

Vaka Pasifika Tuvalu Fellowship Scheme

Action Research Report

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*Photo: Coastal adaptation infrastructure, Tuvalu.
Credit: Maraia Vavaitamana*



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Introduction

The Tuvalu Fellowship Scheme was established in June 2024 as part of the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Vaka Pasifika project, *Accountable Public Finances to Serve Pacific People (2022–2026)*. The fellowship aimed to bring together motivated accountability actors from across government, civil society, women's groups, youth organizations, and religious institutions to strengthen public financial management and enhance citizen engagement in governance processes in Tuvalu. It followed on from political economy analysis research that examined the constraints and opportunities for accountability in Tuvalu's broad accountability ecosystem (see Illingworth & Simeti 2023).

Alongside the Fellowship Scheme, the Centre for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University has been undertaking action research, to document and learn from the experience of supporting a local accountability 'coalition.' This has involved a Centre researcher working remotely in support of a national researcher who has attended fellowship meetings and checked in with fellowship members roughly monthly over the 14-month period. In addition, a regional meeting of fellowship schemes and UNDP in Vanuatu in July 2025 provided a dedicated space for the Tuvaluan Fellowship Scheme to come together and meet with both researchers and reflect on the journey to date. For more details on the methodology (see Annex 3).

This report examines the fellowship's 14-month journey from June 2024 to August 2025, documenting both its achievements and challenges. The analysis draws on action research methodology (Denney 2024), with embedded observation of fellowship activities, interviews with members, and documentation of the group's evolution over time. Rather than focusing solely on policy outcomes, this study examines the process of building and sustaining multi-sector accountability coalitions in a Pacific Island context. In Tuvalu, this meant experimenting with new ways to hold decision makers to account – from creating spaces where government staff could reflect on their dual roles as civil servants and advocates, to piloting community-driven feedback mechanism that tested how policy decisions resonated beyond Funafuti. The fellowship's experience offers insights into the practical challenges of coalition-building in small island states, including the tensions between external support and local ownership, the constraints facing government employees in advocacy roles, and the adaptive strategies required when policy contexts change. The report concludes with lessons for future efforts to strengthen accountability through collective action in Pacific governance contexts.

The approach

Under the auspices of their Vaka Pasifika project, UNDP offered to support a locally identified and designed initiative to strengthen public financial management and accountability practices. The specific shape of the intervention was not prescribed, beyond the clear intention to bring together actors from across the Tuvalu accountability ecosystem to be able to work collaboratively. There is strong evidence that supporting coalitions of actors is an effective approach for addressing developmental issues that are politically sensitive (see Sidel & Faustino 2020). This is especially true in the Pacific, where there are several examples of positive social change being driven by coalitions (Crane & Hudson 2020; Denney & McLaren 2016; Roche et al 2020). Coalition building allows for

stakeholders to combine their differing perspectives and utilise their knowledge of how change happens in local settings to influence policy and practice. The Vaka Pasifika project team employed the language of ‘fellowships’ for these gatherings, and it was anticipated that UNDP could utilise its convening power to assist members to connect and collaborate.

Potential fellowship members (‘fellows’) were identified during the political economy analysis of accountability ecosystems in Tuvalu conducted by La Trobe University in 2023 (Illingworth & Simeti, 2023). As part of this research key local stakeholders recommended potential candidates, and following further testing of interest during a mission in May 2024, UNDP finalised a group of eight fellows in June 2024:

Name	Gender	Role Organization
Sosefiligaiousmanatu Nelu	F	Freelance Consultant & Director of Women for Change Association
Talua Nivaga	M	Tuvalu National Youth Representative
Macdonald Tau	M	Former Director for Local Government, Previously in government, overseeing local Kaupule funds
Kitasi Sioni	M	Pastor Representing Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu
Selai Mangreve	F	Senior Auditor at the Auditor General’s Office
Lilian Falealuga	F	National Women Council Secretary
Falema Afelee	M	Tuvalu Former Diplomat
Yvette Isaac	F	Director at the Tuvalu Media Corporation

The fellowship members were drawn from diverse sectors, including government departments, NGOs, women, youth organizations, and religious groups. By leveraging their expertise and experiences, the initiative aimed to foster practical solutions, increase awareness, and advocate for better financial governance in Tuvalu. Some members, such as Kitasi Sioni, were nominated by their institutions, while others, such as Talua Nivaga, were invited after discussions with UNDP. One member was removed after consistent non-participation. To bolster momentum, UNDP approached one of the initial action researchers, Amalinda Satupa to be part of the fellowship cohort. Amalinda first engaged with the fellowship in mid-2024 in a research capacity, assisting the action research process (interviews and documentation). In September 2024, to bolster momentum, she was invited to join as a fellowship member in her personal capacity (not representing an institution). As participation declined, UNDP formally appointed her as Vaka Pasifika Tuvalu Fellowship Coordinator in early 2025, a light coordination role to help schedule meetings, follow up on tasks, and support small expenditures once funds were approved.

Membership evolved significantly over the course of following year. Selai Managreve relocated overseas for work and joined the FSM audit office, Macdonald Tau went on study leave in Fiji, and Falema Piita withdrew due to work commitments. Lilian Falealuga had become very busy, which made her less responsive to contact attempts by early 2025. In their place, four new members joined the fellowship in the weeks before a regional 'sense making' workshop was held in Vanuatu in July 2025. The new members were: Avaonoa Homasi, treasurer of Tuvalu's National Women's Council (replacing Lilian), Mase Tumua, Communication Manager from the Office of the Auditor General (replacing Selai), Sepoe Tafea, Director of Local Government, and Faiatea Latasi, Director of Tuvalu's Association of NGOs (TANGO). Faiatea Latasi was subsequently removed from the fellowship due to personal reasons, leaving a group of six fellows (see below). In part, this evolving membership demonstrates the challenge of maintaining membership of such groups in a context such as Tuvalu, where mobility in

and out of the country is high. Regular movement of people to Australia/NZ/Fiji for study, work and personal relocation make membership more variable that may be the case in other contexts.

First Name	Gender	Role Organization
Mase Tumua	M	Senior Audit Officer Office of the Auditor General
Sepoe Tafea	M	Director of Local Government
Avanoa Paelate	F	Programme Officer Tuvalu National Women Council
Talua Nivaga	M	Tuvalu National Youth Representative
Kitasi Sioni	M	Pastor Representing Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu
Amalinda Satupa	F	Consultant

UNDP's selection of participants focused on ensuring individuals with firsthand experience in governance, financial management, and civil society work were included, with representation across key stakeholder groups, making the fellowship a rich space for cross-sectoral collaboration. Despite many of the recommendations coming from local stakeholders originally, UNDP's role has meant that the fellowship is perceived as largely UNDP owned and led, rather than a homegrown Tuvaluan initiative. This can be seen in some of the challenges around sustained functioning and commitment – with some individuals involved because they are representing the organization of which they are a part, rather than because they are personally motivated to do so. It is striking that at no point has the fellowship self-identified as a coalition, however as a result of UNDP's use of the word, they have interchangeably used the term to describe the fellowship. Despite these ownership and naming issues, fellowship members have indicated they felt they had a unifying focus as group, rather than merely being a collective of individuals, and there was a shared sense of valuing governance reform. During a July 2025 focus group in Vanuatu, when asked directly about naming, members confirmed that "Fellowship is good" and their preferred designation.

The issue

At the first meeting of the fellowship in June 2024, hosted and facilitated by UNDP, fellowship members were trained in adaptive leadership and the group's objective, issues of focus and workplan were discussed. Members were invited to table accountability issues of interest or concern. From a list of 17 possible priorities the fellowship collectively agreed to focus on Tuvalu's Community Development Assistance (CDA) program. During the COVID-19 period, the Tuvalu government introduced the Outer Island Development Fund, informally called 'CDA', allocating AUD \$4 million annually to support outer island communities. Managed by each of Tuvalu's 16 MPs, the fund provides around AUD \$250,000 per MP per year. While intended to address the needs of remote communities and stimulate local development, its implementation has been perceived to lack transparency.

There had been no formal reports or audits of the CDA program since 2020, and this lack of accountability meant that large sums of money were circulating with limited oversight, leaving communities uncertain about what benefits they should be receiving. This raised broader governance concerns, as MPs were managing significant funds with little scrutiny, and citizens were not meaningfully engaged in decision-making, undermining priorities articulated in Tuvalu's National Strategy for Sustainable Development (Government of Tuvalu, 2020). This hybrid system creates

complex accountability relationships that span both customary and modern governance frameworks, requiring approaches that work with, rather than around, traditional authority structures. For all these reasons, the fellows chose to focus their efforts on understanding and improving accountability within the CDA system. Importantly, whilst UNDP had orchestrated the meeting, this decision to focus on CDA reform was a collective decision of the members themselves, and provided evidence of the Fellows' commitment to addressing a tangible governance challenge with direct consequences for Tuvaluan communities.

A short time after the fellowship had commenced functioning and the decision was made to focus on CDA reform, the Government of Tuvalu finalised a fundamental shift in policy. The CDA was replaced by Community Sustainable Funding Assistance (CoFSA) program. Rather than a discretionary fund for MPs, the CoFSA appears in the national budget and takes the form of a recurrent transfer to Kaupule/Falekaupule to support local services and development. The Falekaupule system in Tuvalu is the country's constitutionally recognised form of island-level local government, rooted in customary authority and formalised through national legislation (notably the Falekaupule Act). While grounded in custom, the Falekaupule is part of Tuvalu's modern state structure: it provides the political–customary mandate that underpins decentralized governance, linking tradition with the formal machinery of government.

It is important to note that MPs remain influential political actors, and even though they no longer directly administer CDA funds, their informal influence and political visibility continue to shape how communities understand and experience the CoFSA mechanism. MPs are very much embedded within their communities and more than 80 percent of MPs are over 50 years of age, meaning they are also part of the Falekaupule and serve as elders and contribute to community decision-making. Nonetheless, the emergence of CoFSA constituted a fundamental shift in the nature of the accountability issue that the fellows had determined to focus on. The fellows chose to continue to work on this topic, however this policy change had significant implications in terms of purpose and priorities for the fellowship scheme.

Ways of working and operational realities

Following the first convening of the Tuvalu Fellowship cohort in June 2024, early stages of the fellowship saw active discussions, information-sharing and informal networking between the members. Following this initial convening, the fellowship has since convened twice in person at the Tomasi Puapua Convention Center (TPCC), (August 2024 and March 2025) and also twice virtually through UNDP prompting to check-in and get updates in June and August 2024. In addition to these structured meetings occurring periodically, informal networking and communication took place via a Facebook Messenger Group set up by the members to keep updated and share ideas (Tuvalu Fellowship Group, 2024)

Initially, following the UNDP mission in June 2024, the fellowship meetings were scheduled regularly and well attended. The Facebook Messenger Group was also active and members were regularly exchanging ideas. In these early months, Filiga was the most motivated member of the initiative and played an active role in maintaining momentum among other fellows. She had initially been positioned to serve as the Tuvalu-based coordinator for the fellowship through a consultancy arrangement with

UNDP, and a contract was issued to support this role. However, as her other work commitments increased, she was unable to continue in that capacity and gradually became less involved. However, due to increasing work commitments, she became less involved. Over time, meetings became sporadic due to competing priorities and a lack of structured leadership. There was no single individual or sub-group to consistently lead the initiative after Filiga. Amalinda, who initially supported the action research, was later approached by UNDP with the same consultancy arrangement and Terms of Reference as Filiga as the Vaka Pasifika Tuvalu Fellowship Coordinator. She was engaged to provide coordination support to the fellowship group and to assist with the implementation of the outer islands visit and the compilation of survey data, helping to maintain momentum in the initiative.

Despite this, it continued to be difficult to engage members, and the lack of structured follow-up meetings led to noticeable declines in communication and engagement. Some members were also engaged in other UNDP-supported initiatives under the Vaka Pasifika program, including the *Citizens Budget Guide* that was developed by PIANGO and launched by TANGO. UNDP also led the development of a *Citizens Audit Guide*, which was launched by the Tuvalu Audit Office along with its *Strategic Plan 2024–2029* to enhance transparency and accountability (UNDP, 2023). Fellows were consulted as part of these projects and invited to these launches, and both were perceived as quite similar to the fellowship given the focus on strengthening community participation and accountability. The lines between Vaka Pasifika projects blurred, which led to concern among members that the projects overlapped and might be seen to duplicate each other. Furthermore, with participation overlapping between the different initiatives, some members deprioritised unfunded fellowship tasks.

Looking back, these frictions were not only operational; they revealed a strategy–context mismatch. The fellowship’s early, CDA-era plan assumed progress through engaging formal government ministries, facilitating templates and reporting cycles, while the shift to CoSFA relocated legitimacy and convening power to the Falekaupule. In that setting, members’ time naturally gravitated toward the other UNDP projects because these offered clearer lines into island-level decision-making and resourcing. The necessary pivot, therefore, was not merely to “fix processes” but to reframe the approach: begin with traditional engagement (Falekaupule sittings) to secure community approval; coordinate with UNDP partners to avoid duplication; and then translate agreed actions into the formal products ministries require. This alignment links effort to where authority is exercised and to how accountability is documented.

The fellowship's operational challenges were compounded by slow and unclear funding arrangements which impacted on the fellowships’ ability to undertake activities. When resources were eventually dispersed, the funding flow followed a circuitous path from UNDP to PIANGO and eventually to the fellows. This multi-step process created delays and coordination difficulties, contributing to the fellowship's operational struggles and therefore an alternative model was pursued, whereby Amalinda was contracted as the fellowship coordinator and received UNDP funds directly, acting as the designated focal point for small disbursements to reduce delays. The contracting of Amalinda as coordinator was a slow process however, reinforcing the impression of the fellowship as a UNDP led initiative. Fellows were also conducting community surveys on their own time and at their own expense, and the absence of funding for travel and materials meant that survey completion stalled. Fellows argued they could not sustain self-funded activities alongside their regular employment responsibilities.

The fellowship's operation was also shaped by personal dynamics within Tuvalu's small professional community. As one key insight emerged from discussions (Illingworth, 2025): government employees in the fellowship faced constraints in advocacy roles, with one participant noting, "Can't speak out

against the person who puts food on your table." This reality affected how openly members could critique government practices and limited the fellowship's ability to take strong accountability positions. It should be noted that the July 2025 Vanuatu workshop provided a critical turning point for the fellowship's operations. The full group galvanized and met twice in person beforehand to shape their presentation and agreed to focus on a candid account of their journey, early momentum, setbacks, and the practical challenges they'd faced since the fellowship began. Another notable shift which emerged in Vanuatu, was to transition to a more collaborative approach rather than an 'accountability watchdog' model.

What did the Fellowship Scheme do?

Following the initial June 2024 meeting of the fellowship, convened by UNDP, a draft Google document was shared via Messenger. It was a framework where all members were asked to start thinking about how they would approach and explore CDA in their communities. A follow-up virtual meeting was held in late June to reinforce discussions from the adaptive leadership training earlier that month. A meeting was then held by the members at the end of July to review the collective contributions to the shared document, and a second virtual meeting, hosted by UNDP, was held in August with the majority of fellowship members attending. The fellowship members then attempted to organize a further follow-up meeting but were unsuccessful due to scheduling conflicts. The initial fellowship meetings faced some confusion, with most members not having a clear understanding of the fellowship's goals. However, by the end of the first in-person and online meetings, greater clarity was achieved, and group cohesion improved. Some members also expressed concerns that UNDP had a key role in selecting members and that without their involvement only a small core group (2–3 members) might continue with the initiative.

In September, UNDP made a trip to Tuvalu to meet with the fellowship in response to concerns raised during the Vaka Pasifika mid-term evaluation, indicating declining participation among members following the shift from CDA to CoSFA. The visit also served to explore how the fellowship could contribute to public financial management (PFM) awareness. During this time, Amalinda was invited to join the fellowship as an active member, rather than continuing solely in her role as an action researcher, to strengthen the groups engagement and harness her motivation. Through discussions on possible activities, the fellowship agreed to focus on CDA and to conduct a survey to assess community awareness and views. This was done after consultations and approval by other group members. Each member was assigned a community and agreed to carry out 20 in-person surveys (Tuvalu Fellowship Group, 2024). The survey's purpose was to understand how well communities know CDA—its objectives, processes and implementation—and to gauge accountability perceptions and whether CDA is bringing positive change (see Annex 2 for survey questions). The plan involved collecting and analysing data, compiling a report, and making it publicly available for government reference and public awareness. Further activities to improve accountability of CDAs could then be explored with this evidence base.

SURVEY IMPLEMENTATION (OCTOBER 2024 - JANUARY 2025)

A fellowship meeting was scheduled for October 2024 to compile and discuss data collection findings, but due to surveys not being completed on time, it was cancelled (Illingworth et al., 2024–2025). Interviews with fellowship members revealed that while the CDA project was continuing, low attendance and workload concerns led to cancelled meetings and disengagement. Some members called for more active UNDP engagement via funding and contracts to sustain motivation. UNDP informed the fellowship of a sense-making workshop to be held in Nadi, Fiji, in November 2024, which motivated members to complete their surveys and present thereafter. The workshop was later postponed to 2025, resulting in further disengagement.

By late 2024, 28 surveys were completed across seven islands. Members noted uneven participation in survey completion. An Excel sheet was prepared to collate data, but analysis was not completed due to coordination challenges and the absence of dedicated resources for data processing. Filiga, who had been coordinating the process, could not sustain the role due to work commitments. Members then endeavoured to complete surveys and scheduled a meeting for 24 December to consolidate data. That meeting was cancelled and activities paused for the holidays, with work expected to resume in January. A January meeting was also cancelled due to scheduling conflicts and overlap with another ongoing project supported by Vaka Pasifika and the Tuvalu Association of Non-Government Organizations (TANGO). By late January 2025, most fellows had undertaken some surveys (two to three of the eight were unresponsive) and the total number completed was up to 38, however communication and coordination challenges persisted. The fellows required structured follow-ups to consolidate data and clarify leadership roles. Lack of meetings, communication and heavy workloads further contributed to the standstill of the fellowship at this time.

The policy switch to CoSFA happened after the fellowship's work had already begun yet constituted a fundamental redirection in the management of these funds that was yet to be fully understood by citizens or stakeholders. Before this shift, the fellowship had planned and begun surveys under the CDA framework to assess community experience and perceptions. Because both CDA and, later, CoSFA had direct and visible impacts on communities, these surveys were intended to provide a practical entry point for research and action. However, the surveys were never fully completed following the transition to CoSFA. At a later workshop (July 2025), with the benefit of hindsight, members were able to reflect that the strategic context for their fellowship fundamentally changed affecting the utility of the surveys (Illingworth, 2025). "Initial purpose under CDA was clear. We could go to the MPs house in Funafuti and talk and address CDA issues. But now under CoSFA this has changed. We cannot walk into the Falekaupule and do the same thing. They will say who are you." This shift required the fellowship to completely reconsider their approach and develop new strategies for engaging with traditional authority structures

FELLOWSHIP DECLINE AND CONFUSION (FEBRUARY - APRIL 2025)

By February, the absence of formal meetings led to confusion about roles and further slowed progress. No analysis of the survey data had been undertaken despite the importance of these findings to the aspirations of the fellowship. Meanwhile, the other Vaka Pasifika project working with the Tuvalu Audit Office remained more active, holding regular meetings and featuring on Radio Tuvalu. Disengagement continued to deepen as three fellows formally left the group: Selai relocated overseas for work, Macdonald went on study leave, and Falema withdrew due to work commitments. Although Filiga and Yvett stayed associated, their participation continued to taper. By March 2025, only three

members of the fellowship remained active: Amalinda, Kitasi, and Talua, who joined virtually, while Tala, the action researcher continued to observe and check-in.

The fellowship reached a standstill, with confusion over Amalinda's role and whether she was acting for the fellowship or independently as a consultant for UNDP. As such the fellowship approached UNDP to engage her more fully to support them. In turn, she was tasked by UNDP to lead engagements in two communities using the same survey approach the fellowship had previously applied to explore how people understand accountability in two communities produce a product to supplement the fellowships surveys. Despite the slowdown in formal meetings, some behind-the-scenes activity continued. The idea behind this work was to complete what had already been planned during the workshop with Adapsys Consulting, and the intention was to build on earlier efforts by integrating additional insights from these consultations into the fellowship's ongoing work. Amalinda thereafter submitted the financial proposal for her consultancy contract and awaited the necessary fund transfers from UNDP to proceed with implementation. Communication among the fellows primarily shifted to their Messenger group, where informal discussions continued to take place amongst this smaller cohort.

STRATEGIC PIVOT AND GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT (MAY 2025)

A significant development occurred when the UNDP engaged the Minister of Climate Change and Local Government, facilitating a meeting about the work of the fellowship that was held in Suva, Fiji in May 2025 (Illingworth, 2025). While UNDP-facilitated, this engagement lent legitimacy to the fellowship's work but also shifted its focus on and relationship with formal government structures. This moment raised important questions about the fellowship's direction—whether it was becoming more government-driven rather than independently-driven. During the May 2025 consultations, it became clear that some government employees within the fellowship faced particular constraints. Employment relationships affected members' ability to advocate for accountability measures that might critique their employers (Illingworth, 2025). This speaks also to the challenge of working on accountability from within the system – as well as the particular challenges of doing so in small population contexts where there are dense social relationships and individuals wear multiple hats (Illingworth and Simeti 2023).

REBUILDING TOWARD VANUATU WORKSHOP (MAY - JULY 2025)

Planning resumed for the regional workshop, postponed from November 2024 and now scheduled for July 2025 in Vanuatu, with participation expected from Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu. In May 2025, only Amalinda, Kitasi, and Talua met in person, followed by a virtual meeting with the same three and the action researcher, who interviewed them on progress to date.

In June 2025, in the hope of revitalizing the group, UNDP asked Amalinda to consult with the remaining fellows to identify additional fellowship members. Based on her recommendations and UNDP input, four new members joined: Avaonoa, Mase, Sepoe, and Faiatea, bringing the Vanuatu workshop delegation to eight. The reconstituted group included Amalinda, Kitasi, Talua, Macdonald (invited to attend as an original fellow despite being on study leave), and the four new members. The full group convened on two occasions throughout July 2025 to prepare their presentation. Although they initially planned to present CDA survey results, data collection remained stalled and no formal analysis had been completed, so they elected instead to present the fellowship's trajectory, its formation, experiences, and the challenges encountered. Through UNDPs contracting of Amalinda and provision of budget support, concrete activities were confirmed and the fellowship was then rekindled into action.

THE VANUATU WORKSHOP (JULY 2025)

Seven members ultimately attended the workshop (Faiatea not attending for personal reasons). The workshop provided the first opportunity for the Tuvalu fellowship to share experiences with their counterparts from Solomon Islands and Tonga, offering comparative perspectives on how fellowship models worked across different Pacific contexts.

The Tuvalu delegation presented a reflective account of their journey noting their early enthusiasm, operational challenges, leadership transitions, and practical lessons about coalition-building in small island contexts. This honest reflection proved valuable for understanding the realities of externally-initiated but locally-implemented governance initiatives.

POST-WORKSHOP STRATEGIC RESET (JULY 2025 ONWARDS)

The workshop experience presented a new focus for the fellowship beyond their previous virtual meetings and training sessions. During the focus group session following their presentation (Illingworth, 2025), members articulated a clearer understanding of their evolving purpose and strategy.

Strategic Clarity on CoSFA Engagement Members recognized that the shift from CDA to CoSFA required fundamental changes to their approach. As they reflected: "Initial purpose under CDA was clear. We could go to the MPs house in Funafuti and talk and address CDA issues. But now under CoSFA this has changed." The Fellowship's initial plan assumed progress through formal government pathways (ministries, templates, and administrative cycles) consistent with CDA's settings. With the transition to CoSFA, the locus of legitimacy and decision-making sits with the Falekaupule, meaning the same tactics would miss the appropriate gatekeepers. Recognising this, the Fellowship reframed its approach: start with traditional engagement to secure approvals, then translate outcomes into formal products (e.g., resolutions, attendance records, procurement justifications) to meet administrative requirements. This pivot aligns the accountability practice with where authority is actually exercised, not just where it is documented.

Two-Part Strategy Development The fellowship developed a clear two-part strategy: "One purpose short term to complete the consultations in the 2 pilot islands and present those findings to the MP and the national workshop (inc Falekaupule). Following national workshop agreement on actions, this group will align purpose to implement the actions." They recognized they had only 20 days to complete this activity in 2025, creating urgency around implementation.

Recognition and Legitimacy Needs Members understood they needed formal recognition for their work: "The fellowship thinking of 2 islands to Pilot consultation. There is a need some authority or formal recognition. Come from different sectors so need a way to be recognized when working with communities." Having Sepoe Tafea, Director of Local Government, in the group provided some legitimacy through Home Affairs' advisory role with Falekaupule.

Community-Led Documentation Plans Plans emerged to produce a documentary and conduct consultations on two islands, reflecting growing initiative among fellows to localize learning and influence public discourse through storytelling. This represented a shift from survey-based data collection to narrative-based community engagement.

Flexible Procurement Innovation Discussions with the Minister for Climate Change about developing unique procurement mechanisms for outer islands highlighted how national processes

may not suit local contexts, opening possibilities for the fellowship to contribute to policy innovation beyond their original accountability focus.

Sustained Commitment and Local Ownership Fellows expressed renewed commitment to analyzing their CDA survey data and potentially replicating the exercise under the new CoSFA framework. Most importantly, the experience demonstrated a clear evolution from external dependency toward local ownership, with members showing more initiative in setting their own priorities rather than waiting for external direction.

The period from March to August 2025 demonstrated how fellowship engagement increased significantly after budget approval and concrete activities were confirmed, while also revealing the group's growing capacity to adapt their approach based on changing political contexts and their own learning about effective coalition-building in Tuvalu's unique governance environment. For a detailed timeline of events see the Timeline in Annex 1.

Impact

The fellowship's influence on governance practices in Tuvalu has been limited to date. The uncompleted survey analysis meant that community voices documented through the fellowship's work had no pathway into policy discussions or public awareness. CDA/CoSFA implementation continued unchanged, and the fellowship has not yet tested their new strategic approaches through pilot consultations. The fellowship's primary impact has been demonstrating the potential, and the practical constraints, of multi-sector accountability initiatives in small island contexts in the Pacific. Members gained firsthand experience with coalition-building challenges, including leadership training and transitions, external dependency, and the complexity of balancing advocacy with employment security. This learning created institutional memory about what enables and constrains collective action, though it remains unclear whether this knowledge will influence future accountability efforts. The fellowship's honest assessment of their operational struggles may prove more valuable than polished success stories for others attempting similar initiatives.

The fellowship's most substantial activity was the CDA survey, which covered 7 of Tuvalu's 9 islands (~78% coverage) and included 38 responses. Analysis remained incomplete due to coordination and resource constraints. Fellows undertook this work in good faith and on a volunteer basis and intended the findings to inform their own practice and the fellowship's agenda. Over time, because analysis was not finalised and as one member reflected, the incomplete analysis meant "we did all this work but couldn't see what communities were actually telling us" which illustrates a critical missed opportunity. Without dedicated coordination resources or funding for data analysis, even highly committed volunteers could not translate their fieldwork into actionable findings. The fellowship learned that while volunteer dedication can drive initial activities, sustainable impact requires support that doesn't depend solely on members' personal resources and unpaid time.

The fellowship did achieve meaningful capacity building among its members. The Adaptive Leadership training provided new frameworks for approaching governance challenges, though members noted limited opportunities to apply these skills in practice. Cross-sector networking created relationships between government employees, civil society advocates, religious leaders, and youth representatives who would not typically collaborate. The cooperation also benefited from a productive and mutually supportive collaboration that emerged between a UNDP staffer, Maraia Vavaitamana, and the fellows.

To date, however, these relationships remained largely informal and untested by significant advocacy challenges. The fellowship's cautious approach to government accountability, shaped by members' employment constraints, meant they didn't push their networking into more demanding territory where deeper collaboration might have emerged.

The fellowship's most significant achievement may be developing sophisticated understanding of how multi-sector coalitions must work within Tuvalu's governance structures, echoing broader lessons about power, politics, and coalition-building (Fletcher, Brimacombe & Roche, 2016). The work also echoes and highlights the importance of traditional, relational structures and processes to understanding and improving accountability in the Pacific (Bond 2024, Illingworth and Simeti 2023). In particular, the fellows reflected on the cultural complexity of engaging with the Falekaupule. To this end their post-workshop recognition of legitimacy requirements for engaging traditional authorities, and their strategic pivot from direct advocacy to facilitated consultation, demonstrated an adaptive capacity that extended well beyond their original mandate.

Insights

COALITIONS WORK IN THE TUVALUAN CONTEXT

The Tuvalu fellowship experience reveals how accountability coalitions must navigate Tuvalu's distinctive governance environment, where formal Westminster-style institutions operate alongside traditional Falekaupule structures, and where personal relationships intersect with professional roles in ways that both enable and constrain collective action, illustrating the complexities of relational accountability (Moncrieffe, 2011).

Tuvalu's small professional community creates unique dynamics for multi-sector collaboration. Members brought different types of influence—Filiga's advocacy networks, Kitasi's religious authority, Macdonald's government experience, Talua's youth representation—enabling access and influence in different communities. But each member had to balance fellowship roles with maintaining personal and professional relationships across a tightly connected society. The fellowship experience revealed that effective coalition work requires constant relationship maintenance with constituencies and personal ties in ways that larger contexts might not demand.

For instance, Macdonald, as a civil servant, had to carefully balance his fellowship advocacy with professional responsibilities, ensuring his contributions did not appear to undermine government positions while still supporting accountability goals. This resonates with Pacific understandings of navigating the *vā* or relational space (Finau, Paea & Reynolds, 2022). Members could not simply advocate for positions without considering ongoing interactions with colleagues, family members, and community leaders who might hold different views. These complex relationships both enriched understanding of governance challenges and constrained advocacy approaches.

Their experience also illuminated gaps between Tuvalu's formal governance systems and traditional authority structures. The shift from CDA to CoSFA demonstrated how policy changes in formal systems can fundamentally alter coalition strategies for engaging traditional authorities. Members realised that "we cannot walk into the Falekaupule and do the same thing" under the new framework, requiring different approaches to traditional engagement. Formal systems have advanced rapidly in

administrative and technological capacity, creating processes that don't always align with traditional decision-making patterns. The fellowship recognised that effective accountability requires working within both systems simultaneously rather than prioritising one over the other.

LOCALLY AND EXTERNALLY LED PRACTICE (THE ROLE OF UNDP)

The fellowship's relationship with UNDP evolved from initial external initiation toward growing local ownership, but this transition revealed tensions about how accountability coalitions form and sustain themselves. UNDP's early influence over member selection created valuable opportunities while establishing patterns of external dependency that took time to overcome. The most problematic pattern was event-driven support that materialised around institutional deadlines rather than supporting sustained local organising, echoing arguments for politically smart, locally led development (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Budget approvals and member recruitment intensified before the Vanuatu workshop, creating artificial momentum that did not reflect organic coalition development. Sustainable coalitions require predictable, ongoing support rather than resource surges tied to external deadlines.

However, the fellowship demonstrated adaptive capacity in evolving toward local ownership. The Vanuatu workshop became a turning point where members began articulating their own strategic direction rather than responding to external frameworks. Amalinda's evolution—as externally appointed Vaka Pasifika Tuvalu fellowship Coordinator and also a key fellowship member—shows how external support can transition into genuine local leadership when space is created for member initiative. The activities also raise questions about external influence on local priorities. Members acknowledged feeling pressure to demonstrate progress to UNDP, particularly around survey completion and workshop participation. This external accountability may have driven activities that did not align with members' own assessment of useful work. As ownership grew, members questioned whether early activities reflected genuine local priorities or responses to external expectations. This tension remained unresolved but increasingly recognised.

Another insight was that the externally supported political economy analysis provided valuable foundation research that identified both potential members and accountability gaps but also established external parameters for understanding governance challenges in Tuvalu. The fellowship worked within research findings and frameworks developed largely by outsiders, rather than starting from their own analysis of local priorities. Similarly, the Adaptive Leadership training provided useful concepts but there were limited opportunities for practical application within the fellowship's cautious advocacy approach. Members appreciated the technical support while recognizing that external training couldn't substitute for locally-developed strategies that reflected Tuvalu's specific relationship dynamics and governance structures.

RESOURCING AND ECONOMIC REALITIES

The fellowship operated within Tuvalu's economic resource reality, where AUD \$250,000 per MP represents significant national expenditure that could dramatically improve community lives if managed effectively. Members understood that accountability failures have outsized consequences where resources are limited and alternative livelihood options are few. These same constraints affected the fellowship's own operations. Members could not sustain self-funded survey work; coordination suffered without dedicated resources; and competing employment priorities took precedence over volunteer coalition activities.

Another critical insight concerned structural limitations facing government employees in advocacy roles. As one member observed, "(you) can't speak out against the person who puts food on your

table.” This reflected not just individual caution but systemic constraints in small island contexts where employment and governance oversight intersect. The fellowship learned that sustainable multi-sector collaboration requires protective arrangements—external partners providing cover for government employees—and clear protocols separating coalition activities from institutional roles (Denney & McLaren, 2016).

COMMUNITY VOICE AND LEGITIMACY GAPS

A final insight concerns community voice and legitimacy. While members conducted surveys in seven communities, there was limited systematic assessment of whether communities viewed the fellowship as credible local advocates or as another “NGO/outsider” initiative disconnected from community priorities. The fellowship’s composition—primarily Funafuti-based professionals with national roles—may have reinforced perceptions of distance from outer-island communities where CDA/CoSFA impacts were most significant. Members recognised late in their journey that they needed “some authority or formal recognition” when working with communities but had not explored how communities themselves understood or valued the fellowship’s accountability work.

This represents a fundamental gap: without genuine community recognition and engagement, even well-intentioned multi-sector efforts risk operating as elite initiatives that lack the grassroots legitimacy necessary for sustained influence. The fellowship’s honest acknowledgment of this limitation highlights the need for more deliberate community engagement strategies that go beyond data collection to build authentic relationships and shared ownership of accountability priorities.

Conclusion

At the time of writing (September 2025) the fellowship has operated for 14 months—a timeframe insufficient for achieving the governance changes members initially envisioned. More critically, declining engagement and incomplete follow-through meant that even modest goals around community awareness and data collection were not fully realized. However, the post-workshop period revealed renewed potential for impact. Members’ development of context-specific strategies for traditional authority engagement and their growing confidence in setting their own priorities suggest that the fellowship’s learning curve may have prepared them for more effective future action. The question remains whether this potential will translate into sustained collective effort or remain dependent on external support for activation.

Based on the reflections and insights provided through this fellowship research, a number of points have been identified and noted below about working collectively in Tuvalu:

Start with Local Ownership, Not Just Participation The fellowship’s experience demonstrates that genuine local ownership requires more than including local members in externally-designed initiatives. Sustainable coalitions need space to develop their own understanding of governance priorities rather than working within externally-defined frameworks, even when that external research is high-quality and relevant.

Resource Support Must Match Local Ways of Working Event-driven support that intensifies around external deadlines can undermine organic coalition development. Effective external

support requires understanding local organizing patterns and providing predictable, ongoing assistance that allows coalitions to develop their own momentum rather than responding to external institutional needs.

Formal Recognition Is Essential for Traditional Authority Engagement Multi-sector coalitions must establish clear protocols for engaging traditional authority structures, working through existing advisory relationships rather than attempting direct advocacy that might be perceived as bypassing traditional processes. Some level of legitimacy is critical.

Relationship Maintenance Is Coalition Work In small island contexts, managing personal and professional relationships across coalition activities requires as much attention as technical advocacy skills. External supporters must understand and accommodate these relationship dynamics rather than expecting coalition members to separate their advocacy from their ongoing community interactions.

The Tuvalu fellowship's experience ultimately demonstrates both the challenges and potential of multi-sector collaboration in small Pacific island governance contexts, reflecting wider patterns identified in regional coalition-building initiatives (The Asia Foundation, 2023). While operational difficulties were significant and policy impacts were limited, members' adaptive learning and growing strategic sophistication provide valuable foundations for future accountability initiatives. Their insights about traditional authority engagement, government employee constraints, and external support patterns offer practical guidance for similar coalitions across Pacific contexts where formal and traditional governance systems must work together to achieve sustainable accountability.

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Annex 1: Timeline (May 2024 - Aug 2025)

Month	Key Events
May 2024	Identification of fellowship members by UNDP drawing on political economy research findings and recommendations from Filiga Nelu. Foundation laid for fellowship formation and early direction.
June 2024	UNDP team mission to Tuvalu (8th-13th June) including Maraia Vavaitamana, Megan Streeter, and Cameron Bowles. Adaptive Leadership training conducted. Fellowship objectives and workplan finalized. First follow-up virtual meeting held.
July 2024	Google document shared for collaborative input with July 10th deadline. End of July meeting to review collective contributions to shared planning document.
August 2024	Second virtual meeting hosted by UNDP with majority member attendance. Fellowship attempted to organize follow-up meeting but unsuccessful due to scheduling conflicts.
September 2024	Tuvalu Fellowship Meeting with Maraia (September 10-12) to discuss PFM awareness contribution. Fellowship goals clarified and group cohesion improved. CDA survey project identified to assess community awareness. Amalinda invited to join as active member rather than observer.
October 2024	Fellowship Meeting (October 25) cancelled due to incomplete surveys. Follow-up interviews conducted with Macdonald and Talua by local researcher. CDA data collection ongoing but challenges with engagement and motivation. Members called for UNDP intervention to sustain momentum.
November 2024	Sense-making workshop postponed from November to 2025, further disengaging members. CDA Survey reached 80% completion despite workload issues and approaching holiday season. Lack of meetings and communication contributed to fellowship standstill. Amalinda appointed as new coordinator as Filiga could not sustain role due to work commitments.
December 2024	Meeting planned for December 24th cancelled due to holiday break. Fellowship activities officially paused for holidays with expectation to resume in January. Survey completion review postponed.
January 2025	Most members completed surveys though 2-3 remained pending, including Lilian Falealuga who became unresponsive. January 24th meeting cancelled due to scheduling conflicts and overlap with similar VAKA Pasifika and TANGO project causing workload issues. Coordination challenges persisted requiring structured follow-ups.
February 2025	No formal meetings held leading to confusion about roles and further slowed progress. Amalinda formally appointed as Project Manager by UNDP to help fellowship momentum. Other VAKA Pasifika project remained more active with regular meetings and Radio Tuvalu features. Survey data analysis remained incomplete.

Month	Key Events
March 2025	By March 13th, only three members remained active: Amalinda, Kitasi, and Talua (virtual participation). Three fellows formally left: Selai Managreve (overseas relocation), Macdonald Tau (study leave), Falema Piita (work commitments). Filiga and Yvett remained associated but participation tapered.
April 2025	Fellowship reached standstill with confusion over Amalinda's role (fellowship representative vs. UNDP independent work). Amalinda tasked with two-community engagement using fellowship's case study approach, supported by Talua and Kitasi. Behind-scenes activity continued with budget drafting and Messenger group communications.
May 2025	Amalinda engaged Minister of Climate Change and Local Government, facilitating UNDP meeting in Suva, Fiji. Planning resumed for July Vanuatu workshop. May 2nd in-person meeting (Amalinda, Kitasi, Talua) and May 21st virtual meeting with Tala for progress assessment.
June 2025	Four new members recruited based on Amalinda's recommendations and UNDP input: Avaonoa Homasi (TNWC), Mase Tumua (Auditor General's Office), Sepoe Tafea (Local Government), Faiatea Latasi (TANGO). External evaluation support concluded June 20th due to limited progress and ongoing uncertainty. Workshop delegation of eight confirmed.
July 2025	Group meetings July 11th and 15th to prepare Vanuatu workshop presentation. Budget approval occurred July 15th (two days before departure). Seven members attended workshop July 21st (Faiatea removed for personal reasons). Strategic reset achieved with two-part strategy development and clearer purpose articulation.
August 2025	Post-workshop implementation planning initiated. Community-led documentation initiatives developed. Pilot island consultation preparations began. Members showed increased initiative in setting own priorities rather than waiting for external direction.

Annex 2:

Survey Questionnaire:

Community Development Assistance (CDA)

VAKA PASIFIKA TUVALU FELLOWSHIP IMPACT FOCUS: EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE (CDA) QUESTIONNAIRE

Respondent Information: Sex: _____ Age: _____ Island/Group: _____

1. **Do you know what is Community Development Assistance (CDA)?**
E iloa ne koe me sea te CDA?
2. **What do you know about CDA?**
E mafai o fakamatala mai ne koe me sea tau mea e iloa ite CDA?
3. **Do you know what are the community developments funded under the CDA?**
Nea a polotieki i te fenua ne fakatupe i lalo ite CDA?
4. **What do you think about those projects? You can share at least one or two in particular, if you want?**
Sea tau fakatau ki polotieki kona, e mafai ne koe o fakamatala mai me tasi io me lua i polotieki kona?

Have you been involved in:

Kai kau aka loa koe ki:

a) **Designing** (If yes what kind of involvement)

Faitega/Palaniiga o te polotieki (Kafai e ao, koe ne kau pefea kiei?):

b) **Implementation** (If yes what kind of involvement)

Fakagaluega o te polotieki (Kafai e ao, koe ne kau pefea kiei?):

c) **Review & Reporting** (If yes what kind of involvement)

Iloiloga o te polotieki (Kafai e ao, koe ne kau pefea kiei?):

5. **What are the benefits of those projects to you or to the society?**
Nea penefiti ne maau ne koe io me ko te fenua mai luga polotieki io m eko atiakega kona?
6. **What are the impacts or challenges those projects cause to you or the society?**
Nea pokotiaga o polotieki konei lalo ite CDA kia koe mot e fenua?
7. **Have there been any remedies implemented to address those challenges already in existence?**
E mata e isi ne fakatokaga ko oti ne fai ke mafai o agai atu iei a pokotiaga katoa ne fai mai ne koe?
8. **What do you think is the most effective way to address those challenges?**
I tau fakatau nea auala e tau iei o fakatoka io me agai atu a pokotiaga o te CDA?
9. **Do you think CDA addresses the needs of the society? Why?**
Sea tau fakatau te CDA e tali atu ki manakoga o te fenua?
10. **What do you think should be the community priorities under the CDA?**
I tau fakatau, mea atiakega e tau o fakamuamua i lalo ite CDA?
11. **As of today, there is no audit including audit performance has been undertaken for the CDA, do you think there should be an audit for the CDA and why?**
Ite vaitaimi nei te tupe ne fakamaumau i lalo i CDA e seki maua loa se taimi ke otita, sea tau fakatau e tau o fai se otita o te CDA kae kaia foki e manko koe.

Any other comments?

E isi aka ne au nisi mea e fia faopoopo?

Annex 3:

Methodology Note

This case study employed an action research approach, with a national action researcher (Tala Simeti) embedded within the fellowship to document interactions, observe discussions, and track participation levels over time. The action research methodology allowed for real-time documentation of the fellowship's evolution while providing feedback and support to members.

Data Sources:

- **Semi-structured interviews** with all active fellowship members and selected community representatives conducted throughout the fellowship period
- **Participant observation** of fellowship meetings, training sessions, and workshop activities
- **Document analysis** of meeting notes, WhatsApp/Messenger communications, planning materials, and UNDP project documentation
- **Focus group discussions** during the July 2025 Vanuatu workshop providing comparative Pacific perspectives
- **Monthly reflection calls** between the national action researcher (Tala Simeti) and Centre researcher (Allan Illingworth) for structured sensemaking

Researcher Position: The action researcher's dual role as both observer and occasional participant provided unique insights into internal dynamics while maintaining analytical distance necessary for objective assessment. Tala Simeti's position as a Tuvaluan professional with existing relationships within the governance community facilitated access and trust while requiring careful navigation of potential conflicts of interest.

Data Collection Challenges: The research faced several methodological challenges including declining fellowship participation affecting interview availability, overlapping UNDP projects creating confusion about roles and boundaries, and the need to balance action research support with objective documentation. The conclusion of external evaluation support in June 2025 reflected both resource constraints and the difficulty of maintaining research activities when fellowship momentum declined.

Analytical Framework: The analysis employed three primary lenses: (1) Leadership, politics and operations examining practical coalition challenges; (2) Participation, purpose and power analyzing member engagement and external relationships; and (3) How change happens in Tuvalu focusing on local governance dynamics and traditional authority structures. This framework emerged iteratively through the research process and was validated through member feedback during the Vanuatu workshop.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

La Trobe University acknowledges that our campuses are located on the lands of many traditional custodians in Australia.

We recognise their ongoing connection to the land and value their unique contribution to the University and wider Australian society.

We are committed to providing opportunities for Indigenous Australians, both as individuals and communities through teaching and learning, research and community partnerships across all of our campuses.

La Trobe University pays our respect to Indigenous Elders, past, present and emerging and will continue to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems and protocols as part of our ongoing strategic and operational business.

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