Accompanying accountability coalitions in the Pacific

UNDP's Vaka Pasifika Fellowship Scheme

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Photo: Mural detail from USP Honiara, site of the Solomon Islands fellowship meeting October 2025
Credit: Marine Destrez

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Introduction

Efforts by governments and international development partners to achieve more accountable and responsive governance have been the subject of significant critique, with a recognition that many tried and tested approaches have not delivered desired results or at the intended scale (see Krafchik & Evans 2024). In response, practitioners and academics are attempting to move away from normative, universalist models to more nuanced and localised approaches to accountability that resonate with the diversity of contexts. Increasingly, this starts with understanding accountability as a local ecosystem, with a range of interacting stakeholders across government, civil society, religious and customary spheres that will operate differently from place-to-place (Halloran 2021, Nadelman et al. 2022; Walton 2013).

Every accountability ecosystem involves a unique combination of formal and informal rules, interests and incentives, all of which are inherently political and shaped by relationships and power dynamics (see Denney et al 2025). This is a useful lens in the Pacific where individuals often identify relationally through their connections to families, clan, ethnic and other cultural or religious affiliations (Finau et al. 2022, Reynolds 2016). Krafchik (2024) contends that in addition to being informed by a political economy understanding of the relationships and incentives at play, accountability interventions intended to shift power should also involve partnerships or coalitions of stakeholders from across the accountability ecosystem. This echoes the success of coalitions in building pressure and accelerating change in the Pacific and elsewhere (Corbett 2013; Denney & McLaren 2016; Krafchik & Evans 2024).

Informed by such approaches, UNDP Pacific has been exploring accountability ecosystems and collective action under the auspices of the EU funded Vaka Pasifika Project – Accountable Public Finances to serve Pacific people. Alongside traditional support to public finance institutions aligned with the Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) reform roadmaps, the Vaka Pasifika project also enjoys the space to work in exploratory and non-traditional ways that suit the Pacific context (Bond 2024). La Trobe University's Centre for Human Security and Social Change (CHSSC) has partnered Vaka Pasifika on this journey since 2022, producing several political economy analyses of accountability ecosystems in the Pacific. Building on the findings of this research, and several years of working and learning alongside accountability stakeholders from across each ecosystem, in 2023 UNDP forged the idea of a fellowship program that could support collective action towards more accountable and effective Public Financial Management systems in Pacific nations (UNDP 2023).

CHSSC has undertaken action research alongside the program at both country and regional levels, accompanying the development of the fellowships in two countries and documenting their story, as well as the attempt by UNDP to work in this experimental way regionally. To that end, two country-level reports have been produced that capture the experience of the fellowship schemes in Solomon Islands (Craney & Tuhanuku 2025) and Tuvalu (Simeti & Mua Illingworth 2025). This synthesis paper draws on those, as well as insights from the regional collaboration of the fellowship schemes, in speaking to the bigger questions of what works to strengthen accountability in the Pacific and what is the role of an international development partner in so doing.

This paper is presented in five sections. The first section introduces the action research itself: its origins, intent, structure and scope of the fellowships and the research process. The second section explores the evolving focus of the fellowship schemes, and the third section summarises what occurred in each country, and at the regional level, over the life of the study. The fourth section details

the learning that has emerged from the action research. The paper concludes with some reflections about the evolution in purpose, power and participation witnessed over the life of the cooperation, and the potential for influence and impact.

The Action Research

In early 2024, building on the findings of research into the political economy of accountability ecosystems in the Pacific, UNDP began supporting the establishment of national accountability fellowship schemes. These schemes were expected to bring together stakeholders from across each national accountability ecosystem who were interested in acting collectively to achieve change. Some of the key participants in the fellowships had been identified as part of the earlier political economy research. CHSSC undertook action research alongside each fellowship, accompanying the development of each group and documenting their story. In addition, UNDP intended to hold a series of meetings bringing the national fellowships together at the regional level, and CHSSC was to accompany and document this process also. Beyond documenting stories of potential change at national and regional levels, the action research was intended to promote reflection and discussion among fellows and to deepen the learning generated in each setting, as well as to reflect on the role of an external development partner, like UNDP, instigating and supporting this process.

The action research shared some of the overarching research questions of the earlier accountability ecosystems studies. For example, how is accountability understood in the Pacific? What form do accountability mechanisms take and whose power and interests are served by these? In addition, the action research sought to explore how coalitions and collective action can bring about change in accountability, and what role external actors (like UNDP) can play in supporting this work. The action research team included a national researcher in each country, supported by a CHSSC researcher (both of whom had previously been engaged in undertaking the political economy analysis in the relevant country), and coordinated by the CHSSC project lead. Each national researcher was embedded in their fellowship scheme and undertook a cycle of interviews and observations over the course of the study. These were initially intended to be monthly, but timeframes have regularly stretched or contracted to adapt to the activity of the fellowship schemes. National researchers then met regularly with their CHSSC researcher, and the entire CHSSC team met periodically to track progress and collectively reflect on emerging findings. In addition to documenting the recurring team workshops, the lead author interviewed 4 UNDP staff members and 4 UNDP consultants up to 3 times each over the course of the cooperation. This tiered approach meant that there were layers of proximity to the fellowship schemes, allowing for different reflections and insights to be drawn out.

The initial plan (in March 2024) was for country level fellowships to be established in six countries, to be supported by UNDP for six months each, in addition to the regional level collaboration. The first cohort included Fiji, Solomon Islands and Tonga and was expected to be supported between April and October 2024. The second cohort included Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, and was expected to be supported between November 2024 and May 2025. Over the course of 2024 it became apparent that

the six-country plan was unrealistic and the scope was reduced to three countries (Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu) to be supported over a longer period of time. In early 2025, a lack of traction for the fellowship in Tonga meant that the scope was further reduced to only Solomon Islands and Tuvalu. Tonga later rejoined deliberations for the one regional level meeting that took place (in July 2025). Plans remain in place to expand the fellowship schemes to other countries, including Fiji (where a new study commenced in late 2025) and possibly Vanuatu, in time.

The Focus

ON COALITIONS AND CONSTITUENCY DEVELOPMENT FUNDS

UNDP elected to steer some of the Vaka Pasifika project resources to convening key stakeholders and supporting the emergence of 'fellowships' or 'coalitions' to improve accountability outcomes. This emphasis on coalitions of key local stakeholders was informed by three factors. The first was an acknowledgement of the diversity of stakeholders with an interest in accountability, including everyone from ordinary citizens, through to staff of accountability organisations, all the way to the highest levels of government. Acknowledging the differing motivations of various stakeholders in an ecosystem, coalitions are thought to be a more effective way of tackling politically sticky development challenges (Denney & McLaren 2016). The second factor was a recognition of emerging accountability research that specifically critiques technocratic interventions and calls, instead, for interventions rooted in collective action (Halloran 2021). Third was a recognition of the documented success that coalitions have had in effecting developmental reforms in various Pacific contexts (Denney & McLaren 2016; Roche et al 2020; Rousseau & Kenneth-Watson 2018).

Halloran (2021) explains that accountability ecosystems encompass a cross-section of society, including organisations and individuals with formal governance responsibilities, but also including civil society, the private sector, the media and others. And rather than being defined by clear hierarchies with cause-and-effect chains, they are instead an entanglement of power dynamics that run in multiple directions. This perspective echoes emerging understandings of how social change happens in the Pacific (see Roche et al 2020). As such, to improve accountability reforms requires understanding local power dynamics and working with key stakeholders collectively to envision, design, implement and govern change. Furthermore, as Craney et al note, 'working with coalitions of influential people, rather than individuals, … both increase[s] the scope of influence and minimize[s] the risk of providing outsized power to any one person' (2022:671). UNDP's support for coalition building sits comfortably within this appreciation of the complexity and inherently political nature of accountability ecosystems.

It is important to note that not all collections of stakeholders constitute a coalition and, moreover, that the way people come (or are brought) together can shape their cooperation and their impact. Whether coalitions are pre-existing or have been brokered with a particular purpose in mind, it is critical that these are locally led and that 'donors are not seen as using local actors for their own agenda' (Denney & McLaren 2016:2). Furthermore 'the size and composition of the coalition, relative to its goals, can influence its effectiveness, as can the manner in which it both frames and strategises its activities' (Leftwich 2012:1). Whether the Vaka Pasifika fellowship schemes constitute coalitions for political change in their current form, and how fit-for-purpose these fellowships are to promote the change they seek, are questions that remain central to this work and are explored further in this paper.

UNDP initially proposed Climate Change as a technical focus area for the fellowships to be brought together around, providing a timely and shared central organising focus. This idea failed to gain traction, however. Instead, and independently of each other, the fellowships in Solomon Islands and Tuvalu both determined that they would focus their accountability efforts on constituency development funds (CDFs) – schemes that disburse funding from the national budget to the local level via Members of Parliament. CDF schemes were first adopted in India and rose sharply in popularity in the early part of this century, particularly following Kenya's adoption of the model in 2003 (Tshangana 2010). By 2010 CDF schemes were active in one form or another in over 15 countries around the world, including Solomon Islands. Supporters of CDF schemes regard them as a means to efficiently direct funds to the constituency level, allowing communities to determine their own development priorities and to more readily access funds (Devaux et al, 2022). Critics, however, question the adequacy of checks and balances when the separation of powers is broken between those approving and managing such funds (Harris 2021, Wiltshire & Batley 2018). Concerns have also been raised regarding the meaningful engagement of communities in decision making, with some observers citing examples of poor access to information and limited opportunity to question or interrogate CDF decisions (International Budget Partnership 2010). As such, review and reform of CDF programs offered a tangible and topical accountability topic for the Vaka Pasifika fellowships to pursue.

The Fellowship Schemes

SOLOMON ISLANDS

The decision to focus on CDFs in Solomon Islands was straightforward. The management and distribution of CDFs is one of "the most visible and important roles performed by MPs" (Wiltshire et al 2020:2) in the country, yet CDF practices are viewed by civil society and others as contributing to an environment that can weaken financial and political accountability (Wilshire and Batley 2018, Craney & Tuhanuku 2025). CDFs were created with the intention of supporting the discreet developmental needs and promoting economic development of the greater than 80% of Solomon Islanders who live in rural and remote areas. Not only have they failed to have a broadscale discernible impact in line with these intentions (Futaiasi 2023:18), they are widely reported as undermining development through a combination of patronage, corruption and cronyism (Barbara 2018, Gordon & Cheeseman 2024, Fraenkel 2011, Kekea & Ride 2023). Although CDF spending is facilitated through a centralised process by which applications must be made to the local Constituency Development Office and are then funded through formal invoices administered by the Ministry of Rural Development and Ministry of Finance and Treasury (Futaiasi 2023:140), in reality their allocation is highly decentralised. It is the imprimatur of the local MP that determines which applications are funded (Wiltshire & Batley 2018).

The focus on CDF reform reflected perceptions domestically and from the donor community that CDFs in Solomon Islands were undermining developmental ambitions and coincided with new CDF legislation. The Constituency Development Fund Act 2023 provided a critical juncture that could be taken advantage of. The new Act stipulated that CDF funds must be spent on projects that include local communities in their planning and that all funding must be audited (Solomon Islands Government 2023). Fellows identified that they could play an important role in influencing, designing and

implementing mechanisms to see these requirements enacted, cementing their decision to focus their efforts on CDF reform.

Initially, the Solomon Islands fellows intended to focus mainly on national level actors. The national action researcher, Ali Tuhanuku, who also was subcontracted by UNDP to act as the local UNDP advisor facilitating the fellowship, identified key accountability ecosystem stakeholders for membership, drawing on the initial political economy research and his own networks and experience. One key identified figure was David Dennis, the Auditor-General, due to a combination of factors including a lengthy history of private and public sector work at the executive level, an established relationship with UNDP working on public financial management and strong relationships across Solomon Islands society. Dennis' participation was also facilitated by a close relationship with Tuhanuku, with whom he had a history of working collaboratively. Dennis and Tuhanuku are also cousins, pointing to the role of personal networks in coalition building. Others identified for the fellowship scheme included representatives of civil society drawn through the peak body, Development Services Exchange, and senior figures within the country's formal accountability institutions. To ensure connection with politicians, it was determined that two MPs should be engaged, representing one seat held by a government minister and one held by a representative outside of government.

Including representatives from inside and outside government was a strategy to mitigate perceptions of bias of any initiative emerging from the fellowship and to increase the network of MPs who may be open to supporting the fellowship's work and lessons drawn from it. The leader of the Independents, Hon Peter Kenilorea Jr joined the fellowship in August 2024 and the Hon Paul Bosawai in March 2025, representing the opposition and government, respectively. Each was selected due to their interest in CDF reform and reputation for having strong working relationships across government and their communities. Due to the involvement of the MPs, it was decided that three representatives from each of their constituencies should be added to the fellowship to represent the perspectives of chiefs/elders, women and youth from the local level. This group formed the initially intended 'fellowship scheme,' although never formally met collectively.

With key elements of the CDF legislative reform of 2023, such as participatory auditing, requiring design and socialisation, the national fellowship decided to focus on measures that would improve CDF accountability. UNDP contracted an external consultant to provide guidance for creating a CDF participatory audit guide based on global precedents. Upon review, this document was determined by the local UNDP advisor, key local stakeholders and the Vaka Pasifika project team as unsuitable, as it did not consider the political realities of CDF operations and reform in Solomon Islands. The political sensitivity of CDF reform meant that intended fellowship participants expressed a desire for Cabinet to endorse the fellowship and remain abreast of its work, so as not to create the perception of the fellowship being a rogue entity undermining the work of the parliament. Due to a combination of factors – including the fellowship not being a priority activity of the Cabinet and large periods of time where Cabinet did not meet – endorsement from Cabinet has proved an ongoing challenge. Motions of no confidence and changes to the senior leadership at the Ministry of Rural Development (MRD), under whose auspices the CDF operates, created further delays to receiving Cabinet endorsement and as at the time of writing this national-level fellowship was still yet to meet.

Given the dormancy of the national fellowship – save for informal discussions between members, often facilitated directly by the national action researcher/local UNDP advisor – scoping missions were undertaken to the constituencies of the two MPs involved to progress activity at the community level. The first visit, to East Areare in August 2024, found high community support for community involvement in participatory auditing. This support was confirmed during a later scoping trip to the

North Guadalcanal constituency. With UNDP already engaging in efforts with the Auditor-General to support such auditing and the Constituency Development Fund Act 2023 outlining that all constituencies need to undertake audits, the local UNDP advisor focused attention on building ties with the MRD (the ministry responsible for developing monitoring and evaluation protocols for participatory audits) to share lessons from the process centrally.

A 'twin track' approach to the Solomon Islands fellowship scheme efforts to reform CDF was thus developed. Lobbying would continue to gather Cabinet support and convene the members identified for the original fellowship at the national level. Concurrently, community-level fellowships would be formed at constituency level to provide broad public engagement, ownership and oversight to developing local participatory audits. Throughout 2025, these community-level fellowships helped to co-design and facilitate training for data collectors in participatory auditing, with assistance from the local UNDP advisor. Meanwhile, conversations and positioning continue at the national level to seek Cabinet level approval for the fellowship scheme to formally meet and pursue reforms that would broaden the scale and reach of what is happening in the two constituencies. It is too soon to assess what impacts the local- or national-level coalitions will have on improving accountability and public knowledge about appropriate CDF disbursement and acquittal.

TUVALU

The Tuvalu fellowship commenced with eight members, drawn largely from recommendations captured during the earlier political economy analysis of the local accountability ecosystem (Illingworth & Simeti 2023). Members came from government, NGOs, women's and youth groups, and religious organisations, with the intention that including a cross-section of individuals with influence across an array of sectors of society would strengthen their efforts to improve accountability. Fellowship scheme members were asked to identify a possible focus for strengthening accountability through collective action, generating an initial list of 17 options (Simeti & Illingworth 2025:3). After discussion amongst the members, they identified the Outer Island Development Fund (OIDF) as requiring greater citizen oversight and governance measures. The Fund, informally called CDA (Community Development Assistance), was created during Covid-19 to support outer island communities, with individual MPs responsible for AUD 250,000 (USD 180,000) of spending in their constituencies annually. No formal reports or auditing occurred across the first four years of the Fund's implementation, beyond limited references to these funds in national financial audits. This perceived lack of formal accountability, along with a view that communities had limited understanding about the fund's implementation, led to its prioritisation by the Tuvalu coalition in June 2024.

A complication arose a few months later when the Tuvalu government overhauled the CDA program and released Community Sustainable Funding Assistance (CoSFA) in its place, partially in response to the recognised problems with CDA monitoring and reporting. A significant feature of CoSFA was that it increased community oversight by vesting decision making in the hands of local Falekaupule (Councils of Elders) instead of MPs. This change better reflected the blend of customary and Westminster governance in Tuvalu (see Corbett 2015) and also went some way to addressing some of the flaws fellowship scheme members had identified in the original CDA. Despite the change, the group decided to continue with this focus, hoping to positively influence the application of changes ratified by parliament and to ensure that the Falekaupule were making decisions that represented citizen needs and interests. This included the potential to positively influence changes in practice, and track governance responsibility now that it was housed in collectives of the Falekaupule, rather than with single MPs in each constituency (Simeti & Illingworth 2025).

The fellowship was highly active in its first few months. Members met in person regularly and stayed in contact via a Facebook Messenger group. The fellowship focused efforts on conducting a survey of seven of Tuvalu's nine islands, assessing community perspectives on how successful community funds were proving in driving developmental change at the local level and perceptions related to effective governance of the OIDF scheme. Ultimately 38 surveys were completed across the 7 islands, before momentum slowed. Fellows identified a lack of strong leadership and supporting funds as a reason for the slow down, in addition to the uncertainty that arose during transition from CDA to CoFSA. Members also had to attend to their myriad other professional and personal obligations. While concurrent associations and responsibilities are common in Pacific societies (Craney & Hudson 2020; Craney & Tuhanuku 2025), this is especially true in Tuvalu where the very small population means that multiple hats are the norm (Illingworth & Simeti 2023).

Disagreements regarding the way survey work should be funded and managed delayed survey implementation and stalled progress on associated activities. A further challenge for the Tuvalu fellowship has been the retention of its members, due to high levels of short- and long-term emigration, mainly for work or study purposes. Of the eight people initially engaged in the coalition, only three remained in Tuvalu one year later. UNDP's appointment of researcher Amalinda Satupa, initially as a member of the fellowship and later as a contracted fellowship coordinator, helped sustain coordination amid declining participation. Momentum picked up again in the lead up to the regional Vaka Pasifika workshop held in Vanuatu in July 2025, providing a focal point for the group in the lead up and then providing a platform for reflection and regrouping during the event.

As with the Solomon Islands example, evidence of the Tuvalu fellowship's impact to-date is limited. Stalls in momentum and shifting priorities mean that the survey data has yet to be analysed and the fellowship has not yet been able to communicate community concerns into policy discussions. Further, it is too soon to assess broader impact that the fellowship has had on the appropriate implementation of CoSFA following its reform – and such impacts may not realistically be determinable for some years. Nonetheless, members of the fellowship reflect that the experience of working as a coalition has been highly beneficial as they have developed skills and experience in working across sectors, understanding the drivers and barriers to change that influence different stakeholders and the communities that they represent.

TONGA

UNDP prioritised Tonga for a fellowship scheme based on UNDP's longstanding commitment to CDF reform there. Prior to the creation of the fellowship program, UNDP had several years of close cooperation with the Tongan parliament, including a high-level presentation to the entire parliament in 2022 and a clear expression of support for CDF reform from the Speaker of the House. A national researcher was identified and contracted to accompany this fellowship as it emerged, however the fellowship scheme did not gain traction over the latter months of 2024 and an agreement between UNDP and the Government of Tonga remained elusive. Progress was impacted by significant parliamentary upheaval taking place in Tonga through this period. UNDP was cautioned against pursuing the idea at the wrong time: "There's a risk of resistance or resentment towards the idea of CDF reform if it is rushed or presented at the wrong time by the wrong person" (Interview with Tongan Civil Society representative, 23 November 2024). In addition, there was some uncertainty expressed about the concept of a fellowship and its appropriateness in this setting: "In Tonga there is very marginal exposure to the term 'fellowship,' and almost no ownership of the concept in the context of CDF reform. It is not the engine we need for CDF reform in Tonga" (Interview with UNDP consultant, 24 October 2024).

Recognising that the timing was not right to push forward with a national fellowship, a decision was made in January 2025 to pause the focus on a fellowship scheme in Tonga. UNDP's longstanding technical support around CDF reform continued at pace, however, accompanying Tonga's Legislative Assembly and its partners "from diagnostic and exploratory work towards a structured, politically grounded and institutionally anchored pathway for reforming constituency development funds, at the institutional level" (UNDP 2025). When a regional meeting of the fellowship schemes in Solomon Islands and Tuvalu was held in July 2025, Tonga re-engaged in the fellowship conversation and a delegation participated. The group included the sole female member of parliament, and representatives from both government and civil society. Participants shared their experience of pursing CDF reform in Tonga and actively exchanged ideas with delegates from Solomon Islands and Tuvalu on the usefulness of collective action. Tonga committed to ongoing cooperation at the regional level and seemed poised to pursue a Tongan fellowship scheme in one form or another. Changes in the wake of Tongan election in late 2025 mean that membership of the fellowship is under review at the time of writing, however a continued commitment to the fellowship scheme seems likely.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

UNDP's intention was to bring representatives of the national fellowships together for periodic regional meetings, initially proposed to occur once every six months from mid-2024 to mid-2025. These meetings were intended as a space for sharing ideas, building stronger regional networks and improving scope for collective action. In reality, it proved challenging to balance these regional aspirations with the unique timing and circumstances of local and national activities in each setting. As the fellowship schemes evolved, UNDP prioritised local efforts and plans for the first regional event in 2024 were initially pushed to early 2025 and then deferred again. At the time of writing, there has only been one regional exchange between fellows, which took place in July 2025 in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Representatives from Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu were present at the event, although each group arrived with fundamentally different histories. The Solomon Islands group had only formed in the weeks immediately prior to the event, uniting the existing project coordinator with a range of national and constituency-level stakeholders who shared a common interest in accountability but not yet a common history as a fellowship. The Tongan group knew each other well but had no prior interaction as a fellowship scheme. The Tuvalu group was the most established, having functioned as a fellowship since mid-2024, however even in this case membership of the fellowship had evolved rapidly in the preceding months and only a small number of the group had been part of the journey from the beginning.

The three-day event in Port Vila was anchored around relational accountability and adaptive leadership, with the majority of sessions led by the Adapsys Group who were well known to UNDP and many of the participants in the room, having also trained the Solomon Islands and Tuvalu fellowship schemes. The facilitators had been involved in conversations around governance and CDF reform in each setting, and each of the national fellowships was encouraged to reflect frankly on their work in this shared space. The CHSSC researchers facilitated reflection and discussion on the evolution in fellowship thinking in each of the three settings. This regional meeting consolidated an emerging awareness that three elements of collective action were centrally important to the story of the fellowship schemes: understanding participation (who and when people chose to engage); understanding purpose (how a purpose was identified and if/how this purpose evolves); and understanding power (how power is exercised to enable or constrain change).

The regional event appeared to generate new energy and enthusiasm for the work, within and across the country teams. Participants spoke of a "new hope and faith in the process" (interview with fellow from Solomon Islands, 23 July 25) and renewed their "commitment to the process because of

commitment to the purpose" (interview with fellow from Tonga, 23 July 25). Each group took away lessons and reflections on their work to date along with a range of ideas and aspirations for the work yet to come. At the time of writing a second regional event is planned for early 2026, at which point the groups will have chance to revisit their intentions and speak to their progress over the intervening months. In addition, fellowship schemes look likely to emerge in other settings where accountability ecosystems analyses have been undertaken (most notably Vanuatu and Fiji) and participation in the regional event may widen accordingly.

Action Research Insights

It is too early in the life of the fellowship scheme to identify substantive impacts, at least in terms of changes to accountability practice. Significant learning has been captured, however, that provides useful reflection of the process and progress witnessed over the journey. These are captured below, grouped under thematic headings.

ACTIONING ACCOUNTABILITY

LOCAL, NATIONAL OR REGIONAL?

Across the fellowship schemes there was regular discussion amongst fellows, consultants, UNDP staff and action researchers about the most appropriate level at which to target the fellowship work. Some participants felt that work at the local level was the most meaningful way to connect citizens with accountability, bringing accountability down "from the abstract to something people could understand" (CHSSC action research workshop notes, 23 February 2025). At one point it was also seen as politically wise to "retreat to the local" due to "the realities of (national level) power and politics" (Interview with UNDP staffer, 18 March 2025). Action at the local level was thus seen as more politically possible. For one participant, the work needed to operate at three levels simultaneously to be effective: "the whole concept is, each market has constituency level engagement first, which delivers evidence for national discussion about potential scaling and practices, and then practice exchange at the regional event" (correspondence with UNDP staffer, 4 March 2025). For another participant, the fellowship model only really made sense at the regional level: "I think it can add some value at the regional level... a fellowship bringing CDF reform initiatives together" (Interview with UNDP consultant, 24 October 2024). Most fellows felt deeper impact was most likely at the national level, as described by this participant: "At the community level change is limited. At the regional level change is diluted. It's national, this is where the progress can be made" (Interview with UNDP consultant, 27.6.25).

The perspective of participants varies depending on their unique combination of experience and expertise, as well as their relationship with the project (i.e. were they a UNDP staff member, an independent consultant or a fellow). Local community members whose daily activities are not directly impacted by national and regional policies and programming naturally preference interventions with clear local impacts. Similarly, professionals who have worked primarily at national or regional levels gravitate towards interventions that operate through their most familiar scales. In practice, the fellowships have, to varying degrees, worked across the community, national and regional levels. Working across these levels, sometimes called multi-scalar governance, "requires an intimate understanding of the norms, values, relations and politics that define social hierarchies and is a helpful

tool when considering less state-centric models of governance reform" (Bond 2024:18). In this way, the composition of a fellowship serves to shape its focus not only in terms of ambition but also process and emphasis.

Focusing on CDFs as a site for strengthening accountability serves to collapse geographies of local and national. Both CDF and CoSFA are national-level schemes, but their design and impact is distinctly focused on the local level. Centring reform efforts on these programs has, on the one hand, brought multiple potential benefits. First, it means that discussions about public financial management are tangible and connected to the everyday lives of citizens, increasing the prospects of their active engagement in seeking accountability from their elected representatives. Second, interventions made in one constituency can still have resonance in other constituencies, allowing for diversified learning. This equally applies to politicians, who can benchmark and communicate their efforts at strengthening accountability or, conversely, be challenged by rivals and/or civil society to improve such efforts based on data and knowledge gained from other constituencies. Third, the focus on CDF and CoSFA incentivises coalitions to be built that include stakeholders from local and national levels, promoting greater national-subnational collaboration, improving access to shared information and networks for improved decision making.

At the same time, a challenge that the coalitions in both Solomon Islands and Tuvalu have faced equally pertains to the bridging of the gap between local and national priorities and experiences relating to CDF and CoSFA. Given that efforts to improve oversight and acquittal of constituency funds in each country include a combination of local level impact and national level legislation and formal oversight, it can be difficult to design interventions that reflect equal representation and commitment from stakeholders at each level. In Solomon Islands this has played out through the creation of the twin track approach. Collective action occurring separately at the local and national levels offers the opportunity to link efforts to breach geographic and jurisdictional gaps, but it also risks creating siloes if not managed prudently. In Tuvalu, this has played out through perceptions that national actors are participating on behalf of local actors, rather than embedding their direct participation. As Simeti and Illingworth (2025:13) highlight, by having a coalition that consists almost entirely of members based in the capital of Funafuti – even though they represent a cross-section of society and interest groups – there is a risk that the national-local divide on CoSFA may be exacerbated rather than collapsed.

PERSONALITY AND POSITIONALITY

The members of the fellowships established in both Solomon Islands and Tuvalu report benefiting from being intentionally connected with others in their national accountability ecosystem (see Halloran 2021). Supporting the development and functioning of the fellowships has had multiple benefits in terms of widening understandings of each accountability ecosystem. To begin with, simple exposure to a cross-section of accountability stakeholders opens pathways for information and resource sharing. Further, by building relationships with people who hold different institutional motivations, coalitions members can develop a more rounded understanding of why and how individuals and institutions support or oppose change, including how decisions are informed by both personal and professional factors (Craney & Tuhanuku 2025; Simeti & Illingworth 2025).

Nonetheless, it cannot be assumed that the simple formation of a coalition will lead to improved understanding and streamlined communications. Although the fellowships were intended to bring together like-minded individuals whose cross-sectoral experience could create a positive hivemind with significant network reach, the experiences of each coalition included tensions regarding who should be included and why. This may in part be explained by the sometimes-competing criteria of seeking fellows who are both reform-minded (including political will) and are also appropriately

influential. For example, in Solomon Islands it was important to include some people because of their formal position even if another individual within their organisation was known to be more reform-minded, while in Tuvalu all fellowship members work at some capacity within the public service (in part because the public service is the nation's largest employer). On top of this, in cities and countries with small populations, relationships marked by social closeness can limit opportunities for providing and receiving critical feedback. Notably, there is also significant power vested in those who determine which stakeholders best meet the criteria and should be included in the fellowship. No coalition is politically neutral. To achieve an effective and critically conscious coalition requires dedication to reflexivity, shared learning, as well as a focus on building and maintaining communication and expectations across stakeholders.

Bringing a diverse set of stakeholders together to agree on a shared pathway of change requires open and honest dialogue. It may also require designing a 'scaffolded' pathway of change, operating multiple small-scale interventions that feed into a larger ambition. Scaffolding also allows for movement between the local, national and regional levels in response to political realities. In Solomon Islands, when reflecting on the initial findings of the action research team and acknowledging that a national-level fellowship in Solomon Islands was hamstrung by not having Cabinet endorsement, key stakeholders determined that a twin track approach was the best way forward. It was felt working at both local and national levels was the most likely method to maintain momentum and produce proof of concept. Flexibility in response to local realities allows stakeholders to trial interventions at different scales, amplifying or minimizing different strategies at different times, with each approach able to inform continued adaptation among the others.

UNPACKING THE SUM AND THE PARTS OF COALITIONS

Although a strength of the individual fellowships lies in how they have brought together diverse stakeholders with differing motivations and experiences, it is also important to acknowledge that certain stakeholders will have more influence than others. The dual role held by Ali Tuhanuku as local UNDP adviser and action researcher in Solomon Islands has allowed him to move within and across spaces to build support within and for the national and local coalitions. Tuhanuku has undoubtedly been supported in these efforts by his established reputation and relationships, as well as the support of other key stakeholders with equally sound reputations and relationships, such as the Auditor-General and the two MPs who have volunteered to involve their constituencies in the pilot project. Meanwhile, in Tuvalu, a decline in momentum precipitated by the reforms that led to CoSFA and rapid member turnover of the fellowship necessitated UNDP to include one of the local action researchers, Amalinda Satupa, as a paid coordinator within the fellowship. Although this created some tension amongst the group regarding whether other fellows should also be paid, Satupa's inclusion, buttressed by her reputation and relationships, most certainly helped the fellowship to reform and refocus.

The lesson that key individuals can play an outsized role in the formation and operation of coalitions is an important one. As noted above, members of coalitions at all levels hold multiple personal and professional obligations. It cannot be expected that they will always have the time and energy to prioritise their contribution to their respective coalitions, particularly when their engagement is not renumerated (Craney 2020). Examples from elsewhere in the Pacific (Craney & Hudson 2020; Roche et al 2020; Rousseau & Kenneth-Watson 2018) highlight that successful collective action often is driven by coalitions that include key individuals who can utilise a combination of convening power, relationship building and navigating small 'p' politics to effect change.

The influence of Tuhanuku and Satupa in Solomon Islands and Tuvalu, respectively, demonstrate that including local individuals who have and are prepared to expend political capital is key to bringing

people together to create and sustain a strong collective. Further, supporting key individuals in facilitation roles means that they can hold space for other members of the group to contribute when and where they can, and also be included in regular communication about coalition progress in periods of low activity. The adaptive, experimental nature of the fellowship model was at odds with a traditional project model of predetermined objectives and activities found in other UNDP activities. Several participants found this approach challenging and most would agree that this necessitated additional time and effort. As one participant reflected at the regional workshop, "In addition to people and purpose, coalitions need time and established relationships to take hold. These parts of the recipe have been missing sometimes in the fellowships" (CHSSC action research workshop notes, 17 July 2025).

NAVIGATING TURMOIL: BIG 'P' AND LITTLE 'p' POLITICS

Attempting reform of CDFs requires adaptiveness, given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, as well as the vested interests and power dynamics involved. The shape and function of the coalitions in each country have both adapted due to shifting social and political conditions. In Solomon Islands, a motion of no confidence in the national government necessitated a change in one of the constituencies to be the site of local intervention. The originally intended national fellowship that was to be the locus of collective action has been nurtured with patience while awaiting Cabinet support, given MP reticence to work on issues that potentially threaten the support base of politicians. And a twin track approach with separate, but connected, foci at local and national levels has been created to respond to community support as well as priorities within the Ministry of Rural Development. In Tuvalu, the very focus of the fellowship has shifted due to legislative change. Members have had to be mindful of how directly they could address matters of accountability so as not to transgress social customs and their own relationships, a challenge compounded by all fellowship members being public servants in a country where government is the largest employer. And membership has needed to be flexible to account for the regular out-migration of key stakeholders. The fellowships have thus had to be flexible and work and adapt 'with the grain' (Levy 2014, Craney & Tuhanuku 2025) of the realities of the environment that each intervention was occurring within.

Responding to changes in the political landscape surrounding accountability demonstrates the need to recognise and respond to both big 'P' and little 'p' politics. Legislative change in both countries has demonstrated the political salience of working on CDF and CoSFA to drive improved accountability efforts. Without these big 'P' changes, efforts by the respective fellowships are unlikely to trigger the step-change being sought in public financial management. Just as importantly, though, the ability for key stakeholders to advocate for change in how fellowships not only operate but are conceptualised shows how empowering local actors to respond to little 'p' politics opens expanded pathways to possible change. It should be acknowledged here the role of the *Vaka Pasifika* project team in supporting local decision-making which allowed for each fellowship to make necessary pivots to their operations. Such adaptability aligns with contemporary research (see Andrews et al 2013; Hudson & Marquette 2015; Roche & Kelly 2012) that argues that focusing on the purpose of an intervention and being adaptable regarding the processes to achieving it provides the greatest prospects for success.

OPERATIONAL REALITIES AND THE ROLE OF UNDP

LOGISTICS AND LOGJAMS

The fellowship schemes each experienced a steady stream of implementation challenges, with plans often changing and activities regularly delayed or redesigned to suit changing circumstances. Some of these challenges can be linked to the exploratory and experimental nature of the project, where the

purpose and process were intentionally loose and necessitated flexibility and adaptation. This was apparent in the changing scope of the project from a primarily regional initiative (in early 2023) to a six country and regional level study (in early 2024) to the eventual two country model with limited regional analysis (from early 2025). It is also true, however, that operational realities linked to staffing, conflicting priorities and access to funding regularly shaped decisions about the fellowship schemes. At the regional level, UNDP found difficulty attracting and retaining personnel to lead the work: "This work requires a rare combination of expertise – political, project planning, operational – that has been difficult to find" (Interview with M. Destrez, 26 June 2025). At the country level, the relative priority given to this work by participants was seen to wax and wane, especially in Tuvalu where many participants disengaged from the work due to other commitments, confusion about their role, frustration at process, a lack of available funding for activities, or a combination of all of these elements (Simeti & Mua Illingworth 2025:7).

A tension also emerged between the technical work on CDF reform and the more conceptual and collaborative aspirations of the fellowship program. In theory the fellowship was to be the driving force behind program activities, bringing partners together around common goals and setting the objectives against which technical resources would then be allocated. In reality, after various delays and stumbling blocks, the relationship between technical and collective interventions became skewed. "The delivery pressure meant we could not wait for the technical work to go ahead and as a result, there was always a slight disconnect between the timing and momentum of individual partnership and the collective work of the fellowship" (commentary from M. Destrez, 12 February 2026). In the case of Tonga, in particular, collective action at country and regional levels was secondary to managing the political and operational realities of delivering on technical commitments in each setting.

The funding model for fellowship schemes also proved challenging. Administration of project funds through UNDP's regional office is difficult in the case of smaller and less predictable collaborations such as the fellowship schemes. Coordination often depends upon a UNDP staff member being on the ground, especially for smaller decisions or more nimble injections of funding that are often called for on short notice. "The (UNDP) procurement system is impossible. It's unrealistic. Systems need to be more flexible in the Pacific" (Interview with M. Streeter, 27 June 2025). Concerns over the flow of resources and the timeliness of funding were raised regularly over the course of the cooperation, and whilst UNDP staff endeavoured to be creative and responsive they could only work within the limitations of the wider system. One participant went further, suggesting this systems dissonance had more profound implications for cooperation in the Pacific than prompt funding for activities: "This is the tension. It's built on a euro-centric model fit for populous nations. As a result, UNDP and the fellows faced donor pressure – deliverables, timeframes, spending – and philosophical pressure, and pressure to demonstrate progress towards a goal" (Interview with UNDP consultant, 27 June 2025).

LIMITATIONS OF LEADERSHIP

Linked to the practical limitations of UNDP systems are some persistent questions about the role and relative influence of UNDP in the work of the fellowships. While the fellowships were intended to operate as locally led coalitions, in practice is has been challenging to move beyond being a UNDP project, with staffing and funding dependent. With this comes project plans and resourcing models necessary to UNDP processes to ensure this work proceeds. Fulfilling these UNDP corporate processes has, at times, been seen to get in the way of the more meaningful work of the fellowship schemes. This raises questions regarding the role of UNDP in supporting locally led coalitions and whether its internal systems and processes are set up in such a way as to facilitate or impede this.

In Tuvalu, for example, UNDP faced criticism for not being supportive or propositional enough in late 2024, yet more recently faced criticism for an emphasis on fellowship events and agreed outcomes that might override local priorities or compromise the organic development of a local coalition. In this example the cooperation looked destined to fold if UNDP did not take a more active role, but in taking this more active role UNDP was also criticised for compromising the local ownership of purpose and process. This leaves the organization in a difficult position to navigate.

UNDP are aware of this tension, and of the wider disconnect between the heavy machinery of UN systems and their earnest desire to promote local leadership and self-determination. As one UNDP staff member described it: “the ideal would be UNDP in the background, providing the platform and coordinating engagement. The reality is that we have had to step in. To guide the discussions, to gather the fellows, to encourage different thinking” (Interview with UNDP staffer, 27 June 2025). This challenge is not unique to UNDP, and echoes the challenges faced by international organisations around the world when seeking to marry the aspiration for locally led partnerships with systems and donor relationships that are heavy on process and compliance and slow to change. Development institutions work within complex authorizing environments, constructed over decades, each layered with multiple processes that function to protect their own power and justify their role (Andrews et al. 2016, Bolton & Dewatripont, 2013). The measures necessary to develop and maintain organisational legitimacy in the eyes of OECD donors, in particular, often include demonstrating conformity, propriety and some level of detachment from implementing partners. These measures run contrary to those that build legitimacy in the eyes of local partners, such as humility, flexibility and deference (see Bond 2022).

Despite these limitations, accountability stakeholders are also aware of the unique strengths of UNDP as an implementing partner: their political neutrality and their power to attract, to mobilise, to operationalise. “UNDP have convening power. People want to work with them, which is different to being donor led. UNDP have really significant formal authority and reputation” (Interview with UNDP consultant, 17 July 2025). At the regional event in July 2025, participants voiced the view that UNDP were critical “to open doors”, “to provide a neutral platform for engagement” and to "safeguard participants and champions" (Regional Forum notes, 23 July 2025). Representatives from Solomon Islands also spoke to the fact that UNDP's involvement had been seen to elevate interest in CDF reform at the community level. As such, whilst UNDP processes are at times an imperfect match with the local coalitions it seeks to support, it can also be seen as an important ally to these endeavours.

The Vaka Pasifika project, and the fellowship schemes in particular, constitute a useful example of development partners seeking to do things differently. UNDP staff have sought to recognise and limit the influence of their own operational norms, their own political economy, to hold space for the local political economy of each fellowship setting. These conversations began with an understanding of the three tiers of Political Economy Analysis: foundational features (often called structures), the rules of the game (formal and informal institutions) and stakeholders (necessarily considering power). Nixon and Denney (2025) explain that these three facets interact in ways that constrain or enable change and can also help us identify potential areas for reform. In this case, recognising the tiers at the country level and again at the level of UNDP’s own engagement has enabled greater adaptability and opened the door for more creative accountability reforms.

SWIMMING WITH THE TIDE: CONTEXT, CHAOS AND MOMENTUM

Understanding and adapting to the shifting priorities, responsibilities and motivations of stakeholders has been central to the fellowship conversation at both country and regional levels. This flexibility often relates to timing. In Tonga it was apparent that pressing too hard on CDF reform discussion in

late 2024 would have been politically insensitive, and that the language of collective action (and fellowships in particular) was not well aligned with the accountability conversation at that time. In Solomon Islands, conversely, the passing of the Constituency Development Fund Act in 2023 was fortuitously timed, dampening much of the political sensitivity that might have otherwise been attached to this conversation in that setting. In contrast, the reform of the Outer Island Development Fund into CoSFA that occurred during the initial meetings and survey implementation of the Tuvalu fellowship led to stalled progress and confusion regarding the necessity of collective action in this space. Swimming with the tide implies a willingness to look for both opportunities and threats in terms of timing, and to retreat or advance accordingly. While there is much emphasis in political economy and adaptive management about responding to emerging opportunities, recognising when to retreat is often the more organisationally difficult option. In the case of the fellowship, the ability to work adaptively, including UNDP dropping back to a technical assistance role when national partners have taken the lead, has been key.

At times the emphasis on iterative and adaptive practice has felt chaotic and has stretched the capacities of all involved. This was certainly true for the fellows at times, who flagged concerns when their purpose or responsibilities were not clearly signposted. It was also true for UNDP, for CHSSC, and even for Adapsys Consulting who were tasked with simultaneously training on adaptative practice and demonstrating adaptation firsthand. Changes to staffing, contracts, timelines, deliverables and decisions were commonplace and there were moments when confusion seemed to reign. Adaptive practice can be unpredictable and workplace systems are rarely set up with this in mind. Learning from the fellowship schemes underlines the need for all parties to be prepared and resourced to navigate such uncertainty, and have regular, clear communication in place if they are to find a shared path through the havoc.

Adaptive and responsive practice also links to the way accountability is understood and practiced in Pacific Island Countries. In many parts of the Pacific, individuals and institutions straddle the formal and informal divide, being simultaneously connected and obligated to multiple audiences at once (Denney et al. 2025). As a result, perspectives are liable to change depending on what role someone is playing at that moment, and what combination of power and influence is present at any given time. “(In Tuvalu) different people in the room provide different answers to the question of how. For some, everything starts and ends with government. For others, the falekaupule hold all the cards” (Interview with M. Vavaitamana 27 July 2025). There are also informal rules in place that directly shape the tone of conversation and the potential for agreeing a path towards change: “If you enter the house of chiefs, you are already negotiating power. The framing is critical, there must be mutual benefit” (quote from regional workshop participant, 23 July 2025). These and similar conversations recurred over the course of the cooperation and spoke directly to the unique context in which each fellowship operated.

In addition, swimming with the tide implies a willingness to recognise when incentives have altered or momentum has shifted. Individuals and, to some extent, institutions do not remain static. A political economy analysis reflects stakeholder power and interests at a point in time, but these are open to change. There were examples of such shifts in each fellowship setting, often triggered or foreshadowed by external events such as the parliamentary upheavals in Tonga in December 2024 and in Solomon Islands in May 2025. In these cases, revisiting relationships and motivations was critical to avoid persisting with outdated assumptions or approaches to change. As one research participant described: “Change processes are quick to unravel. Interest and incentives need to be maintained to keep up the momentum” (Interview with C. Bowles, 17 July 2025).

Conclusion

On paper, schemes such as CDF and CoSFA serve to locate decisions about funds and their use at the local level (see Gordon & Cheeseman 2024). Sustained research on CDFs has demonstrated, however, that such schemes may instead have the opposite effect and actually reduce accountable use of resources for public benefit (see Wiltshire & Batley 2018, for example). Concerns about unaccountable use of CDF programs have triggered countless interventions from the donor community to redress shortcomings in the model or abolish such funds. The support offered by Vaka Pasifika is something new, attempting to utilise the knowledge and political capital of local stakeholders to define and lead changes in CDF practice. Importantly, the focus on CDFs in this instance echoes contemporary legislative change in Tuvalu and Solomon Islands, and builds upon a demonstrable political will in the case of Tonga, but action for change was articulated by the fellowship schemes themselves.

In providing the opportunity and resources to pursue this work, UNDP have created a space to test new methods of cooperation, focused on convening local coalitions of actors to pursue change. Partners have sought to accommodate and adapt to changes in timing, context and momentum. And in doing so, new connections have been made, difficult conversations have commenced, and opaque expressions of power and influence have become a little clearer. Progress towards functioning accountability coalitions was slower than hoped in all settings, and pathways to change have rarely been clear over the journey to date. This is the nature of exploratory practice, however, and does not detract from the valuable insights garnered through accompanying the early days of this work. This also speaks to what we know about working on accountability generally – there are no short cuts. It is hard, slow work. Despite the challenges, the partnerships and practices emerging from the fellowship scheme generate useful insights for actioning accountability in the Pacific and demonstrate potential for significant influence over time.

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