

Australia-SPC Partnership Evaluation 2022

SYNTHESIS EVALUATION REPORT

This synthesis report presents the purpose, approach, findings, case studies and recommendations of two parts of an evaluation exploring the contribution and impact of the Government of Australia (GoA) and The Pacific Community (SPC) Partnership (the Partnership) 2014-2023. The evaluations were conducted between July and November 2022 and were jointly commissioned by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and SPC.

About the Partnership

SPC is the principal scientific and technical organisation in the Pacific region, established 1947. It is an inter-governmental organisation owned and governed by 27 country and territory members, including Australia.

In 2014, the Australian Government and SPC signed a ten-year Partnership agreement. Three grant arrangements of core funding sit under this Partnership. This core funding is the largest contribution of flexible and predictable multi-year funding to SPC. Outside these core funding grants, Australia also provides programmatic and project funding.

Evaluation Purpose

Part One: Institutional strengthening and partnership mechanisms

Conducted by University of Technology Sydney, Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS-ISF) and CoLAB Consulting



Assess the contribution of the Partnership, including funding modalities to development impact through SPC.



Identify possible improvements to the design, management and evaluation mechanisms under the Partnership, including how to monitor, assess and report the impact of Australia's core contributions.



Identify whether the Partnership could further support key areas of SPC's capabilities that are of particular interest to Australia and SPC, such as gender and disability inclusion, and social and environmental responsibility.



Consider the impact that COVID-19 has had on SPC service delivery and processes and assess the contribution of flexible core funding to SPC's adaptations and pivots; and make recommendations on positive changes that resulted from COVID-19 that should be retained into the future.

Part Two: Impact and Value for money

Conducted by the Strategic Development Group



Assess the value and impact of SPC's unique contribution to the delivery of Pacific regional priorities, within the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP).



Assess what value and impact Australia is adding as a member and donor of SPC.



Consider options to embed value for money and impact assessments into SPC Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) practices.

Synthesis across Parts One and Two

Conducted by University of Technology Sydney, Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS-ISF) and CoLAB Consulting



Present a synthesis summary of the findings from Part Two (impact) in relation to Part One (contribution).

Evaluation Approach

Both parts of the evaluation employed a qualitative approach, using key informant interviews and document review.



More than 118 documents were reviewed for both evaluations.



41 individuals were interviewed across Parts One and Two of the evaluation.



Sampling of participants was intentional to ensure diversity of perspectives from across SPC, its members, DFAT and development partners.



Multiple forms of analysis responded to evaluation questions, assessing effectiveness and contribution of the Partnership.

Limitations



Both evaluations were conducted to a tight schedule, which meant some key informants were unavailable. Limited engagement with SPC member countries, particularly Representatives of Governments and Administrations (CRGA).

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EVALUATION FINDINGS

Part One: Institutional strengthening and partnership mechanisms

Partnership contribution to SPC institutional strengthening

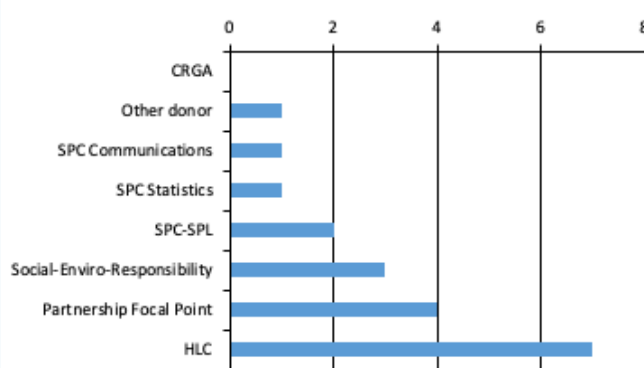
The Partnership has contributed to significant enhancements in SPC's institutional capabilities over the past eight years.

- The provision of core funding and technical support, effective partnership relationships, and Australia's strategic contribution as a member of SPC have enhanced SPC institutional capacity.
- Core funding was valued as critically important and described as providing SPC senior leadership with the ability to carry out institutional reform. Core funding not only supported institutional capacity but helped to change the dynamics of the Partnership, fostering trust rather than a relationship focused on donor compliance.
- Flexible, multi-year core and program funding is meeting the needs of both SPC and GoA, though further opportunities may be realised through continued refinement of the Partnership arrangements and GoA's understanding and expectations of the Partnership.

"I think by Australia delivering so much of our funding through core funding has given the organisation [SPC] that ability to reshape itself, to reinvent itself and given it the scope to make some decisions to improve the overall system and architecture of the system..." DFAT interviewee.

"DFAT is just incredibly valuable to SPC in the way it engages. Having DFAT embrace the fact that its core funding leverages and impacts so much, because it provides the base that all program and project founding has - if it's just projects and programs - there would be gaps. The core provides that certainty" SPC interviewee.

Part One Evaluation: Number of interviewees by stakeholder group



Design, management, evaluation and communication mechanisms under the Partnership

High Level Consultations (HLC), annual results reporting, and GoA's position as both a member and donor of SPC were described as particularly effective partnership mechanisms.

- Various aspects of partnership arrangements were described as effective for achieving shared outcomes, most notably the HLC. DFAT and SPC stakeholders identified areas for improvement including ensuring senior staff equivalency in HLC, reviewing the function and expectations of partnership focal point roles, and reviewing and operationalising partnership principles.
- GoA's use of SPC annual results reporting to report on contribution of core funding is highly valued by both SPC and DFAT stakeholders. Both parts of the evaluation revealed the need for clarity about expectations of reporting. SPC staff noted that the types of questions in reporting need to be reviewed to consider the macro-strategic context of the Partnership. Partnership visibility plans are viewed positively, though there is recognition that there is opportunity to strengthen visibility of partnership outcomes in the future.
- GoA is highly valued as a donor and member of SPC. There is potential for GoA to realise more strategic gains from the Partnership arrangements, while also prioritising listening to and being informed by members' priorities.

"I think the high-level consultations work pretty well. They've managed to stay at a reasonably high level, which is good in terms of this there's a strategy... So that's very, very positive, I think, and that's a sign of the maturing relationship that there is between the Government and SPC" SPC interviewee.

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EVALUATION FINDINGS

Part One: Institutional strengthening and partnership mechanisms

Gender and disability inclusion within SPC's operations and programming

The Partnership has supported SPC to make concerted efforts over the last eight years to operationalise its Social and Environmental (SER) policy and mainstream SER priorities.

- Flexible core funding and partnership principles that value environmental and social safeguards has helped SPC to develop, refine and evolve its Social Environmental Responsibility (SER) Policy.

"There was no policy eight years ago. Now we have a SER Policy and it is great. We are making sure everyone at SPC is using it. ... The Partnership does value Environment and Social safeguards – that is critical. That makes sure we are moving to a coherent and cohesive SER standard" SPC interviewee.

- The Partnership has supported SPC to mainstream gender equality into policies and processes and strengthen SPC institutional capacity. Over the past eight years SPC has built capability to implement DFAT's largest investment in gender equality, the Pacific Women Lead program. While not representative, there are some perceptions amongst some SPC staff that gender equality has been a DFAT donor-driven agenda within the Partnership.
- The evaluation found less evidence of the Partnership's contribution to supporting SPC to operationalise disability inclusion. The Partnership can continue to promote gender equality and disability inclusion in SPC's operations and programming by supporting SPC to operationalise its SER policy, with more focused efforts to operationalise disability inclusion and prioritisation of core funding to sustain institutional capacity to embed SER in SPC programming and policy.

The impact of COVID-19 on the Partnership

Core funding from GoA and the mature relationship between GoA and SPC enabled SPC to be flexible, adaptable and responsive to the needs of the organisation and its members during the pandemic.

- SPC had to spend a lot of time negotiating changes to other projects during the early part of the pandemic, which did not benefit and address real-time needs of Pacific people. By contrast, core funding was particularly useful to fund programs while activities were being redesigned and negotiated with other donors.
- Core funding also ensured that SPC had the appropriate infrastructure and systems in place to receive pandemic related funding, act as a conduit to support regional member needs, and to support staff to work remotely.



- An example of SPC's role can be seen in the work of the Public Health Division (PHD) in which SPC is the lead agency in the region for laboratory testing and laboratory surveillance for COVID-19. Testing services were a critical component of the pandemic response.
- The COVID-19 context changed the relationship and conversation between Australia and SPC. A two day in-person meeting became two hours, which enabled senior management who are usually time poor to participate in meetings. Australia should continue to maintain this high-level of engagement.

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EVALUATION FINDINGS

Summary of case studies



Case Study One: Leading learning in the Pacific illustrating partnership contribution to strengthening monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) capacity within SPC

- Significant change in MEL capacity has been realised over the last eight years, as evidenced through partnership related reporting, staffing, networks and engagement across SPC and the region with members. As described by one SPC staff member, *'it has been a transformation'*.
- MEL staffing has substantially increased from two central MEL positions and a further four-five sitting in divisions seven years ago, to 15 staff dedicated to MEL and increased numbers at division, program and project level.
- Short-term technical support provided under the Regional Advisory Services (RAS) program was a key contributor to strengthened MEL practice.
- There has been a cultural shift in the organisation with increased demand and recognition of the utility of MEL by SPC staff and also members.
- The Annual Results Report (Pacific Community Results Report) has been prepared through leadership of SPC since 2016. The reporting provides the basis for reporting to members and donors alike, for GoA and MFAT who provide core funding.

"With lots of different programs there was also a growing recognition of the reporting burden for both DFAT and SPC. Shifting to the Results Report has balanced requirements. DFAT support has supported robust MEL but minimised the reporting burden. For the Partnership this has been a real strength" SPC interviewee.



Case Study Two: Focused consideration of gender equality in the Pacific illustrating the contribution of the Partnership to strengthening gender equality within SPC

"We have gone from a place where we [SPC] may have been underperforming, at the start of the Partnership to a place where SPC is recognised as a leader, now that the Pacific Women Lead program is housed at SPC" SPC interviewee.

- Australian aid performance reporting in 2020 acknowledged the concerted efforts of SPC to strengthen its mainstreaming of gender equality at an organisational and programmatic level and stated that the Partnership continued to improve in making a difference to gender equality at organisational and programming levels.
- Both DFAT and SPC stakeholders interviewed regard the investment of Pacific Women Lead through SPC as a key success in the Australia SPC partnership. The success demonstrates DFAT's ongoing commitment to support SPC's gender equality objectives, and SPC's concerted efforts over the Partnership to mainstream gender equality in SPC policies and systems.
- Australia's consistent advocacy for gender equality, and the provision of additional financial resourcing has helped enable SPC to operationalise gender equality in a more strategic way within the Partnership.



Case Study Three: Flexible core funding supporting SPC's COVID-19 response illustrating how enabled SPC to support organisational and member needs during the COVID-19 pandemic the Partnership

- SPC's long-term commitment to supporting regional public goods enabled a strong response to COVID-19.
- As the CROP lead in public health, SPC was able to provide timely reporting of epidemic and emerging diseases via the existing Pacific Public Health Surveillance Network (PPHSN) which meant SPC and its partners were able to be proactive in providing tailored assistance to members and COVID-19 testing capacity to all PICTs.
- Years of work and investment by Australia in SPC resulted in SPC efficiently responding to member's needs. SPC's response to COVID-19 was enabled through established core capacities which supported the organisation to pivot ways of working but continue to maintain core division programs and initiatives.

"There's quite a good marriage there between the flexible modalities that we have with the government of Australia and some of our other partners, and the management decisions that are made under specific circumstances, able to pivot and also keep many of the services that we were able to." SPC Interviewee.

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EVALUATION FINDINGS

Part Two: Impact

The value and impact Australia adds as a member and donor of SPC

The Partnership allows GoA to establish mutual accountability and responsibility for its regional assistance and it ensures that the assistance provided by Australia is tailored to the needs of the region.

- SPC's work aligns with Australian aid, foreign policy and whole-of-government priorities and that of its other members.
- For Australia, regional organisations such as SPC are important vehicles for policy dialogue and for advancing its foreign relations, trade, security and development interests within the region.
- The Partnership ensures that assistance provided by Australia is delivered in a more coordinated manner than other modalities would allow.
- The Partnership has contributed to SPC's Value for Money (VfM) efforts and is providing Value for Money to the region. SPC is a significantly stronger organisation because of the increase in core funding, including Australia's significantly increased contribution under the Partnership.
- Stakeholders spoke of how core funds allow for a wider scope of activities for the region, and that core funding is also for short term initiatives before program funding comes online.
- The evaluation also identified strong evidence of strengthening of SPC's systems, which has been enabled through contribution of core funding.

"The support by Australia represents the gold standard of how to do development in the Pacific when compared to other like-minded partners" SPC interviewee.

Options to embed value for money and impact assessments into SPC MEL practices

- The Part Two evaluation team developed and applied a VfM matrix to guide analysis of the merit, worth, and significance of the use of the Partnership's resources and a Theory of Value Creation.
- The VfM matrix would be useful for SPC, provided it is 'fit for purpose'. To ensure its utility it is important that the rubric developed is co-created with SPC to ensure that it truly reflects SPC's values and that it is therefore 'owned' by SPC.
- Using this tool, and the baseline measurement already provided, would be of value to SPC in helping it demonstrate its value to both its members and its metropolitan donors.

Table 1: Member core funding contributions 2022 (Euros)

Member	Assessed	Voluntary	Total	% of total
Australia	2.7m	5.9m	8.6m	54%
France	2.1m	0.3m	2.4m	15%
New Zealand	1.7m		1.7m	11%
United States	1.2m		1.2m	7%
Other Members	2.1m		2.1m	13%
Total	9.8m	6.2m	16.0m	100%

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EVALUATION FINDINGS

Part Two: Value for Money



Economy

- Leadership, management and governance arrangements of the Partnership are working to ensure the Partnership supports demonstrable changes in the regional service delivery by SPC. However, a perception does exist within SPC that the importance of the Partnership to DFAT is waning.
- SPC is leveraging its comparative advantage, with support from the Partnership, in the provision of scientific and technical expertise to enhance its regional service delivery.



Efficiency

- The Partnership has provided predictable, multi-year funding which has enhanced SPC's efforts to optimise the planning and allocation of these funds.
- Predictable, multiyear funding has contributed to continuity of SPC's work between project funding cycles.
- SPC, with support from the Partnership, has instituted wide ranging efforts to ensure more efficient practices (e.g. Internal audits, revamped Human Resource processes, strengthened MEL, improved procurement).
- SPC, with support from the Partnership, has adopted strategies and measures to ensure transparent financial budgeting and reporting.
- Whilst the Partnership has contributed to progress with regards to implementing full cost recovery practices across its operations, certain metropolitan members have not shifted on contributing the full cost of managing projects. (By way of comparison, Australia and New Zealand have agreed to a 15 % management fee. The average from all other donors to SPC is around 10-11%.)
- Funding of mutual priorities, supported by flexible and predictable funding, has enhanced collaboration between SPC and Australia.



Effectiveness

- The Partnership has enhanced SPC's efforts to continuously review performance. SPC, with support from the Partnership, has adopted strategies and measures to learn from experience, adapt delivery, and manage risks.
- Processes are in place, supported by the Partnership, to routinely discuss and review risks.



Sustainability

- The Partnership is contributing to sustainability in multiple ways, including having put mechanisms in place to enhance sustainability (such as the lobbying of metropolitan donors to provide predictable multi-year funding).
- The Partnership is being used as a guide, but SPC still needs to convince development partners to provide predictable multi-year core and flexible program funding.



Ethics

- The Partnership has helped hold partners to account and has contributed to effective dialogue between partners.
- The Partnership has contributed to ensuring greater transparent budgeting and reporting.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Part One: Institutional strengthening and partnership mechanisms

Recommendation 1: Ensure senior equivalency between organisations



Ensure senior equivalency between organisations within High Level Consultations and prioritise complementary Canberra-based meetings and online meetings within annual schedules.

Recommendation 5: Review and adjust reporting expectations



DFAT, together with SPC, to review, clarify and adjust reporting expectations in line with partnership principles associated with flexible funding arrangements. Socialise the value and utility of SPC Annual Results Reports to broader GoA agencies associated with the Australia-SPC partnership.

Recommendation 2: Review partnership focal point roles



Review and clarify functionality and expectations of partnership focal point roles as part of, and to inform the next phase of the Partnership (agreement).

Recommendation 6: Continue to strengthen coordination within DFAT



DFAT to continue efforts to improve strengthened coordination within DFAT and also across all GoA agencies associated with the Australia-SPC partnership.

Recommendation 3: Review and update partnership principles



Principles as set out in the Partnership agreement are not commonly described as core to partnership arrangements.

Review and clarify partnership principles as part of, and to enable the next phase of the Partnership to be principles-led, ensuring that the principles are relevant to the Pacific region.

Recommendation 7: Focus on strategic long-term contribution through core funding and membership



DFAT engagement to be informed by clarified principles and prioritise a focus on its contribution to SPC through core funding and member contribution to strategic longer-term priorities of SPC and Members. Emphasise Pacific-led priorities and SPC leadership of coordinated delivery of regional public goods.

Recommendation 4: Conduct annual partnership health checks



Carry out partnership health checks as part of annual HLC to strengthen partnership arrangements, as well as provide an effective means by which to measure contribution of Australia to SPC.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen the profile of the Partnership's contribution to regional public goods



SPC to strengthen its own visibility and the profile of the Partnership's contribution to regional public goods to members and the broader Pacific community, as a channel that can then be taken up by DFAT.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Part Two: Impact and Value for Money

Recommendation 9: Government of Australia to continue to engage at a senior level



The importance remains of DFAT continuing to engage at a sufficiently senior level to support meaningful, strategic conversations.

Recommendation 11: Shift to a rolling 3-year partnership arrangement



A shift to a rolling 3-year arrangement would give greater visibility and certainty over future funding. If this is not possible given DFAT's systems, a longer arrangement period with the possibility of extension, such as a 5-year arrangement with the option for an additional 5-years would be preferable.

Recommendation 10: Build stronger relationships between senior DFAT and SPC staff



DFAT could better maximise the soft power garnered through the Partnership by having more senior representatives build stronger relationships with senior counterparts in SPC.

Recommendation 12: Co-create a Theory of Value Creation and Value for Money Matrix



A Theory of Value Creation and an appropriate VfM Matrix need to be co-created with SPC and its members to ensure it fully reflects a collective understanding of value, and is hence owned by SPC.

Evaluation outputs

This report is part of a suite of outputs produced for SPC and DFAT:

- Synthesis evaluation report (this document)
- Full evaluation report
- Evaluation Part Two report

This report was developed by ISF and CoLAB after a series of workshops to sense-check the evaluation findings and recommendations with DFAT and SPC.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of DFAT, the Australian Government or SPC.

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