

Advancing local government in Pacific Island Countries: a practitioner reflects

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Abstract

This paper presents the author's reflections on efforts to advance the scope and role of elected local government in the Pacific Islands. It focuses primarily on the Commonwealth Local Government Forum Pacific Project, which has been operating since 2000, but also looks at broader issues around decentralisation and devolution, legislation and funding for local government, democracy and good governance, promoting better practice, sustainability and resilience, and the importance of a sound evidence base for developmental programmes and projects.

Keywords: Pacific Island Countries, local government, local democracy, capacity building

Introduction

This paper presents the author's reflections on almost 20 years of direct and indirect involvement with developing local government in Pacific Islands Countries (PICs). In this context, 'local government' refers to the 'Western system' of elected or appointed municipal government. However, the paper also reflects on interactions between local government and parallel sub-national and traditional systems of governance where appropriate.

The primary focus will be on outcomes of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum Pacific Project (CLGF Pacific), which since 2000 has been working with a robust local government network encompassing Cook Islands, Kiribati, Fiji, Marshall Islands,¹ Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

¹ Although not a member of the Commonwealth, Marshall Islands has actively participated in donor-funded CLGF capacity building projects.

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Based in Suva, Fiji Islands, CLGF Pacific collaborates with in-country and other partner organisations to strengthen local democracy and build capacity for sustainable development at the local level. It does this through advocacy, capacity building, provision of technical assistance, peer to peer support and regional exchange of learning. The aim is to ensure that local government is well positioned to play its key roles in good governance, service delivery to communities, and national development. This requires close working relationships and strategic partnerships with donors, cities and local government authorities, ministries responsible for local government and community development, traditional leaders, regional and community-based organisations, as well as academic and professional networks across the Pacific Islands and beyond.

Over its lifespan CLGF Pacific aimed to contribute to improving local governance in terms of leadership, institutional structures, systems and policies, gender equity, and more recently sustainability and resilience. The paper draws on experience and outcomes from these and related activities to highlight key issues and factors that impact local governance across the Pacific Islands.

Small states' perspectives on decentralisation

CLGF Pacific has repeatedly encountered views that 'Western' forms of sub-national government are for the most part unnecessary or inappropriate in Small Island States due to their geography and small national populations, the resulting proximity of national government to local communities, the absence in most countries of large cities, and the existence of traditional systems of governance focused on village life and the role of chiefs. Certainly, this is a distinctive context compared to other regions such as Africa (where a colleague once described a city of 500,000 people as 'small city where everyone knows each other') and requires a different approach to intergovernmental relations.

In general, however, decentralised local government in those small states has a definitive role to play and can work effectively, albeit not always 'across the board'. Western, elected local government is a legislative creation of the state (traditional structures are also legislated in some countries such as Tuvalu and Samoa). Although an unencumbered and creative operating environment for local government is desirable under genuine decentralisation, it is important that there be checks and balances, and that consistency be maintained, given that ultimately the central government (through a responsible minister) is answerable for the performance and conduct of local municipalities.

Nevertheless, consistent with Commonwealth principles for local democracy and good governance (discussed later under 'Promoting good governance'), municipal councils should have the benefit of clearly defined roles and responsibilities that are respected by central government. And in carrying out those responsibilities, they should be primarily accountable to the people; this is the foundation of local autonomy. Local government provides important opportunities for citizens to participate in governance processes through standing for election and determining local issues. In this regard, the return of elected

local government in Fiji after its suspension in 2009 is to be applauded and will open up more opportunities for community participation.

In the author's experience, the sharing or devolution of power by central governments to give municipalities more autonomy does not come naturally in the Pacific and is not something to be treated lightly. It requires a good balancing act so that both sides – central government and local authorities – are not in a confrontational relationship and can work together to create an environment for effective and reliable local governance. Among other things, this involves ensuring local government has access to the resources and capacity to initiate, plan, prioritise and implement in order to justify giving local communities their autonomy.

CLGF Pacific has been encouraged in its beliefs and efforts over the years by consistent messages from stakeholders that the institution of local government matters. It matters to a broad range of people in many ways: almost always local government was seen to have a place as a true partner in governance and as an important service provider. But this message was regularly tempered by the call that local government needs to perform better and adapt to meet the increasing and changing expectations of the community and other stakeholders, as well as respond to new threats and challenges.

Capacity building

When planning its activities, CLGF Pacific has always been conscious of the changing environment in which local government operates across the region, a message reinforced by the global impact of climate change and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Programme and project initiatives are always informed by the requested needs of country partner organisations. Here are some thoughts on specific projects undertaken over the past 20 years.

Pacific regional local government capacity building programme

Stretching from 2005 to 2014, this programme funded by New Zealand Aid was CLGF Pacific's flagship initiative of the time and established the organisation as the 'go to' development partner for local government. The programme was initiated in late 2004 at a Regional Symposium on Local Governance in the Pacific held in Suva, the first of its type in the region focusing exclusively on local government. An initial five-year programme emerged from the symposium, operationalising its 14 recommendations aimed at improving quality of life for Pacific communities through strengthened local democracy and good governance. The programme was made up of over 120 separate activities during its initial and extended phases. Activities revolved around research, professional development, civic awareness, intergovernmental/civil society dialogues, gender and human rights in local governance, legislation review, local elected leadership development, financial management, strategic planning, local economic development and exchanges of personnel.

The programme adopted in general a ‘back to basics’ approach to capacity building. This worked reasonably well, but in hindsight the early stages did not adequately factor in related complexities around some intergovernmental relationships, geopolitics, traditional structures and differing paradigms. Broader perspectives were applied in the design of subsequent phases and other initiatives.

A Technical Advisory Panel (TAP), comprising representatives (political and professional) from national and local government from each of the participating PICs and donor partners was established to plan and oversee the project.² This mechanism worked well and provided further opportunities for collaboration. A monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system was developed with support from the University of Technology Sydney and implemented by the TAP, ensuring M&E was part of the programme from the outset. The ‘most significant change’ methodology was applied later.

The capacity building programme was particularly successful in encouraging other development partners to recognise the importance of effective local government in service delivery and to national and regional development, and to start to support the sector.

Pacific capital cities forum

Also emerging from the capacity building programme was the Pacific Capital Cities Forum, working collaboratively on issues unique to PIC capitals. Several successful partnerships were established, notably between Port Vila, Honiara and Suva.

The strategic importance of capital cities, as distinct from other cities and towns, is that these are often the largest urban areas in the country, are focal centres of economic activity and growth, the seat of government, a ‘melting pot’ of cultures, the ‘window’ to the nation and support to other urban centres.

Given the focus on regionalism, particularly as advocated under the Pacific Plan, and the increasing globalised world that major cities have to work within, there are significant advantages to be gained from a network of capital cities in the Pacific. These include opportunities to:

- enhance awareness of current and emerging trends in urban policy, management and leadership, and encourage innovation and strategic thinking
- analyse strategic challenges in the context of global economic integration and national development, and collectively promote the concept of well governed cities
- collect, analyse and apply experiences from the region, supporting regional cooperation and sharing of best practices, and providing opportunities for peer reviews
- advocate on a national and regional basis for the important role of local government in national development, promoting shared learning and cooperation between levels of government.

² The TAP was chaired and motivated by regional practitioners, with particular mention of the efforts of Rikiau Takeke (Kiribati), Malolo Amosa Tavita (Samoa), Cherol Ala (Vanuatu) and Joseph Huta (Solomon Islands).

Commonwealth local government good practice scheme (GPS)

The GPS is a Commonwealth-wide initiative of CLGF. Funded by Australian Aid and initially introduced in the Pacific in 2000, the GPS predominantly focused on Papua New Guinea. It utilised the proven successful mechanisms of council to council, peer to peer, technical support, plus on-the-job training to help build local capacity and skills. A total of ten partnerships between local governments in Australia and New Zealand and partners in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu were supported, as shown in the table below.

Papua New Guinea	
Waste management and community health	Alotau/Sunshine Coast; Mt Hagen/ Orange; Madang/Adelaide; NCDC*/Townsville
Litter control, street beautification and the environment	Mt Hagen/Orange; Madang/Adelaide; NCDC/Townsville; Alotau/Sunshine Coast; Kokopo/Mt Barker
Financial management and property rating	Alotau/Sunshine Coast; Madang/Adelaide; Kokopo/Mt Barker; Goroka/Hunter
Town planning and urban development planning	Alotau/Sunshine Coast; Mt Hagen/ Orange; Madang/Adelaide
Administrative systems, procedures; community engagement and regulatory services	NCDC/Townsville; Kokopo/Mt Barker
Information technology and information management	NCDC/Townsville; Alotau/Sunshine Coast; Kokopo/Mt Barker; Goroka/Hunter
Tourism development	Alotau/Sunshine Coast
Social equity for women	Mt Hagen/Orange
Solomon Islands	
Programme design and ongoing support	Honiara/Kapiti Coast (New Zealand)
Staff technical support (CEO, customer services, administration and finance)	Honiara/Kapiti Coast (New Zealand)
Staff technical support (town planning)	Honiara/Dunedin (New Zealand)
Staff technical support (engineering)	Honiara/Maryborough; Honiara/Fraser Coast
Tuvalu	
Staff technical support (operations and service delivery)	Funafuti/Lake Macquarie

*National Capital Development Commission, Port Moresby

Notes: All partnerships/exchanges were with Australian councils except in the Solomon Islands; the Mt Hagen/Orange and NCDC/Townsville partnerships were already in place when CLGF commenced the Pacific component of the GPS.

This was one of CLGF Pacific's more successful and cost-effective initiatives. It capitalised on the goodwill and commitment of councils in developed countries supporting their colleagues on the way up. The scheme involved a long-term commitment by all partners resulting in an enduring relationship with two-way benefits. The Pacific Islands partners greatly appreciated the skills and capacity development, also working with peers instead of consultants; and the Australian partners particularly valued the opportunities for staff development which participation in the GPS offered them. Trade and other economic and social development opportunities also emerged from the partnerships. Overall, the GPS contributed to the positive branding of local level government both in Australia and in partner countries, notably Papua New Guinea.

It was disappointing that funding for this programme ceased in 2012. The reasons were not due to the approach as such (which was widely recognised as innovative and successful) but rather because it was a small programme for the donor with outwardly high administration costs. Although talks were held at the time around incorporating the GPS in wider Australian Official Development Assistance (ODA) programmes, unfortunately the private companies now managing the Australian Aid programme did not buy into such delivery mechanisms.

CLGF Pacific's overhead and operational costs for the GPS were also questioned, however, these were naturally higher by ratio as all staff time from partners was contributed at no cost. In retrospect, reporting of the expense categories could have better reflected the true ratios. Nonetheless, interest in this programme still remains high and it could easily be reinstated if donor support returns.

An independent evaluation of the CLGF Pacific Project in 2014 commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the New Zealand Aid Programme supported the value of the GPS and recommended it be restarted. It was calculated by Local Government Professionals Australia and CLGF Pacific that Australian and New Zealand Councils contributed value of \$4 to every \$1 of ODA funds as all staff inputs were provided as contributions (EvaluationConsult 2014, p. 23). The programme also brought leveraging opportunities for community participation and people to people connections in schools, churches, hospitals, civil society groups, sports, arts and culture. The evaluation found that reinstatement and expansion of the GPS Pacific-wide would be of great benefit to localities and build on other CLGF Pacific work: other countries such as Kiribati and Vanuatu were keen for this to occur.

Honiara city council capacity rebuilding programme

In 2004, following the civil tensions of 1999–2003, CLGF Pacific was requested by the Solomon Islands Government to consider a programme to support the restoration and enhancement of governance and basic service delivery by the Honiara City Council (HCC). The request was aligned to the then government's objectives for sustainable urban development and maintenance of peace and stability. Detailed capacity building actions across all functional areas of HCC were developed and substantial funding support secured from the New Zealand Aid Programme for a range of activities carried out from 2005 to 2011. This was a broad-based technical partnership targeted towards achieving HCC's vision of an inclusive, stable, sustainable, and well serviced capital city

Aiming to ensure the greatest impact, the programme included a mix of approaches to effect the needed capacity development including direct support for in-line senior staff appointments, financial assistance for materials and equipment to enhance service delivery, technical staff exchanges with New Zealand and Australian councils, and significant technical assistance for specific functions and assignments.

This programme also presented one of the first of many opportunities for CLGF Pacific to collaborate with other like-minded organisations including Local Government New Zealand, Kapiti Coast District

Council, INGENIUM NZ (the institute for engineers), Local Government Professionals Australia, Maryborough City Council/Fraser Coast Regional Council (Australia), UN-Habitat, Australian Volunteers International, Volunteer Service Abroad (New Zealand), among others. The support and enthusiasm of the HCC Councillors, ably led by the Lord Mayor of the time, Hon Andrew Mua, and council staff, together with the ten or so dedicated technical experts recruited for the project activities made this one of the most successful, enduring and satisfying initiatives undertaken by CLGF Pacific.³

Significant achievements of the project included:

- A six-fold increase in the council's own source revenues (principally local taxes, property rates and service charges).⁴
- Improved service delivery capacity, particularly in the areas of solid waste management, roads, markets and health clinics.
- With HCC's greater capacity to deliver better services and improved governance, improved working relationships with central government agencies developed, including cooperation as had never been seen before, on key strategic issues such as land, decentralisation, urbanisation and physical planning, security, and conflict prevention.
- Improved local leadership, particularly relating to the complexities of conflict and fragile situations, local economic development initiatives and the 'parallel' economy.
- Successful implementation of community engagement strategies, particularly improving relationships with informal settlements which in the past had been openly hostile to the council.

The project provided key lessons for all partners and stakeholders, notably around the clear links between effective and equitable municipal service delivery and conflict prevention; the critical role of sound financial management, governance and accountability; and the value of wide-ranging community empowerment in advancing sustainability, community cohesion and the legitimacy of the council (Sansom and Whitaker 2009).

It also highlighted the need to achieve visible 'quick wins' at the beginning of the development process to strengthen ties among stakeholders and build support for rebuilding initiatives, as well as the fragility of development gains in such a complex and troubled environment. However, at the same time the project demonstrated the effectiveness of a whole-of-institution approach coupled with significant

³ Particular acknowledgement is due to the belief and unyielding support of Dr Mike Reid from Local Government New Zealand; Mark Dacombe, then CEO of Kapiti Coast Regional Council; and Rebecca Spratt (then NZAID).

⁴ Due almost entirely to the work of CLGF Associates John and Rosemary Leigh, two local government finance professionals of the highest calibre. John's untimely passing in 2011 was heartbreaking for all his many friends in Honiara and at CLGF. He will not be forgotten.

appropriate financial and human resources, taking enough time to ‘do the job’, and what was thought at the time to be a sustainable exit strategy. Nevertheless, it was later agreed that further technical support was required to fully embed the improvements made and to support economic development. This led to a new two-year CLGF Pacific/New Zealand Honiara Economic Development Sustainable Urban Programme (HEDSUP), which was implemented from 2015 to 2016 focusing on economic opportunities for the residents of (and visitors to) Honiara through further improved management, governance and delivery of essential services by HCC.

Pacific urban partnership

One of the most significant recent initiatives in development partner collaboration was the formation of the Pacific Partnership for the New Urban Agenda in 2020 (renamed the Pacific Urban Partnership (PUP) in 2022). This brings together eight development organisations⁵ working in the urban sector in the Pacific region.

The PUP aims to enable the implementation of actions arising from the Pacific Urban Forum and the Pacific New Urban Agenda by supporting the countries of the region to achieve sustainable urban development. It seeks to rally implementing partners, and to mobilise resources for regional and cross-country learning and development across different sectors to achieve better integration and synergies.

PUP members, in partnership with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Government of Fiji and Suva City Council held the successful Sixth Pacific Urban Forum (PUF6) in Suva in July 2023 (see Trundle at al. 2023). This event provided the opportunity to reflect on the key issues facing the urban sector in the Pacific post COVID-19, and resulted in the ‘Suva Statement for a Sustainable Urban Pacific’ which encouraged all countries and stakeholders to, amongst other things: *“Strengthen the pivotal role of cities, towns, local communities and their regions to pave the way for a brighter future, empowering youth to drive economic opportunities, foster innovation, and contribute to the resilience and prosperity of the entire Pacific region.”*⁶

CLGF Pacific is well credentialed to help action the PUF6 recommendations. Since 2007, CLGF has partnered with UNESCAP, UN-Habitat and others to hold similar quadrennial events⁷ aimed at drawing attention to rapid urbanisation in the Pacific, develop strategies to address this and elevate the issue on the regional development agenda. This remains a work in progress, however the active participation of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in PUF6 is certainly encouraging for the future.

⁵ UN-Habitat; UNESCAP; CLGF Pacific; ICLEI Oceania; Home in Place; EAROPH; Centre for Cities, University of Melbourne; Monash University Sustainable Development Unit.

⁶ https://pacificurbanpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/PUF6_OutcomeStatement.pdf

⁷ Titled Pacific Urban Forums since 2011. The first such event was held in 2003, initiated by Alastair Wilkinson, then with UNESCAP.

Support to libraries

During the early stages of the CLGF Pacific regional programme, discussions with Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) raised the issue of support to municipal libraries. CLGF Pacific's planning had not previously considered including libraries, but it was then decided that LGNZ would carry out a scoping mission to assess the level of need and demand from discussions with Pacific councils. This mission was highly successful, and convinced CLGF Pacific to include support for municipal libraries from 2008 onwards. Subsequent achievements included the establishment of three new libraries in Fiji, as well as donations of used and new books from libraries and publishers in New Zealand, also computers, to improve the book stocks and facilities at municipal libraries in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

This project activity, although not originally planned and then greeted with some scepticism, turned out to be one of CLGF Pacific's more successful and satisfying endeavours. The lesson learned was that, as in this case, it is extremely difficult and unwise to ignore or resist the infectious passion and commitment of dedicated professionals.⁸

Legislative reform

Consistently, review and reform of the legislation governing local government has been raised by stakeholders, particularly councils,⁹ as being required to improve their service delivery capacity and local governance generally. This ranks highly in requests for technical assistance from CLGF Pacific. In response, work has been carried out on local government legislation review over the years and at various levels in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Kiribati. Most legislation dates back to colonial days with subsequent ad hoc amendments dealing with particular issues that needed legislative remedy.

Appropriate legislation is the foundation for effective local government (see Sansom 2013). It is important that the legislative framework reflects the current operating environment and expectations of stakeholders and is sufficiently flexible to deal with as many situations as possible, even 'unknown unknowns'. Legislation should match the important regulatory functions of local government with its enabling role in community social and economic development.

In reviewing existing legislation, the temptation is to start with the existing provisions and decide what needs to be changed, i.e. take a 'legalistic' approach. However, experience has shown that the most effective means of revising local government legislation is to apply the 'policy informing legislation'

⁸ This project was propelled by the enthusiasm and innovation of Ms Jill Best, then Chief Librarian of Tauranga City Council, and her daughter Stella. Even in retirement, Jill continues to support libraries in the region as a CLGF Associate.

⁹ In particular the strong advocacy led by outstanding local government practitioners Charles Kelly in Solomon Islands and Azam Khan in Fiji.

approach. Consideration of the actual legal drafting of amendments should be the final phase of the process, not the first. The process of preparing a ‘layman’s draft’ of new legislation prior to drafting has proven workable.

Increasingly, both central governments and communities are expecting councils to deliver better services, provide value for money, be transparent and accountable, and to make the right decisions. Councils are also expected to adapt to the changing environment where technology, sustainability, economic pressures and increasing expectations are at the forefront.

In addition, local government is faced with more contemporary issues that were not envisaged in the original legislation, particularly those around sustainability and resilience, such as the impacts of climate change, environmental degradation, disaster planning and response, social justice, community cohesion, urban poverty, citizenship, human rights and the like.

That being the case, the legislation development/review process should look at key strategic and policy-based issues around what local government is expected to do, how it should be structured and financed, the governance and management systems that should be in place, and what systems are required to monitor performance.

Local government legislation review enables the future of local government. It presents a unique opportunity to modernise and empower local councils, meet community expectations and examine the regulatory system to ensure the legislative framework is relevant and empowering, and relieve any unnecessary regulatory burdens.

However, experience has shown that this is not a task to be taken lightly. An effective review requires commitment and political will, together with a good deal of policy research and wide-ranging consultations. This is a demanding process, even in countries like Australia and New Zealand, so it is perhaps not surprising that despite there being strong motivation for wholesale reviews of local government legislation in the Pacific, and guidance available, minimal action has so far been taken on this front. Political will may weaken in the face of the volume of work and processes involved, particularly where there is limited capacity. On the other hand, it may be that the current legislation (often inherited from the colonial days) has served local government well over the years and may only need to be amended and updated periodically.

By way of examples, CLGF Pacific supported a partial review of the Honiara City Act as part of the rebuilding project referenced earlier. From the outset there was recognition of the need to review some elements of the Act to restore public confidence in the electoral process and to underpin good governance. The process began in 2004–2005 with the appointment of a Review Committee and preparation of terms of reference. However, little was done. After the return of an elected Council in

2006, the Act review was back on the agenda in 2008, but again lapsed, likely due in part to day-to-day pressures and political and staff changes. As a result, the Council continues to operate under legislation with deficiencies in important areas.

In 2018 the Fiji government decided to carry out a review of the Local Government Act 1972. A Review Committee was established and terms of reference developed. CLGF Pacific is providing ongoing technical support to the review process including expert advice to the Review Committee, preparation of background papers, community consultation processes, guidelines and the like. As in Honiara, however, substantive actions on the review are yet to materialise.

Funding local government

Coming a close second to legislation on the scale of requests to CLGF Pacific for technical support is that of how to improve the revenue generation and financing capacity of local governments.

Local government revenues are generally made up of property rates, user fees and charges (licences, markets, parking, etc), commercial activities, property rentals, and central government grants for operational costs, specific purposes and capital projects. Some councils have also accessed funding from international donors and collaborating partners, and in some cases are able to take out loans to fund infrastructure projects. However, as a general rule local governments have limited options to raise revenues beyond legislated mechanisms.

In looking at additional revenue options for local government, CLGF Pacific has often cautioned that any proposed additional taxation or charges will likely draw upon the same set of people already being taxed, and their capacity to pay anything more must be assessed. New fees and charges should also bring new contributors. The other initial advice given is to ensure that all existing revenue collection methods are being utilised effectively and that all recoverable costs are in fact recouped via fees and charges. These include simple factors such as whether property rating records are up to date and that everyone who should pay rates is being billed; ensuring processes are in place for timely collection of all revenues and outstanding debts that are due; and making sure that fees and charges remain relevant and realistic compared to the costs involved.

In respect to new opportunities, councils are increasingly exploring public/private partnerships and other co-financing mechanisms for specific services. This is to be encouraged, as long as such agreements are fully researched and a strong business case is developed. Resource sharing between councils is also being practised in order to reduce costs.

Nevertheless, it is inevitable that most Pacific local governments cannot exist without some form of central government or other external assistance. Such assistance is in fact warranted, particularly for operational and capital expenditures that serve a wider community. Opportunities do exist to revisit

intergovernmental fiscal relationships, particularly to look at better methodologies for funding transfers, such as providing untied grants based on principles of equalisation – to enable similar levels of service delivery from one locality to another taking into account differing capacity to raise revenue and ‘disability factors’ that increase standard costs, for example, remoteness.

Looking more broadly and taking realities into account, local governments are diverse, particularly in population, as are their expenditure decisions on competing projects and services vis-à-vis their available revenue. Practically, councils need to balance their ambitions against the community’s ability to pay. On the other hand, taxpayers also have an interest in ensuring their council remains financially sustainable and generates sufficient revenue to provide quality services and facilities and to respond to changing needs. Again, a balancing act.

Promoting good governance

On 18 March 2005, at their biennial conference held in Aberdeen, Scotland, CLGF members unanimously adopted the *Aberdeen Agenda: Commonwealth principles on good practice for local democracy and good governance* (see below). In 2013, the *Aberdeen Agenda* was incorporated into the new Commonwealth Charter.

Aberdeen Agenda: Commonwealth principles for local democracy and good governance

- 1 **Constitutional and legal recognition for local democracy:** local democracy should enjoy constitutional and legal recognition.
- 2 **The ability to elect local representatives:** citizens should be able to elect their local representatives in conditions of political freedom.
- 3 **Partnerships between spheres of government:** there should be cooperation and partnership among local, regional/provincial and national spheres of government.
- 4 **Defined legislative framework:** local democracy should ensure local government has appropriate powers in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.
- 5 **Opportunity to participate in local decision-making:** all citizens should be able to participate actively in the local democratic process.
- 6 **Open local government – accountability:** local government should be accountable to the community it serves.
- 7 **Open local government – transparency:** the local decision-making process should be open and transparent.
- 8 **Openness to scrutiny:** the work of the executive should be subject to scrutiny.
- 9 **Inclusiveness:** the process of local decision-making must reflect the social, economic, environmental and cultural needs of the entire community.
- 10 **Adequate and equitable resource allocation:** in order to respond to the needs of the local community.
- 11 **Equitable service delivery:** the distribution of services should reflect the diverse needs of the local community.
- 12 **Building strong local democracy and good governance:** commitment to continuous capacity development of democratic local government.

*See [Aberdeen-agenda.pdf](#) (clgf.org.uk)

Often also referred to as the *Aberdeen Principles*, the Agenda provides a set of standards to promote healthy local democracy and good governance. These reflect deeply held Commonwealth values and include principles around legislation, participation, openness, transparency, inclusiveness, equity and other pillars of strong local democracy and good governance. The *Principles* therefore underpin CLGF Pacific's project work, based on the conviction that local government authorities demonstrating good governance in their provision of services and decision-making are entitled to the confidence and respect of their communities.

In particular, good governance principles highlight the importance of the community's right and opportunity to engage and participate in local government decision-making. Community engagement is critical to effective, transparent and accountable governance by which the aspirations, concerns, needs and values of citizens and communities are incorporated in policy development, planning, decision-making, service delivery and assessment. Two-way engagement generates better decisions, delivering sustainable economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits.

Sharing of information with residents and key stakeholders is also important as citizens are becoming more vocal on their expectations around service delivery, fast turnaround on applications, response to complaints, etc. This is a worldwide trend consistent with the speed of information transmission, particularly via social media.

However, there are real barriers to expanding community engagement that must be faced. Councillors and council staff may be reluctant to consult for fear of criticism, or think that 'we are elected to make decisions' and see no need to involve communities beyond elections (perhaps reflecting the attitudes of central governments?). They may also feel overwhelmed by day-to-day pressures, see engagement as 'just more work', and lack both the capacity and understanding to make it happen. At the same time, often citizens are not aware that they can participate, although with increased efforts on the part of civil society organisations this is slowly changing.

Women in local government

CLGF Pacific recognised the under-representation of women in elected and professional local government in the region, and the potentially untapped resource of greater women's participation, as key elements of a good governance agenda. From its inception CLGF Pacific has mainstreamed gender dimensions in all projects, and from 2008 it planned and implemented several specific project activities. These included:

- Strengthening Women's Participation in Municipal Government in the Pacific, which established a 'A Place on the Mat – Centre of Excellence for Women in Local Government' as part of the programme's training initiatives.

- Funding Leadership Opportunities for Women (FLOW), which ran from 2012 to 2016 and was funded by the Netherlands government in partnership with the International Women’s Development Agency. FLOW aimed to increase women’s representation in civil and political leadership in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Bougainville, Papua New Guinea.
- Components to promote women’s participation in local government and economic empowerment in the 2012–2014 Pacific Leadership Programme; 2016–2021 Markets for Change in Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands; and 2019–2021 Local Economic Development and Climate Change Adaptation programmes.

These efforts succeeded in identifying some outstanding Pacific women who had much to offer local governance. Some stood for election: inevitably not all were successful, but the skills gained by these women are no doubt being used for maximum impact in their communities. Nonetheless, challenges to more women’s participation prevail in terms of cultural barriers, discrimination and entrenched inequality; limited availability of information and training; lack of sufficient motivation to become involved, given the other roles and responsibilities of women in family and society; the cost of standing for election; and the sometimes adversarial nature of local politics, among other factors.

Fortunately, this issue remains on the regional agenda, with the Sixth Pacific Urban Forum in July 2023 reaffirming the need to address the lack of women in leadership roles, promote women in such roles, and incorporate gender perspectives in all aspects of governance. Providing platforms and opportunities for knowledge sharing for women at all stages of the decision-making process would enable the creation of more representative local governments to serve communities. Affirmative action policies, such as quotas or reserved seats, which have operated successfully in South Asia and were introduced as ‘temporary special measures’ in Vanuatu in 2013,¹⁰ may need to be applied more widely across the Pacific Islands.

Accountability and monitoring of councils’ performance

Accountability is the cornerstone of good local governance and is critical in ensuring public trust in the institutions of local government. However, accountability is also complicated and dependent on factors such as professional standards and the morals, values and attitudes of those responsible for decision-making and dispensing public funds. In making those decisions, councils must be seen to be sufficiently accountable to the communities they serve.

It is important to create an environment conducive to good governance through proactive measures to eliminate mismanagement, such as legislative procedures, separation of powers, codes of conduct, registers of interests, guidelines, regulations, transparency, and instilling ethical values. This needs to be combined with reactive mechanisms including scrutiny, oversight, enforcement and punitive action

¹⁰ See <https://devpolicy.org/reserved-seats-in-vanuatu-gender-equality-and-foreign-interference-20191112/>

against those who are guilty of digression. In short, accountability needs to be mainstreamed into the business of local government at all levels.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that accountability mechanisms are typically time-consuming and need to be adequately resourced. Councils often require support in building capacity and properly equipping political leaders and officials for their tasks to ensure they can perform as expected. This includes orientation and development of elected leaders, capacity building of council staff (and simply having enough capable staff to do the work required), issuing official instructions on specific functions and so on. Ministries responsible for local government similarly need sufficient resources to undertake their oversight role and combine that with developing the sector, including research and training capacity. CLGF Pacific has endeavoured to assist Ministries in this regard.

Sustainability and resilience

CLGF Pacific's more recent work has shifted beyond the traditional functions of local government and been driven by the urgent need for governments at all levels to respond to global challenges around sustainable urbanisation, climate change and the impacts of COVID-19, highlighting the importance of adaptability. CLGF Pacific's work in this field has been guided by groundbreaking work on multi-level governance as it relates to climate change and disaster management (see McNaught et al. 2022).

Recent and ongoing climate resilience projects include:

- LoCAL Climate Adaptive Living Facility in Tuvalu: strengthening local governments' performance in resilience and adaptation to climate (2017–2021); funded by UNCDF.
- Sustainable Urban Resources Management Project in Nasinu, Fiji (2019–2021), strengthening capacity for collaborative urban governance around solid waste management; funded by UNESCAP and CLGF.
- Promoting a vibrant, diversified and sustainable local economy in Funafuti, Tuvalu (2021–2022), supporting local models for climate change adaptation and resilience; funded by Canada Fund and CLGF.
- Cross-country exchange of skills and experience in seaweed farming, composting and use of beach wrack, involving communities in Samoa and Kiribati (2022–2023); funded by Canada Fund and CLGF.
- Blue-Green Development in Kiribati: sustainable community-based development for climate and pandemic resilience (2021–2025); funded by the German Government International Climate Initiative (IKI), CLGF and Kiribati Local Government Association.

Specifically, the partnership with ICLEI World Secretariat and Oceania regional office on the IKI project in Kiribati was a significant achievement, given that under 10% of IKI applications are

approved. Additional opportunities to access climate funding are being pursued and this should be an ongoing focus.

CLGF also supports the role of local government in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is particularly important now that the indicators for SDG 11 (cities) show negative progress. In 2014 CLGF Pacific undertook the only Pacific case study for the programme of country dialogues convened to inform localisation of the post-2015 Goals. Vanuatu was the selected country, and CLGF Pacific conducted both sub-national and national dialogues, followed up by discussions with selected key stakeholders, to record a broad range of views from government agencies, local government, non-government organisations, civil society organisations and development partners. Another concrete example of work promoted by CLGF Pacific to raise awareness and commitment to the SDGs is the Voluntary Local Review being undertaken by Suva City Council in Fiji, supported by UNESCAP.

The importance of an evidence base

At the inception of the CLGF Pacific Project there was a noticeable lack of research and studies on dimensions of local government in the region. However, CLGF had recognised the important connection between action research and practice and established a Research Advisory Group at Commonwealth level for that very purpose. CLGF Pacific followed up with its own network of researchers, some of whom sat on the Technical Advisory Panel, and ensured that wherever possible its projects were based on sound evidence and/or included a research component. Mention has already been made of specific examples in the areas of legislation and climate resilience.

In particular, a partnership on governance, including relations between ‘Western’ local government and traditional governance, was established with the University of the South Pacific and much of the material produced formed the basis of CLGF Pacific’s training programmes. Additionally, CLGF Pacific worked with researchers from Massey University in New Zealand, the University of Technology Sydney, and elsewhere¹¹ on designated topics. Several research papers arising from or linked to CLGF Pacific’s work have been published in previous issues of the Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance, especially in the programme’s early years (see for example Hassall and Tipu 2008; Richardson 2009; Storey 2009; Parker 2010; Amosa 2010).

This support for research efforts culminated in the inaugural Pacific Local Government Research Roundtable, held as part of CLGF Pacific’s biennial regional conference in Port Moresby in May 2014. The focus was on action research to promote and support democratic local government, contribute to

¹¹ Particular mention should be made of the contributions of Afamasaga Toleafoa, a highly respected chief, diplomat and independent researcher, to CLGF Pacific’s work on village governance in Samoa.

building local government capacity, facilitating the exchange of learning and good practice, and positioning local government as a voice for local communities and partner in development.

The significance of background research in support of project activities cannot be underestimated. This has been proven by CLGF Pacific's experiences, and appreciation goes to the talented researchers and institutions who have supported these efforts, and in so doing have enhanced the quality of local governance in the region.

Concluding thoughts

One of the key learnings from implementation of so many project activities in the region is that effective implementation takes time, in almost all cases significantly longer than first planned. CLGF Pacific learned this lesson very early in the process, experiencing implementation timeframes at least double those originally planned. However, encouraged by then New Zealand Aid's approach to the initial CLGF Regional Programme of 'longer, deeper, more sustainable', as evidenced by the longevity of the programme, CLGF Pacific was later able to apply a longer planning window, with more activities to better embed the technical support. This was particularly important in relation to local leadership training, where the democratic processes result in changes of elected representatives. Sadly, recent years have seen expectations of quicker results, with adverse impacts on the quality of outcomes.

CLGF Pacific has relied heavily on the financial support of a range of development partners to carry out the various project activities. It is a small, niche development organisation, which has its benefits in that a specialist focus on supporting local government has enabled a more concentrated effort. This comparative advantage has been recognised by donors, for which CLGF Pacific is grateful. However, more recently the focus of many major donors had been on larger and broader projects, exploiting 'economies of scale' and aimed at minimising administrative costs. This makes it more difficult for smaller organisations to compete for limited funds.

To address this challenge, CLGF Pacific is looking for partnerships with other development organisations working in the field of governance to meet objectives, using its expertise in local government to present itself as a desirable partner. The Pacific Urban Partnership has been an instrumental mechanism in pursuing this approach, which has been applied to the Sustainable Urban Resources Management Project in Nasinu, Fiji (partnership with UNESCAP), and the Blue Green Development Project in Kiribati (partnership with ICLEI and Kiribati Local Government Association). In this regard, continuing efforts to establish and maintain good working relationships with all partners and stakeholders will be critical.

CLGF Pacific also joins in Commonwealth-wide initiatives such as the Sustainable Cities Network and Women in Local Government Network. Since its inception as part of the CLGF family, CLGF Pacific

has gained much from links with the Commonwealth Secretariat,¹² and from information and technical advice shared with other CLGF programmes. But CLGF Pacific's specialist expertise, credibility and sufficient regional autonomy to address the distinctive needs of Pacific Islands countries have been the keys to success.

Finally, with respect to the time and efforts needed to achieve project outcomes and make continued progress, CLGF Pacific's work has been guided by the words of John Lennon: *Everything will be OK in the end. If it's not OK, it's not the end.* And somehow it always has worked out, in the end.

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Annex

CLGF Pacific Team

This piece would not be complete without acknowledging the professional team behind CLGF Pacific, both current and those who came before. Each of these individuals has brought unique skills and commitment to the organisation, which when combined were able to deliver, and continue to produce, excellent results.

Current team:

Mrs Karibaiti Taoaba – Regional Director

Mr Akuila Masi – Programme Officer

Mr Shailendra Prasad – Finance Manager and Trainer

Mrs Letila Naqasima – long serving Administration and Finance Officer

Dr Jane Stanley – CLGF Associate Sustainability and Resilience

Past staff members:

H.E. Feue Tipu (Governance Officer and Trainer) – currently serving as High Commissioner of Tuvalu to New Zealand

Ms Megan Praeger (Programme Manager) – now a senior local government official in Australia

Mr Ted Lulu (Project Officer) – became Deputy City Manager of National Capital District Commission, Port Moresby

Mr Sachin Sharma (Finance Manager and Trainer) – now pursuing his finance career in the USA

Mrs Litia Rabukawaqa – initiator of the CLGF Suva office, now also residing in the USA

Mr Terry Parker – Regional Adviser/Programme Manager (in effect, Director)

The ongoing assistance and guidance received from CLGF headquarters in London is also acknowledged with appreciation. Particular thanks go to Lucy Slack, now CLGF Secretary-General, who has visited the Pacific whenever possible and provided strong personal support.