

# Understanding the marginalisation of Pacific Small Island Developing States through digitalisation

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In recent years, there has been growing concern about the marginalisation of civil society perspectives in global and national processes. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in advocating for the interests of marginalised communities and holding governments and international organisations accountable.<sup>1</sup> However, their voices are often sidelined or overlooked when decisions are made and policies are set. Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) face unique challenges in embracing digitalisation that are often not taken into account in global governance processes. At the same time, governments in the Pacific Islands do not sufficiently leverage the skills and capacities of civil society organisations better to bridge the digital divide. This short report delves into the factors contributing to the digital divide experienced by PSIDS and suggests ways of fostering digital inclusion in the region.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) stands as a pivotal platform for addressing global issues concerning the use and impact of information and communications technologies (ICTs). As we navigate the complexities of our increasingly interconnected world, it is imperative that WSIS takes into account the perspectives of marginalised

geographies and communities in the Pacific. These communities often face unique challenges and barriers in accessing and using ICTs, and addressing their concerns is essential for achieving the overarching goals of WSIS. The digital divide in the Pacific is often a result of intersecting issues including infrastructural hurdles,<sup>2</sup> inadequate regulatory frameworks,<sup>3</sup> socioeconomic factors, limited digital literacy and awareness,<sup>4</sup> and climate vulnerability.

Due to the unique physical geography, cultural and linguistic diversity, and dispersed population, Pacific Island countries encounter numerous obstacles in providing information services.<sup>5</sup> Digital disparities prevalent in the Pacific region encompass divides within nations, among nations, and between the Pacific and the global community. PSIDs are facing a range of challenges due to their size, isolation and vulnerability to external forces. Internet accessibility varies significantly across the Pacific region, with a general deficiency compared to other global regions.<sup>6</sup> Among those with internet access, mobile phones are a prevalent means of connectivity, as opposed to tablets, laptops or desktop computers.

1 The Global Digital Justice Forum sees a strong and central role for civil society and social movements in global to local digital policy making. See: Global Digital Justice Forum. (2023). *Submission of Inputs for the Global Digital Compact*. [https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/2333/ITFC\\_Submission%20of%20Inputs%20for%20the%20Global%20Digital%20Compact.pdf](https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/2333/ITFC_Submission%20of%20Inputs%20for%20the%20Global%20Digital%20Compact.pdf)

2 Wolfenden, A. (2023). *A Strategy to Where? The Pacific Regional E-Commerce Strategy and the Need to Put Data Sovereignty First*. *DAWN Informs: Towards Feminist Digital Justice*. <https://www.dawnfeminist.org/library/dawn-informs-towards-feminist-digital-justice>

3 Global Digital Justice Forum. (2023). Op. cit.

4 The Pacific islands have a narrow focus on what constitutes e-commerce, only referring to e-commerce as online transactions.

5 UNFPA Pacific Sub-Regional Office. (2014). *Population and Development Profiles: Pacific Island Countries*. [https://pacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/web\\_140414\\_UNFPAPopulationandDevelopmentProfiles-PacificSub-RegionExtendedv1LRv2\\_o.pdf](https://pacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/web_140414_UNFPAPopulationandDevelopmentProfiles-PacificSub-RegionExtendedv1LRv2_o.pdf)

6 UNESCAP. (2018). *Broadband Connectivity in Pacific Island Countries*. [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/PACIFIC\\_PAPER\\_Final\\_Publication\\_1\\_1.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/PACIFIC_PAPER_Final_Publication_1_1.pdf)

However, mobile phone accessibility and adoption differ among Pacific countries. For example, while Fiji boasts an 84% subscriber penetration rate, the Federated States of Micronesia lag behind with only 17%.<sup>7</sup> Merely 37% of Kiribati's population can access mobile internet – it has an even lower internet penetration rate of 15% – resulting in a majority of the population residing in a state of digital obscurity.<sup>8</sup> Broadband data services come at a high cost, often triple that of Fiji.<sup>9</sup>

The diverse yet typically expensive internet access costs, partly influenced by national telecommunication monopolies, are widening the digital gap based on socioeconomic status. However, they also contribute to regional disparities, leading to the effective isolation of certain countries like Kiribati and Tuvalu. Currently, there are no plans in these countries to tackle digital disparities or consider the impacts of technology on traditional hierarchies of rank, status and power, which are essential aspects in Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian societies.<sup>10</sup> Even though Pacific governments have made a concerted effort to improve infrastructure,<sup>11</sup> poor internet speeds and unreliable electricity among Pacific countries deepen the digital divide. Since most PSIDS rely on diesel fuel to generate electricity, this means that most mobile telephone towers require costly solar systems and backup diesel generators.<sup>12</sup> Telecommunication services entail

significant fixed costs for most PSIDS. In regions with sparse populations, economies of scale are typically limited. This results in substandard services, elevated prices and slower internet speeds.<sup>13</sup> For instance, telecommunications providers might opt for a 2G or 3G network installation instead of investing in the latest generation network.<sup>14</sup>

Most people typically do not associate poverty with the Pacific. Instead, it is often associated with the plight of children in Africa or the arduous labour endured by many in Asia. However, as the people of the Pacific well know, the reality does not always align with the idealised image. The Pacific Islands are vulnerable to natural disasters and the rise in sea levels (due to the climate crisis), most have few resources, almost all are remote, and many have small populations.<sup>15</sup> One commonly held view is that Pacific Islanders live in a state of subsistence affluence.<sup>16</sup> However, this characterisation does not apply universally, and even where it does, it implies minimal prospects for advancement and growth. Factors such as the quality of education and available resources, remoteness from the global economy, constraints on engagement with this economy, and traditional land management systems combine to restrict opportunities available to most Pacific Islands.<sup>17</sup> Given this

7 GSMA. (2023). *The Mobile Economy: Pacific Islands 2023*. <https://www.gsma.com/mobileeconomy/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/GSMA-ME-Pacific-Islands-2023.pdf>

8 UNCTAD. (2020, 20 May). Kiribati sets sights on overcoming hurdles to e-commerce. <https://unctad.org/news/kiribati-sets-sights-overcoming-hurdles-e-commerce>

9 Ibid.

10 McLeod, A. (2008). *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia*. Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. [https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/10082/1/McLeod\\_LeadershipModels2008.pdf](https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/10082/1/McLeod_LeadershipModels2008.pdf)

11 For example, the Tui-Samoa undersea cable connects Fiji to the major Southern Cross cable. The Coral Sea Cable System connects to the domestic undersea cable with the Solomon Islands and its links to Papua New Guinea and Australia. There is also the Kumul Submarine Cable in Papua New Guinea, and the Manatua One Polynesia Cable linking the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and French Polynesia.

12 Watson, A. H. A., & Fox, R. (2021). Digital divide: Mobile internet speeds in the Pacific. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 27(1&2), 215-231. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v27i1and2.1168>

13 Highet, C., Nique, M., Watson, A. H. A., & Wilson, A. (2019). *Digital Transformation: The Role of Mobile Technology in Papua New Guinea*. GSMA. <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/digital-transformation-the-role-of-mobile-technology-in-papua-new-guinea>

14 GSMA. (2023). Op. cit.

15 Nakatani, R. (2019). *A Possible Approach to Fiscal Rules in Small Islands – Incorporating Natural Disasters and Climate Change*. IMF. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2019/09/06/A-Possible-Approach-to-Fiscal-Rules-in-Small-Islands-Incorporating-Natural-Disasters-and-48590>

16 See, for example: Yari, M. (2004). Beyond “subsistence affluence”: Poverty in Pacific island countries. *Bulletin on Asia-Pacific Perspectives 2003/04*. UNESCAP. <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/bulletin03-04-ch3.pdf> and Asian Development Bank Office of Pacific Operations. (2001). *Poverty: Is it an issue in the Pacific?* <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29747/poverty-pacific.pdf>

17 UNESCAP. (2010). *Sustainable Development in the Pacific: Progress and Challenges. Pacific Regional Report for the 5 Year Review of the Mauritius Strategy for Further Implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action for Sustainable Development of SIDS (MSI+5)*. [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/11783Pacific\\_Regional\\_Synthesis-MSI5-Final.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/11783Pacific_Regional_Synthesis-MSI5-Final.pdf)

context, the digital sector has frequently been overlooked in terms of setting priorities.<sup>18</sup> This oversight, combined with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, has had a negative economic impact that in turn has limited Pacific national budgets for ICTs. Some have argued that the economic consequences of the pandemic outweighed those of the health crisis itself.<sup>19</sup>

The threat of climate change is a significant factor that WSIS must consider when assessing the key issues for marginalised geographies and communities in the Pacific. The Pacific Islands is one of the first regions experiencing the impacts of climate change.<sup>20</sup> Many of the islands are low-lying, often atolls or other islands that rise only a few feet above sea level.<sup>21</sup> Sinking shores and storm surges continuously threaten habitable and arable land, freshwater resources and infrastructure.<sup>22</sup> The climate crisis affects Pacific nations not only environmentally but also culturally, as there are shared traditional values emphasising the significance of their oceanic homelands.<sup>23</sup> The land holds more than mere habitat; it symbolises cultural and spiritual prosperity.

Inadequate government frameworks have also contributed to the digital divide. Pacific

governments have a tendency to have sweeping policies that often overlook fundamental elements. For example, in Fiji the Bainimarama administration introduced the “One Laptop per Child” initiative to improve digital education for students, overlooking that the teachers required significant professional development in e-learning platforms and an overhaul in curriculum.<sup>24</sup> For the Pacific, ICT policy must be guided by appropriate technical choices that need to be complemented by effective institutional approaches.

Another notable deficiency in ICT initiatives is the tendency for policies to be portrayed as Pacific Island-owned, yet they are frequently propelled and upheld by international organisations. The reliance of PSIDS on international entities to finance and facilitate these initiatives significantly influences their success.<sup>25</sup> This reliance fosters market deregulation and provides access for international corporations, aligning with the interests and objectives of the international organisations involved. The disparity in geopolitical power and the realities of global ICT interests restrict policy makers’ capacity to alter the processes and pursue results that suit the Pacific context.

Civil society involvement is thus critical in reducing the digital divide and improving digitalisation for marginal communities in the Pacific. Pacific governments must make a concerted effort to include civil society organisations advocating for equitable access to digital resources, promoting digital literacy programmes, and fostering community engagement in the consultation process. A vital reason for the inclusion of civil society organisations<sup>26</sup> is that they

18 See the Feminist Digital Justice background paper (<https://feministdigitaljustice.net/background-paper>) and declaration (<https://feministdigitaljustice.net>), which examine the various perspectives of the digital paradigm and evolve a new vision of feminist digital justice.

19 Hoy, C. (2020, 15 June). Poverty and the pandemic in the Pacific. *Development Policy Centre Blog*. <https://devpolicy.org/poverty-and-teh-pandemic-in-the-pacific-20200615-2>; Howes, S., & Surandiran, S. (2020, 18 August). COVID-19: economic damage and Pacific strengths. *Development Policy Centre Blog*. <https://devpolicy.org/covid-19-economic-damage-pacific-20200818>; United Nations Pacific. (2020). *Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in Fiji*. <https://pacific.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/200901%20SEIA%20Fiji%20-%20Consolidated%20Report%20-%20FINAL%20%28002%29.pdf>

20 UNESCAP. (2010). Op. cit.

21 Parsons, C. (2022, 23 May). The Pacific Islands: The front line in the battle against climate change. *U.S. National Science Foundation*. <https://new.nsf.gov/science-matters/pacific-islands-front-line-battle-against-climate>

22 Ibid.

23 Pacific Community SPC. (2021, 17 August). Did you know? Land is fundamental to the identity and way of life of indigenous Pacific islanders. <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/did-you-know/2021/08/did-you-know-land-is-fundamental-to-the-identity-and-way-of-life>

24 Raturi, S., & Kedrayate, A. (2015). Impact of elearning on primary school children and teachers: A study of the One Laptop per Child pilot project in Fiji. *International Journal of Instructional and Distance Learning*, 12(8), 3-23. [http://repository.usp.ac.fj/8462/1/Impact\\_of\\_elearning\\_on\\_primary\\_school\\_children\\_and\\_teachers-a\\_study\\_of\\_the\\_one\\_laptop\\_per\\_child\\_pilot\\_project\\_in\\_Fiji.pdf](http://repository.usp.ac.fj/8462/1/Impact_of_elearning_on_primary_school_children_and_teachers-a_study_of_the_one_laptop_per_child_pilot_project_in_Fiji.pdf)

25 International Telecommunication Union. (2021). *Digital trends in Asia and the Pacific 2021: Information and communication technology trends and developments in the Asia Pacific region, 2017-2022*. <https://www.unapcict.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Digital%20Trends%20in%20Asia%20Pacific%202021.pdf>

26 Global Digital Justice Forum. (2023). Op. cit.

advocate for policies and initiatives that prioritise extending internet infrastructure and technology access to underserved areas, but in a way that also halts the encroaching artificial intelligence (AI) and surveillance issues prevalent in the rest of the world. Digital literacy workshops and training sessions are more effective working through grassroots organisations than through heavily bureaucratic ministries where politics often impedes the process.<sup>27</sup> Pacific civil society organisations could also facilitate community-led initiatives that leverage digital tools to address local challenges. For example, the Pacific Blue Line Campaign is advocating for the total ban of deep sea mining and challenging the narrative that deep sea mining is the solution to clean energy.<sup>28</sup> Its effective use of social media has led to ongoing, successful social and digital mobilisation.

A holistic strategy is needed to tackle the marginalisation of PSIDS in the digitalisation process, which involves addressing infrastructure limitations, improving digital literacy and capacity, fostering collaboration, and advocating for climate-resilient solutions. By prioritising efforts to achieve digital inclusion,<sup>29</sup> PSIDS could unlock the potential of digital technologies to enhance socioeconomic development and improve the welfare of their citizens.<sup>30</sup> Beyond access and affordability, Pacific marginalised communities may also experience forms of digital exclusion stemming from discrimination, social inequalities and structural barriers. WSIS needs to address these underlying issues by supporting policies and interventions that promote social equity, tackle systemic discrimination, and empower Pacific Islanders to participate fully in the digital society.

27 Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2022, 6 September). Fiji Parliament works with government and civil society on climate change. <https://www.ipu.org/news/case-studies/2022-09/fiji-parliament-works-with-government-and-civil-society-climate-change>

28 For more information, see: <https://www.pacificblueline.org>

29 The Feminist Digital Justice declaration ([https://feministdigitaljustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/JNC-WG-Declaration-of-Feminist-Digital-Justice\\_2023.pdf](https://feministdigitaljustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/JNC-WG-Declaration-of-Feminist-Digital-Justice_2023.pdf)) suggests key principles to achieve gender inclusion in the digital sphere. Its background paper ([https://feministdigitaljustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/FDJ-Background-paper\\_23-Aug.pdf](https://feministdigitaljustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/FDJ-Background-paper_23-Aug.pdf)) takes stock of the dominant digital paradigm from a critical feminist perspective, teasing out the various dimensions of gender injustice.

30 Aker, J. C. (2017). Using Digital Technology for Public Service Provision in Developing Countries: Potential and Pitfalls. In S. Gupta, M. Keen, A. Shah, & G. Verdier (Eds.), *Digital Revolutions in Public Finance*. IMF. <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/downloadpdf/display/book/9781484315224/choo8.pdf>