# Responsive Governance in the Pacific

## Informing a conceptual framing for UNDP

**SEPTEMBER 2024**

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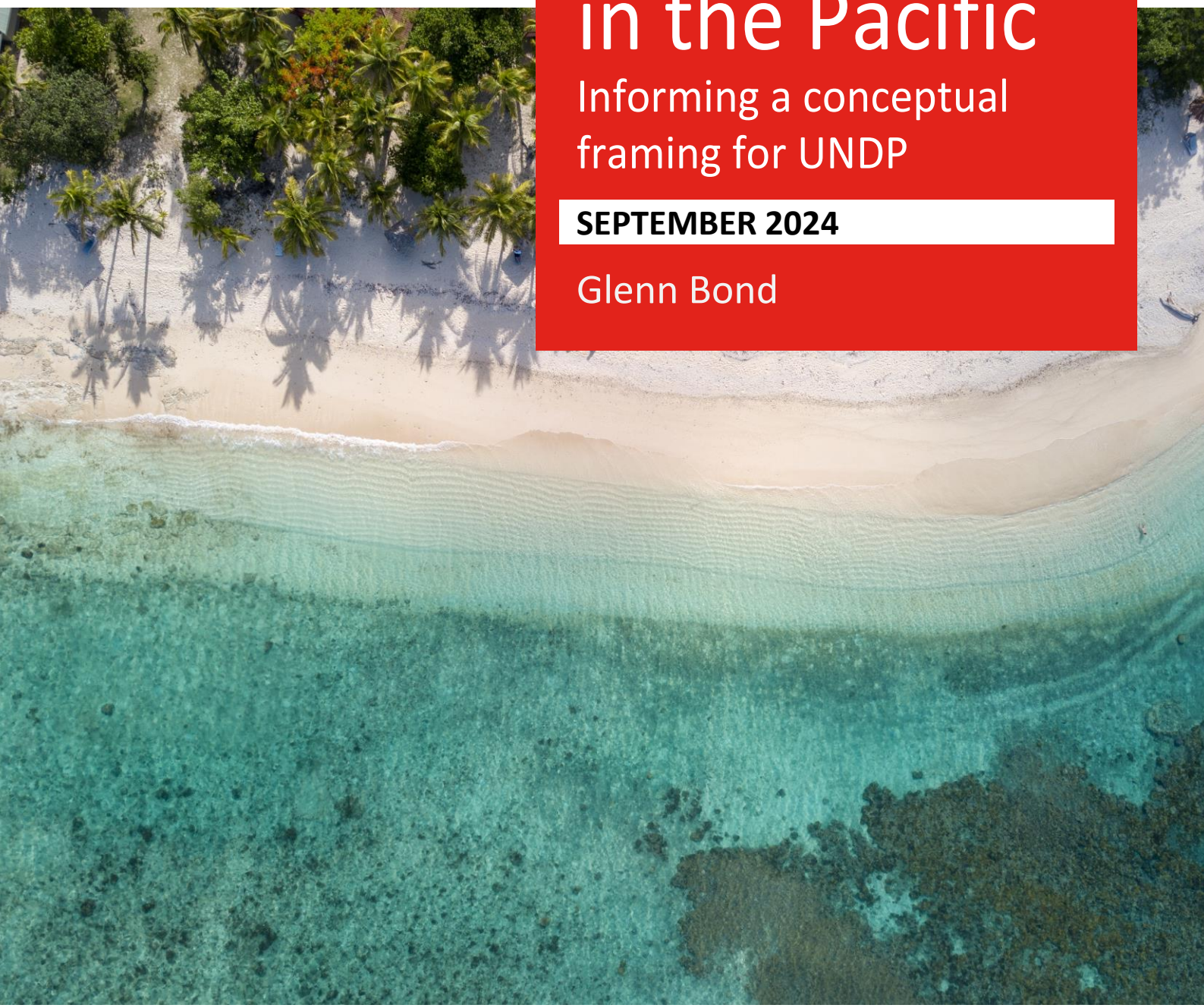

Funded by the European Union

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# Acknowledgements

This policy paper has been developed as part of a wider research partnership between UNDP and the Centre for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University, exploring accountability and governance in the Pacific. The research has been undertaken as part of UNDP's Accountable Public Finances to serve Pacific people – Vaka Pasifika project, funded by the European Union.

The author acknowledges the generous contributions of the UNDP Pacific team during the team workshop on the 14th of May 2024, as well as the numerous UNDP peers and partners who contributed their views during the conference session on 30th of May 2024. I also acknowledge the useful comments from Marine Destrez, Lisa Denney and Chris Roche when reviewing earlier drafts. Responsibility for any errors, however, remains with the author.



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# Executive Summary

This discussion paper seeks to situate UNDP's governance and accountability work in the Pacific within existing literature on governance and state-society relations, and in relation to live governance issues in the Pacific. The analysis provides some conceptual anchoring and important considerations as UNDP strive for a more cohesive approach to responsive governance in the region. The analysis is primarily drawn from a desk-based review of contemporary international literature on accountability and governance, layered and triangulated with several studies specific to the Pacific region. A range of working documents and discussion pieces internal to UNDP Pacific were also relied on, tracing the history of the three major projects in this space and documenting portfolio discussions to date. Further advice was garnered at a sense-making workshop with the UNDP Pacific team and at a conference attended by 60 key stakeholders from Government, donors and civil society across the region in May 2024.

The analysis of contemporary international literature highlights the importance of locally tailored, deeply contextualized governance models. Interpretations of accountability have grown more sophisticated and remain pertinent, yet it is in the nuanced understanding of each local context that the greatest opportunities reside. Responsive governance is necessarily shaped by each unique political settlement, by the local appetite and infrastructure for citizen-state interaction, and by the endogenous webs and networks already in place. The historical enthusiasm for linear and hierarchical governance solutions, often only lightly adapted from international templates applied in vastly different settings, is giving way to more creative models of hybrid, nodal and scalar governance. Moreover, the traditional emphasis on international norms and standards is losing ground to the notion of emergence: of starting with an understanding of people's expectations and needs, as locally understood, and remaining open as to what form of governance may deliver best on these. This raises questions about the viability and usefulness of overly normative approaches to governance and accountability that focus on particular institutional forms.

Many of these findings resonate well in the Pacific. Accountability may be seen as political and relational in many Pacific settings, and there are many examples of traditional understandings of authority and responsibility coexisting with the legal-rational values inherited through colonialism. The social contract and political settlement conversation is alive and well and speaks directly to the complex and varied histories of governance across the region. Perhaps the strongest resonance between the international literature and the Pacific context emerges in the realm of hybridity and locally led governance. Well established relational structures and processes (kastom governance in Melanesia, fa'amatai in Samoa, mataqali in Fiji, and others) offer demonstrations of the way many Pacific cultures interpret and apply governance principles. In these and other settings the churches also play an important and perhaps under-recognised role in governance practice.

Themes from the literature were further tested against the advice provided by the UNDP staff team on their current projects, including their deliberations regarding the shift to a portfolio approach. Team members appeared to echo the cautions found in the literature, warning against a conceptual framing that focused on perceived gaps against international standards of accountability, when what was required was a more sophisticated, contextualised understanding of the unique needs of the region. Balancing the aspiration for locally led systems transformation with international values and metrics will likely require further testing and experimentation. Digging deeper to understand Pacific

governance values may offer an alternative entry point, examining where existing codes and practices potentially align with UNDP goals and responsive governance aspirations.

Themes from the literature were also considered against regional viewpoints shared at the conference workshop. Several commonalities and insights emerged, most notably the challenge of aligning international standards with local systems, both traditional and emerging. Participants suggested it can be difficult to generate respect and recognition for the local ways of doing things when measured alongside international norms. Several participants suggested, further, that the quality of citizen-state interactions was inadequately monitored and evaluated, meaning that even where commitments were enshrined through legislation or policy, their efficacy was unclear. In addition, the delicate interdependency of accountability measures was a recurring theme and reinforces the argument for a systemic approach to achieving change.

The paper concludes with a range of findings and reflections that need to be considered in determining the eventual shape of a responsive governance portfolio. A range of conceptual frames are presented to assist UNDP in reframing their responsive governance practice. Against the backdrop of the 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent, and in the context of a global push towards decolonisation, it is from a nuanced understanding of each local context that the greatest opportunities will emerge. In striving for more inclusive and equitable governance practices, an intimate knowledge of pre-existing political settlements and the nature of citizen-state interactions are critical. Furthermore, analysis from the Pacific, echoed by UNDP's staff and partners, suggests alternative governance models that are locally led, and perhaps hybrid or nodal in form, may be particularly useful in triggering transformational change in governance systems.

# Contents

# Introduction

UNDP supports a range of governance initiatives in the Pacific, engaging with governments through a variety of entry points and supporting projects across several technical areas, including public financial management, anti-corruption initiatives and digital governance. Some partnerships focus on core government functions whilst others are more specific to governance and service delivery, including contact points between government and citizens. UNDP Pacific is keen to bring this work together under a shared conceptual framework that would strengthen the coherence and collective impact of the program, whilst also accommodating the expectations of the UNDP Portfolio Policy released in March 2024.

The UNDP Strategic Plan 2022-2025 (UNDP 2021) calls for a fundamental rethink of the organisation's business model and the nature of their development interventions. In response to ever increasing complexity and compounding crises, the plan calls for a shift in focus from incremental change to systems transformation. UNDP believe a portfolio approach will accelerate progress to this end by strengthening learning and adaptation, and facilitating a continuous commitment to transformational change (UNDP 2023). The transition to a portfolio approach is hoped to enable UNDP teams "to achieve the greatest possible impact in their work… to complement other established thematic areas throughout UNDP, rather than compete with them… [and] build coherence across the range of initiatives UNDP is stewarding" (UNDP 2022:1).

This discussion paper seeks to situate UNDP's governance and accountability work in the Pacific in existing literature on governance and state-society relations, and in relation to live governance issues in the Pacific. Whilst not part of UNDP's formal portfolio development process, the analysis provides some conceptual anchoring and important considerations as UNDP strive for a more cohesive approach to responsive governance in the region. Following a description of method, the paper offers a targeted analysis of themes emerging from international literature on responsive governance. These themes are then considered in the unique context of the Pacific region, drawing from earlier research on accountability in the Pacific, the advice provided by the UNDP staff team and the range of voices captured at a regional workshop held in May 2024. The paper concludes with several sample conceptual frames to support UNDP with their planning, alongside a range of findings and reflections that the La Trobe team feel need to be considered regardless of the eventual shape of a responsive governance portfolio.

# Method

The analysis is primarily drawn from a desk-based review of contemporary international literature on accountability and governance, layered and triangulated with several previous studies undertaken by La Trobe's Centre for Human Security and Social Change and UNDP looking at accountability ecosystems in the Pacific. The author was also provided access to a range of working documents and discussion pieces from within UNDP Pacific, tracing the history of the three major projects in this space and documenting the portfolio discussions to date. Further advice was garnered at a sense-making workshop with the UNDP Pacific team (15 May 2024), during which senior staff from the region shared their views on the connections, gaps and portfolio potential of their work in governance and accountability. Notes from this session are analysed and captured under the *Reflections from the UNDP Pacific Team* section of this report.

Reflections from the sense-making exercise, along with additional documents shared in that process, helped surface portfolio ideas that could then be tested at a conference workshop (30 May 2024). The conference, *Harnessing New and Innovative Technology for Tackling Corruption in the Pacific*, was attended by 60 key stakeholders from Government, donors and civil society across the region. The focus on tackling corruption meant that themes of transparency, accountability and good governance were threaded throughout the proceedings, supporting and informing deliberations over an accountability portfolio for UNDP. Late on the second day, participants were brought together to share their reflections on three emerging domains of change: inclusive governance, interactive governance and innovative governance. Working in small groups, participants chose a domain of interest before exchanging views on what was working well and what was working less well. The results were discussed in plenary, along with any perceived limitations of the three proposed domains. This data is analysed in the *Reflections from Regional Partners and Practitioners* section of this report.

# What does the literature tell us?

This section does not aim to provide an exhaustive literature review of the wide body of work on governance and accountability. Rather, it seeks to highlight some of the most pertinent debates and issues in the field that bear consideration in developing a conceptual framework for UNDP's work on responsive governance. These debates and issues provide important touchstones, as well as guidance on what is important to keep in mind so that proposed conceptual framings are responsive to latest research.

## ACCOUNTABILITY IS MULTI-DIRECTIONAL AND POLITICAL

In reviewing responsive governance literature, it is useful to consider some of the contested terms applied and interchanged by development actors and institutions. Accountability in governance generally relates to 'how power and authority are allocated and applied' across a variety of public realms (Brinkerhoff 2001:1). Whilst definitional debates persist, a consistent understanding of accountability is that someone (the object) has a responsibility to provide information, someone (the agent) has a right to expect information, that information must be provided (answerability), and that penalties may be suffered for inadequate information (Bond 2022). The possibility of sanction or punishment is often described as enforceability and is seen to give "teeth" to accountability (Brinkerhoff 2001). Accountability is thought to have both intrinsic and instrumental value, being a positive outcome in itself and also contributing to the realisation of a range of other governance and development goals (Combaz and McLoughlin 2014:1). Most commonly in international development literature, this instrumental value is tied to its focus on ensuring that those with responsibility for governing are answerable to those they govern for, ensuring greater consideration of the interests of 'the governed' in governance (Denney et al. 2023).

As explored in a literature review developed for UNDP by La Trobe's Centre for Human Security and Social Change, accountability can apply to a range of different functions – financial, professional, performance and political accountability among others – and in all of these forms can be applied either *horizontally* or *vertically* (Denney et al. 2023). Horizontal accountability generally denotes autonomous state institutions holding public agencies to account (Brinkerhoff 2001, Reddick et al. 2020). Vertical accountability refers, instead, to the manner in which governments are accountable in a principal-agent relationship to those who put them in power (for instance, citizens through elections) (Akerman

2004, Bovens 2007). Yet given the power asymmetries that limit the ability of many citizens to hold government to account in traditional horizontal and vertical forms of accountability, the term *social accountability* has emerged and speaks to the collective "voice and capacity of citizens to participate in exacting greater accountability and responsiveness from public officials" (Roche 2009:5). In social accountability, the role of civil society, an independent media and other collective action by citizens creates pressure on public officials to meet expected standards. This concept moves beyond political accountability between elected officials and constituents, yet remains a deeply political process which often implies a shift in power (see Fox 2007, 2015) and necessitates goodwill or reform on both the supply and demand sides of answerability (Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg 2015).

In practice the vertical, horizontal and social forms of accountability can only be fully understood within each unique cultural, historical and political setting. Strengthened accountability depends on numerous concurrent preconditions, all of which are deeply contextual in nature. To this end accountability is defined by many as a relationship (Bovens 2007, Denney et al. 2023) and progress towards accountability requires an understanding of the constantly evolving power and politics at play within this relationship (Halloran 2014, 2015). It follows that in place of technocratic *blueprint* solutions to demand or supply side accountability, sustained changes in answerability and enforceability require a deeper analysis of the local accountability ecosystem and a suite of "nuanced, holistic and politically informed approaches" (Halloran 2015:15) to recognise and tackle these complexities.

## ACCOUNTABILITY IS TIED TO INCLUSIVITY AND TRANSPARENCY

There is an extensive body of literature that associates accountability with participation and transparency in governance. Inclusive governance speaks to the extent to and ways in which people, particularly those that have traditionally been marginalised, are able to participate, exert influence and hold authorities to account (Rocha Menocal 2020). The term accountability refers, further, to a normative sensibility that positions inclusion as the benchmark against which institutions can be judged and also promoted (Hickey et al. 2014, Hickey 2015). Inclusivity is also seen to have both horizontal and vertical interpretations, where horizontal access refers to the breadth of inclusion (across religious or religious or other distinctions) and vertical refers to the depth of inclusion beyond elite representatives of each social group (Castillejo 2014, Rocha Menocal 2020). Achieving inclusivity is necessarily complex, involving diverse stakeholders interacting with each other at a variety of levels, across a wide range of unique geographic and socio-political contexts (Fukuyama 2013, Rocha Menocal 2017).

Inclusive governance is widely linked to stability and peaceful political processes in the short term (Rocha Menocal 2015), and there is also an "extensive and well-established body of research (which) shows that over the long term, states and societies with more open and inclusive institutions, both political and economic, tend to be wealthier and better governed across a range of dimensions" (OECD 2020:12). As with accountability, the concept of inclusive governance is seen to have both intrinsic and instrumental value. The intrinsic value is tied to the belief that inclusive processes offer people voice and freedom to pursue aspirations and redress injustice (Sen 1999, Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009). The instrumental value links inclusive governance with more inclusive development outcomes, where increased voice and influence lead to greater accountability and, in turn, more equitable service delivery and more evenly distributed prosperity (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014, Rocha Menocal 2014). Whilst many scholars and practitioners assert that a more inclusive political settlement is a pre-cursor to more inclusive development outcomes (OECD 2020, World Bank 2017), others contest this linear connection as naïve given the entrenched and profoundly political nature of exclusion (Rocha Menocal 2020, Booth 2012).

In the international literature, transparency in governance refers to the degree to which information is available to all stakeholders and enables them to have an informed voice in decisions and assess the choices made by insiders (Florini 2013). Transparency has been a central theme of development cooperation since the turn of the century, to the point that "at nearly every level of governance… reforms that seek greater transparency are increasingly on the agendas of governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector" (Kosack and Fung 2014:66). In addition to the assumed value of equitable access to information, there is evidence to suggest that transparency is effective at enhancing political engagement. Citizens are more likely to participate in political processes and develop or share views on public institutions where transparency is improved (Alessandro et al. 2021, World Bank 2016). As with inclusion, however, transparency takes many forms and encounters obstacles in the form of power and political will that may compromise the linear logic assuming *transparency + participation = accountability* (Halloran 2015). Indeed, transparency assumes that more information enables greater ability to hold public officials to account. But this can be a low bar for accountability when information is provided in formats and via means that limit accessibility and intelligibility. The completeness, presentation and usability of information can all inform its usefulness as a tool for transparency (Douglas and Meijer 2016). Moreover, effective transparency relies to some degree on a relationship of trust between the information provider and receiver – complicating it as a starting point for improving accountability.

## POLITICAL SETTLEMENTS SHAPE THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Much of the contemporary governance literature extends beyond the concept of accountability to a more nuanced understanding of responsive governance, anchored to an evolved understanding of the social contract and citizen-state interaction. The social contract includes three critical and interdependent elements: political settlement and political processes; state capability and responsiveness; and social expectations (OECD 2011). Political settlement refers to implicit or explicit agreements on the *rules of the game* (Bell 2015) and can include a range of formal and informal rules, behaviours and understandings about how power and resources are divided in such a way that peace is broadly maintained. States are commonly seen as, or expected to become, more stable when the nature of the political settlement is agreed – even if that settlement is exclusive (Kelsall et al. 2022). But a stable political settlement does not guarantee that everyone benefits – the benefits of growth or development may be concentrated in the hands of a few and where this is the case, efforts to shift to a more inclusive settlement may be met with resistance. Actors in this space must be cognisant of the prevailing political settlement, yet must also understand how any efforts to shift power may destabilise this in both positive and negative ways.

In addition, a state's ability to perform minimum functions (make and enforce laws, raise and expend revenue, deliver basic services, and more) is a fundamental obligation of the social contract (Schedler 1999, OECD 2011). The adequacy of state performance against normative expectations (of what a state *should* do) and realistic expectations (of what a state *will* do) provide a basis for legitimacy in the eyes of citizens (OECD 2009, 2011). Accountability mechanisms play a crucial role in enabling pathways for citizens to hold public officials to account for delivering on their side of the contract. Where these are weak or do not work as intended, the social contract is broken and public officials face little repercussions for failure to uphold their side of the contract by delivering services and fulfilling governance functions. This is intrinsically connected to political settlements because if the settlement is oriented towards delivering benefit for only a few, then it becomes difficult to enforce the social contract. Where the political settlement depends on delivering for a more inclusive population base, then accountability mechanisms are likely to be more effective in holding power to account for delivery and performance.

Understanding the prevailing political settlement is delicate and deeply contextual, however, and increasingly the literature points to the importance of interactive governance as a means to overcome the exclusive and/or exclusionary nature of some political settlements. Interactive governance describes a shift towards "*emphasising interactions, collaboration and partnerships with local actors, particularly citizens"* (Jantti et al. 2023:1481). Improving the number and nature of opportunities for citizens to interact with states simultaneously informs and expands social expectations and is a precursor to states honouring the social contract (Bishara et al. 2023, Taysum 2019). These efforts are not without risk for states as enhanced citizen awareness may lead, at least initially, to decreased trust and diminished legitimacy for established institutions or existing societal power brokers (Ianiello et al. 2018, Klijn 2011).

Citizen participation is heralded as a way to overcome an exclusive political settlement and promote more transparent, inclusive and legitimate governance:

> "Citizen participation has intrinsic and instrumental benefits. It leads to a better and more democratic policy-making process, which becomes more transparent, inclusive, legitimate, and accountable. It enhances public trust in government and democratic institutions by giving citizens a role in public decision making. By taking into account and using citizens' experience and knowledge, it helps public institutions tackle complex policy problems and leads to better policy results." (OECD 2022)

As the international appetite for participatory governance has grown, a plethora of participation standards and tools have emerged to support and strengthen citizen interaction with their states. There is wide acceptance of a spectrum of participatory practice, variously described as the three pillars: information; consultation; and engagement (OECD 2017) or five levels (inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower, IAP2 2016). Despite the popularity of programs and policies intended to deepen inclusion and enable progression along this participation spectrum, however, critics point to several fault lines in this movement. Rising populism and declining democracy in the west are compromising the legitimacy of donor countries when promoting democracy (Pintsch et al. 2022, Diamond 2016). In recipient countries, international models of civic engagement are increasingly criticised as technocratic solutions that lack context and nuance (Kurki 2011, Hobson and Kurki 2011), and/or neo-colonial interference in domestic affairs (Carothers 2006, Bartels et al. 2023). While there are many assumed benefits of citizen participation, precisely how this is enacted and is meaningful in a given political context is considerably more complex. Promotion of the social contract requires a cautious consideration of international models and a deference to local solutions for effective citizen-state interaction.

## CITIZEN-STATE INTERACTION AS DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN A DIGITAL WORLD

When considering specific forms of citizen-state interaction the concept of deliberative governance increasingly emerges in the international literature, encouraging the creation of spaces where different institutions, agencies, groups, activists and individual citizens can come together to deliberate on pressing social issues. These spaces can range from informal gatherings to highly structured deliberative mechanisms such a citizen juries, and differ from conventional consultation activities in that they explicitly strive for *inclusive* and *deliberative* goals (Carson and Hartz-Karp 2005, Hendriks 2009). Deliberation moves beyond mere participation to describe a communicative process in which actors are informed about a policy issue, consider its complexities, and reason together in view of the better argument (Dryzek 2002, cited in Hendriks 2009). Where participatory consultation may

be measured by the number of participants, or breadth, deliberative consultation may be measured by the quality of participation, or depth (Carson and Elstub 2022).

Increasingly, these and other forms of citizen-state interaction are taking place in the digital world, variously called technological governance and digital democracy (among other terms). Digital technology is simultaneously regarded a risk and opportunity for responsive governance. Whilst many development scholars, partners and practitioners celebrate the potential of technology to enable new connections with government, improve transparency and *turbocharge* civic activism (USAID 2024) this is balanced with risks of disinformation, extremism, manipulation and control that may have the opposite effect, consolidating power imbalances and further excluding citizens (Ingram 2021, Miller and Vacardi 2020). Technology is thus largely ambivalent and can both support and undermine democratic principles. The rush to embrace technology in governance spaces needs to be tempered by thinking about the potential intended and unintended impacts of technology as a platform for enabling responsive governance.

## GOVERNANCE MUST BE CONTEXTUALLY DRIVEN AND LOCALLY LED

The role of international actors in development, including UNDP and its partners, is under increased scrutiny in the context of a global shift towards decolonisation and locally led development. In governance as elsewhere, international cooperation has emphasised processes of isomorphic mimicry, where partners adopt and replicate the *form* of others (tools, language, policies, structures) in the hope that improved *function* will follow (Andrews et al. 2017, Pritchett et al. 2010). These patterns reflect and embody a neo-colonial deference to the expertise of the global north (Bond 2022, Elbers & Schulpen 2012, Pailey 2019) that is increasingly brought into question. Development scholars suggest that the link between replicated form and replicated function is rarely guaranteed, however, and instead cite decades of 'reforms' putatively to improve performance, where very little performance is achieved (Andrews et al. 2017). Locally led and 'best fit' governance solutions emerge as a fundamental feature of the systemic change being sought:

> "For the international development partner community, it is vital to understand that achieving a political settlement that assures agreement concerning the rules of political engagement, law-abiding elite conduct, effective accountability and inclusive governance structures is the outcome of local political processes and capabilities and local political power struggles, and not externally led intervention per se." (OECD 2011:32)

It is here, under the banner of locally led development, that much development literature identifies the greatest opportunity. This includes recognising the shortcomings of historical development cooperation, most notably "the non-recognition of endogenous and local 'politics' and institutions [that], when combined with a linear, engineering approach to 'fixing' things, generates a misplaced certainty about how change happens and the role of outsiders in that" (Hewett and Roche 2013:17). Recognising local ownership over development interventions and outcomes, despite seemingly unanimous support across the international development community, may be compromised or contradicted by the continuing deference to international standards and exogenous metrics of effectiveness (see von Billerbeck 2016). Navigating these tensions and finding innovative, systemic solutions are seen as critical to transformational change in governance and accountability.

## THE SHIFT TO HYBRID, NODAL AND SCALAR MODELS OF GOVERNANCE

Increasingly, international literature suggests that responsive governance must necessarily extend beyond governments and citizens to a more complex web of stakeholders and institutions (Forsyth et al. 2020, Holley and Shearing 2017, Colona and Jaffe 2016). Among the possibilities for shifting power in governance and decentring the focus from western models are the concepts of hybrid, nodal and scalar governance. Hybrid governance speaks to the possibility of a 'marriage' between customary governance and introduced Western forms of governance (Boege et al. 2008). This approach can be seen to build upon strong customary spheres and to inform or support state institutions that struggle with problems of effectiveness and legitimacy. These customary and introduced forms of governance are rarely discrete 'systems' – but rather interwoven hybrids that are not easily separated out and must be thought of as interconnected.

Nodal governance reflects a more polycentric view of governance, extending beyond state and custom forms of governance to recognise *nodes* – 'institutions with a set of technologies, mentalities and resources – that mobilize the knowledge and capacity of members to manage the course of events' (Burris et al. 2005:5). The form and function of such nodes varies widely but includes both formal and informal structures, both publicly and privately established. Finally, scalar governance seeks to recognise scalar divisions, such as global-regional-local or centre-periphery, as a means to organize hierarchical perceptions of the world (Moore 2008, Jones 1998). The appropriate use and interpretation of scale is contested across the social sciences, but most schools agree that scale is a social construct, and that even the simplest of spatial scales (local, national, regional, global) are shaped by unique social norms, values, relations and politics. Across all of the literature on hybrid, nodal and scalar approaches, the emphasis is on understanding *governance* as a function, rather than *government* as a particular form of delivering governance. Paying attention to the empirical realities of how governance is experienced and delivered becomes key.

## RADICAL CHANGE THROUGH INNOVATION AND SYSTEMS THINKING

Another key theme in contemporary governance literature is the notion of innovation. Building on the literatures on hybridity mentioned above, there is a widely accepted view that doing what has always been done will not adequately respond to emerging threats and challenges. More specifically, there is an emerging understanding that "*our existing governance processes are designed largely to sort people and issues into siloed boxes onto which "optimal" procedures can be applied, sandpapering away the diversity and volatility that characterize reality*" (UNDP 2022a:181). Despite the apparent consensus on the need for change, however, the role and nature of innovation in the solution is less certain. Whilst many regard innovation as an essential tool in adapting to rapid change and responding to unforeseen events (OECD 2022a, Polchar 2020), others caution against the tendency to neophilia and the thirst for new (and often external) ideas (Scott-Smith 2016).

Political economist Yuen Yuen Ang suggests that decades of reforms led by international institutions and intended as radical shortcuts to improved development outcomes have proved disappointing. She argues, instead, for adaptation that starts *with what you have, not what you want,* where innovation starts at the grassroots with a repurposing of existing practices and resources rather than a reliance on wealth or expertise from outside (Yuen Ang 2024). Complexity theory and systems thinking are being called upon to look beyond linear (cause and effect) models of change to recognise a web of human interactions predicated on the power relationships and interdependencies of the actors involved (Harvey and Reed 2010, Neely 2015). Systems change also implies a shift to more holistic analysis, assuming contestability of ideas and the inclusion of many disciplines and perspectives (Ramalingham 2008). Further, this approach necessitates understanding not only the individual components and

actors in interrelated systems, but also the nature of their interactions and relationships (Colander and Kupers 2014, Florini et al. 2023).

Further analysis of this approach to development cooperation exposes some important differences in the way systems change is construed and constructed. Lynn and Coffman (2024) identify two distinct mental models for systems change being used in philanthropy: *systems dynamics* and *systems emergence.* They suggest that strategies that use the systems-dynamics mental model aim at points of high leverage in a system and predict the kinds of changes that will occur. This builds on the work of Donella Meadows and others on levers for change (see Meadows and Wright 2008). Strategies that use the systems-emergence mental model look for parts of the system that are under-resourced and experiment with ways to disrupt or reinforce them. Such approaches are less predictive and build on complexity as it is understood a range of natural and real-world systems (see Boulton et al. 2015). Whilst each model has its own strengths, they each require different emphasis and planning, and as such this becomes an important consideration for UNDP and their partners.

### FROM GOVERNANCE TEMPLATES TO RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE

In summary, the international literature increasingly points us to tailored, deeply contextualized governance models. Our shared understanding of accountability has grown more sophisticated and remains important, yet it is in the nuanced understanding of each local context that the greatest opportunities reside. Responsive governance is necessarily shaped by each unique political settlement, by the local appetite and infrastructure for citizen-state interaction, and by the endogenous webs and networks already in place. The historical enthusiasm for linear and hierarchical governance solutions, often only lightly adapted from international templates applied in vastly different settings, is giving way to more flexible and creative models. Moreover, the traditional emphasis on international norms and standards is losing ground to the notion of *emergence*: of starting with an understanding of people's expectations and needs, as locally understood, and remaining open as to what form of governance may deliver best on these.

# How does the international literature resonate in the Pacific context?

The above themes from governance literature are not specific to the Pacific but drawn from research and learning globally. This section locates and translates some of these key themes in the Pacific context, noting some of the key trends and issues that resonate for responsive governance in this region.

### ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT IN THE PACIFIC

As discussed in the previous section, Bovens (2007) presented accountability as a *relationship* between an actor and a forum. The relationship model resonates well in the Pacific where the concept of accountability often first understood from the perspectives of family and community relationships, in which transparency and responsibility for one's actions are assumed. Accountability also connects well

with many reciprocal traditions across Melanesia and Polynesia, where specific practices may differ yet share common features of responsibility, transparency and a public distribution of resources (Denney et al. 2023). In addition to reciprocal traditions, many Pacific cultures also share values of social order, harmony and authority which exist independently of the legal-rational values that have been inherited through various histories of governance and colonialism (Lawson 1996). Those governance histories directly shape the political cultures and political settlement of the present day, where societies have inherited 'governance systems that reflect the upward accountability to the colonial metropole and the reinforcement of authoritarian structures' (Brinkerhoff 2001: 7). Despite efforts to dismantle some of these colonial governance architectures, the political cultures that they encouraged have provided difficult to shift and political leaders may continue to act and be treated as having largely unchecked power (Denney et al. 2023).

In the language of the wider literature on the social contract, these structures point to exclusivity in some political settlements. Efforts to bolster accountability in the Pacific have also tended to focus on the supply side, in particular supporting the establishment of mechanisms to promote accountability for public money, with comparatively few demand side investments over time (Menzies 2011). The focus on social accountability and bolstering citizen-state interaction within the social contract has largely been the domain of non-government organisations and other civil society actors, parallel rather than central to governance reform. Here, it is important to note the important role played by Churches as a space for citizen interaction and engagement, and some customary meeting forums that facilitate some of the kinds of governance-citizen engagement that the accountability literature points to as important. In the Pacific, however, this may not be direct community-government interaction, but mediated by religious and customary institutions (see Craney and Tanielu 2024).

## RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE – HYBRID, NODAL AND SCALAR MODELS

The strongest resonance between the international literature and the unique Pacific context emerges in the realm of hybridity and locally led governance. Well established relational structures and processes (*kastom* governance in Melanesia, *fa'amatai* in Samoa, *mataqali* in Fiji, and others) offer demonstrations of the way many Pacific cultures interpret and apply governance principles. Similarly, there are strong ties between religion and governance across the Pacific. At the sub-national level in parts of the Pacific "church authority often supersedes state authority, making it a potent avenue for accountability" (Nimbtik and Illingworth 2023). Elevating the importance of traditional structures such as these, moving them to the centre of governance deliberations, constitutes a practical demonstration of shifting the value emphasis from exogenous to endogenous governance. Moreover, it is increasingly apparent that "efforts to address corruption and strengthen accountability and public financial management that do not engage with *kastom* are destined to fail" (Craney and Tuhanuku, 2023).

Similarly, multi-scalar governance models may offer promise in an environment where access to information, resources and political influence are experienced very differently between national and sub-national levels. Decentralisation reforms are underway in many Pacific countries, meaning that significant resources and administrative power reside (or, will in future reside) at the subnational level (Walton and Jackson 2020:2). As a result, local levels of government are particularly important in ensuring proper use of power and resources. The concept of subsidiarity refers to how "social and political issues should be dealt with at the most immediate level consistent with their adequate resolution" (Arato and Cohen 2018:43). Pacific governance based on subsidiarity may help to strengthen citizen-state interaction because local authorities tend to be physically closer, more connected and more visible to the people they serve. It is also at this local level of government that the

intersections between formal, legal-rational state institutions and customary governance are most apparent, reinforcing again the importance of customary actors as well (Denney et al. 2023).

## RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE IN THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Perhaps the most pressing consideration for responsive governance in the Pacific is the issue of climate change. Across the literature, responding to climate change and overseeing climate security in the Pacific is thought to depend upon several interpdependent factors including: strategic coordination, cooperative multi-level governance, targeted municipal resourcing strategies and the avoidance of climate-maladaptive path dependencies (Tangney et al. 2021:21). This is deeply entwined with the wider responsive governance discourse, requiring timebound cooperation within and between jurisdictions at all levels (local, national and regional), regardless of existing tension or institutional strictures. Whilst this may be the ideal proving ground for evolved governance practices that demonstrate the ability to work across hybridity, scales, etc., the urgent and indeed existential nature of the climate crisis in the Pacific has the potential to compromise inclusive political settlements and social accountability. Finding ways to progress responsive governance in a context of increasing political crisis will be a challenge.

## RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE, REGIONALISM AND GEOPOLITICS

The contribution of UNDP and other international development partners to responsive governance in the Pacific must also be considered against the geopolitical backdrop of regionalism, sovereignty and decolonisation discourse. The Pacific region has been positioning itself much more assertively in recent years as independently leading its own development pathway, grounded in Pacific values and worldviews. “The Pacific is invoked sometimes as a regional cultural identity; sometimes as a political community with its own values, norms and practices; sometimes as a collective diplomatic agent; and sometimes as a site of political struggle” (Fry 2019:2). Various regional structures and institutions consolidate this regional identity and serve to mediate between global forces and local practices.

The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent describes a shared aspiration for regional growth and development, built upon common commitments and striving towards shared thematic outcomes. The strategy builds upon decades of frameworks, declarations and agreements to deliver a collective vision that seeks to simultaneously ‘embrace our cultural diversities, respect our national sovereignties, and protect our collective interests’ (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022:10). Although tensions periodically emerge between sovereignty and the interdependence, most notably when a domestic agenda strays from an agreed or desired regional agenda, the regional messaging is clear: engaging with Pacific nations must be on their own terms, and not those of external actors.

Internationally, the changing geopolitics of the region is also having an impact. The increased presence of China in regional affairs and its positioning “as a south-south partner, an alternative, and as proof that modernization does not have to equal Westernization” (Taylor 2023:2) is challenging the role of the traditional development partners. A range of newer Western development partners have also emerged in the region in response. The space for locally led governance solutions and the very nature of political settlements are potentially shaped by this context or more partners to choose from and partners with different priorities and interests. It will be critical that Western development partners tread especially carefully in any efforts that might be perceived as imposing external standards or worldviews.

## REFLECTIONS FROM UNDP PACIFIC TEAM

In identifying key issues for UNDP to consider in developing a conceptual framing for its responsive governance work, it is useful to consider the views of UNDP's staff themselves, alongside the literature and pertinent issues in the Pacific. To this end, a sense-making workshop was held with the UNDP Pacific team on 15 May 2024. The group included management and senior staff from across the range of governance and accountability projects. Participants shared their views on the connections and challenges within their existing area of work before reflecting on their experience to date of attempting to bring this together under a portfolio approach.

### CURRENT UNDP PROJECTS: CONNECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

The bulk of UNDP's work on responsive governance in the Pacific is administered through three large projects supporting improvement in Public Financial Management, digital democracy and anti-corruption. Team members pointed to a range of related work (notably with parliaments, elections, economic development and gender) however it is these three projects that constitute the core focus. The anticorruption (AC) project was described as conventional, primarily providing technical support to develop strategies and support accountability institutions at the national and international level, including multilateral cooperation related to money laundering. This project also works to empower civil society actors to play a role in anti-corruption initiatives.

The digital democracy (DD) project targets two closely entwined aims: the digitisation of democracy and the democratisation of the digital space. This is achieved through a simultaneous upskilling of civil society actors and government counterparts.

The public financial management (PFM) project works with auditors and other central institutions to support the PEFA-informed core reforms through traditional Technical Assistance support, yet also enjoys the space to work in exploratory and non-traditional ways that suit the Pacific context. This project is working at international, national and sub-national levels with government and non-government partners.

Whilst the delivery mechanisms and engagement strategies differ for each project, all three share features of traditional technical assistance and institutional strengthening, and all three include a commitment to upskilling and empowering civil society organisations. The projects also share a number of common challenges. The divide between rural and urban communities, and between central and local governments, is high among these. The resources, infrastructure, power and voice available to urban communities and central governments commonly exceeds that of their rural and/or local equivalents.

In addition, project leaders point to the challenge of advocating for international standards in the context of opaque accountability norms and chiefly governance systems that follow a different rulebook. This has been a key feature of the research on the political economy of Pacific accountability ecosystems undertaken by the Centre for Human Security and Social Change, which has found that a focus on international standards by foreign donors has neglected local conceptions of accountability that are meaningful in customary and religious settings and may offer opportunities for further exploration (Craney and Tanielu 2024, Simeti and Illingworth 2023, Craney and Tuhanuku 2023, Nimbtik and Illingworth 2023). In each of UNDP's project there are also examples of disillusioned counterparts, who believe government systems are so corrupt as to be beyond help and for whom project ambitions are constrained by the scale of change required. This experience is reminiscent of other 'stuck' projects and circular problems in the Pacific, where state bureaucratic capacity is required to fix problems caused by lack of state bureaucratic capacity (see Futaiasi 2023).

## PORTFOLIO DELIBERATIONS

The UNDP Pacific team have been discussing possible conceptual framings to bring together this responsive governance work for over 12 months. What began as a management discussion (how best to manage limited human resources) evolved into deeper conceptual questions about the nature and intent of this work (what does success look like? what is the end goal?). At the same time as UNDP headquarters was developing and disseminating guidance on the portfolio approach, the Pacific team were considering options for improving program coherence and maximising the collective impact of this work.

At a meeting in February 2024, the team developed some text to capture their thinking to date and summarise their aspirations for *a coherent suite of programs and partnerships*. This included the following overview:

> *"UNDP Pacific newest portfolio supports quality and inclusive interactions between citizens and States as a pathway towards equity in opportunities and ownership of the futures (development trajectories).*
>
> *Interventions target transformative change and shifts in power dynamics. The activities aim to impact service delivery, social contract, inclusion and access across generational groups, gender and marginalized communities. The portfolio is centred around a strong learning component nurtured by champions, coalitions, technology and innovation. It is grounded in UN and universal values but driven by local expectations, standards and understanding of the State and rule of law."* (UNDP Pacific 2024)

The concurrent focus on transformative change and universal values is interesting and presents a challenge. Against the backdrop of the governance literature, especially the sections on locally led governance and systems transformation, the intention to ground interventions in an international framework yet ensure they are driven by local expectations and standards may prove challenging. At face value, UN and universal values might constitute the international standards and exogenous metrics of effectiveness referred to by von Billerbeck and others. At the workshop team members appeared to echo the cautions found in the literature, warning against a conceptual framing that focused on perceived gaps against international standards of accountability, when what was actually required was a more sophisticated, contextualised understanding of the unique needs of the region. Balancing the aspirations of locally led systems transformation with international values may require some testing. Digging deeper to understand Pacific values may offer an alternative entry point, examining where existing values offer shared alignment with UNDP goals.

The language of coherence is also worth considering, appearing as it does in the UNDP Pacific paper referenced above and a myriad of UNDP documents related to strategy and portfolio approaches (UNDP Pacific 2024, UNDP 2022, 2023, 2024). If the goal is to pursue systems change, especially when following a systems-emergence model, the space to identify and be open to emergent events or patterns might be compromised by a neatly grouped, *coherent* collection of projects and interventions. UNDP may be more comfortable with a systems- dynamics model, where the focus is on experimenting with points of 'leverage' in a more planned manner than emergence approaches (Meadows and Wright 2008, Lynn and Coffman 2024). This tension between planned and uncertain approaches to change, similar to the local or global question above, will need to be regularly revisited over the course of agreeing a conceptual framework for responsive governance in the Pacific.

## REFLECTIONS FROM REGIONAL PARTNERS AND PRACTITIONERS

A loose conceptual framing for UNDP's Pacific governance work emerged from the discussions with staff and a review of internal documents. UNDP staff felt that the three domains of interactive, inclusive and innovative governance accurately captured much of their thinking to date, and determined to test this language at a conference regional partners and practitioners in May 2024. Conference participants were invited to self-select an area of interest from among the three and then consider in small groups two key questions (*what is working well?* and *where are we stuck?)* under each of these elements. Whilst all of this feedback was captured for UNDP, for the purposes of this report the focus is limited to those areas where participants felt they, or UNDP, or the system as a whole, was stuck. This data provides the most insight into the challenges UNDP and partners seek to overcome when reconceptualising their approach to governance.

Participants felt that *Inclusive Governance* became stuck at the point of implementation and service delivery, where legislation and policy commitments tended to run aground and/or be overridden by changing political whims. Examples were shared of due process being compromised or ignored, and where breaches of legislation were not investigated, or penalties not enforced. Concerns were also raised over the adequacy of inclusive representation, a persistent sticking point that was variously linked to a lack of qualified volunteers[1], a conflict with social norms and traditions, and/or self -interest among those purporting to be representing a marginalised social group. At a more fundamental level, some participants argued that it was hard to progress toward ideals such as inclusive governance when in many communities basic needs such as water were still unmet.

The group discussing *Interactive Governance* identified a number of sticking points linked to citizen-state interaction and the social contract. The planning and implementation of services and contact points is done poorly, with limited consultation and limited resourcing to roll activities out. Right to information legislation is lacking in some settings (such as the Solomon Islands), whilst in other settings it is in place but not yet widely socialised or understood (such as in Fiji). Participation is still vulnerable to exclusionary practices, where invitations are required and/or the involvement of civil society organisations is restricted through formal or informal means. Several participants suggested that the quality of citizen-state interactions was inadequately monitored and evaluated, meaning that even where commitments were enshrined through legislation or policy, their efficacy was unclear.

For participants discussing *Innovative Governance* the most consistent sticking point was the challenge of aligning international standards with local systems, both traditional and emerging. Participants suggested it can be difficult to generate respect and recognition for the local ways of doing things when measured alongside international norms. A longer list of sticking points included: entrenched corruption and limited transparency; resistance to sharing decision making power with citizens; and limited appetite for new ideas. In addition, some participants described settings where legacy practices are tightly protected, and power brokers resist both technological and legislative change.

In addition, certain commonalities were identified across the groups, particularly in terms of the missing pieces of the puzzle. Across the region participants pointed to examples of gaps and disconnections that compromise progress towards governance aims. One such example, shared several times, relates to anti-corruption efforts and existence of three interdependent mechanisms: Legislation; Investigation; and Prosecution. Despite good examples of progress in one element or

[1] It was suggested that a small number of familiar faces were always called upon to represent particular interest groups (e.g. young people or women or people living with disabilities). This was not analysed further at the time but is likely more complicated than a lack of interest from potential volunteers.

another, participants advise that transformational change in corruption will remain elusive unless all three functions are recognised and resourced simultaneously. Several similar examples were shared, where the success of a given project or initiative was constrained by a lack of progress or connection in a related area. This delicate interdependency of accountability measures was a recurring theme and reinforces the argument for a systemic approach to achieving change. It also speaks, however, to the tendency for UNDP staff and partners to fall into a deficits/gap analysis approach – focused on the ways in which states are not meeting external standards of and approaches to accountability. Shifting the mindsets of those involved in programming to look at other forms of accountability that may be better suited to functioning in the Pacific may well be part of the challenge.

# Considerations for framing UNDP's responsive governance work

Building on what we have gleaned from the literature and from pertinent governance issues in the Pacific, further informed by the opinions of UNDP staff, donors and partners, this section outlines a range of important considerations in any future consolidation of UNDP's responsive governance work. UNDP will need to consider the points below regardless of the final choice of conceptual framing. These might be thought of providing some of the conceptual boundaries for developing a cross-project framing.

Accountability, inclusion and transparency in Governance, considering:

- the multi-dimensional forms of accountability (vertical, horizontal and social)
- the opportunity to locate in local understandings and applications of accountability, first and foremost as a *relationship* between actors and forums
- the multiple and concurrent preconditions necessary for inclusive and transparent governance
- the urgency of the climate emergency and how it may provide both opportunities and constraints for deepening accountability, inclusion and transparency
- the growing role of other donors in the Pacific and the possibility of other political futures that are not necessarily inclusive or democratic.

The social contract, considering:

- the exclusive nature of many political settlements, and the complexity involved in transitioning to more inclusive political settlements
- the opportunities and constraints provided by constituency development funds to be a form of accountable, responsive public spending
- the relationship between state capability and legitimacy (understanding normative and realistic social expectations)
- the 'stuck' and often circular nature of state capacity gaps and state capacity solutions

Hybrid and locally led governance, considering:

- moving beyond 'governments' and state-centric views to accommodate customary, religious and other forms of governance
- moving beyond the national level to sub-national and other scales (or nodes)
- framing that is resonant with Pacific ways of knowing and being (collective and holistic)
- use of Pacific narratives and metaphors

Emergence and systems transformation, considering:

- starting with an understanding of people's expectations and needs, as locally understood
- remaining open to what form of governance will best serve these
- breaking free from technocratic, predetermined models and assumptions
- seeking innovation in local, grassroots solutions that *start where people are*
- planning for *dynamic system* change or for *emergent system* change
- protecting space for UNDP to experiment with new partnerships and approaches.

# Final Reflections

UNDP staff, their donors and their partners, both government and non-government, share the view that the end goal of their governance cooperation is *inclusive and equitable development* for Pacific Island Countries and the region as a whole. Collaborations to empower citizens and strengthen states are steps on a path to this shared future. The eventual framework, therefore, must speak not only to the complex interactions and intersections between various elements of this work but also to their connection with this higher aim.

The traditional emphasis on international governance standards and templates is losing ground to the notion of *emergence*: of starting with an understanding of people's expectations and needs, as locally understood, and remaining open as to what form of governance may deliver best on these. At the same time, the concepts of accountability and transparency are increasingly understood as features of responsive governance rather than stand-alone aspirations. Against the backdrop of the 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent, and in the context of a global push towards decolonisation and locally led development, it is in the nuanced understanding of each local context that the greatest opportunities reside. In striving for more inclusive and equitable governance practices, the international literature suggests an intimate knowledge of pre-existing political settlements and the nature of citizen-state interactions are critical. Furthermore, analysis from the Pacific, echoed by UNDP's staff and partners, suggests alternative governance models that are less centralised, perhaps hybrid or nodal in form, may be particularly useful in triggering transformational change in governance systems.

# Appendix One: Conceptual Frames

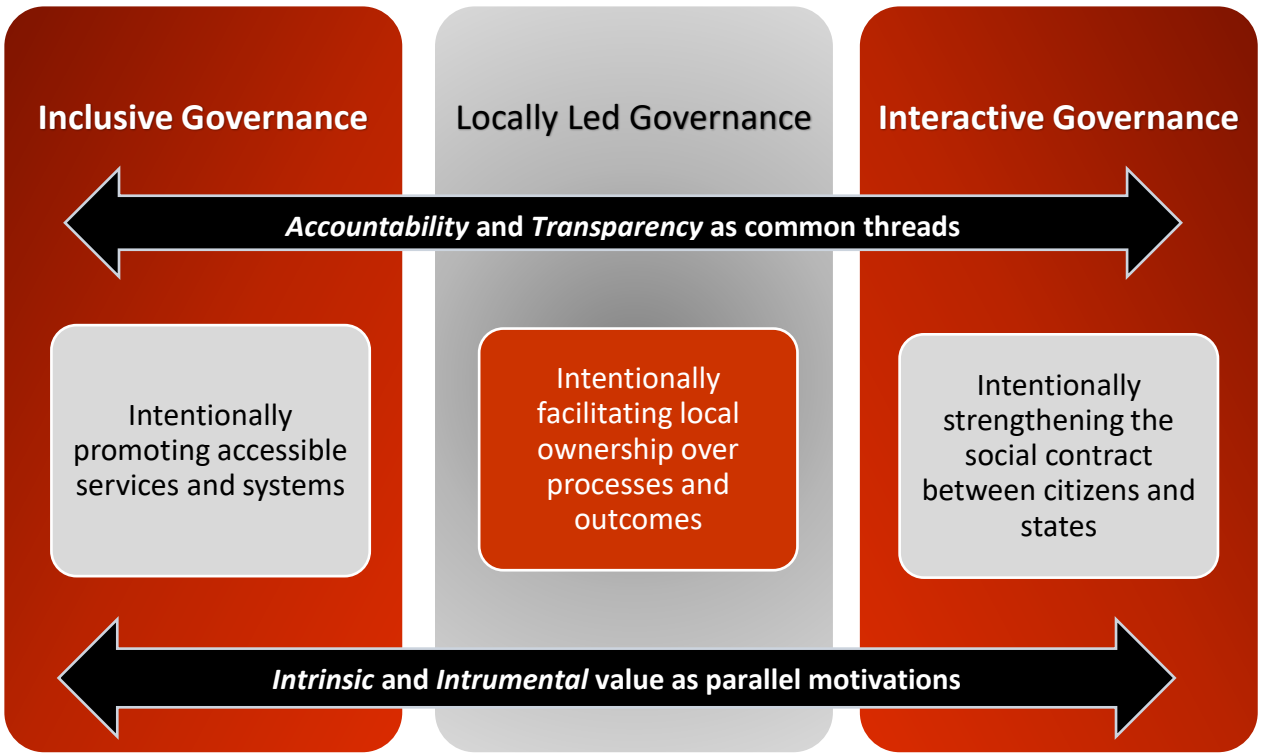
This appendix introduces several ideas for conceptual frames that might help UNDP reshape and reposition their responsive governance practice. Each of the options includes a brief description of elements, a highly simplified graphic representation and a narrative summary of how this framing might interact with current projects. These are intended to trigger reflection and discussion as the team move forward with their deliberations over the manner in which this work might come together.

## DOMAINS FRAME

***Inclusive Governance*** focuses on promoting accessible services and systems. This element speaks to inclusive political settlements and civic participation, as well as state capability and multi-directional accountability.

***Interactive Governance*** prioritises the critical connection points for citizen engagement (e.g. deliberative governance, digital democracy) and accommodates local, nodal or scalar governance.

***Locally Led Governance*** takes a central place among the domains of change as the key feature of transformational cooperation between partners. This element leads the shift to systems change.



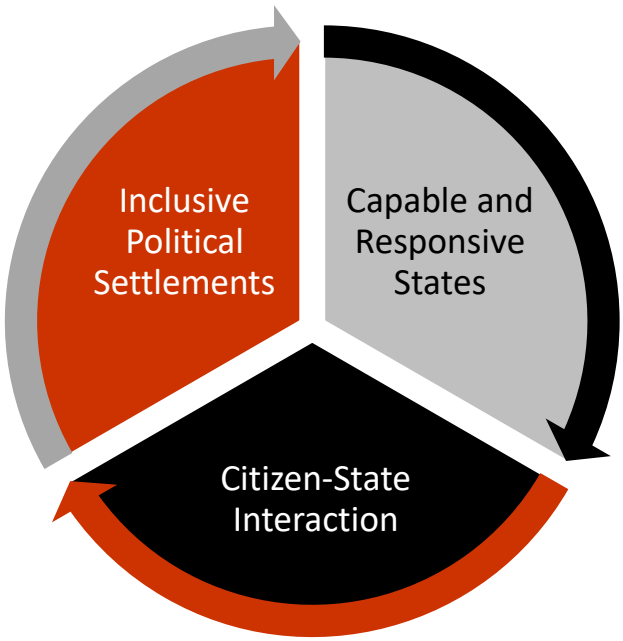

Under the Domains frame existing projects might each be informed by, and make contributions to, each domain. Digital Democracy work, for example, might primarily support the interactive governance domain, yet also demonstrate clear intersections with the other domains and the common threads. Another version of this frame (overleaf) centres the work on the needs and expectations of Pacific people and endeavours to protect space for emergent governance models that deliver on these.


## SOCIAL CONTRACT FRAME

***Inclusive Political Settlements*** focuses on shaping the formal and informal rules, behaviours and understandings that constitute the political settlement.

***Capable and Responsive States*** focuses on supporting states to perform functions in line with social expectations.

***Citizen-State Interaction*** focuses on normative and realistic social expectations, alongside strengthened form and function of interaction points.




Under the Social Contract frame the emphasis shifts to the three interdependent elements of the social contract model. Under this frame the Anti-Corruption project, for example, might be associated most strongly with state capability and responsiveness but demonstrate clear intersections with the

other elements. Whilst this is similar to the Domains frame in that projects might emphasise one element or another, this model differs in that it prioritises pre-conditions for responsive governance rather than the outcomes. This model offers strong potential at the national level but would require nuancing at sub-national or regional scales.

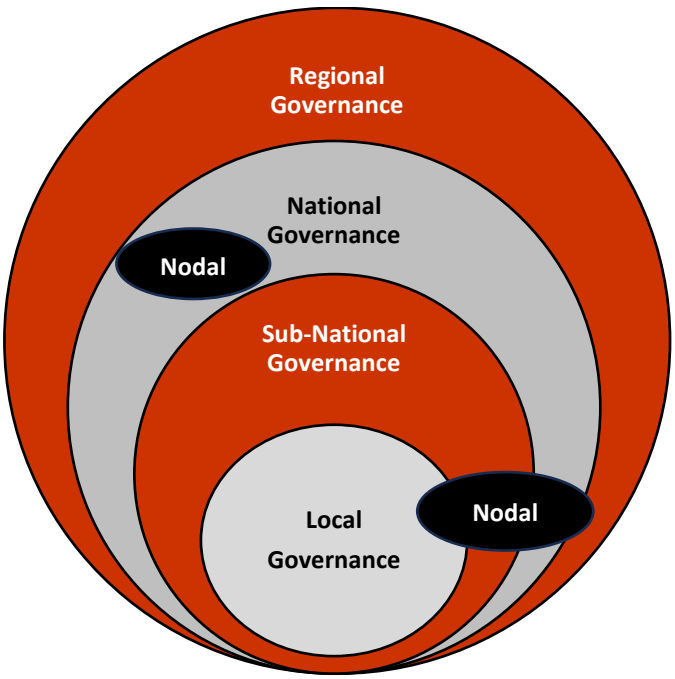
## MULTI-SCALAR FRAME

***Regional Governance*** focuses on the balance between regional cooperation and priorities especially to address transnational issues, and state sovereignty.

***National Governance*** Focuses on the responsive governance at the level of the state, including interactions with donors and development partners.

***Sub-National and Local Governance*** focuses on tailored, contextually appropriate governance cooperation at the local level.

***Nodal Governance*** anticipates pockets of intersection and cooperation within or across the socio-geographic scales, coming together around particular issues




Under the Scalar frame the emphasis shifts from specific governance preconditions or outcomes to the interaction between scales and where additional analysis or emphasis are most valuable. In this model the scales are geographic but there are other scales that might be applied (state and non-state institutions, formal and informal communities and associations). Whilst this provides less obvious homes for individual projects or workstreams it potentially allows for a more tailored understanding of the different ways in which change is achieved. Multi-scalar governance requires an intimate understanding of the norms, values, relations and politics that define social hierarchies and is a helpful tool when considering less state-centric models of governance reform.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

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

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

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

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

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