local institutions working with local communities.

However local governments in the region are generally experiencing significant capacity deficiencies and in some cases probity issues, that prevent them carrying out their functions effectively and meeting the expectations of their communities. Capacity strengthening across a range of local government functional and leadership areas would be an appropriate application of development aid. It is important that local governments and local communities are strengthened to be able to handle their own development. This approach ensures that aid is invested across the Pacific and reaches/is felt by a cross-section of communities rather than being channelled just to central government Ministries in capital cities. In most cases the central ministries responsible for local government are also relatively weak in terms of personnel and capacity, particularly in collating financial information and other data to facilitate decision making and support at the Ministry level is also important to effectively enhance local government across the region.

Encouraging, through ODA, the building of a more bottom-up participatory system to increase local government and community involvement in sustainable development should be considered. Buy-in across all the different sectors of government of this concept, with good support from National government and technical ministries, has the potential to help achieve this. It also has the potential to significantly extend the impact and reach of Australian ODA in the Pacific.

Local Government needs to have its place in the development space. The only way to do that is to ensure resources and capacity are in place to give them the confidence they need and to enable them to demonstrate capacity to deliver effectively to citizens. This is where ODA can provide meaningful support to make sure that local government are included and can participate fully in development and in meeting the SDGs and other global development targets which Governments across the Pacific have endorsed.

Recommendations:

The New International Development Policy includes:

- enabling sustainable urbanisation as it relates to smart and resilient sustainable cities and communities as a priority area for Australian development assistance
- development aid be channeled directly to strengthen local government in the Pacific, the closest level of government to the people – the ultimate beneficiaries
- Australia’s engagement in the Pacific Urban Forum process

Building stronger and more meaningful partnerships in our region

Recommendations:

Based on the above and CLGF’s experiences, we propose the new policy include:

- A focus on local community action, championed by local government.
- Options for Australian ODA to work with smaller regional development organisations that have a presence in the region and already have an established track record of strong partnerships based on mutual trust, respect and shared values.
- Establish formal mechanisms for regular dialogue on challenges and opportunities, recognising that best progress can be made by ongoing face to face discussions with regional partners.
- Promote and build networks between practitioners across the Pacific to promote learning, peer support and sharing of intra-Pacific expertise and good practice

Lessons from Australia's past development efforts

The slow pace of international development is a significant constraint. This is often due to Local Government not normally being included in decision making that affects them and their local communities. As an example, development partners, including DFAT provide funding for local projects to National Government because local government is perceived as being unable to properly manage development aid projects. CLGF Pacific has demonstrated that with greater investment in local capacity development the impact of Australian support can be enhanced and this localization is essential if progress towards the SDGs in the region is to be accelerated.

CLGF has in the past partnered with AusAID and DFAT in the delivery of successful development assistance focussed on local government capacity building. In particular the Commonwealth Local Government Good Practice Scheme, a cost-effective programme linking local authorities in developing countries with those in Australia through institution to institution, peer to peer technical exchanges. Also, the Pacific Leadership Programme which focused on strengthening women in leadership, including market women, and supported a variety of capacity building projects to strengthen local leadership and local delivery capability within a regional programme.

It is ***recommended*** that the new policy recognise the value of investing in the development of local government capacity building, recognising the opportunity of a focus on localisation to enable locally-led development, and building on the experience of work that has been successfully carried out in the past under the Australian aid programme. This should include using the experience and capacity of Australian local government in supporting developing partner nations.

Development assistance performance and delivery systems

Aid delivery systems should be focussed and efficient, and this can often be better achieved by providing smaller, focused, not for profit development organisations with the opportunity to bid for Australian development aid programs.

One of the major challenges of the aid programme in the Pacific has been a lack of buy-in to new approaches and a scepticism of solutions and approaches that are not felt to be relevant to the local context and culture. Smaller organisations, especially those based in the region, which are driven less by profit are often more able to build and invest in the kind of trusted relationships that are needed to enable the adoption of more accountable, open and transparent government and governance, including at the local level.

Ideally procurement processes should be opened up to embrace the contribution that more specialist organisations such as CLGF Pacific can offer, so as to reduce reliance on large consultancies. If this is not feasible, there should be alternative routes through direct grants, etc., where these skills can be retained in the program, ensuring that aid is not seen to be just a one-size fits all but can be framed to reach harder to reach communities in an impactful way.