

PROJECT Governance

THE FORTNIGHTLY
INSIGHT

10 December, 2024



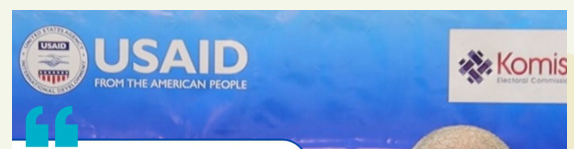
Participants at the Tonga EDAWG workshop

Tonga Electoral Commission Establishes Groundbreaking Elections Disability Access Working Group

27 November 2024

On November 27, 2024, the Pacific Community's (SPC) PROJECT Governance team facilitated a historic workshop in partnership with Tonga Electoral Commission (TEC), providing a platform for persons with disabilities to voice their challenges in exercising their right to vote independently.

(Continued on page 2)



I am so excited to see that something is being done in Tonga to strengthen the political participation for persons with disabilities. I am now starting to see something that I have been dreaming about for so long to ensure full participation of persons with disabilities in the elections. I have no doubt that that the discussions as part of the inclusive elections work done by TEC and SPC will bring about inclusion," Rhiema Miso, Director, Lavame'ata'e'iloa Association, Tonga.



The workshop marked the first time that Tonga’s Organisations for Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) were directly involved in such a dialogue with the Electoral Commission. Culminating in a historic decision, TEC have agreed in principle to establish the Elections Disability Access Working Group, a dedicated body aimed at breaking down barriers to electoral participation.

The Rt. Hon. Lord Ramsey Dalgety, Chairman of TEC, underscored the Commission’s commitment to fostering an enabling environment for all voters.

“We are looking forward to this work to ensure everyone is able to exercise their democratic right to vote on election day, ensuring that their voices are heard and creating an enabling environment for all persons with disabilities in Tonga,” Lord Dalgety said.

Established under the Electoral Act 2010, TEC is responsible for organizing and administering elections in the Kingdom of Tonga. The new Working Group, chaired by the Supervisor of Elections and including representatives from six OPDs, will focus on enhancing accessibility through comprehensive recommendations, such as polling venue audits and the development of inclusive electoral materials.

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Rt. Hon. Lord Ramsey Dalgety, Chairman of TEC



The workshop’s outcomes are now shaping a Four-Year Work Plan for Inclusive Elections, designed to prepare for Tonga’s upcoming 2025 General Election and beyond. Developed collaboratively by TEC, OPDs, and SPC advisors, the plan outlines practical strategies to address the barriers faced by persons with disabilities in the electoral process.

Key focus areas include:

- **Polling venue accessibility audits to identify and mitigate obstacles.**
- **Development of inclusive voter education materials and accommodations in accessible formats.**
- **Disability inclusion training for TEC staff and polling officials to enhance support for persons with disabilities.**
- **Sustained collaboration between TEC, the Working Group, and SPC to address evolving challenges.**

Workshop participants celebrated the initiative as a milestone for Tonga's disability community. Ms. Finau Tele'ahiva, a participant with a disability, expressed her enthusiasm:

"The workshop is helpful for persons with disabilities because we want to fully participate and cast our votes in all places and venues where elections happen. It's helpful because all OPDs are included, and it's the first time for us to have a workshop like this and work directly with the TEC."

She emphasised the need for ongoing awareness within TEC about the diverse challenges faced by persons with disabilities during elections, highlighting the importance of long-term collaboration to create meaningful change.

SPC's Governance and Human Rights Officer, Ranjesh Prakash, who is leading this initiative, highlighted the alignment with SPC's People-Centered Approach, which prioritises equal participation in democratic processes.

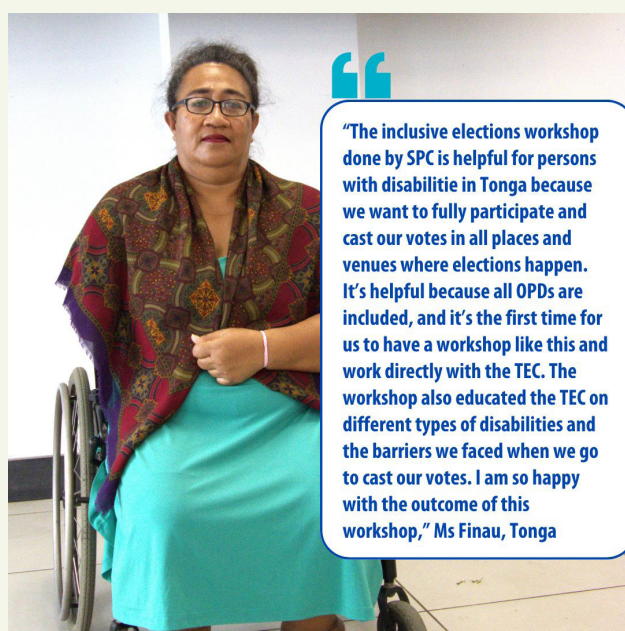
"The vision of the inclusive elections work in Tonga is to build a society where elections are inclusive, accessible, and equitable for all, ensuring that no one is left behind," Mr. Prakash shared.

Supported by SPC's Human Rights and Social Development Division through its Promoting Just, Engaged, Civic-minded, and Transparent (PROJECT) Governance Program—funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—this initiative builds on existing work and experiences from similar programs in Fiji and the Republic of the Marshall Islands to tailor solutions for Tonga's unique context.

The establishment of the Tonga Elections Disability Access Working Group and the Four-Year Work Plan represents a transformative step towards making the 2025 General Election a model of inclusivity and will set a precedent for future electoral processes that reflect the values of equity, transparency, and accessibility for all citizens.

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*Ms. Finau Tele'ahiva,
Participant*



So what?

The Tonga Electoral Commission's (TEC) creation of the Elections Disability Access Working Group is a pivotal step in inclusive governance. This initiative, developed in collaboration with SPC and Tonga's Organisations for Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), empowers persons with disabilities to participate fully in the democratic process. Through a Four-Year Work Plan, the group will address barriers to voting via accessibility audits, inclusive materials, and disability training. By fostering collaboration and prioritising inclusion, TEC is setting a new standard for equitable elections in Tonga, with the 2025 General Election poised to exemplify accessibility and empower all citizens to exercise their rights.



Joy Waffi – Inclusive Governance Program Manager on CARE’s component of PROJECT Governance presenting at the AAC. Seated is Chair of the Panel, Dr. Annabel Dulhunty, Lecturer, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University

PROJECT Governance represented at the 2024 Australasian AID Conference



3-5 December 2024

Over 3-5 December, at the 2024 Australasian AID Conference in Canberra Australia, CARE talked about its work under the PROJECT Governance in the Pacific initiative. The presentation was part of Panel 3d - ***Gender and transformative change: foreign policy, conflict and leadership.***

Titled ***“Her Voice, Her Leadership: Promoting Inclusive Governance in Vanuatu and PNG”***, the presentation highlighted CARE’s efforts to promote inclusive governance by empowering women and breaking down male gendered stereotypes of women in leadership.

In both Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea (PNG), CARE has worked with communities to break down gender barriers and promote women’s participation in decision-making processes. This approach aligns with national strategies, such as Vanuatu’s National Gender Equality Policy and PNG’s Bougainville Community Government Act, which aim to ensure more inclusive and decentralized governance.

CARE’s work has demonstrated that when women are empowered with the necessary skills and confidence, communities function more effectively, and governance becomes more inclusive. However, the paper also addresses the challenges women face, including societal backlash, limited support from male counterparts, and traditional gender norms that restrict women’s participation in leadership roles. CARE uses the Gender Equality Framework to mitigate these risks and foster long-term change.

The presentation emphasised the importance of gender-sensitive governance structures, such as community development committees (CDCs), which create safe spaces for women to engage in decision-making. It also discussed the integration of traditional and formal governance systems, where male leaders play a crucial role in supporting women’s leadership.

So what?

Sustainable development relies on women’s active role in governance to ensure equitable resource distribution and address marginalised groups’ needs. CARE’s work in Vanuatu and PNG highlights the impact of empowering women through community-led approaches that challenge gender barriers and stereotypes. Inclusive governance enhances decision-making and community outcomes, despite challenges like societal backlash and entrenched norms. CARE advocates for greater investment in initiatives that amplify women’s voices, foster leadership, and create inclusive systems for transformative, sustainable development.

A busy end to 2024



November 2024

CARE International in Vanuatu is maintaining the momentum and continuing to contribute to a responsive Central Tanna Area Administration through building active, educated, and inclusive structures. November has been busy with PROJECT Governance assisting **17 tribes across 101 hamlets and villages** across Central Tanna to elect their pillar council members. Pillar councils represent the churches, youth, women, people with disabilities, and businesses and are a key part of the area council structure. Once set-up, the five pillar councils will:

1. Address priorities that cannot be addressed by community development committees at tribe level. These may include larger more widespread health issue for women or initiatives such as a sports complex for all youth to benefit from; and
2. Provide the space for area council pillar representatives to plan and budget more inclusively as well as elect new pillar representatives to the Area Council when the office bearers' term is over.



CARE rep explaining the pillar council structure



Imanuene Tribe members that took part in electing their pillar council



Namas Tribe pillar Council going through understanding VNCW structure by VNCW rep



Nipikas Loyane Tribe pillar council discussion



Nipikas Loyane tribe pillar council with set up team (CARE, AC Pillar, VNCW rep)



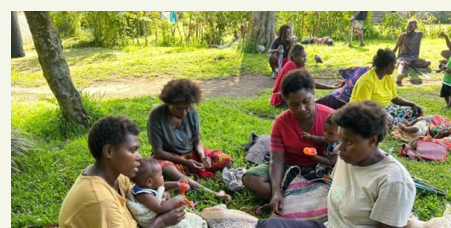
Nisinam Tribe pillar council with set up Team (CARE, VNCW, AC women Pillar, AC Disability Pillar)



Set up team presenting the purpose of the pillar Council set to Namas Tribe



Set up Team-Dorothy Bel VNCW REP, Madeleine Naul Central AC women rep, Sylvie Niras CARE, Tom Iaken Central AC Disability rep



Women Pillar at Imanuene Tribe discussing and electing Women Pillar

So what?

The Pillar council as a structure works towards and in support of a sound, just and responsive local governance model, with Pillar representative at the tribal level informing the development plan of the local council e.g., the need for a sports complex for young people. Next steps are for pillar councils to strengthen their capacity and understanding through workshopping the Tafea Provincial 5-year Strategic Plan which covers priorities such as enhancing public engagement.



Photo: Veronica Meriri – Ward Member, Keriaka Community Government, at the 2nd Leadership and Team Building Workshop in July 2024.

Women Champions in Bougainville’s Community Governments: Overcoming Barriers with Strength and Resilience



On Wednesday 20 November 2024, CARE International in PNG project officer Ruthy Sawa spoke with four dedicated women members of the Keriaka Community Government (CG) in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. Their stories reveal the many challenges they face in balancing their roles as leaders with family pressures, lack of support from their husbands and male counterparts, and community expectations. Despite these obstacles, these women continue to lead with resilience and a strong commitment towards the betterment of their communities.

Roselyn Tommy shared that while her husband supports her work, family issues, such as her son’s education and the lack of cooperation from her male counterpart ward member, have been significant challenges. She was the driving force behind the formation of her Ward Steering Committee (WSC), despite limited backing from her counterpart ward member and the community.

Rachael Katsi, although initially reluctant to run for office, put her hand up with encouragement from her husband. However, since taking up her ward member role, she has faced constant challenges from him. With the support of chiefs, youths, and church leaders, she has successfully formed an active WSC, proving that even in the face of personal challenges, teamwork and community support can make a big difference for women in leadership.

Veronica Merisi, in contrast, enjoys strong support from both her spouse and her community. After attending the February Leadership and Team Building workshop, she excitedly shared her newfound knowledge with local leaders. Facilitating the power walk in the community was quite an empowering experience for her.

Jacklyn Tevu, who was initially reluctant to become a ward member, faces strong opposition within her own village. Despite this, she remains committed to her community and believes in the potential for change, even if it’s a slow process.

So what?

These women are true champions—facing personal and societal barriers, yet they continue to serve their communities with courage and determination. Their stories are not isolated. These are the resilient women that PROJECT Governance is supporting to have enhanced voice and leadership. Transformative change in men will make a big difference for women in leadership. While a good number of men, including chiefs in Community Government have changed, there is still more work to be done.



Workshop report on: “Countering threats of disinformation and other harmful speech in Fiji”



3-5 December 2024

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in collaboration with the with the Fijian Elections Office (FEO) organized a workshop titled “Countering Threats of Disinformation and Other Harmful Speech for Elections in Fiji” in Suva, Fiji on June 12, 2024. Following the successful completion of the event, IFES worked with the FEO to produce a comprehensive report outlining workshop outcomes and recommendations for future action to counter harmful speech in elections. The report acknowledges the intersection of elections and information integrity and that election outcomes influenced through manipulating traditional or social media content. Furthermore, the FEO recognises the critical importance of free and fair elections as a foundation for democracy and that any threats to the democratic process undermines the interests of all Fijians.

The primary outcome of the workshop was to identify key stakeholders in Fiji in order to work collaboratively towards strengthening information integrity. These stakeholders include government agencies such as the Ministry of Justice, civil society organisations, community leaders, mainstream media entities and social media influencers. The report emphasises the importance of ongoing adaptation and collaboration given the evolving nature of technology and advances such as artificial intelligence (AI).

The recommendations for the FEO include developing an information integrity response plan for elections, establishing an elections task force with a structured workflow and a systemic classification of the level of threat and actor behaviour, establishing resources needed to run countermeasures and improving coordination between public and private stakeholders. The report also provides an overview of the group discussions where barriers, short-term and long-term priorities, and stakeholders were identified through thematic group discussions.

So what?

The drafting and dissemination of the workshop report among all relevant stakeholders by the FEO demonstrates its commitment to build a strong, multi-stakeholder strategy towards information integrity during elections. FEO emphasizes formulating proactive measures to mitigate digital threats and promote fact-checking. There is also an emphasis on the importance of increasing digital media literacy. This is an indication of the potential future opportunities for IFES, FEO and other stakeholders to work together towards making these commitments a reality. IFES’ support to develop these strategies and contribute to digital literacy are already underway in consultation with the FEO.

Snapshots



Ranjesh Prakash, the Governance and Human Rights Officer with PROJECT Governance, presenting at the Tonga EDAWG workshop



Joy Waffi with panel members at the Australasian AID Conference



Tonga EDAWG Workshop

MARK THE DATE

10 December:
Solomon Islands Electoral Commission Strategic Planning Committee Workshop - Solomon Islands

12-13 December:
Solomon Islands Electoral Commission Strategic Planning Workshop (internal SIEC participation only) - Solomon Islands

24 December:
SPC offices close for Christmas Holidays

2 January 2025:
SPC offices open for 2025

For more information, please contact:

Ashley Bowe, Chief of Party:
ashleyb@spc.int

Xolani Zitha, Deputy Chief of Party:
xolaniz@spc.int

Kalpana Nizarat, Communications & Visibility Officer:
Kalpanan@spc.int

Visit our Website:
<https://projectgov.org/>