

Australian **WASH** Reference Group

Australian WASH Reference Group submission to the JSCFADT Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and the Pacific region

The Australian Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Reference Group was formed in 2007 as a network of organisations working on WASH in developing countries. Our network has specialist expertise related to Sustainable Development Goal 6 – to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” as well as a range of other interrelated Sustainable Development Goals.

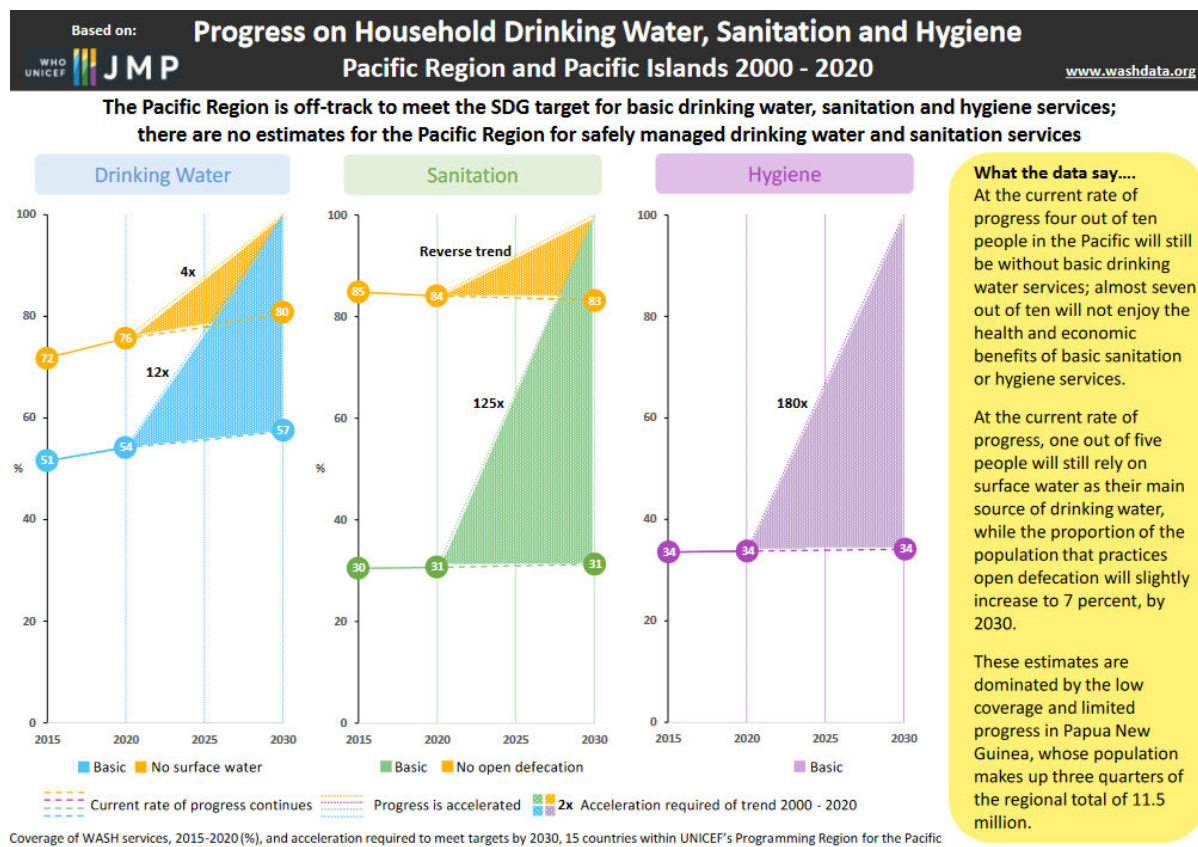
The WASH Reference Group is made up of 38 members from 27 organisations, including non-government organisations, academic institutions and private consultants. The WASH Reference Group is the peak group for the Australian WASH sector, and is largely responsible for delivering Australia's contribution to WASH in the Asia Pacific region.

The Australian WASH Reference Group would like to thank the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for the opportunity to provide this submission on Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region. We offer the following key points and recommendations to the Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and the Pacific region.

As you would be aware, water, sanitation and hygiene underpin all elements of the economy, health, wellbeing, climate resilience, gender equality and education. However, as shown in the following figure published by the Joint Monitoring Program (JMP) of the WHO and UNICEF, the Pacific region is off track to meeting the SDG targets for drinking water and sanitation.¹

At the current rate of progress, 40% of people in the Pacific will still be without basic drinking water services by 2030.

¹ Source: Joint Monitoring Program, 2021. Accessed at: <https://washdata.org/report/unicef-2021-regional-snapshot-pacific>



Currently, only 6.5% of people in the Pacific have safely managed water, and only 6.7% have safely managed sanitation². The majority of people in the Pacific therefore drink from water sources that are likely to be contaminated, and use toilet facilities that are not managed safely and are likely to pose a risk to the environment, water sources and people. During times of extreme weather events, these risks are magnified.

A focus on WASH directly links to, and will help to deliver the recently launched Australian Aid Policy in terms of a focus on climate and the importance of the Pacific region, a commitment to localisation and delivery of the performance framework which identifies climate and WASH goals on page 16:

Climate Adaptation, Mitigation Environment and Biodiversity

- Number of people for whom Australia's investments have improved adaptation to climate change and resilience to disasters.
- Number and value of investments that are:
 - contributing to low-emissions development pathways or are supporting mitigation activities and
 - improving climate change adaptation and disaster resilience.
- Number and value of investments which are promoting/ delivering nature-positive outcomes
- Number of people using:
 - basic or safely managed drinking water services
 - basic or safely managed sanitation services and/or a handwashing facility with soap and water.

While Australia's contributions to WASH In the region are not in line with need, a report commissioned by UNICEF in 2023 titled Financing Water, Sanitation & Hygiene in the Pacific found that *"Donor funding for WASH [in the Pacific] does not always correlate with need. The two countries with the*

² UNICEF (2023) Accessed at: <https://www.unicef.org/pacificislands/reports/financing-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-pacific> see page 8

greatest access to at least basic services in 2011 have since received the highest levels of donor funding for WASH per capita. In contrast, the four countries with the lowest levels of access to basic services were ranked 5th, 10th, 11th, and 13th in terms of donor funding for WASH" (UNICEF Pacific, 2023).³

We recommend to the Inquiry that in order to sustain and improve WASH in our region, in support of climate resilience and improved health and wellbeing outcomes for all, Australia must:

1. Prioritise long-term partnerships with governments and civil society organisations and academic organisations/universities in the Pacific region with a focus on WASH;
2. Recognise WASH investments as legitimate climate change adaptation measures as communicated in recent CoP agreements;
3. Emphasise the importance of WASH in underpinning functional health systems; and
4. Allocate resources to research, evidence-based practice, monitoring, evaluation, and learning in relation to WASH and water resources management.
5. Support WASH programming as a way to actively and tangibly deliver on gender equality, disability and social inclusion goals as outlined in Australia's aid policy and program targets.

These recommendations are further explained as follows.

Recommendation 1. Prioritise long-term partnerships with governments and civil society organisations and academic organisations/universities in the Pacific region with a focus on WASH

Sustainable WASH services are essential for supporting health, wellbeing, economic development, gender equality, growth and prosperity within the Pacific region. Well-designed, long-term and well delivered WASH programs increase individual, household, community and institutional resilience and are also investments in equity, security, stability, and reducing poverty and extreme inequality.

Limited progress towards improving access to WASH services has arisen from structural deficiencies that result in poor planning, weak governance, mis-focused prioritisation and under-investment, all of which will be exacerbated by climate change. The combined benefits of improved water supply, sanitation and hygiene reduce the overall disease burden experienced by poor and marginalised communities, meaning they are better able to cope with the impacts of climate change.

It is therefore essential that Australia prioritises investments that strengthen the whole WASH system, rather than simply increasing the availability of WASH infrastructure, in order to support broader gains in public health. Additionally, for Australia's development assistance program to be credible, it must acknowledge the importance of WASH in underpinning functional health systems and the preventative power of WASH. Investing in WASH in communities and in health care facilities is a no-regrets investment given the multitude of positive impacts WASH has, including reducing several infections common to health care facilities.

Our collective experience over decades with partners across the Pacific region has shown that long-term partnerships with governments and civil society organisations and academic organisations/universities are the most effective way to build capacity and support sustainability of WASH systems in our region.

Recommendation 2. Recognise WASH investments as legitimate climate change adaptation measures as communicated in recent CoP agreements

At CoP28 in 2023, WASH was included in the official global goal on adaptation as the first point, urging parties to enhance climate resilience to water and sanitation related hazards:

³ UNICEF (2023) Accessed at: <https://www.unicef.org/pacificislands/reports/financing-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-pacific> see page 4

9. *Urges Parties and invites non-Party stakeholders to pursue the objectives outlined in paragraph 8 above and to increase ambition and enhance adaptation action and support, in order to accelerate swift action at scale and at all levels, from local to global, in alignment with other global frameworks, towards the achievement of, inter alia, the following targets by 2030, and progressively beyond:*

(a) *Significantly reducing climate-induced water scarcity and enhancing climate resilience to water-related hazards towards a climate-resilient water supply, climate-resilient sanitation and towards access to safe and affordable potable water for all;*

The impacts of climate change on Pacific communities will be felt primarily through water, with projections of more intense cyclones, increased coastal inundation, uncertain changes in rainfall, increased frequency of flooding and drought, increased sea level rise, and ocean acidification (CSIRO and SPREP, 2021)⁴. With water central to the effects of climate change, it is important that WASH is included in the Australian Government's support to the region's climate response and adaptation and DPPs.

Moreover, climate change has devastating effects on already fragile WASH services and infrastructure in the Pacific, which is why improved, climate resilient, WASH should also be a priority in the region. Cyclones present a major challenge for communities that do not have resilient WASH infrastructure, with damage exacerbating inequalities, as those with less resilient infrastructure are less likely to have access to the resources to rebuild or access alternative safe drinking water and sanitation services. Increased flooding and sea level rise present water quality and environmental health issues due to impacted sanitation systems (particularly in coastal communities) and seawater intrusion in groundwater. In the context of these challenges, the Australian Government's increased focus on climate change is critical to mitigate the threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of Pacific Islanders. Therefore, a focus on sustainable and climate resilient WASH is needed to provide safe and adequate services for domestic, industrial, tourism, and agricultural needs in the Pacific.

UNICEF Pacific's 2018 'Pacific WASH Resilience Guidelines' set out the clear link between WASH provision, climate change adaptation (CCA) and disaster risk reduction (DRR):

As these challenges are interlinked and have impacted WASH provision over the years, it is now critical that WASH programming is not isolated from disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate-change adaptation (CCA), but instead is planned for in an integrated manner.⁵

It is evident that achieving the SDGs by 2030 in the Pacific region will not be possible unless there is a substantial investment in the WASH sector. All SDGs are dependent upon SDG6.1 and 6.2 being achieved, because without safely managed water and sanitation, people cannot meet their nutritional needs, participate in the economy to their full potential, or be safe and healthy.

⁴ See: <https://www.csiro.au/en/research/environmental-impacts/climate-change/pacific-climate-change-info> and https://www.rccap.org/uploads/files/aaa60215-85fd-4020-891c-64c40cb9f0e7/NextGen%20Digital%20Digest_Updated.pdf

⁵ UNICEF Pacific (2018). Pacific WASH Resilience Guidelines. p7

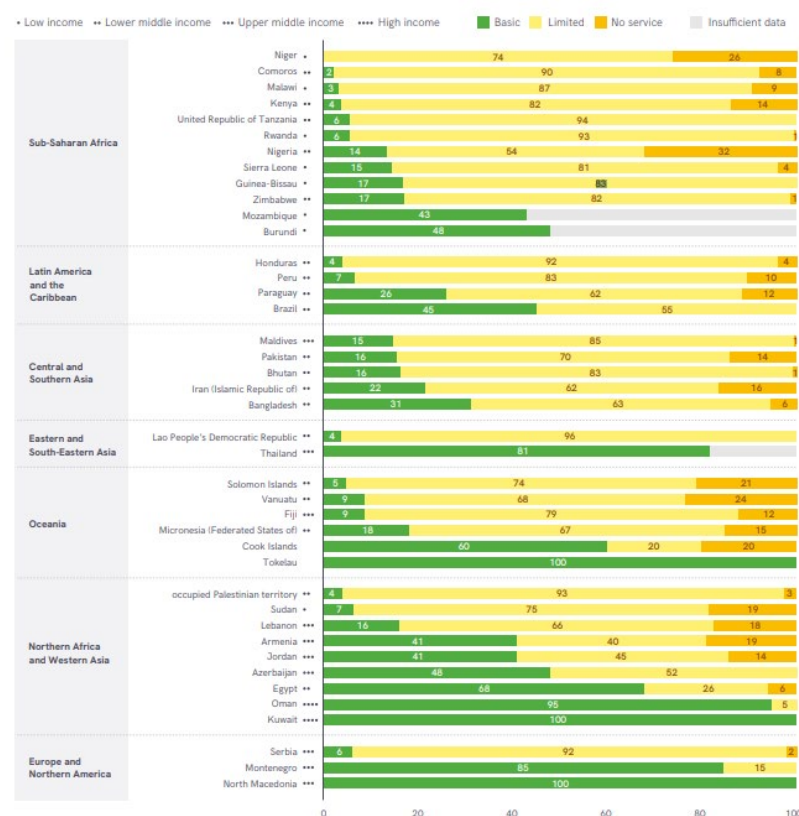
Recommendation 3. Emphasise the importance of WASH in underpinning functional health systems

WASH is a foundation to Primary Health Care (PHC) and supporting safe, universal access to health for all.⁶ WASH services are important for combating communicable diseases globally - there is much evidence that reliable water supplies and frequent handwashing with soap are key to preventing and controlling communicable diseases.

Currently the majority of the Pacific region's population rely on unprotected sources of water and unsanitary means of excreta disposal, both of which pose serious risks to health. Preventable water-borne disease and mortality from WASH conditions are higher in the Pacific than in neighbouring Asia, particularly among vulnerable population groups including infants and elderly. Without upholding health security through WASH, antimicrobial resistance, a major threat across the region, is permitted to flourish. This presents major risks to human health and the safety of health care, while it also risks the health of animals and crops, across the One Health spectrum⁷.

As can be seen in the following graph, countries in the Pacific region have some of the lowest safely managed sanitation levels in the world⁸. For example, in the Solomon Islands, according to the latest Joint Monitoring Program (JMP) data, 45% of households practice open defecation, with a further 15% having access to 'unimproved' sanitation.⁹

Sanitation service levels varied widely between countries and regions in 2021



Above: Sanitation levels across the world (JMP, 2023)

⁶ Chaitkin et al (2022) Estimating the cost of achieving basic water, sanitation, hygiene, and waste management services in public health-care facilities in the 46 UN designated least-developed countries: a modelling study. The Lancet. Accessed at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(22\)00099-7/fulltext#%20](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(22)00099-7/fulltext#%20)

⁷ See: Progress on WASH in health care facilities 2000-2021: Special focus on WASH and infection prevention and control. Accessed at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240058699>

⁸ See page 64 of Progress on WASH in health care facilities 2000-2021: Special focus on WASH and infection prevention and control. Accessed at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240058699>

⁹ See: <https://washdata.org/data/household#!/slb>

Recommendation 4. Allocate resources to research, evidence-based practice, monitoring, evaluation, and learning in relation to WASH and water resources management.

Australian Government programs such as the Civil Society WASH Fund (2014-2017) and Water for Women (2018-2024) have included designated support for research including NGO and academic research partnerships; and monitoring, evaluation and learning. Australia has therefore become a world leader in developing, sharing and utilising WASH research and evidence. This investment and sector development is at risk of being lost if funding is not made available for research, monitoring, evaluation and learning of and about development investments. Partnerships with Pacific research institutions and NGOs is a core focus of our sector strategy, and one that supports Australia's interests in localising development assistance and building capacity and diplomatic partnerships across our region.

Australia has an opportunity to drive a global commitment to drinking water and sanitation by supporting international ambitions as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals. Complementing the Australian Government's new Climate Resilient Communities (CRC) Facility with a focus on sanitation in the Pacific Region is necessary for all the SDGs, and for the health and wellbeing of Pacific Islanders. However, with the end of the Water for Women Fund, there is no comprehensive Australian initiative addressing sanitation and hygiene challenges, particularly in the Pacific, which warrants immediate attention. We recommend that Australia commit funding specifically for WASH delivered by NGOs, research organisations, and governments in the Pacific region, informed by the knowledge and practice that has emerged from the Water for Women Fund and prior investments in the region and sector.

Recommendation 5. Support WASH programming as a way to actively and tangibly deliver on gender equality, disability and social inclusion goals as outlined in Australia's aid policy and program targets.

Poor access to WASH disproportionately affects women in the Pacific, due to gender norms of women's domestic responsibilities linked to water. Women are generally responsible for cooking, cleaning and fetching drinking water as well as being the primary carers for children and the elderly. This burden of responsibilities relating to WASH is exacerbated during disasters, when accessing WASH services may be more challenging than usual, but the gendered division of responsibilities remains in place. Poor access to WASH, gender-insensitive WASH systems and lack of women's voices in decision-making relating to WASH services across the Pacific exacerbate gender inequality and prevent Pacific women and girls from realising their full potential.

Poor access to WASH leads to increased domestic labour, poor maternal and menstrual health outcomes and increased risks of gender-based violence. Gender-insensitive WASH interventions mean that women and girls are excluded from decision-making and leadership. Conversely, WASH interventions which have clearly defined outcomes for people of different genders are a vehicle for gender empowerment.

These existing social inequalities will be intensified by climate change, with unequal access to safe WASH services as a driver. For example, a woman with a disability in Vanuatu shared the devastating effects of water insecurity in her community, where people mostly rely on rainwater: *"During the dry season, we [people with disabilities] struggle a lot"* – woman with a disability in Vanuatu.

Climate change projections for the Pacific predict highly uncertain rainfall patterns, which raises serious concerns for the people who don't have safe and reliable access to WASH, especially people at risk of marginalisation, who are less likely to be able to afford and access alternative water sources in the dry season. Communities throughout the Pacific need improved WASH services and evidence-based solutions to ensure no one is left behind.

From our collective work and research, we know that strengthening WASH services and systems across the Pacific is an opportunity to further realise gender equality and social inclusion outcomes if these essential services are developed, delivered and monitored with a central focus on gender equality and social inclusion transformations in partnership with local organisations including rights holder organisations.

We have outlined five key recommendations to the Inquiry, and again thank you for this opportunity. We urge the Australian Government to advance localisation, gender equality and inclusion and climate resilience in our region by:

1. Prioritising long-term partnerships with governments and civil society organisations and academic organisations/universities in the Pacific region with a focus on WASH;
2. Recognising WASH investments as legitimate adaptation measures as communicated in recent CoP agreements;
3. Emphasising the importance of WASH in underpinning functional health systems; and
4. Allocate resources to research, evidence-based practice, monitoring, evaluation, and learning in relation to WASH and water resources management.
5. Supporting WASH programming as a way to actively and tangibly deliver on gender equality, disability and social inclusion goals as outlined in Australia's aid policy and program targets.

Please feel free to contact either of our co-chair's should you wish to meet with us or any of our members.

Sincerely, on behalf of the Australian WASH Reference Group,

John Kelleher

Co-Chair

Melita Grant

Co-Chair