

# Social cohesion and social protection in Pacific Island countries

AusAID Pacific social protection series:  
poverty, vulnerability and social protection  
in the Pacific

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# Contents

1. Introduction to the research .....	3
2. About this research paper .....	5
3. The importance of social cohesion and nation building in Pacific Island countries.....	6
4. Poverty, inequality and social cohesion in Pacific Island countries.....	7
5. The role of social protection in strengthening social cohesion and supporting nation building.....	9
6. Conclusion and recommendations.....	13
7. References.....	14

# 1. Introduction to the research

Pacific Island countries (PICs) have varying social protection systems, informal and traditional. These systems are important in supporting the most vulnerable members of society and those affected by personal and natural disasters. In the Pacific Islands social protection has typically been an area of low government involvement. Knowledge about formal social protection in the region is limited, and there have been no studies on the impact of such schemes on poverty, human development and economic growth.

There is no one agreed definition of social protection, but this body of research—commissioned by AusAID—uses the term to refer to the set of public actions aimed at tackling poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion, as well as providing people with the means to cope with major risks they may face throughout their life.

Social protection's core instruments include regular and predictable cash or in-kind transfers to individuals and households. More broadly, social protection includes instruments that improve people's access to education, health care, water, sanitation, and other vital services.

Traditional social protection in the Pacific Islands is stretched by new challenges, most recently the 2008–09 global food, fuel and financial crisis. This has led to greater attention to innovative social protection mechanisms that tackle chronic poverty, mitigate the impact of shocks, improve food security and overcome financial constraints to accessing social services. This attention has been driven by the success of mechanisms in other parts of the world.

In an environment with limited or conflicting information about patterns of poverty and vulnerability, knowing whether social protection represents a sound, or even appropriate, policy choice is difficult. This research looks at poverty, vulnerability and social protection across the dimensions of health and education, gender, social cohesion, economic growth, and traditional protection networks in the Pacific Islands. It aims to improve the evidence base on formal and informal social protection programs and activities in the Pacific region and make recommendations on support for strengthening and expanding social protection coverage so it can contribute to achieving development outcomes.

The research was conducted by social protection experts and is based on case studies in Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu—representing the three sub-regions of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia—and a review of secondary literature. It also commissioned a set of research papers:

- > an overview of poverty and vulnerability in the Pacific, and the potential role of social protection
- > a briefing on the role of social protection in achieving health and education outcomes
- > a life-cycle approach to social protection and gender
- > an assessment of the role of social protection in promoting social cohesion and nation

building in the Pacific

- > an assessment of the relationship between social protection and economic growth;
- > a review of the strengths and weaknesses of informal social protection in the Pacific
- > a micro-simulation analysis of social protection interventions in Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

## 2. About this research paper

This research paper—‘Social cohesion and social protection in the Pacific’—explores different perspectives on social cohesion across PICs and the role it might play. It covers the importance of social cohesion and nation building in PICs and examines poverty, inequality and social cohesion in PICs. The research paper then explores the role of social protection in strengthening social cohesion and supporting nation building. The last section draws conclusions and makes policy recommendations.

This research paper accepts that social cohesion and nation building are important issues for policy makers across the Pacific. Pacific leaders have argued that national cohesion is of high political priority in national agendas, alongside security, governance and law and order (Plant 2002). At the same time, the increased focus on providing aid and development in fragile and conflict-affected situations was largely based on the assumption that fragility and conflict were reduced by social protection and other services.

Two concerns are associated with attempts to use social protection to deliver socially cohesive societies, and these are considered throughout this research paper.

First, social cohesion is not easy to specify, with many countries and regions interpreting the concept differently or using terms interchangeably, such as social cohesion, state building, nation building, equality, social inclusion, stability, social contract and social capital. In some parts of the world outside of the Pacific—for example in Europe—terms can take on different meanings in different languages. This research paper reflects on commentaries about social cohesion and nation building and explores the implications for social protection policies and programming.

Second, there is no robust, comparable empirical evidence about the impact of social protection on social cohesion and its relations or on equality in developing countries. Despite the breadth of wisdom in the links between social protection and social cohesion—for example statements made about social cohesion and state building by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2009)—there is no empirical evidence of these links. Recent events in the Middle East and North Africa suggest that governments can deliver social protection programs as much as they want but this does not necessarily engender legitimacy. Tunisia, with its existing and relatively wide coverage of programs, is a good example of this. At the same time, political scientists have challenged statements about social protection and social contracts (Hickey 2010).

### 3. The importance of social cohesion and nation building in Pacific Island countries

Leaders in PICs have pointed to the importance of national cohesion as a key political priority, yet at individual level these countries have different experiences of social cohesion and nation building as well as different objectives. Some are relatively homogenous and the concept of 'the nation' is readily accepted—such as in Samoa and Tonga (Kidd et al. 2010). In others social cohesion is more of a challenge.

Melanesia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, for example, are home to a large number of ethnic groups. Divisions between the two major ethnic groups in Fiji undermine economic progress and political stability. In Solomon Islands, nation-building efforts are seen by some as important to creating a common identity, partly as a response to the civil unrest experienced from 1998 to 2003, but also to address unstable, fragmented government and political parties (Fukuyama 2008). A number of authors have suggested that while social cohesion in some PICs is necessary for traditional forms of safety nets to continue, they also point out that such group solidarity and reciprocity can conflict with broader nation-building objectives (Prasad & Kausimae 2010).

The roles of different agencies, including donors, in supporting nation building are also contested by some authors. Fukuyama (2008) argued that development partners concentrated on building the state at the expense of nation building. Braithwaite et al (2010) argued that nation building cannot be imposed by donors. Elsewhere, donor efforts to strengthen governance systems while building a coherent sense of nation among diverse ethnic groups—arguably a challenging and visionary venture—has been overlooked (Kidd et al. 2010).

## 4. Poverty, inequality and social cohesion in Pacific Island countries

Most discussion about social cohesion in the Pacific has less to do with the impacts of poverty and inequality<sup>1</sup> and more to do with conflict between social groups, the role of traditional and formal institutions and prospects for nation building. This is not to say that poverty and inequality are not important. Indeed as Kidd et al. (2010) noted, in contrast to the apparent high cultural value placed on re-distribution and equality among Pacific societies, countries experience high—and in some increasing—levels of inequality. Kidd (2010) further added that:

although high levels of inequality have been noted in the Pacific literature, its implications for development and poverty reduction in the region have rarely been discussed. Nonetheless there is a danger that if inequality is not addressed, unrest and social conflict could continue to increase, impeding efforts both to stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty.

Conflict between social groups is a key constraint to social cohesion and nation-building efforts. In Solomon Islands urbanisation and migration has created new social groups (Fukuyama 2008) and the conflict has weakened the social bond, diminishing trust and heightening suspicion (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2005). The conflict has diminished the authority of chiefs and loosened social cohesion giving young men, for example, 'a sense of independence and adventure' and creating the feeling 'they are no longer bound by traditional norms (ILO 2005). While the focus in Solomon Islands is frequently on violent conflicts between Indigenous groups, in Fiji, and Tonga, tensions are increasingly emerging due to perceptions of favoured access by non-Indigenous (particularly Chinese) communities and resentment about their economic success.<sup>2</sup>

This concern over the role of traditional social institutions (for example, *wantok* 'one talk' and *kastom*) is reflected across the Pacific because these institutions are central to social cohesion. However, there are very different views about how stable different Pacific Island states are and about the relationship between *wantok* systems and social

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<sup>1</sup> In Samoa, for instance, Amosa and Samson 2010 argued that while inequality was high (the Gini coefficient was 0.43 in 2002 social cohesion appeared strong. Plant 2002 looked at the links between ethnicity and poverty in PICs arguing that '... there is some evidence that pockets of immigrants from other islands can endure poverty and hardship in certain Pacific Developing Member Countries when they live in isolated communities, and can be excluded from broader systems of social protection.'

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication, Matthew Allen 2011.

cohesion and *wantok* systems and nation building (for example, Briggs' 2009 response to Fukuyama 2008). Some researchers see the diminishing role of

community as a key concern. Where these structures remain strong they are central to social cohesion. In Solomon Islands, for example, the development process could change the 'strong, stable form of social organisation represented by the *wantok*' to 'new and highly dysfunctional forms of social organisation like [the] urban gangs and warlord armies that are present throughout Africa and Latin America' (Fukuyama 2008). Conversely, in Samoa, despite increasing inequality, traditional social structures are key to ensuring that 'social cohesion is strong' (Amosa & Samson 2010). Similarly in Vanuatu, Freeland and Robertson (2010) argued that the highly effective structure of social support—based on shared resources, the extended family network and traditional values of *kastom*—has successfully combined with a post-independence sense of national identity, relative political stability, social cohesion and sound economic growth over the last decade. Furthermore, the strength of social cohesion in Samoa and Vanuatu is seen as the balance between traditional social support and a functional modern state (Amosa & Samson 2010; Freeland & Robertson 2010).

In contrast, others have suggested that the role of the modern state and institutional governance is fractured and unstable. In many PICs it is suggested that social cohesion *within* interest groups has hindered national cohesion and that political parties and their policies are driven by these interest groups with budgetary allocation and social spending based on group influences at the expense of national interests (Prasad & Kausimae 2010). This is exemplified in PNG with its physical geography and more than 850 language groups representing an extreme kind of social fragmentation and making communication and national unity challenging. Fukuyama (2006) argued that the challenge in PNG has been that much of the country operates outside of the state and is characterised by 'big man' politics in which status is derived from an ability to distribute resources to people in one's village. This also operates at national level with legislators seeking to distribute national resources to their own *wantok* or descent group, rather than toward the public good (Fukuyama 2006). Allen disputed this view in 2010 arguing that the clan-based, patron – client model of political behaviour only really applied to PNG's Highlands and had broken down elsewhere. A different view of the 'big man' illustrates how in PICs, including Fiji and PNG, which have the largest populations, electoral systems have changed to alternative voting ensuring a majoritarian system that could increase social cohesion (Reilly 2007).



# 5. The role of social protection in strengthening social cohesion and supporting nation building

With policy interest in social protection growing over the last few years, so has interest in the role and impacts of social protection interventions on broader dimensions of poverty and vulnerability. Many assumptions are made about the role social protection can play on creating social cohesion—largely based on arguments about its state-controlled redistributive role and the levels of social unrest in the absence of social protection.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the United Nation's Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) (2011) recently argued that:

social protection programs have been increasingly seen as an effective means to reduce poverty, inequality and social exclusion, as well as to ... promote social integration.

Countries that have reduced income poverty and improved social conditions on a significant scale have done so through integrating comprehensive social protection programs into broader social and economic development strategies (Cook 2011). At the beginning of the 2000s, the Asian Development Bank stated that:

social assistance can promote equity by ensuring access to human development opportunities that create a skilled and productive workforce and contribute to levels of social cohesion that assist in long-term economic development ... Generally, countries that have failed to redistribute social and economic opportunities to vulnerable groups have the lowest growth and continued instability. (Ortiz 2001)

While these arguments make intuitive sense there is little empirical evidence on the impacts or mechanisms by which social protection achieves better social cohesion outcomes. While the logic is clear—if a state can demonstrate its capacity to deliver social protection in an inclusive and equitable way, then people are more likely to recognise, respect and identify with it (Slater 2010)—there are problems in practice.

First, state delivery of social protection in low-income and fragile countries faces delivery challenges relating to capacity and corruption. Second, where there are high levels of inequality or exclusion, social protection can exacerbate and reinforce

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<sup>3</sup> There are significant conceptual inconsistencies in these arguments with inclusion, inequality, cohesion used interchangeably. These terms are found in the examples that follow.

discrimination rather than address it. Targeting, for example, can have positive or negative effects of inequality. Third, recent experience in other parts of the world (particularly the Middle East and North Africa) casts doubt on how far state legitimacy can be achieved through social protection. Tunisia, for example, has had relatively good levels of social protection and health and education services, yet the state was neither accountable nor viewed as legitimate.

There are two main mechanisms by which social protection is assumed to contribute to social cohesion.

The first mechanism is through universal coverage of social protection. As Cook (2011) noted, there is a:

strong conclusion in favour of universal access to basic social protection and services in order to maintain social cohesion, complemented by interventions that address discrimination, access to resources and their distribution ... comprehensive systems that lean towards universalism are more socially inclusive and contribute to security and social cohesion.

Targeting social protection programs at the poor, often the most feasible choice, potentially had a negative effect on social cohesion:

*because* social protection interventions are largely oriented towards targeting the poor resulting in social policies that are fragmented with gaps in coverage and high administrative costs and limited impacts on poverty and inequality. (Cook 2010)

Targeting the poor is also reflected in some discussions about cash transfer programs in Latin America where some have argued that targeting specific groups could create social tensions. Discussing Brazil's Conditional Cash Transfer Program, Loureiro (2009) argued that in many cases, 'there is the risk that benefiting Indigenous populations with cash transfers as opposed to poor non-Indigenous populations could create conflict and social tensions.' Others have argued that targeting the poor could foster social inclusion as long as social protection is coordinated with other social programs to strengthen poverty alleviation (de la Brière & Rawlings 2006).

The second mechanism is through changing social accountability relationships between beneficiaries, service providers and governments (de la Brière & Rawlings 2006). Here it has been argued that these can accrue downstream between service providers and beneficiaries, as well as upstream between local agents and central governments. The dynamics, however, vary considerably with program design and are affected by the degree of program decentralisation and level of civil society engagement (de la Brière & Rawlings 2006).

Assessing the potential of social protection in the Pacific to provide ancillary benefits to promote social cohesion and support nation building is difficult, given the limited interventions in place and the significant challenges to defining and measuring social cohesion. To date discussion has centred on traditional safety nets which explicitly support social cohesion (Box 1) (ILO 2005). However, it appears that countries with relatively high levels of social cohesion have the potential for social protection to

contribute to this cohesion more so than those with low levels of cohesion. For instance, Amosa and Samson (2010) noted that:

discussions with village chiefs and government officials articulated a constructive and flexible relationship of trust and engagement, which lays the foundation for proactive government interventions supporting social protection, inclusive development and building a bond between citizen and the State.

Conversely in Solomon Islands, Slater (2010) reported that 'the idea of social protection as a potential mechanism for increasing social cohesion at national level was usually met with laughter in interviews.'

### Box 1: Traditional safety nets and their impacts on social cohesion

In Fiji the *Solesolevaki* form of reciprocity involves the exchange of collective labour and promotes social cohesion and good relations within the community. In Samoa, the *fa'a Samoa* is the major network for socio-economic sustenance of relatives. It perpetuates Samoan cultural identity and contributes to a feeling of social cohesion and social responsibility. In Kiribati, kinship-based social protection systems pull resources together to sustain daily lives and maintain social cohesion. Systems of social support exist inside and outside the *utu*, which is the centre for social identity, common obligation, social support and communal relationships. Outside the *utu* other systems of social support take care of needs for goods and services which the *utu* may not be able to satisfy.

Source: ILO (2005)

In countries where social instability (or even conflict) are prevalent, the actions required to achieve cohesion are likely to be outside the scope and capacity of social protection interventions. At worst these interventions may exacerbate existing tensions. Slater (2010) argued that in Solomon Islands people identify with their *wantok* and, perhaps, their province and rarely call themselves Solomon Islanders. It is not clear if social protection would have the intended effects on social cohesion and state-building here, for two main reasons. First, it would have to be delivered effectively if it were to unify the idea of nation or build confidence in the state's capacity to provide for its people. Challenges with delivering basic services raise questions about the state's ability to achieve this. Second, if poverty or social category targeting were applied in communities with different cultural norms, social protection could potentially unstick the glue that holds societies together. Current development programs are implemented to avoid

creating tensions or social

instability by not targeting and therefore not providing more support to some people than to others. This means they do little to address relative deprivation. Pressures to address certain population groups therefore continue to present policy challenges in some PICs.

State delivery may increase tensions where it crowds out others delivering services or social protection effectively. Churches, for example, play a leading role in delivering many services in the Pacific (particularly education, but also transfers to vulnerable households) and undermining their effective delivery in the name of nation building would be counter-productive.

In some countries it is unclear how social protection contributes to social cohesion in the context of remaining challenges in state building. As Freeland and Robertson (2010) argued, basic questions about the roles of different institutions, and their relationships with each other, remain unresolved. So do questions around local community capacity to interact with the state and become active agents in their own development. Freeland and Robertson (2010) also argued that:

communities need to be empowered to deal with the state and operate within the formal economy, while at the same time keeping intact the structures and traditions that they value. Until now, the state has relied extensively on traditional structures for local governance, particularly in the area of law and order, without investing in building their capacity.

These unresolved questions pose challenges for developing social protection and for its potential or expected role in promoting social cohesion. It seems likely that social protection programs need to work with and build on existing strengths of traditional institutions to deliver safety nets. Experience has shown that community participation in designing programs can achieve outcomes against objectives and can be correlated with community cohesiveness. However, this depends on context and community capacity (Woodruff et al. 2010).

## 6. Conclusion and recommendations

There is limited evidence on the role of social protection in contributing to social cohesion globally and many views of this across the Pacific. A debate is emerging about state and nation building in the Pacific (for example Briggs' 2009 response to Fukuyama 2008). In the absence of evidence it is important to avoid making assumptions about the role of social protection in PICs.

Before incorporating objectives about social cohesion (or overlapping constructs such as social inclusion, equality, state building and peace building) a number of actions are needed:

- > more clearly articulating what terms such as social cohesion, inclusion and justice mean in different Pacific settings
- > better understanding of the scale or level at which social cohesion objectives might be appropriate (national, sub-national, community or *wantok* system)
- > basing decisions about social protection programs (in regard to social cohesion) on empirical evidence (and where the data or methods do not exist, working towards developing these)
- > ensuring that Indigenous or traditional community institutions are engaged in designing and implementing social protection programs (Loureiro 2009)
- > ensuring development projects do not bypass non-state institutions, such as local civil society organisations and religious organisations, particularly those that are important providers of social services. Bypassing them may do more harm than good (Fukuyama 2008).

These actions will likely require a closer collaboration between those who have a strong anthropological understanding of social and cultural relationships in the Pacific and those who are expert in designing and delivering social protection expertise. Even with closer collaboration, governments and donors should consider whether alternative actions or delivery mechanisms might be more effective. Examples include changing electoral systems to alternative voting so candidates must receive an absolute majority once first, second and third choices have been considered—in the hope that a majority will contribute towards increased social cohesion (Reilly 2007). Finally, donors need to consider whether their actions are crowding out local agendas for peace or nation building (Braithwaite et al 2010).

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