



PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM SECRETARIAT

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FORUM ECONOMIC OFFICIALS MEETING

FORUM ECONOMIC MINISTERS MEETING

10 – 12 August 2022

Port Vila, Vanuatu

AGENDA 4D: INCLUSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION AND RECOVERY

Purpose and Recommendations

Purpose

This paper provides an update on a status of monitoring of socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. This includes focus on inclusive social protection systems and recovery as we look to ensure regional initiatives continue to contribute to the wellbeing of Pacific communities as highlighted in the 2050 Strategy of the Blue Pacific Continent recently endorsed by PIF Leaders. The paper also provides at [Attachment 1](#) a draft Concept Note for consideration by Forum Economic Officials for a regional event on inclusive social protection and recovery that will look at women, early childhood development, youth, and persons with disability.

Summary

In 2021, Forum Economic Ministers endorsed the socio-economic impact assessment of COVID 19 in the Pacific, which exposed economic and social vulnerabilities in the areas of health, financial, education and social systems as countries faced increased unemployment, closure of small businesses, disruptions for learners, and reported increased incidences of gender-based violence, social unrest and poverty.

The socio-economic impact assessment (SEIA) Taskforce established to conduct this assessment was co-chaired by the Secretariat and the Pacific Community and involved CROP agencies. The Taskforce completed the work commissioned by FEMM with continued monitoring work where able and reporting through the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Taskforce to inform specific policy areas for consideration at the Forum Economic Ministers Meeting in August of 2022.

Findings from the assessment and on-going monitoring on the socio-economic recovery efforts recognizes the importance of strengthening education measures, support for private sector, addressing gender-based violence and inequalities, and recommends further consultations on inclusive social protection systems and recovery that will support the needs of our vulnerable communities. This will provide the opportunity to look at areas such as labour policies for increased employment opportunities, understand social security benefits, look at universal social protection measures and strengthen the design of life span social protection support that can assist families and individuals.

The Secretariat will work on proposed regional approaches on inclusive social protection and recovery that will inform the development of the Blue Pacific Economic Strategy (BPES) ; and development of the Implementation Plan for the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific. To progress this, discussions with CROP agencies and partners will be part of the process.

Acknowledging significant work has progressed on issues such as early childhood development,

youth, support for persons with disability and gender responsive budgeting issues within the context of the revitalization of Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration as endorsed by Leaders¹ in July 2022, there is opportunity to progress regional in-depth discussions including non-traditional forms of social protection that will contribute to the core goals of the BPES, within the context of the 2050 Strategy.

Based on these discussions and on-going COVID-19 socio-economic recovery efforts, a concept note has been developed proposing a regional event² on inclusive social protection and recovery for FEOM to endorse for further consideration at FEMM. The regional event proposed will provide a platform for Members to look at policy design options on inclusive social protection that are contextual and relevant. Recommendations through this process will be taken back to FEMM for their endorsement at their next meeting.

A. Context and Background

The continued monitoring and analysis from partner agencies capture available information for assistance provided to monitoring of recommendations from the SEIA report 2021 and is on-going for Members information.

2. Countries continue to implement national COVID-19 Recovery plans and strategies in collaboration with key partners and agencies that respond to key recommendations highlighted in the 2021 report on the impacts on women, youth, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable communities.

Health and wellbeing

3. Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) continues to threaten the region with countries committed to implementing the Pacific NCD Roadmap identifying 29 indicators that are being monitored. Regional efforts are underway for collaborative efforts on Eliminating Childhood Obesity, mental health and psychosocial support and other key health concerns of COVID -19.

4. On-going support is provided to early childhood development reporting on expenditure tracking and budget analysis in 5 Pacific countries by UNICEF recommending a comprehensive approach to policies for children and pregnant women. As highlighted by the World Bank's Human capital index, Pacific children will only achieve 47% of their development potential unless provided with the best possible health and education services and programmes.

5. While addressing these we need to closely monitor the increased cases of child neglect, physical and sexual abuse of our children as reported for example by the Fiji Child Welfare Act National Database recording 1,719 in 2020 and less to 1,518 in 2021. While these numbers show a decrease, gender-based violence reported an increase of 606% by Ministry of Women Fiji in 2021 compared to 2020.³ It is important to work closely with education systems to ensure gender equality and education are included in learning and curriculum development.

Education pathways

6. There is continued support provided by development partners in the education sector under the Pacific Education Regional Framework (PacREF) following impacts of school closures and disrupted learning. While learning was disrupted, countries such as Fiji and Kiribati reported

¹ <https://www.forumsec.org/2022/07/17/report-communicue-of-the-51st-pacific-islands-forum-leaders-meeting/>

PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM WOMEN LEADERS MEETING Outcomes, June 9, 2022

² This may be considered as a conference or capacity building event that will look at regional approaches or policy guide on inclusive social protection.

³ Ministry of Women and Social Welfare Fiji, 2021

successful pass rate for Year 13 and 74% pass rate for Year 12 2020. There was a 1% decrease in Year 13 compared to the results of 2019 and a 1% increase in Year 12 results when compared to the 2019 results. Education systems will continue to report on outcomes through regional monitoring mechanisms.

7. Several initiatives are underway that support and will increase employment opportunities for our children and young people as we also work towards strengthening the Technical, Vocational, Education and Training (TVET) and Sport training and accreditation in the region.

8. A partnership with the Oceania National Olympic Committee and the Pacific Community has successfully seen the development of micro-qualifications as well as qualifications recognized by the Pacific Qualifications Framework for 3 areas, Sport Management, Strength & Conditioning and Technical Coaching. Career pathways in the sports arena allows our Pacific youth and children professional skills and opportunities to contribute to economic recovery and growth.⁴

9. To continue to inform regional discussions on labour mobility, the Secretariat is finalising a comprehensive report on labour mobility in the Pacific for consideration by Forum Trade Ministers later in the year.

Inclusive social protection and recovery

10. With the impacts of COVID-19 globally and its significant impact in the Pacific, countries have continued to work on strengthening public financial management systems (PFM), additional social protection initiatives, and tailored budget allocations to focus on specific areas heavily impacted by COVID-19. These areas include unemployment, food insecurity, education, increased gender-based violence, and other forms of violence against children resulting in social unrest, mental health issues, and poverty. There has been an upsurge in requests for psychosocial support since the onset of the pandemic, indicating the high mental health toll that people face.

11. While our national governments respond to the impact of economic shocks on fiscal deficit and public debt sustainability, we need to recognize the importance of ensuring economic and fiscal policy responses does not crowd out the public spending on essential health and social services and humanitarian needs. This was also highlighted at the Pacific Regional Conference on Debt Sustainability convened by the Secretariat in April 2022.⁵

12. The 2022 Regional PFM Symposium also convened earlier this year recognised the importance of inclusive budgeting including gender responsive budgeting as in the case study for Fiji and the work by the Pacific Disability Forum in the region.⁶ Other examples for Fiji show that they have the broadest inclusive budgeting schedules with multiple ministries providing budget allocation specific for disability inclusion.

13. Social protection assistance during COVID-19 were put in place as temporary measures across the region. This support differed with each country but generally included assistance to women, and children, COVID-19 allowance for persons with disabilities, and support to social insurance schemes.

Traditional or informal social protection

14. As evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, formal social protection measures were insufficient and struggled to meet the basic needs of affected populations and provide the necessary

⁴ <https://www.oceanianoc.org/press/sport-education-experts-to-review-osep-micro-qualifications-progress>, 26/07/22

⁵ PIFS Debt Sustainability Conference, April 2022

⁶ PDF presentation delivered at Pacific Finance Management, April 2022

support required. Across the region, non-formal workers were left out of formal social protection assistance by government increasing social risks of food insecurity, community violence, gender-based violence and for children unable to attend to education commitments.

15. Traditional social structures and safety nets provided the care and support needed for individuals and their families as reported in the socio-economic report 2021, with increased mental health issues and anxiety evident for example with small business operators.⁷ Traditional knowledge and culture played a significant role where food sharing practices responded to food shortages for families, barter system for goods or services provided many families with needed resources and necessities.⁸

16. Diaspora communities whilst known to provide welfare support and social protection-oriented support to nationals that are overseas, their engagement and contribution to families and communities during COVID-19 at home have also provided significant support during COVID 19.

Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
28 July 2022

⁷ Pacific Trade and Invest Report, 2021

⁸ Changes and adaptations in village food systems in Solomon Islands A rapid appraisal during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, pg 4

PROPOSED REGIONAL APPROACH TO INCLUSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Purpose

This Concept Note outlines a region wide approach in the form of a regional event that will provide a platform for Members to discuss and explore opportunities of strengthening inclusive social protection systems and recovery and the alignment to the strategic pathways as presented in the endorsed 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent under the People Centered Development thematic area.

Objectives:

2. In this context, the Secretariat will work closely with partners and CROP agencies to convene a regional event on inclusive social protection systems which will allow Forum Members to discuss and identify regional approaches that responds to the policy needs at national level around the following:

- i. building an **understanding** of the existing inclusive social protection policies in place at national level and emerging social issues,
- ii. providing the opportunity for Members to identify and address **vulnerability, inequality and social exclusion** when looking at inclusive social protection and recovery.
- iii. identifying opportunities for innovative, transformative, and appropriate fiscal approaches to cope with the impacts of COVID-19 and the ongoing challenges of climate change,
- iv. building **resilience of social protection systems, including traditional social support networks**, when looking at external shocks, that considers the diverse cultural contexts and needs of population groups across the region,
- v. strengthening regional cross-sectoral **coordination** through dialogue and collaboration that will enhance inclusive social protection systems as outlined in the recently endorsed 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

Background

3. With the impacts of COVID-19 globally and its significant impact in the Pacific, countries have continued to work on recovery strategies and increased collaborative efforts in addressing unemployment, private sector and small business opportunities, social protection initiatives, continued education, prevention of gender-based violence, and other forms of violence against children, health issues, and poverty.

4. While our national governments continue to explore opportunities to create fiscal space and sustainably manage fiscal deficit and public debt, we need to recognize the importance of ensuring

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economic and fiscal policy responses does not significantly reduce the public spending on essential health and social services and humanitarian needs. This was also highlighted at the Pacific Regional Debt Conference on Debt Sustainability convened by the Secretariat in April 2022.⁹

5. The 2022 Regional Public Financial Management Symposium also convened earlier this year recognized the importance of inclusive budgeting including gender responsive budgeting as in the case study for Fiji and the work by the Pacific Disability Forum in the region.¹⁰ Other examples for Fiji show that they have the broadest inclusive budgeting schedules with multiple ministries providing budget allocation specific for disability inclusion.

6. Countries continue to implement national COVID-19 Recovery plans and strategies in collaboration with key partners and agencies that respond to key recommendations highlighted in the 2021 report on the impacts on women, youth, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable communities. This regional conference will provide the opportunity for countries to dialogue and identify strategies that are transformative, relevant, fit-for-purpose, and contextual.

Methodology

- The proposed regional event will take place over a three-day period and will involve development partners and regional agencies that may participate as panelists on their technical areas of expertise on inclusive social protections systems and recovery strategies.
- The regional conference will open with a scene setting session and presentation of the recently endorsed 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and the alignment to the strategic pathway that reflects the importance of social protection that targets vulnerable communities in the region.
- All Forum Members that work on social protection systems and policies at national level will participate in the conference with maximum participation of 50 participants and all sessions will be delivered and managed by moderators that will guide the presenters and facilitate questions and answers.
- The event will be as interactive as possible, including the use of Q&A sessions following panels to allow participants to make links to their own national policies and actions.

Proposed timelines

Activity	Timeline	Responsibility
Consultations on developing program for the regional conference	September	PIFS/Partners
Finalised program and panelists/presenters	October	PIFS/partners
Delivery of regional conference/event	November	PIFS/Partners

⁹ PIFS Debt Sustainability Conference, April 2022

¹⁰ PDF presentation delivered at Pacific Finance Management, April 2022

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Resource implications

7. Consultation are underway with partners for collaborative approach for the event. Virtual participation will also be considered