Accountability ecosystems political economy analysis

Kiribati country study

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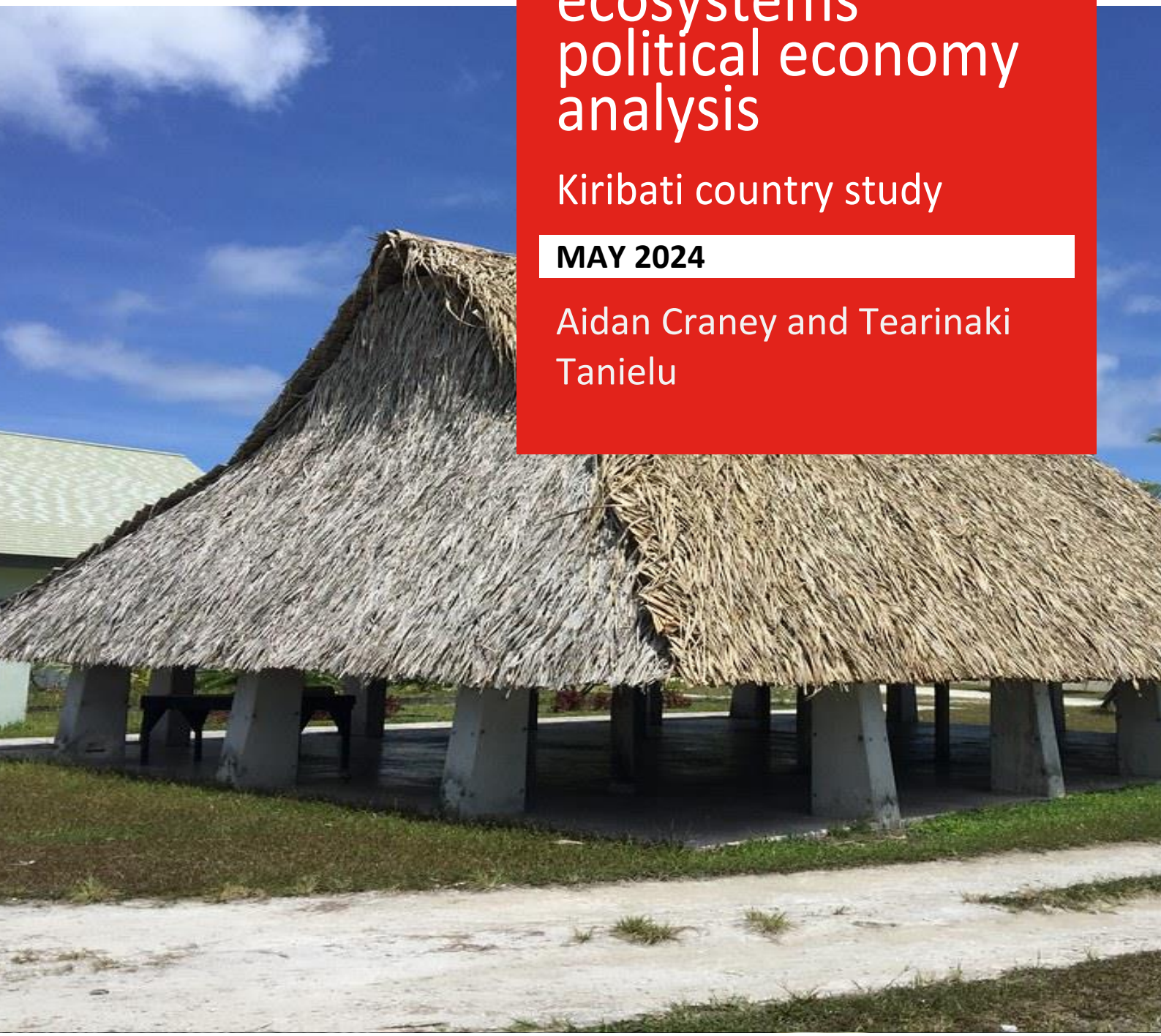

Photo: A mwaneaba (traditional meeting place). These meeting places are where community discussion and decision-making take place in communities across Kiribati. Each island also has its own mwaneaba in the administrative district of South Tarawa, providing free accommodation for citizens undertaking short stays. [Photo: Kiribati Parliament Office Mwaneaba]

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Acronyms

AES	Annual Establishment Register
AMAK	Aia Mwaea Ainen Kiribati (Women's NGO)
DCC	Development Coordinating Committee
FRP	Fiscal Reporting Policy
KNAO	Kiribati National Audit Office
KFSU	Kiribati Fiduciary Services Unit
KV20	Kiribati 20-year Vision
MFAI	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration
MFED	Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
NAO	National Authorising Office
NEPO	National Economic Planning Office
PFM	` Public Financial Management
PSC	Public Service Commission
PSO	Public Service Office
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSO	National Statistics Office
OAG	Office of the Attorney General
KAO	Kiribati Audit Office
TI	Transparency International
TTM	Te Toa Matoa (Disability NGO)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Executive Summary

Accountability is widely understood and practiced in Kiribati in ways that reflect both local and international standards. As Uriam Timiti, Chairman of the Leadership Commission of Kiribati explains: 'Accountability as a concept is not a foreign concept; it's a social concept and Kiribati concept' (Interview, February 2024). Underpinning strong formal and informal measures of accountability are the foundational values of I-Kiribati culture: egalitarianism and communalism.

Strong accountability measures throughout Kiribati are buttressed at multiple levels. Social closeness and the eminence of churches and traditional leaders encourage egalitarian and communal customs, both through appeals to local values and the natural oversight that comes with living in close communities. While in the public service, private sector and civil society, robust legislation and accountability institutions help identify impropriety and work collaboratively with individuals and organisations to improve their own accountability practices.

This is not to say that local practices of accountability always align with Western norms. Local practices may not always be in keeping with international accountability standards or approaches – such as political representatives being petitioned by citizens for financial assistance with daily living costs. Yet in Kiribati, such practices are viewed as culturally acceptable, as elected representatives are expected to demonstrate care for their constituents. Such practices are not hidden from the community, nor do they carry an expectation of direct reciprocation, such as through vote buying. By being transparent, non-transactional and reflective of egalitarian sociocultural norms, these practices reflect notions of locally relevant accountability.

While formal accountability has not always flourished in Kiribati, a 2016 change in government brought to power a party with a commitment to improved accountability and anti-corruption measures. This has since aided by a robust and committed opposition and since 2016, the visibility, reach and everyday political cachet of accountability in the country has improved. Existing accountability institutions received increased support and new accountability institutions, such as the Leadership Commission, were established. Importantly, these institutions were created to reflect local values of egalitarianism and communalism, drawing on pre-existing institutions of authority including *te mwaneaba* (traditional meeting spaces), *unimwane* (councils of elder men)[1] and churches. This has meant that formal accountability institutions are not entirely foreign, but build on existing local norms and practices, producing a hybrid system of accountability that is more locally resonant.

Accountability actors in Kiribati are viewed as having significant powers of enforcement (although operate with limited budgets and human resources). They are also respected for the collaborative and educational approach they take to corruption – seeking to teach and support ethical governance rather than simply 'catching out' bad practice. Customary and religious leaders, such as *unimwane* and church leaders are also highly influential, both in people's day to day lives as well as in the political sphere in some cases. Other accountability actors such as civil society and the media, however, are largely nascent in Kiribati, meaning that accountability is largely enacted internally within governance systems (both formal and customary), rather than outside of them. Women, youth and people with disability are also less well represented in existing governance arrangements. Despite respondent's

[1] Councils of older women are referred to as *unaine*, but these carry less direct authority.

assurances that gender equity is improving and that gender issues are not significant concerns in Kiribati, exploring locally-attuned avenues for providing voice and access for less represented groups remains important.

Recommendations for improving accountability include recognising and celebrating the strength of formal and informal accountability that exists in Kiribati, as well as supporting how formal and informal accountability measures intersect and mutually reinforce one another. Observing the gains made regarding accountability in recent years may contribute to national pride in accountability, creating a virtuous circle that reinforces accountability. Further, lessons can be shared from Kiribati regarding the establishment and strengthening of accountability through robust formal measures as well as direct engagement between accountability institutions and their stakeholders, with both formal policies and operationalised practices of accountability reflecting I-Kiribati values and ways of life. These lessons may assist in strengthening accountability in other countries in the Pacific.

Concurrently, donors should support the Kiribati public service to further their work, identifying areas where budgetary and human resource capacity can be supported to build on their existing strengths of working collaboratively with NGOs and community organisations rather than punitively policing accountability compliance. Significant efforts could be made to strengthen Kiribati civil society organisations – both to support them in putting in place their own internal accountability policies to attract donor funding, as well as to position them to play a stronger role in holding government to account. Donors should also engage with *unimwane*, churches and local communities – ideally through local staff in recognition of their deep contextual knowledge – to continue to refine messaging and interventions related to accountability to ensure that they reflect local values and needs, including in relation to representativity and matters of gender and social inclusion. Importantly, this means engaging with communities both inside and outside South Tarawa, and their different approaches to accountability based on local values and authority structures.

Contents

Introduction and methods

Egalitarianism is a fundamental element of Kiribati culture (ADB 2009; Dixon 2004; Throsby 2001). At surface level, all members of a community are valued equally and the advancement of individual interests over those of the collective is socially discouraged. Similarly, decision-making favours collective interests and imbues traditional values of humility and obedience, to abate individual or sub-group interests. Even in situations where power is not equally distributed throughout the country, such as with differences across indicators of gender, age and geography, among others, this is informed by broadly accepted cultural norms that prescribe social roles. Rather than undermining the influence of any particular group, these roles are viewed locally as being significant in contributing to the everyday functioning of life in Kiribati and the ongoing preservation of culture.

Given the values of egalitarianism and communalism that are at the heart of Kiribati culture, it should perhaps be no surprise that accountability is well understood and practiced in Kiribati at formal and informal levels. However, as previous analyses have shown (Craney and Tuhanuku 2023; Nimbtik and Mua Illingworth 2023), connecting social conceptions of accountability with formal institutions and even informal everyday actions has been challenging in multiple Pacific settings. Social closeness and the eminence of churches and traditional leaders in Kiribati encourage egalitarian and communal customs, both through appeals to local values and the natural oversight that comes with living in close communities. Within the public service, private sector and civil society, robust legislation and accountability institutions not only help identify impropriety but work with individuals and organisations to improve their own accountability practices – with these measures reported to have notably improved since a change of government in 2016. Kiribati offers lessons for establishing and strengthening accountability through robust formal measures seemingly because of a focused commitment to contextualising concepts that could be depicted as foreign impositions to local values systems.

This country report examines how accountability is locally conceptualised and practised in Kiribati at formal and informal levels of governance. The report is part of a wider research project looking at Pacific understandings and practices of accountability across the North and South Pacific and how these are shaped by particular contextual histories and political-economy realities.[2] The aim is to start with how accountability is thought about and practiced locally, by Pacific Islanders, and to identify constraints and opportunities for strengthening accountability from this basis. This is in contrast to externally imposed ideas of accountability and how it should be progressed, which have gained little traction despite many years of often well-intended efforts.

The study uses a political economy analysis methodology to examine how structures or contextual features, institutions (formal and informal rules) and the power, agency and interests of individuals combine to create both constraints and opportunities for change in accountability practices. Accountability is thought about as an inherently political concept – as privileging particular interests and excluding others. It is also thought about as an ecosystem. That is, there are a wide range of actors

[2] Six country studies are taking place in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tuvalu and Kiribati with studies forthcoming in the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau.

that play varying and interrelated accountability roles – both formal actors outsiders tend to think about first, such as ombudsmen and anti-corruption commissions, but also others such as the Church, customary governance actors, civil society and the media. It is this entire network (or 'ecosystem') that shapes what accountability looks like in a given place and thinking more expansively about who is relevant to accountability opens up potentially new avenues for strengthening accountability (see Denney, Nimbtik and Ford, 2023).

In Kiribati, research was undertaken through a review of relevant academic and grey literature, alongside eight interviews[3] with 13 respondents who are accountability ecosystem actors in the urban region of the Kiribati capital, South Tarawa, in February 2024. In addition, a focus group was held with members of an informal settlement community on the outskirts of South Tarawa. Participants in this focus group included three men and two women, including members of that community's *unimwane*, women's group and church youth group. Attempts were made to visit communities in the more remote and culturally distinct North Tarawa region but were thwarted by the breakdown of a chartered boat and the sudden collapse of the only bridge linking the regions, demonstrating the precarious connection of citizens outside South Tarawa with the institutions of central governance in Kiribati. This report should be read with an understanding that although diverse and plural views were sought, there may be individuals and communities in Kiribati that would challenge the narratives given. Analysis involved distilling key themes that emerged across the interviews and focus group discussion.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 1 summarises understandings of accountability in Kiribati. Section 2 details some of the contextual features that shape how accountability is thought about and practiced. Section 3 considers the formal and informal rules that inform how accountability functions (or does not). Section 4 maps the actors, power and interests of the accountability ecosystem in Kiribati. Finally, section 5 synthesises these political economy elements to identify potential constraints and opportunities for change and sets out recommendations. Throughout, images are used to assist in conveying key points of analysis.

How accountability is understood and practiced in Kiribati

Although the term 'accountability' has no literal equivalent in Gilbertese, the egalitarian ideals of I-Kiribati society and the physical and social closeness of citizens means that it is widely understood in local contexts and examples. These examples range from official processes within institutions of governance to how discussions occur in *te mwaneaba* (traditional meeting spaces) through to informal customary behaviours. As Uriam Timiti, Chairman of the Leadership Commission of Kiribati informed us: 'Accountability as a concept is not a foreign concept; it's a social concept and Kiribati concept' (Interview, February 2024).

[3] Four interviews were conducted with a single interviewee, three with two interviewees, and one with three interviewees.

Despite the assertions of egalitarianism from interviewees, perceptions of accountability and corruption in literature related to Kiribati vary significantly in how these issues are framed and evaluated. Research that approaches corruption from a Western lens and relies on data from literature and standardised measurements[4] asserts high levels of corruption in the country (e.g., Transparency International 2013). In fact, multiple respondents indicated dismay and concern for the way that past research has been carried out, which they felt did not represent contextual realities based on their lived experiences. Multiple interviewees specifically pointed to a study conducted by Transparency International in 2021 that claimed corruption was widespread in Kiribati despite the research being conducted entirely remotely through computer assisted telephone interviews (Interview with Uering Iteraera, February 2024; Interview with Ritite Tekiau, February 2024). In juxtaposition, research that is contextualised and grounded in empirical data (e.g., Mackenzie 2004; Uakeia 2013) argues that corruption is not a significant social or economic problem in Kiribati. The people spoken with for this report expressed unanimously that formal and informal accountability is strong in Kiribati and that issues such as corruption are minor issues that can be readily dealt with through existing formal and informal structures.

The Kiribati government has a raft of accountability mechanisms in place and understands accountability as ensuring that government and its employees act in the public interest and with respect for and responsible use of public finances. There is a strong focus on adherence to rules of good conduct, alongside a sense of responsiveness of leaders to community needs (although it is also often implicitly assumed that leaders – by virtue of being elected as leaders – accurately represent community interests and needs). The strength of formal accountability institutions in Kiribati has increased in recent years following a focus by the then-opposition on the establishment of an anti-corruption commission (PIFS nd), which was implemented following their success at the 2016 election (RNZ 2017).

While the government has played a strong role, especially since 2016, in promoting accountability and anti-corruption efforts, interviewees also expressed that the people of Kiribati adapted quickly to these newly introduced formal accountability practices, as they reflect their cultural norms. The Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Uering Iteraera, further told us: ‘it is very difficult to be corrupt in my village. If I get a new car, people will instantly talk amongst each other about how he/she got a new car, and if one has engaged in acts of corruption, there is no escaping what we call the "coconut wireless" – this is our natural system of accountability embedded in our culture’ (Interview, February 2024). The ‘relational accountability’ (Moncrieffe 2011) that occurs through social closeness helped provide fertile ground for formal accountability institutions that hybridised (see Garcia Canclini 1995; Levitt and Merry 2009) such institutions to make them fit sociocultural norms and ideals. The strength of social oversight in Kiribati contributed to an environment where corruption and accountability were not of significant and immediate concern for I-Kiribati (see Mackenzie 2004; Uakeia 2013) and allowed for formal institutions to be created that reflected traditional and informal institutions, and engage in practices that mimicked existing relational informalities (see Dressel et al 2024).

One civil servant respondent recalled how consultations between integrity institutions and public servants were useful and reconstituted their understanding of corruption to be more relevant to local

[4] Such as indices measured by fixed indicators published by organisations such as Freedom House or the World Bank’s Governance Indicators.

social norms so that it is not only constrained to misusing power or funds, but also connects to broader social concepts of public integrity. Examples given by interviewees for these shifts include contemporary perceptions that using official vehicles for personal use can be seen as an act of corruption and that coming late for work and/or non-attendance means you are stealing money from the government, and is therefore unacceptable. Coinciding with the emergence and use of social media platforms in Kiribati, people began to bear responsibility of reporting government officials for acts of corruption by reporting inappropriate behaviour, such as by taking photos of official cars parked in bars and nightclubs. We were also informed that public servants have become careful to avoid using official vehicles after working hours, even if for official use, because of the looks given to them by members of the public (Interview with Uering Iteraera, February 2024). These examples demonstrate the strong sense of social accountability that pervades in Kiribati and the overlap between formal, informal and relational measures of accountability and oversight.

Related to the shift in public perceptions and strengthening of institutions regarding accountability with the election of a new government in 2016, the strength and quality of parliamentary opposition improved at this time leading to improvements in parliamentary accountability. This was reported by interviewees as occurring because of a focus on formal accountability by the incoming government as well as increased capacity for scrutiny from the former government as they moved into opposition (Undisclosed interviews, February 2024). The ability for both the government to effectively champion accountability is aided by the relative stability of political parties and alliances when compared with states such as Solomon Islands (see Craney and Tuhanuku 2023). A respondent also described how the budget review during parliament now requires very detailed accounts such as how many laptops are purchased each year to support operations, or how many overseas trips are needed (Undisclosed interview, February 2024). This has made it necessary that some Ministers are now required to explain their budget provisions, line by line.

Importantly, the accountability mechanisms supported by the government and the scrutiny of the opposition are buttressed by long-existing traditional understandings of accountability and loci of sociocultural influence. Key among these are the *mwaneaba* – where consensus decision-making led by groups of respected elder men known as *unimwane* – and, increasingly, Christian churches in urban South Tarawa. The strength of each of these settings lies in widespread community involvement and their connection to, and promotion of, the strongly held Kiribati values of egalitarianism and communalism.

Contextual features shaping accountability

Three contextual factors stand out as influencing how accountability is understood and practiced in Kiribati. The first is its unique geographical and social network dynamics. The second is the role of traditional institutions in shaping social mores and how these are adapting, such as through the increased influence of the church in South Tarawa. The third relates to the topography of Kiribati as a widely dispersed, geographically isolated state with perpetual challenges to food sovereignty and security that risk exacerbation as a result of the climate crisis.

GEOGRAPHY, DEMOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

As of 2020, the population of Kiribati was 119,438 (NSO 2021).[5] The population consists of relatively small populations spread across a vast ocean of islands. The 32 atolls and 1 island that make up the landmass of Kiribati total only 810 square kilometres (World Bank nd(b)), however once the oceanscape of Kiribati is accounted for the total size of the country is almost 3.5 million square kilometres (IILS 2021). Slightly greater than half of the population live in the urban South Tarawa region (63,072 people), with the remaining population living in villages widely dispersed across the vast archipelago (NSO 2021). Population growth is significantly greater in South Tarawa than other parts of the country, largely due to internal migration in search of improved livelihood opportunities and access to the cash economy (Government of Kiribati 2016a).

Despite the differences in the large urban population of South Tarawa compared with the much smaller, highly diffused village populations in the rest of the country, social and physical closeness is a hallmark of life throughout Kiribati. In South Tarawa, population density is equivalent to metropolises such as Hong Kong and Tokyo (CIA 2022; Learson 2020), despite the lack of multi-level buildings. Outside South Tarawa, density is low and communities live in villages of relatively small numbers. A consequence of living arrangements in both settings is that people tend to know others in their community well or have one to two degrees of proximity to those they do not have strong connections with. The social closeness of Kiribati is further evident through the parliament – a total of 45 parliamentarians across the country means that there is a representative on average for every 2,654 people (Government of Kiribati nd). Combined with the low population numbers, high number of elected representatives and well-established local networks I-Kiribati society is marked by high social as well as physical closeness – a sensation where 'everybody knows everybody' (Corbett 2015). The lack of social distance (see Magee and Smith 2013) between leaders and the general population acts as an accountability mechanism (see Moncrieffe 2011), both by creating an environment where the public have a strong understanding of the workings and decisions of their leaders, as well as by providing perspective to leaders of the everyday concerns of the general public, rather than their existence within elite bubbles. The ADB has noted that the physical and social closeness of Kiribati can be seen as risking accountability through increased likelihood of patron-client political relationships, but recognises that in practice it serves as an accountability mechanism:

> Patron–client politics to achieve political office is pervasive but does not seem to result in huge gains by a few at the expense of the rest of society. The political importance of maintaining widespread government distribution of the common-pool resource seems to curb elite capture. (ADB 2009:14)

The framing from ADB of widespread patronage that has limited inequitable outcomes demonstrates that the social closeness of I-Kiribati results in behaviours that are recognised locally as accountable, even if they may appear to foreigners as examples of corruption or patronage. A common example discussed in our interviews was that of local politicians being directly petitioned by citizens for financial assistance with costs such as school fees. Although the direct provision of cash from a politician to a citizen may be considered corrupt in some contexts, in Kiribati this practice is considered culturally acceptable and appropriate as elected representatives are expected to demonstrate care for their constituents. Importantly, such practices are not hidden from the community, nor do they carry

[5] The World Bank (nd(a)) estimates that the population grew to 131,232 in 2022, which would represent population growth of almost 10% in just two years. This is a significant increase on 2016 figures which posited growth at 4.4% in South Tarawa and 0.2% across the rest of the country (Government of Kiribati 2016a:6).

an expectation of direct reciprocation, such as through vote buying. By being transparent, non-transactional and reflective of sociocultural norms, these practices adhere to notions of accountability in ways that are locally relevant.

Social proximity thus has a profound effect on accountability – because people are known to each other; and especially because elected leaders are known to their constituents, there is a strong sense of relational accountability that obliges people to behave in accordance with wider social rules and expectations.

GOVERNMENT AS PRIMARY EMPLOYER

Government is not only the largest single employer in Kiribati (DFAT 2020, Duncan 2014a, UNCTAD 2020) but is also widely regarded as the employer of choice. The reasons for this are both economic and social. Economically, Kiribati has limited reach of private enterprise owing largely to its low population coupled with its geographic dispersal and isolation, making the cost of doing business high when compared with terrestrial countries with larger populations and closer neighbours (Duncan 2014a, 2014b, Government of Kiribati 2016a, Toatu 2001, UNCTAD 2020). Outside of government, the largest sources of income for the country are the fisheries industry, thanks largely to Kiribati being a member of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (Aqorau 2020), and official development assistance (World Bank nd(c)).

In addition to the economic reasons above, the egalitarian values of I-Kiribati people also factor into considerations of government as employer of choice. Not only is public service highly valued socially but so too is the avoidance of seeking individual wealth through private enterprise. As the Asian Development Bank (ADB) notes: 'The cultural ethos of egalitarianism is very strong in Kiribati society—so strong that working for the government is preferred to working for private businesses, which is seen as helping individuals raise themselves above the rest of the community. External signs of success, such as ownership of big houses and new cars, are also frowned upon' (2009:10; see also Dixon 2004:29; Throsby 2001:3-4). Community sentiment towards accountability can be directly tied to desires to see improvements to livelihoods and livelihood opportunities that are widespread across society and not concentrated in the hands of a few.

TOPOGRAPHY AND RISKS RELATED TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS

As an archipelago of low-lying islands and atolls spread across an area comparable to the width of Australia, Kiribati faces challenges related to domestic food production, salinity and impacts related to poor food security. These challenges are compounded by risks related to the climate crisis, particularly rising sea levels that threaten to overwhelm most of the country's current landmass (COP23 nd). The previous government, led by former Beretitenti (President) Anote Tong, was a strong presence in global climate negotiations and advocacy. The Tong government promoted long-term planning for 'migration with dignity' (McClain, Bruch and Fujii 2022) of the population in response to rising sea levels. Propositions for the facilitated migration of the population were highly contested by I-Kiribati (Mallin 2018) and the current government has made clear that it prioritises mitigation and adaptation to address changing global climate conditions. It also recognises circular labour mobility as an effective mechanism to build economic resilience in a changing climate and is directly engaged in a number of new labour mobility schemes in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Japan, in addition to previous schemes for seafarers in merchant and fishing vessels. Relatedly, the government makes clear that permanent migration remains a personal decision, in line with relevant laws and policies of receiving countries (Undisclosed interview, February 2024). The assertion of self-sufficiency and adaptability

reflects Kiribati's strengths-based positioning of itself as a Large Ocean State with the resources to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

The topography of Kiribati constrains local agrarian capacity. Only limited fresh produce – such as coconut and breadfruit – can grow in the soils which are highly saline and at regular risk of coastal flooding, and rearing of livestock at scale is unfeasible (Cauchi et al 2021, Government of Kiribati 2016, Webb 2020). Fresh water sources are also at regular risk of contamination from king tides (Werner 2017). Although the climate crisis has brought greater global attention to these challenges, I-Kiribati have longstanding adaptation practices of moderation, restraint and resilience in times of particularly limited resources (Nakayama et al 2019). These practices are still strongly valued in the outer islands, however people in urban areas have become more reliant on imported foods, particularly tinned and processed foods, which have been shown to result in poor health outcomes for the population and has the potential to negatively impact sovereignty through lack of control over supply chain (Cauchi et al 2021).

The lack of ongoing food security within Kiribati is an ever-present threat to the population's livelihoods. These risks are expected to worsen in coming years as a result of the climate crisis (Cauchi, Correa-Valez and Bambrick 2019; Cauchi et al 2021). Although the climate crisis is less of an immediate, everyday concern for most I-Kiribati, as a perpetual threat it contributes to difficulties in development planning. Combined, the topography of Kiribati and the projected risks associated with the climate crisis reinforce the need for effective and accountable decision-making for the long-term prosperity of Kiribati across social and developmental spheres such as food security, health, housing and economic sustainability.

	1. Close social proximity between people and between elected leaders and their constituents cultivates a strong sense of social obligation to behave in accordance with wider social rules and expectations. 2. Government as primary employer demonstrates cultural values that promote working for the public benefit and disavowing individual wealth at the expense of others. 3. Geographic isolation and topography pose direct risks to food and economic security, compounded by the existential threat posed by the climate crisis. These livelihood concerns underline why accountable leadership is viewed as important.

Figure 1 Contextual features shaping accountability in Kiribati[6]

[6] This map shows only the North Tarawa and South Tarawa island groups. With the atolls and islands of Kiribati stretching over more than 3,500 kilometres, it is not possible to produce a legible map of the entire country in this format.

Formal and informal rules and norms shaping accountability

HYBRID GOVERNANCE (TRADITIONAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL)

As noted above, to appreciate how accountability is understood and practised in Kiribati requires a recognition of two sets of interdependent but distinct features within the country. The first is hybrid governance, drawing on both formal and informal influence and sources of legitimacy. This is best articulated in the difference between the role of formal laws and figureheads on the one hand and the influence of churches, *unimwane* and community discussions in *mwaneaba* on people's day-to-day lives on the other. The second is a separation between urban South Tarawa and the remote islands that make up the remainder of the country. South Tarawa is the primary site of government and commerce, as well as the hub for healthcare and travel, where livelihoods are largely income-focused and community is based in family, employment and church membership. On the outer islands – including North Tarawa, parts of which are reachable by car from South Tarawa – livelihoods are largely subsistence-based and community is based in family, the village and *te mwaneaba*.

Although there are distinctions between the formal and the informal, the urban and the outer islands, there is also significant overlap between these areas. For example, the law is at its greatest force when buttressed by community favour – whether church leaders endorsing Covid-19 curfews or accountability measures being grounded in local cultural values. Similarly, the strength of community is demonstrated by the large numbers of outer islanders who camp at the *mwaneaba* that each island operates on South Tarawa free of charge while accessing healthcare, visiting family or visiting the capital for other reasons. It is the symbiosis – or hybridity – of Kiribati society that not only gives it strength but provides opportunities for social change by demonstrating how improvements in one area can benefit others. It thus follows that any efforts to strengthen accountability would equally need to consider this hybrid dynamic and how formal and informal rules can be mutually reinforcing.

FORMAL GOVERNANCE – INCREASING REACH OF ACCOUNTABILITY INSTITUTIONS

Formal state governance in Kiribati is dictated by the Constitution. Stability of government is high, with governments typically running to their full four years and often being returned for a second or third term. In interviews with actors from key accountability institutions, such as the Leadership Commission and Office of the Auditor General, as well as government ministries, we were repeatedly told of formal accountability mechanisms that have been institutionalised in Kiribati, and the legislative frameworks that oversee the operations of these institutions.

Many interviewees referred to the Teieniwa Vision on Anti-Corruption (UNDP 2021), a document adopted by regional leaders in Kiribati and steeped in I-Kiribati cultural references, as highlighting that Kiribati is a global leader on accountability and anti-corruption. In 2020, Kiribati was Chair and host for

the Pacific Unity Against Corruption meeting[7] that brought together leaders from the region[8] and resulted in the adoption of the Teieniwa Vision (UNODC 2020). The Teieniwa Vision is a broad statement advocating for implementation of anti-corruption behaviours and processes throughout the Pacific region and has been endorsed as a regional agreement by the Pacific Islands Forum.

In 2016, a Leaders Code of Conduct Act and Leadership Commission was established. This occurred alongside increased resourcing and support for established accountability institutions, such as the Kiribati Audit Office (KAO), Public Service Office (PSO), and the Office of the Attorney General (OAG). Between them, these institutions have the power to investigate and prosecute parliamentarians, public servants, staff of state-owned enterprises, business owners and staff within the private sector. These institutions are legally mandated to be independent of the parliament in their operations and all we spoke with testified that this independence is respected and observed.

A notable quality of the accountability institutions is that they seek to engage with those they have investigative power over in a collaborative manner. Eriati Manaima, the Auditor General, shared that while his office acts 'as the watchdog for public funds,' his message to the members of the public service and private sector is that 'We're not out there to get you' (Interview, February 2024). Rather, the KAO seeks to train the people and organisations it audits to be able to go about their business effectively and legally. This ambition was shared as fact by staff from TTM, who referred to their regular auditing process from KAO as 'very interactive' (Interview, February 2024), explaining that the KAO will flag potential breaches and then assist TTM in creating and implementing measures to rectify these.

The PSO, which incorporates the duty of the Ombudsman, is the primary oversight body for the appropriate conduct of public servants and offices. Following the 2016 election, the Public Service Office also created a new Public Service Management and Integrity Division, which includes an Anti-corruption Unit that leads public awareness and engagement with government bodies and communities. This Unit has now become a separate Division, recognising its crucial role and ensuring it has a separate and dedicated function (Interview with PSO, February 2024).

A key component of the accountability infrastructure that interviewees emphasised related to public sector performance. Under Chapter IV of the Constitution of the Republic of Kiribati,[9] the PSO is responsible for the overall management of the Public Service, including recruitments, promotions, reward systems and disciplinary systems, as well as managing and administering anti-corruption and related policies for civil servants (Government of Kiribati, 2024). These functions are outlined in the Public Service Performance Act (2022) and the National Conditions of Service (NCS), that serves as a rulebook for the public service.

When recruiting new public servants, an exhaustive recruitment process is undertaken whereby ministries request new line roles to PSO, PSO recommends roles for approval by Parliament, the Ministry of Employment advertises roles that parliament authorise, an appointment panel is created, and shortlisted applicants undertake screening tests (coded for anonymity) before offers are made (Interview with PSO staff, February 2024). Beyond these measures, a Public Service Commissioner

[7] UN-PRAC is a joint initiative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which supported the first Pacific Regional Conference on Anti-Corruption, held in Kiribati in February 2020, which produced consensus on a roadmap to implement anti-corruption, called the Teieniwa Vision (UNDP 2021).
[8] Countries in attendance were: Kiribati, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa and Tonga.
[9] Chapter IV of the Constitution outlines directions assigning Ministerial responsibility of the government.

must be present throughout the recruitment process and has the authority to reject applicants who are not seen to be competent for the roles they are applying to. This process ensures that nepotism does not influence government recruitment processes.

Other measures were also brought into place to improve accountability of the public service. One such measure was the elimination of permanent secretaries to ministries. Multiple interviewees informed us that secretaries and directors now serve three-year terms with clear performance indicators. If they meet their indicators, they may be awarded a further three-year term, however public servants can no longer rely on holding a position in perpetuity. This was reported as a strong measure that encouraged accountability within the public service. An oversight body, the Public Service Commission (PSC), was created to oversee how the PSO carries out its functions for appointments, removal, and disciplinary control in respect of all public sector employees.

Respondents commented that these formal institutions of accountability are relatively recent innovations, with particular reference to the Leadership Commission, MFED and PSO. Numerous interviewees highlighted that the turning point for formal accountability was the change of government at the 2016 election (Undisclosed interviews, February 2024). With the election of a new government under Beretitenti Maamau in 2016 came a reinvigorated focus on accountability. The Maamau government implemented reforms that led to the creation of new accountability laws and institutions such as the Leadership Commission, and also introduced strengthened accountability within the public service through the PSO. A stricter approach for staff punctuality was implemented, and government officials' salary deductions were introduced for staff arriving late to work. The use of fingerprint machines in the workplace was introduced to ensure accountability, mitigating discrepancies common with the use of manual logbooks (Interview with Uering Iteraera, 2024). The impacts of prioritising accountability through the creation and appropriate funding of accountability institutions were reported by interviewees as complementing local approaches to accountability that rely on the physical and social closeness of communities and people in Kiribati. For example, Uering Iteraera, Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, noted that, 'This is a small community so people hold us accountable,' before half-jokingly stating of accountability institutions: 'We're very scared of them. They know who you are. They know where you live. They know your salary' (Interview, February 2024).

Accountability through strengthening opposition

Although the strengthening and increased reach of accountability institutions post-2016 can be seen as a legacy of the Maamau government, interviewees shared that the accountability ecosystem of Kiribati was complementarily strengthened by having a robust governmental opposition. Prior to 2016, oppositions were reported as leaving the government to implement their mandate without offering much oversight (Undisclosed interview, February 2024). Today, however, both government and opposition are reported as holding one another to account inside and outside parliament.

In addition, a near-universal picture was painted by multiple interviewees, including key players in the accountability ecosystem, of a country that prides itself on its strong informal accountability mechanisms. When pressed as to why, then, there was a need for formal accountability institutions, it was shared that continued practices of anti-corruption, quality public service and appropriate governance could never be guaranteed. Uriam Timiti, Chair of the Leadership Commission, shared that the existence of accountability institutions serves as a preventative measure and also helps to keep thoughts of accountability front of mind for leaders and public servants (Interview, February 2024).

The quandary of judicial independence

Judicial independence has been the source of tension between Kiribati and bilateral and multilateral partners recently. Since gaining independence, Kiribati has employed 'judges from Australia and New Zealand as well as from other Pacific states and common law African countries' (Dziedzic 2022b) alongside local personnel, a practice that has been common in numerous Pacific states post-independence (Dziedzic 2022a). The preponderance of foreign judges in Pacific countries, including Kiribati, has led to criticism from some quarters that such states cannot be considered fully independent and that the practice replicates aspects of colonialism (see Borisenkko 2022) or, at the very least, creates conditions for foreign governments to involve themselves in local legal matters where a citizen of their state sits on the judiciary (Dziedzic 2022a). In this respect, foreign judges may be seen to represent a personalised form of foreign aid (Bell 2024). Describing the role of foreign judges, Former Chief Justice Hastings has observed:

> The salary of the Chief Justice of Kiribati was AUD 40,0000, about 1/8th of my salary as a District Court Judge, so I could only take up the position [of Chief Justice of Kiribati] as a secondment under which I would retain my New Zealand warrant and salary, and have my Kiribati salary paid to the New Zealand government. I essentially became a Pacific aid project aligned with New Zealand's goals of strengthening judicial independence and the rule of law in the Pacific. (Cited in Bell 2024)

Similar to the delivery of other foreign aid projects, and to allow for sustainability, Dziedzic (2023) notes that, ultimately, foreign judges in Pacific states are recruited and appointed by the recipient state.

Specific to Kiribati, it would be remiss to mention the strengths of formal accountability and the complementary work of government and opposition in Kiribati without noting recent controversy related to the dismissal of Australian-born High Court judge, David Lambourne. Lambourne is the husband of opposition leader, Tessie Lambourne, and was removed from his role under what foreign observers are citing as controversial circumstances (Wiseman 2024). United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Margaret Satterthwaite, has criticised the decision, saying Lambourne was not afforded 'a fair hearing' in a manner that 'undermined the independence of the judiciary in Kiribati' (UNOHCHR 2024). In contrast, leading Pacific legal scholar, Bal Kama (2024), has voiced support for the decision and expressly noted that it would be inappropriate for Lambourne to hold the position while his spouse is opposition leader. The government of Kiribati held firm to its decision, citing, inter alia, that foreign judges cannot serve life-time appointments and must follow immigration laws. Amidst the politically charged saga, the subsequent appointment of the nation's first I-Kiribati woman as Chief Justice was seen by I-Kiribati across all levels of government as a historic moment to be celebrated. It also marked the first moment in history where all three branches of the Kiribati Government are headed by I-Kiribati, with two of them being women (the Chief Justice and the Speaker of Parliament).

Although the case of Lambourne has drawn global attention to a specific dispute, recent public notices (Kiribati Judiciary, 2024) have shown that the Chief Justice and the judiciary have developed a strategic plan to recognize the maturity of local expertise in law and are eager to localise positions on the High Court. Such localisation would cement judicial independence and mitigate risks related to the government having control over the immigration status of foreign judges and of such judges imposing interpretations of legislation that reflect cultural biases that do not align with local sociocultural realities (Dziedzic 2022a).

INFORMAL GOVERNANCE – SOCIAL NORMS SUPPORTING ACCOUNTABILITY

Contrasting with the formal and highly systematised electoral governance system of Kiribati, accountability in local settings, particularly villages, is primarily shaped by long-standing practices of decision-by-consensus occurring in *mwaneaba*. Reflecting the egalitarian ideals of I-Kiribati culture, the *mwaneaba* is a space intended for open discussion with decisions made by consensus within the space that must be respected by villagers (ADB 2009:11). Not all voices are equal within the *mwaneaba*, however, with councils of senior men – selected through an immanent social process, individually and collectively referred to as *unimwane* – carrying the greatest authority (multiple interviews, February 2024; also Cauchi et al 2021; Geddes et al 1982). The seniority of the *unimwane* does not preclude the involvement and voice of other members of the community, with women particularly recognised as deliberating and organising around specific issues ahead of and outside *mwaneaba* conversations, which then inform discussion within the *mwaneaba* (Interview with AMAK staff, February 2024; Interview with Kiribati National Museum staff, February 2024). Decisions made through the *mwaneaba* system have been reported as being more likely to result in long-term community planning compared with centralised parliamentary politics, due to the divested power structure of the former compared with the individual power available to MPs (Cauchi et al 2021:11). Notably, however, the central government and bureaucracy is recognised as responsible for broader I-Kiribati wellbeing and to facilitate response to villages and other communities in times of disaster or other misfortune (Cauchi et al 2021:10).

The pre-eminence of the *mwaneaba* remains as a cultural institution and continues to operate as it has for generations outside of South Tarawa; within South Tarawa, *unimwane* retain privileged positions but social authority is also registered in churches, which have committees that deliberate in the manner of *mwaneaba* discussions but may not be open to all parishioners (Interview with Museum staff; Interview with TTM staff; Interview with Uriam Timiti, February 2024). This comparable influence of Christian churches on South Tarawa to the *mwaneaba* through the rest of Kiribati (discussed below) not only demonstrates a need for different strategies when seeking to engage social influence in South Tarawa compared to other locations but also a lack of uniformity in where social influence lies throughout the country. Building relationships with church leaders and *unimwane* is necessary to address sociocultural change in South Tarawa today, however attention should be paid to shifts in where informal power exists in different communities through Kiribati on an ongoing basis.

The interaction between the informal accountability of social closeness and the formal accountability measure of democratically elected leaders was demonstrated in the focus group discussion we held. When discussing the role of local councillors, participants informed us that it is rare for citizens to raise concerns directly with elected representatives. They said, ‘Councillors should know what to do; they should know their community and its needs’ (FGD, February 2024). When asked what would happen in the event a councillor was not attending to the community’s needs and interests, the participants simply stated that the elected representative would be held accountable ‘at the ballot box’ (FGD, February 2024). This demonstrates the way that social connectedness is valued by I-Kiribati, including as a trait of leadership, and that if leaders are not seen to effectively represent their communities they will be removed from office.

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES INFLUENCING SOCIAL NORMS ON ACCOUNTABILITY

Although the official leadership positions within the churches are strongly hierarchical (such as bishops at the apex, then priests, then members of the congregation), churches were reported as having strong accountability and diverse community engagement and leadership opportunities. In contrast to the male dominance of *unimwane* in *mwaneaba* settings and in the national parliament, where fewer

than 10% of the seats are held by women (PacWIP nd), churches were reported as having diverse and demographically broad leadership representation. Across committees and groups that both manage church operations (such as finances) and social functions (such as youth groups), it was reported that groups that are typically dissuaded from *mwaneaba* discussions, including women and youth, had higher representation (Interview with Museum staff, February 2024). The high levels of participation and representativity within churches in Kiribati contributes to and reinforces the social value of egalitarianism, improving expectations and practices of social accountability.

The committees and groups that form a foundational element of the individual churches in Kiribati have been recognised as creating an environment that supports the leadership potential of congregants (ADB 2009: 11). Further, it was reported that they also provide additional layers of oversight that increase accountability within the churches (Interview with TTM staff, February 2024). However, questions have been raised about the extent to which the churches reliance on volunteering efforts has disproportionate negative impacts on the income generating capacity of women, who are more likely to volunteer significant amounts of their time (UNCTAD 2020). In addition, AMAK staff (Interview, February 2024) queried whether the churches could be making more of their influence to push for positive social change, suggesting that the churches could undertake more coordinated community engagement and action, rather than remaining focused on small-scale matters within their congregations. The influence of the churches may not be legislated but they carry considerable social weight. By providing an alternative avenue for government to secure support for issues of social importance as well as for citizens to place collective, institutional pressure on government to address the needs of the population, they offer a practical location for developing skills in and exercising forms of social accountability.

DECLINING PATRIARCHY AS WOMEN PLAY LEADERSHIP ROLES

Although men hold the majority of visible power in Kiribati, both through formal positions of power and in settings such as the *mwaneaba*, we were repeatedly informed that women are not disempowered in Kiribati. Gradual social change is leading to greater prominence for women in leadership positions (Interview with AMAK staff; Interview with Museum staff; and FGD, February 2024). This can be seen in the role of women leading church groups through to professional positions, including as heads of ministries, and even within formal politics and the judiciary (Interview with AMAK staff; Interview with Museum staff, February 2024). Changing attitudes towards the role of women in formal leadership is also demonstrated in the increase of women politicians in Kiribati, with the election of four women in 2020. Although having four women politicians in a parliament of 45 total members represents a small minority, this number notably exceeds the three elected in 2016, which had previously been the highest representation of women in the parliament of Kiribati (PacWIP nd). This increase in women's leadership can be viewed as the result of long-term change.

Further, even in cultural settings where gender roles remain quite fixed and 'traditional', multiple women that we spoke to shared that some gender roles for both men and women are maintained out of respect for I-Kiribati culture and that much pride is taken in observing these roles (Interview with AMAK staff; FGD; Museum staff, February 2024). Burnett (2022) writes of the complexity of women's power within traditional roles through discussing *rikiara*, literally 'our way,' as the social guidelines of I-Kiribati life that determine 'everything that makes up an I-Kiribati person and informs the conduct and behaviour of different identities in Kiribati society' (2022:89). Burnett notes that although *rikiara* is not confined to gender spaces, it does shape gender roles and domains of power. Addressing gender equality in Kiribati requires contextualising initiatives to correspond with local customs and ways of being, rather than being imposed from above in ways that feel confronting and as if they are aimed at 'changing their culture' (Burnett 2022:88). Those seeking to promote women into more positions of

power in Kiribati, whether local or foreign, may do well to heed lessons from how accountability has been contextualised to reflect Kiribati values.

Interviewees – both male and female – detailed that women do not exist in a powerless vacuum, even when their influence may not be visible. Women utilise the collective strength of church groups to discuss issues of concern, which they can then choose to elevate for further discussion and/or action within the church, local community or other relevant authority figure, as required (FGD; Interview with Museum staff, February 2024). Women also utilise collective deliberation to influence discussion within *mwaneaba*, often settling on a position to be raised by a female representative within the *mwaneaba* and deliberated upon alongside the *unimwane* and other community members (Interview with AMAK staff, February 2024). The power of this process is similar to the pipeline 'from Cookhouse to the Cabinet' discussed of Marshall Islands (Yamaguchi-Capelle with Azfa, 2023), recognising the value of discussion at the hyperlocal cookhouse level, which is traditionally the domain of women, through to the highest level of decision-making in the country. Interviewing AMAK staff (February 2024), we were informed of how they create committees of advocacy on specific issues that they feel need to be raised with government and have a successful track record of petitioning for an audience as a trusted and representative voice of the women's sector. And although women were seen as having less access to power and influence in rural and island settings (i.e., outside South Tarawa), UNCTAD reports that '[while] Men still dominate island councils… [they also] maintain the posts of Women Interest Workers (WIW), a focal officer responsible for women's programmes and activities, and recognize Women's Associations as bodies representing women's interests' (2020:14).

Even within households, women have increased influence, challenging traditional patriarchal norms, particularly if they are the breadwinner (Interview with AMAK staff, February 2024). With women disproportionately securing scholarships for tertiary education, AMAK staff reported an expectation of increased social change in gender spaces in coming years. The message repeatedly raised by interviewees was that progress on women's leadership needs to come from within Kiribati, utilising existing pathways and contextualising so as not to be perceived as threatening (Interview with AMAK staff, February 2024). The declining influence of patriarchy – particularly on South Tarawa – demonstrates the social shifts occurring in Kiribati society and indicate further increases in accountability that women and women's groups will be able to demand in coming years.

DONOR ACCOUNTABILITY EFFORTS UNDERMINING LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Donors occupy an interesting position in the Kiribati accountability ecosystem. Donors are respected as an integral part of Kiribati's economy and social environment, however they are regularly seen as acting in their own interests and failing to support self-determination principles that allow Kiribati to guide its own development. To ensure development efforts in Kiribati meet the country's national aims, a Development Coordination Committee (DCC) sits within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is responsible for coordinating donors, avoiding duplication of projects and ensuring that donor-funded interventions are driven by data-based need rather than the preferences of individual donors (Interview with Uering Iteraera, February 2024). Although donors may feel their role should be to promote accountability within Kiribati, the internal perspective from those we spoke to in Kiribati is that donors should adhere to the processes of the DCC to ensure that donors are, themselves, acting in appropriate and accountable ways to the country they are there to support (FGD, February 2024). Some concern was raised that donors at times avoid engaging with the DCC, seeing themselves as above this line of accountability (FGD, February 2024), which both frustrates and undermines the effectiveness of the Kiribati government to oversee its own development agenda.

Further, while it was recognised that bilateral donors must themselves be accountable to the citizens of their own countries and so could not be expected to write blank cheques, multiple interviewees reflected that donors can be problematic and inefficient in their processes. For instance, reporting mechanisms were considered unnecessarily onerous and awareness of local needs considerably lacking (Interview with AMAK staff; Interview with TTM staff, February 2024). One interviewee (Undisclosed interview, February 2024) shared an anecdote of a donor funding a fruit cannery to assist with food security, despite the almost complete absence of locally grown produce in Kiribati outside of coconuts and breadfruit. Another spoke of a donor wanting to sight the anti-corruption policy of a government ministry before it would supply them with funding to respond to a humanitarian disaster (Undisclosed interview, February 2024). The same interviewee suggested that the bureaucratic hurdles placed by donors sometimes felt as if they were designed to enforce a relationship where the donor country held power over Kiribati and thus undermined its own domestic accountability processes. This sentiment was echoed by non-government organisation (NGO) respondents, who shared that donors often do not trust local NGOs, even though they are the ones with cultural knowledge and experience of creating social change at the community level (Interview with AMAK staff, February 2024). While donors thus tend to be seen as promoting international standards of accountability, their day-to-day practice can simultaneously undermine accountability systems within Kiribati.

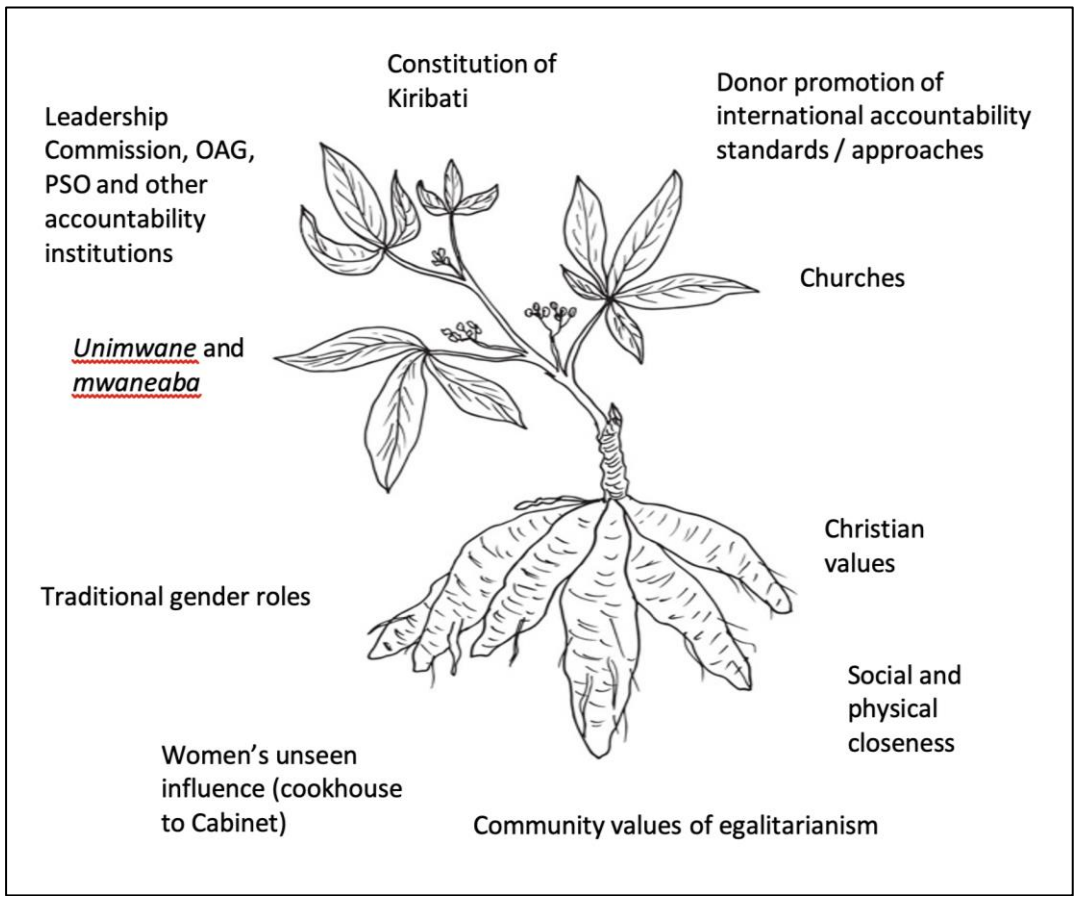

Figure 2 Kiribati's formal and informal 'accountability casava plant'

People, power, interests and relationships shaping accountability

The combination of formal and informal accountability institutions and mechanisms contribute to a strong accountability ecosystem within Kiribati. This is not to say that decision-making is uniformly positive, nor that the egalitarian ideals of Kiribati result in a horizontal distribution of power across the community. A truer reflection is that there are multiple layers of checks and balances across the accountability ecosystem within Kiribati, meaning that there is a high level of oversight of power that limits corruption and self-serving leadership.

Formal power is most clearly vested in politicians and bureaucrats, *unimwane* and church leaders. Within the political sphere, power can be represented hierarchically with the president and the apex, followed by ministers, other members of government and then opposition, with local councillors mostly operating separately to national politicians. In the bureaucracy, secretaries and directors wield the most power, with further power divested through layers of senior management, middle management and officers. Despite clear hierarchies in government and the public service, each level of power has multiple layers of accountability. The behaviour of all politicians and public servants is subject to oversight from accountability institutions, such as the Leadership Commission. Further, measures are in place that disallow permanent tenure of positions without review, whether this be the fixed-term (but renewable) contracts of public servants or elections for politicians.

The Office of the Beretitenti (President) is widely recognised as wielding the most power and influence within Kiribati. Notably, however, the power of the president is not viewed as sweeping nor beyond criticism. A significant overlap exists between conceptions of individual and communal rights in Kiribati, informed by the importance placed on egalitarianism, which means that civil disobedience against people and structures of authority – such as the president, parliament and police – is seen as a valid expression of citizen sentiment (Interview with TTM Staff, February 2024).

Members of parliament (MPs) have high discretionary power over the policies and issues that they choose to focus on and raise to Parliament (Parliament of Kiribati, Rules of Procedure). However, MPs were reported as having both social and physical closeness to citizens that makes them approachable and accountable (FGD; Interview with PSO staff, February 2024). Conversely, MPs were also reported as keeping their distance from citizens until and unless they were campaigning for election, particularly in the case of more marginalised communities, such as women and people living with disabilities (Interview with AMAK staff; Interview with TTM staff, February 2024). Notably, parliamentarians are not considered above reproach and it is culturally acceptable to criticise their work. Regardless of their accessibility, interviewees repeatedly noted that MPs who are not seen to be serving their communities appropriately would be held accountable through the electoral process.

Social influence is strongly vested in *unimwane* and churches. Although they have less formal power than elected representatives, they are seen as providing moral guidance and leadership (Interview with Uriam Timiti, February 2024). *Unimwane* influence was seen to be stronger in rural and island communities and the churches' influence greatest in South Tarawa (FGD; Interview with Uriam Timiti, February 2024). Accountability for *unimwane* and for church leaders is also formally covered by the

operations of the Leadership Commission, however the main accountability measures come directly from the community. In instances where the community does not feel a leader is being representative and serving community needs, they will enact social recourse that either isolates the individual or removes them from power (Interview with National Museum staff; Interview with TTM staff, February 2024).

The power of Christian churches in Kiribati emanates from their high rates of practicing parishioners, with approximately 90% of the population of Kiribati identifying as belonging to the Roman Catholic or Kiribati Uniting Church (Government of Kiribati 2016; US Department of State 2016). At times, and specifically in South Tarawa, the influence of Christian churches goes beyond that of the government or local *unimwane*. For example, when the government-imposed curfews due to the Covid-19 pandemic, citizens expressed considerable disapproval online and by refusing to adhere to curfew conditions. In response, the government worked with church leaders to publicly support the curfew measures, following which adherence increased significantly and set a precedent for the government to engage church leaders in disseminating public interventions (Interview with Uriam Timiti, February 2024).

Notably, the majority of leaders across politics, *unimwane* and the church are men – and the majority are able-bodied and aged over 40. Despite this, we were repeatedly informed that the gender representation gap is not widely considered an issue. The reasons behind the lack of expressed concern for women's political representation need to be investigated further to better understand women's roles within *rikiara*, which should illustrate more fully the ways that I-Kiribati women wield influence, where they are excluded and the extent to which this is problematic or not within Kiribati society. Such exploration of women's roles needs to be careful and nuanced so as to avoid what Burnett (2022:84) has identified as the impossible conundrum whereby 'Kiribati 'culture' is simultaneously framed as the cause of and solution to gender equality.' As Burnett (2022:12-17) identifies, through drawing on Pacific feminist scholars, imposing foreign rigid definitions and expectations in relation to gender norms – including how gender equality is perceived – risks not only recreating inequitable North-South power relations but may actually negatively impact women's rights and livelihoods by forcing distinctions and definitions to be articulated in spaces where they do not have local relevance. It was, however, notable that women's increasing access to formal leadership was represented as positive and anticipated to grow (Interview with AMAK staff; Interview with National Museum staff; FGD, February 2024), partly in response to changing gender norms in South Tarawa influenced by the increasing number of women as breadwinners. Discussion of the leadership potential of more diverse groups in Kiribati was muted, with young people considered only as future leaders and people with disabilities, for example, reported as having minimal access to leadership and influence except through advocacy groups (Interview with TTM, February 2024).

The influence of the private sector was difficult to gauge in interviews. When private enterprise was discussed it was mainly to note the limited role of business as an employer and economic driver in Kiribati (Interview with PSO, February 2024; Interview with TTM, February 2024). Despite the preference of the government as employer of choice, the social closeness that marks much of Kiribati society opens itself to influence between business and politics, particularly during elections when funds are required for campaigns.

Groups that had little clear evidence of influence as collectives in Kiribati included NGOs and the media. Although some NGOs have connections to government and/or donors – particularly those working in gender, disability and disaster spheres – there is limited coordination among NGOs. Multiple interviewees (February 2024) were unsure if the Kiribati Association of NGOs (KANGO) was even active. It was noted that NGOs associated with churches tend to be more trusted than secular

NGOs, and many within government view NGOs as competition (Undisclosed interview, February 2024), instead of considering them as potential partners. Similarly, the reach and influence of independent media within Kiribati is limited, although media reporting is seen as being a gauge of public sentiment and, in turn, influences political discourse and decision-making (Interview with Eriati Manaima, February 2024). A summary table of these actors and insight into their roles and power relationships is provided below.

Table 1: Accountability actors in Kiribati

	Actors	Roles	Power relationships
Parliament, Government Bodies and Legislation	Government	Majority party (or coalition of parties) democratically voted to lead national policy and planning.	Strongest influence over parliamentary matters, through majority vote to pass laws, approve budget, and pass motions. This majority gives it the greatest influence.
	Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MFED)	Responsible for the development of fiscal and economic policies, oversight of government investments, and the management of government revenue and expenditure.	Some influence over Ministerial budget submissions to Parliament; does not directly influence budget provisions of Ministries, but it does provide oversight to Ministerial budgets prior to submission to Parliament, to ensure compliance with relevant Acts and to verify accuracy with Treasury and accounts. The Ministry approves compliance with financial regulations but does not necessarily exert control over the budget provisions of the other government Ministries, beyond regulatory oversight.
	Opposition	Minority party, parties and/or independent politicians not in government providing oversight of and alternatives to government initiatives through the parliament and public engagement.	Strong influence in the scrutiny of budgetary provisions of Government, by highlighting discrepancies, and providing suggestions on value for money, impact and sustainability. Influence is wielded through public opinion, but it holds weaker power in parliamentary voting and approving budget or passing laws.
	Public Service Office	Responsible for a broad spectrum of activities aimed at enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of government operations.	Strong influence in workforce planning and pre-approves positions to be submitted to Parliament for approval in the National workforce Register (Establishment Register). Holds influence over Ministries ability to create line positions, or retitle positions, or regrade positions (including promotions), but remains subject to review and final approval by Parliament, although approval by Parliament often seems to be a formality, with no record yet of an Establishment Register not being approved in the past.
	Fiscal Reporting Policy	This policy, pursuant to the Public Finance (Control and Audit) Act (CAP.79), outlines processes and procedures to enhance fiscal stability by improving financial reporting processes.	Strong influence. Policy provides MFED with strong influence and authority to coordinate and scrutinize budgetary submissions of Ministries, including fiscal procedures to draw or invest public resources.

Government-Established Entities of Kiribati	Auditor General	Leads Audit service to the government and the people of Kiribati, to review and report compliance (or non-compliance) to fiscal management Acts and procedures.	Strong influence. Respected and influential authority for fiscal compliance and its impact on public opinion, and possible legislative and legal proceedings, recognizing that Audit reports are made public an presented to Parliament.
	Kiribati Audit Office	Independent state Organization headed by the Auditor General who is responsible to carry out audits for Government Ministries, Annual Accounts (Treasury), Government Companies (SOEs), Local Government (Island Councils), Development Projects, Special Audits and ICT Audits.	Strong influence. It is a well-known authority that Ministries respect, because of the mandatory obligation to comply, and the possible implications that may emerge due to the scrutiny applied. Most Ministries conveyed being fearful of KNAO due to public scrutiny and opinion.
	Accountant General	Established within MFED, oversees the recording of expenditure and revenue for the whole of government and provides management reports for all government Ministries, and recording and reconciliation of government's bank accounts, Kiribati Provident Fund and Pension Contributions.	Strong influence. Has influence over government approvals of transactions and accounts approved by Parliament, but equally remains liable to auditing by the Auditor General, and reporting to the Minister of Finance on budgetary matters.
	Attorney General	Responsible for overseeing legal policies, initiating criminal prosecutions, and offering legal advice to the Government.	Strong influence in legal representation and legal advice, however remains under the authority of executive, representing the interest of government, and prosecuting cases of civil and criminal matters on public funds and resources in the interest of the government.
	Central Procurement Unit	Established as the centre of excellence for public procurement in Kiribati and is responsible for providing operational support to procuring entities in the execution of public funds procurement.	Some influences the approval of all public fund procurements made by Ministries and State-owned entities. However, it remains under the authority of the Minister for Finance.
	National Economic Planning Office (NEPO)	A division of MFED, leads a whole-of-government approach for the formulation and implementation of a policy and public expenditure framework.	Strong influence. Manages and coordinates the development of national development plans and the oversight of government fiscal policies, including the fiscal reporting policy. But it remains within the control and authority of the Minister for Finance.
	Development Coordination Committee	A body coordinated by NEPO comprising of all Secretaries of Government, to oversee the implementation of the Development	Strong influence over government Ministries and bodies. Main authority over all bilateral and multilateral projects implemented in Kiribati, and provides oversight on all donor-led projects, to

		Cooperation Policy, and consider and approve all bilateral and multilateral development projects implemented in Kiribati by development partners to ensure the effective mobilisation of funds from development cooperation.	ensure compliance with government priorities, and avoid duplication of efforts and harmonisation of project objectives. All projects proposed by Ministries and government bodies, need the approval of the DCC, which sometimes creates a bottleneck in the approval and subsequent implementation of critical projects. However, it remains subject to Cabinet decisions and endorsement.
	Kiribati Fiduciary Services Unit	Established within MFED and serves as the central unit for providing fiduciary support to all Bank-financed (i.e., Asian Development Bank and World Bank) projects.	Strong influence. Coordinates the compliance of projects financed by development partners including ADB/World Bank with relevant fiscal regulations and policies, including procurement and reporting. The KFSU specifically provides oversight to ensure compliance with donor fiscal policies, which are often more stringent than government policies, and require a dedicated office to avoid overburden of existing government bodies, which may find it difficult to cope with government and donor requirements at the same time.
	National Authorising Office	Established within MFED and serves as the central unit for providing fiduciary support to all European Union projects.	Strong influence. Wields influence over EU projects and the disbursement of EU funding and the share of Kiribati in the EDF investment.
	Public Service Management: Public Integrity and Corruption Control Unit	Develop, implement, and oversee policies and practices that enhance the efficiency, accountability, and integrity of public service operations.	Some influence. Wields influence over Ministries by undertaking independent reviews and recommendations to the Public Service Office on potential breaches for accountability and complaints on public servants. These reviews are later shared with the Secretary of Public Service who would later share with the relevant Secretary of the public servant being reviewed. Does not investigate, only reviews, and is not mandatory, and reviews may be carried out depending on availability of staff.
	Local Government Section	Coordinates engagement of Government and local communities (i.e. *Te Mwaneaba* system and the Church) through the Island Councils.	Some influence. Coordinates engagement with local communities, and all Ministries have to go through this section to engage with local communities in terms of community engagement and awareness required for project implementation. Ensures cultural sensitisation of project proponents and affiliates as they engage with local communities. However, it remains under the authority of the Minister for Culture and Internal Affairs.

Government - Committee	Public Service Commission	Oversees the Public Service Office's functions in terms of appointments, removals, and disciplinary actions for all public sector employees.	Strong influence in the recruitment of government positions, and has authority to validate any person nominated for appointment by any Ministry. Holds the power to review and invalidate any appointment or recruitment, if there are any discrepancies or complaints by the public. The role of the President to appoint civil servants on the advice of the Public Service Commission is observed as a formality, with the actual power to appoint or dismiss any civil servant remaining squarely within the remit of the Public Service Commission.
	Leadership Commission	Independent body that ensures Kiribati Leaders carry out their duties diligently, with honesty and integrity so as to protect the right of civil society in accordance with the Constitution and Laws of Kiribati and the Leaders Code of Conduct Act 2016 (Leadership Commission, 2024).	Strong influence over Parliament and Cabinet, through public opinion. Has independence of authority, empowered by support of both government and opposition.
	Public Accounts Committee	Make recommendations to the parliament aimed at ensuring compliance with statutory requirements and good financial management practices and as provided for under the Constitution.	Strong influence. Combines both members of the government and opposition- remains independent and wields influence over public opinion on its reports. Although, reports require majority vote, public opinion balances its influence.
Judicial system	Magistrates Court	Hearings of judicial matters before an accredited judicial officer.	Strong influence over everyday actions of citizens and MPs in their personal capacity. Some influence over Executive and Parliament as institutions, in line with normative privileges and immunities provided under relevant Laws, and separation of powers.
	High Court	Hearings of judicial matters, commonly related to matters of appeal.	
Traditional leadership settings	*Te mwaneaba* System (*Unimwane*)	*Unimwane* or old men who had been designated to represent their *kainga* (extended kin network) who sit in the front rows of their assigned *boti* or sitting place inside the *mwaneaba* (see Maude 1963). The *unimwane* had an important role to carry out in the functioning of the *mwaneaba* as they were involved in decision making and	Strong influence over everyday actions of citizens, traditional institutions, formal institutions. Some influence over everyday functioning of MPs and within ministries but on a personalised basis.

		authorising the implementation of those decisions by members of the society for the common welfare of everyone (Uakeia, 2012). An important caveat is that decisions made by *Unimwane* in *Te Mwaneaba*, and carry weight, denoting the significance of *Te Mwaneaba*.	
	Island Council	Serves as the link and the liaison between formal and informal systems of accountability, which is the mandate provided to island councils under the Local Government Act (1984).	Strong influence in the outer islands. All Ministries have to seek approval and work with the local island council in activities on the respective islands. Funding and resources are channelled via the Island Councils through departmental warrants, which means that Ministries have to conform to island councils to draw on government funds earmarked for outer island projects. This gives the Island Council considerable power over government funded projects. This is not the case for foreign aid projects.
Christian Churches	Church Leaders	Community Leaders with authority provided by respective church institutions and hold a high degree of authority within communities in Kiribati.	Very strong influence socially and politically. In some cases, the government relies on the support of Church leaders to influence their local parishioners or constituents. Political leaders also deeply respect the authority of Church leaders.
Civil society groups	NGOs	Two broad types: 1, implementing development projects; 2, issues- or demographic-based organisations representing the needs of their community.	Weak influence over everyday actions of citizens, traditional institutions, formal institutions. Some influence over everyday functioning of MPs and within ministries but on a personalised basis.
	Women's groups	Constituted in churches and/or villages, represent the interests of local women.	Weak influence, subject to church leadership.
	Youth groups	Constituted in churches and/or villages, represent the interests of local youth.	Some influence, noting the emerging spirit of activism, and the advocacy of youth leaders to influence support from church and government leadership. A leading youth group in Kiribati, the Tungaru Youth Action is very active and has for the past few years demonstrated leadership by coordinating national clean up events. The government Ministries often work with these youth groups to support national campaigns on climate changed, oceans conservation and other matters of priority.

Bilateral and multilateral relationships	International financial institutions	Provide funding and technical assistance to the government in support of developmental objectives.	Wield limited influence over decision making and policy planning from parliament, government, OPMC and other key ministries. Perceived to be minimally influenced by or accountable to citizens and parliament.
	United Nations agencies	Provide funding and technical assistance to the government in support of developmental objectives.	Strong influence over government projects, which are financially managed locally, with oversight by UN agencies.
	CROP agencies	Provide technical, administrative, legal, logistical, policy and programming support and oversight to member states through various bodies	Strong influence over government projects, which are financially managed locally, with oversight by CROP agencies.
	Bilateral donors	Bilateral development, defence, diplomatic and trade relationship	Strong influence over government projects, which are financially managed locally, with oversight by resident and non-resident High Commissions and Embassies.
Business	Small, medium and large businesses	Income generation from informal vendors through to large businesses.	Wield strong influence over MPs through social connections, support base and/or finance necessary for re-election.
Citizens	All citizens	Direct accountability through electoral representation but few other levers to demand more accountable governance.	Weak influence over MPs and key sector ministries. Some discrete mutual influence through patronage, and customary practices.

Synthesis: Opportunities and challenges in Kiribati's accountability ecosystem

Accountability in Kiribati appears strong: measures occur at formal and informal levels and intersect in ways that are mutually reinforcing. The combination of communal and egalitarian values as the foundation for Kiribati society that work with robust accountability institutions that reflect local values lends to an accountability environment that is strong from the bottom-up and the top-down. Notwithstanding, the nature and strength of accountability is not equally distributed throughout the country. To begin with, the geographic focus of formal accountability mechanisms and institutions on South Tarawa renders them difficult to access for rural and island communities. Further, the vast majority of leaders in villages, churches and formal politics are able-bodied, elder men, demonstrating significant gaps in direct representativity – although this does not necessarily demonstrate the extent to which women wield influence nor how men's direct representativity positively and negatively impacts the everyday functioning of I-Kiribati society.

INFORMAL ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS CREATE A STRONG ENVIRONMENT FOR FORMAL INSTITUTIONS

The formal accountability institutions of Kiribati, such as the Leadership Commission, Office of the Auditor General and Leadership Commission, were reported as being strong, collaborative and independent of government influence. The willingness of these institutions to investigate influential entities in the country was demonstrated by the Auditor General's investigation of Air Kiribati relating to allegations of impropriety in the purchase of an aeroplane, and the subsequent presentation of findings to Parliament (Interview with Eriati Manaima, February 2024). Conversely, their willingness to engage collaboratively with bodies that they are investigating, as relayed by TTM staff, demonstrates a commitment to improving the practise of accountability rather than seeking a pure enforcement approach. This collaborative style reflects social values of seeking to work towards consensus and providing oversight through everyday actions, highlighting the power of relational accountability (see Moncrieffe, 2011). The formal and informal mechanisms of accountability are mutually reinforcing and demonstrate the effectiveness of hybridising seemingly foreign systems to suit local sociocultural realities (cf Garcia Canclini; Levitt and Merry, 2009).

EGALITARIANISM IS A BEDROCK OF I-KIRIBATI SOCIETY

Fundamental to understanding why accountability measures occur at formal and informal levels is recognising the extent to which Kiribati society is committed to egalitarian principles and maintaining strong social bonds. This does not mean that power is shared horizontally – older men have greater influence than other demographics, for example – but that no individual is considered above reproach. As staff from the Public Service Office told us, 'Kiribati culture respects people irrespective of their title' (Interview, February 2024). By extension, nobody's title protects them from criticism and oversight.

IMPROVED VISIBILITY OF ACCOUNTABILITY LEADS TO A STRENGTHENED ACCOUNTABILITY ECOSYSTEM

Although accountability is reported as strong at both formal and informal levels, it is evident that the increased focus on formal accountability mechanisms following the change of national government in 2016 has had a significant impact in terms of the public awareness and framing of accountability. As Uriam Timiti, Chair of the Leadership Commission, noted, the existence of accountability institutions and the faith from citizens that they are doing their job effectively contribute to their successful operation (Interview, February 2024). Multiple interviewees also discussed that the strength of institutions such as the Leadership Commission, KAO and PSO directly impact their decision making and help them to avoid taking shortcuts or engage in practices that could be seen as corrupt, nepotistic or otherwise unethical. The successful and visible operation of accountability institutions can thus be seen to increase positive public sentiment towards accountability institutions and encourage accountable practices through social expectations, thus creating a mutually reinforcing virtuous circle.

RURAL AND ISLAND COMMUNITIES ARE MORE REMOVED FROM ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS THAN URBAN COMMUNITIES

Politics and the administrative arms of national government are concentrated in South Tarawa, meaning their reach and influence is somewhat omnipresent in this region. South Tarawa is densely populated, has a high proportion of well-educated women and is increasingly receiving its social guidance from church communities rather than villages and the *unimwane* within them. In comparison, rural and island locations are primarily influenced by community-level politics, discussed in *mwaneaba*, and live more traditional lifestyles. Ensuring effective accountability across urban, rural and island requires being acutely attuned to the different needs, values and interests across these societies, and the different sources of accountability within them.

REPRESENTATION FOR WOMEN, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND RURAL POPULATIONS CAN BE IMPROVED

With the concentration of direct influence in the hands of older men, significant scope exists for the needs and priorities of other demographics to not be represented or given voice. Although some interest groups exist and/or are represented by NGOs – such as AMAK with women and TTM for people living with disabilities – their influence is limited by small budgets and personnel, meaning their reach is greatest in South Tarawa and within the networks they have already cultivated. For those people not represented by these groups or who do not have access to them, it is unclear what opportunities they have to raise issues of concern and to influence positive change. Further, the collective impact of NGOs is currently hampered by the unclear status of KANGO and a small media pool potentially limits the ability for frank and fearless reporting.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to inform ways forward to improve understanding and practices of accountability at all levels of society in Kiribati.

IDENTIFY KIRIBATI AS A POSITIVE EXAMPLE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is well understood and practiced in Kiribati. Social measures for accountability include a cultural commitment to egalitarianism as well as positive influences from centres of social and traditional leadership, such as *unimwane* and Christian churches. Notably, formal accountability has been significantly strengthened following increased focus and financial support since the change of government in 2016.

This success should be celebrated and shared as an exemple of how to create strong, locally relevant accountability in the Pacific. To better capture the fullness of how Kiribati has created and sustained strong formal and informal measures of accountability, further research should be conducted into the story of Kiribati's attempts to improve its accountability ecosystem. As well as highlighting strengths of the Kiribati accountability ecosystem, this research could potentially identify fault lines where formal and informal accountability measures in Kiribati are more challenging and contested. Such research should include a thorough review of relevant policy and planning documents, as well as interviews with a broader representation of key figures within the accountability ecosystem. As noted above, increased visibility of accountability mechanisms functioning well leads to improved sentiments, expectations and practices related to accountability. By being recognised as a regional leader on accountability, the accountability ecosystem of Kiribati can be further strengthened.

INVEST IN CONTINUED STRENGTHENING OF FORMAL ACCOUNTABILITY ORGANISATIONS

The establishment of integrity institutions in Kiribati in the last decade and the independence granted to such institutions is heartening. Further, their establishment demonstrates that efforts to embed and strengthen accountability cannot effectively be driven from outside Kiribati and that external organisations are best placed in supporting existing local efforts which have local knowledge and cachet. Multiple interviewees expressed how the creation of these accountability bodies and the justification of their existence through connecting their work to cultural values has reshaped how I-Kiribati, particularly in South Tarawa, conceive of issues of corruption and accountability. Nonetheless, these accountability organisations remain limited in their ability to carry out their duties with full effect due to limited budget for personnel, training and travel, as well as a lack of tertiary qualified staff in-country that can fill roles requiring technical expertise. An audit of the technical and financial capabilities and deficits of integrity institutions should be undertaken and collaborative planning between relevant institutions and donor agencies to address identified gaps, with preference given to the needs identified and articulated by those within the accountability ecosystem including actors within integrity institutions and their key stakeholders. Given the number of organisations identified in Table 1 and Appendix I, triaging of which accountability organisations should be prioritised should be coordinated between donor agencies, the PSO and the Office of the Beretitenti.

INVEST IN CAPACITY BUILDING OF NGOS AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Although accountability organisations at the national level have been strengthened and contributed to shifts in community perceptions of corruption and accountability, grassroots organisations remain limited in their capacity to create and implement accountability processes, simultaneously limiting their role in acting as a check on government. Staff from TTM noted that they are reliant on a collaborative working relationship with the Office of the Auditor General to identify and resolve accountability issues within the organisation. This collaborative approach can be used as a basis for expansion of local capacity building on accountability issues by local experts. Partnerships could be formed with national accountability organisations to proactively engage with local NGOs and other

community organisations to upskill them in auditing and compliance in line with recent and emerging national standards.

INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS OF FORMAL ACCOUNTABILITY ORGANISATIONS AND PROCESSES OUTSIDE SOUTH TARAWA

It was widely reported by interviewees that formal accountability measures are much more commonly known and implemented in South Tarawa, while other islands rely more heavily on informal measures of accountability. More could be done to engage outer islands in conversations about Kiribati's formal accountability mechanisms. In these conversations, care should be given to contextualise how integrity institutions and formal processes of accountability can work in harmony with I-Kiribati cultural values. Increased awareness of formal accountability processes and organisations may provide citizens on outer islands with greater scope to report and/or address issues of corruption and impropriety and hold their leaders to account.

ENGAGE *UNIMWANE* AND CHURCHES TO STRENGTHEN ALIGNMENT BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Any efforts to promote formal accountability measures in the outer islands should create and sustain relationships with *unimwane* and churches. *Unimwane* and churches are the hubs of informal knowledge and influence in Kiribati and formal processes of accountability are more likely to be successful when supported by them. Donor agencies should invest in understanding the operation of decision-making within *mwaneaba* and embed ways of working with *unimwane* and churches that reflect egalitarianism, open discussion and consensus decision-making.

COMMIT TIME AND RESOURCES TO DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER ROLES WITHIN KIRIBATI SOCIETY

Complementary to engaging *unimwane* and churches, further effort could be made in understanding how gender roles influence the everyday functioning of Kiribati society, particularly drawing on *rikiara*. The lack of formal representation of women in leadership positions is striking when viewed through a lens of Global North approaches to and understandings of gender equality. Respondents advised that gender norms are shifting, and both women and men informants alike reported that gender representation in local and national politics is not a significant concern in Kiribati. Research is required to better understand how gender roles are understood in Kiribati, including to contextualise gender-focused initiatives to match local values and beliefs.

SUPPORT LOCAL STAFF TO LEAD INITIATIVES, AND TRAIN FOREIGN ADVISORS ON LOCAL WAYS OF BEING, KNOWING AND DOING

Donor agencies should support local staff to take the lead in designing, implementing, managing and monitoring accountability-focused interventions – ideally in collaboration with local communities and organisations – given that they are steeped in and regularly cross the boundaries between formal and customary knowledge and practices. Complementary to this, foreign staff working on accountability should focus on building their local knowledge through direct person-to-person engagement and relationship building, including in areas outside of South Tarawa. By engaging directly with members of the public, increased understanding of the processes of formal accountability mechanisms can be acquired by the citizenry and a deeper knowledge of the informal norms that influence the accountability ecosystem in practice can be acquired by foreign staff. Drawing on existing hybrid

approaches and further synthesising 'local' and 'foreign' knowledge of how accountability is understood and practiced will provide insights into how formal and informal measures of accountability can be strengthened.

ENSURE THAT DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE IS TRANSPARENT AND ALIGNED WITH NATIONAL PRIORITIES

Kiribati has demonstrated deep commitment to accountability and anti-corruption in recent years. Alongside this is a more assertive approach to development through a self-determined articulation of the national interest, formally coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration through its Development Coordination Committee. Despite all development interventions legally needing to be approved by the DCC, some donors reportedly circumvent this process, demonstrating a lack of commitment to accountability. Working with the DCC and other relevant bodies and processes for accountability will further strengthen relationships between donors and Kiribati on matters of anti-corruption, help to minimise duplication of development efforts and ensure donor investment supports local and sustainable development, beyond the scope of discrete project investments. Failure to engage with the DCC and other relevant bodies risks directly undermining the efforts of Kiribati to articulate and coordinate its national development priorities and undermines the very accountability practices that the international community is meant to be in the business of supporting.

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Interviews

No.	First Name	Last Name	Sex	Position and Organisation
1	Ritite	Tekiau	F	Secretary, Public Service Office
2	Kireata	Meauke	M	Senior Integrity and Corruption Control Officer, Public Service Office
3	Eriati	Manaima	M	Auditor-General, Kiribati National Audit Office
4	James	Bakatii	M	Office Manager,Te Toa Matoa
5	Tabaia	Iakobwa	M	Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Te Toa Matoa
6	Uriam	Timiti	M	Chairperson, Leadership Commission
7	Toromon	Metutera	M	Accountant-General, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
8	Uering	Iteraera	M	Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration
9	Teraaiti	Euta	F	Senior Museum Officer, National Museum
10	Kirikara	Koraua	F	Cultural Officer, National Museum
11	Robite	Teaete	F	Senior Cultural Officer, National Museum
12	Erimeta	Barako	F	Women's Representative (AMAK)
13	Tekoba	Koririnietaake	F	Women's Representative (AMAK)

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

1	Tetaake	Baneati	M
2	Kiarerei	Biira	F
3	Laitele	Peletele	M
4	Kamoia	Biira	F
5	Botibara	O'Connor	F

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.

GENERAL ENQUIRIES

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