

Rising Tides, Rising Voices:

Building a Pacific Movement for Gender Justice, Climate and Water

Evidence from research with Pacific advocates and practitioners | April 2026



WaterAid/Tariq Hawari



Gender justice, climate and water belong together

Gender equality, climate justice, and water security are closely interlinked. Women and girls bear a disproportionate share of the burden when water becomes scarce and climate impacts intensify. They carry the water, manage the household, care for the family. They hold knowledge of where medicinal plants grow and how to read signs in the sea. And they are systematically excluded from the governance structures that determine how these crises are addressed.

It is critical that Pacific voices collectively rise up to inform global climate policy dialogue. WaterAid, together with partners, supported the development of this brief which draws on evidence from Pacific advocates, practitioners, and grassroots leaders to strengthen that advocacy. We present what they said is most urgently needed, what narratives resonate, who needs to be engaged, and what actions are possible now.



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The Pacific region: Gender justice, climate and water

Pacific Island countries face some of the highest climate risks in the world, yet contribute less than 0.03% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The Blue Pacific is home to over 12 million people and spans over 25,000 islands and millions of square kilometres of ocean. It is a region that encompasses extraordinary diversity in language, culture, traditional governance, and livelihood systems, unified by deep relationships between people, land, and sea.

The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report concludes with high confidence that small island states face intensifying cyclones, sea level rise, saltwater intrusion into freshwater aquifers, coral bleaching, and prolonged drought – all already detectable and accelerating. Climate change impacts threaten not only land and infrastructure but the ocean systems that sustain Pacific communities, cultures, and identities. Women, girls, people with disabilities, and gender-diverse people bear the greatest burden.

The Pacific has led the world calling for climate justice. Women and young people have been fiercely driving movements for change alongside Pacific Island governments at community, regional, and global levels. They have sought to raise awareness of the positive impact that reducing global greenhouse gas emissions will have on women and girls and called for gender-responsive climate justice.

“Water and climate justice is gender justice. Any solutions that ignore women, young women, and gender-diverse people will fail.”

– Pacific advocate

Pacific feminist and climate activists have their say

This research centres the expertise of activists, advocates, practitioners, and grassroots leaders working on the frontlines of gender justice, climate, and water in the Pacific. It is designed to be grounded and advocacy-relevant, developed with and for the movement it seeks to serve. It is designed to bolster the 15th Pacific Women's Triennial Outcome Statement (2024) which articulated 18 commitments to progress towards Gender Responsive Climate Justice.

The research was conducted between November 2025 – March 2026, co-led by an Advisory Group of Pacific women leaders who validated early findings, and shaped the call to action.

Evidence was gathered through (i) key informant interviews with eight advocates from Samoa, Fiji, Vanuatu, Kiribati, and Papua New Guinea, representing grassroots feminist organisations, organisations of persons with disabilities, women's rights organisations, environmental conservation organisations, and community advocacy groups; and (ii) an online survey that gathered perspectives from 38 practitioners and advocates working in or focused on the Pacific region, representing 24 countries and territories.

The following Call to Action is grounded in the perspectives of Pacific advocates, practitioners, and community leaders who participated in this research.

All the Pacific countries represented in the study through the surveys and interviews



A call to action

Building a Pacific Movement for Gender Justice, Climate and Water

1 Centre Pacific women, women with disabilities, and gender-diverse people as decision-makers, not consultees

Meaningful inclusion means Pacific women in all their diversity, sitting on steering committees, program design bodies, and governance structures as decision-makers, not just as voices to be consulted.

2 Fund grassroots Pacific organisations directly to strengthen community level management of systems and services

Climate finance and development funding must directly support women-led grassroots organisations to deliver community-led initiatives. Funding must be needs-driven and shift away from large-scale infrastructure towards targeted, sustainable community-led initiatives. It must not force local organisations to compete, merge, or compromise their context-specific priorities. Women are the primary managers of water at household and community level across the Pacific; financing frameworks must be localised and reflect this.

3 Shift Pacific climate and water narratives from vulnerability to strengths-based

Global advocacy must move away from framing Pacific communities as passive victims of climate change toward narratives that reflect their resilience, leadership, and knowledge. Solutions must be contextually grounded, culturally respectful, and community-led. Context-specific approaches are essential, because Pacific island countries are not homogeneous.

4 Name and address what is being left out of global debates

Several urgent issues remain systematically absent from regional and global climate-water advocacy: the link between water insecurity and sexual and reproductive health; the invisibility of women's unpaid care and water labour in climate accounting; the compounded vulnerability of women and girls with disabilities; the impacts of labour mobility schemes on Pacific family structures and care responsibilities; and the role of corporate water extraction in perpetuating water insecurity. These issues are structural.

5 Invest in Pacific feminist and grassroots movement-building for the long term

Sustained structural change requires investment in feminist and grassroots coalitions, in youth leadership and peer-to-peer education, in practitioners who are embedded in communities, and in the solidarity structures that prevent a shrinking funding pool from fracturing the movement. Accelerated action is needed across all fronts, and global forums have a responsibility not only to amplify Pacific voices but to resource and protect the organisations through which those voices are sustained.

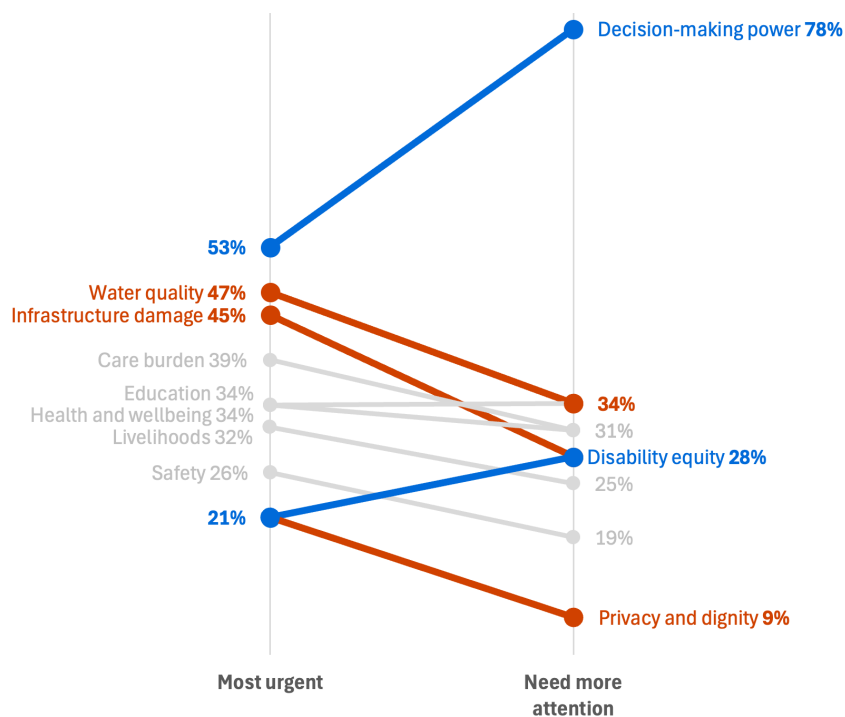
Research findings

1. Current Pacific gender, climate and water issues that need urgent attention

Women's exclusion from decision-making is the structural root cause underlying all other gendered climate-water impacts, and disability equity remains the most under-recognised crisis in both global debate and local response.

Women's decision-making power is the most urgent and needs more attention in global debates, as does **disability equity**. **Water quality, infrastructure, and privacy** are urgent, but already get attention.

% of survey respondents selecting each option (multiple selections permitted)



Issues around decision-making power, understood as the limited participation of women in climate and water governance and decision-making, including customary and traditional decision-making structures, was the most frequently cited urgent impact (53% of respondents) and was also identified as needing more attention in global debates (79%). This difference was the largest gap between issues that are most urgent and need more attention. Advocates articulated how all other gendered

climate-water impacts persist because women are absent from the spaces where decisions are made, especially at community and subnational level.

Every interview confirmed that women hold the knowledge about water needs and responsibilities for domestic water management but are systematically excluded from the spaces where decisions are made.



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“The water system is not built for women, children, people with disabilities, gender non-binary people, or LBT communities. Village meetings where water issues are raised are dominated by men.” - Advocate from Fiji

The other issue advocates identified as needing more attention was disability equity, understood as the disproportionate impacts on women and girls with disabilities in accessing safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. Responses suggest this remains an under-recognised issue, with only 21% of respondents identifying it as most urgent and 28% identifying it as needing more attention in global debates – a small gap that may reflect limited awareness of the specific and compounded ways disability intersects with climate-water insecurity. Evidence from the interviews and other studies confirms that climate-water impacts are compounded for women with disabilities, who are also excluded from decision-making spaces and largely rely on family members for access to water and support, including during climate events.

Across the Pacific, it was reported that women with disabilities often choose to stay home during cyclones rather than use inaccessible

Women with disabilities stay home during disasters

“When a cyclone or earthquake hits, evacuation centres are supposed to be safe. For women with disabilities, they often are not. Evacuation centres are not wheelchair accessible. Washrooms are not adapted. Overcrowding means privacy is impossible and dignity is routinely compromised. Shared utilities create safety risks. Women with disabilities are among the least economically secure, and they often cannot afford to bring provisions. Because of these issues, most of the times, women with disabilities will just prefer to stay in their own houses instead of going to the evacuation centres. Staying home feels safer. But staying home during a cyclone, alone, without mobility aids, without support, is dangerous. The evacuation system was not designed with them in mind. And so, they make the least-bad choice available to them, and hope the disaster passes.”

- Pacific disability advocate

evacuation centres that offered no safety or dignity.

In Kiribati, a respondent described a woman with a disability who hid her water needs from her own family for years for fear of being a burden, secretly collecting water from neighbours until she died (a death the respondent linked directly to lack of clean water for hygiene).

Advocates made a call for more participation for women, and women with disabilities in particular

“Consultation alone is not sufficient. Equitable participation requires women with disabilities to sit on steering committees and program design bodies as decision-makers, not just as voices to be heard.” – Pacific advocate

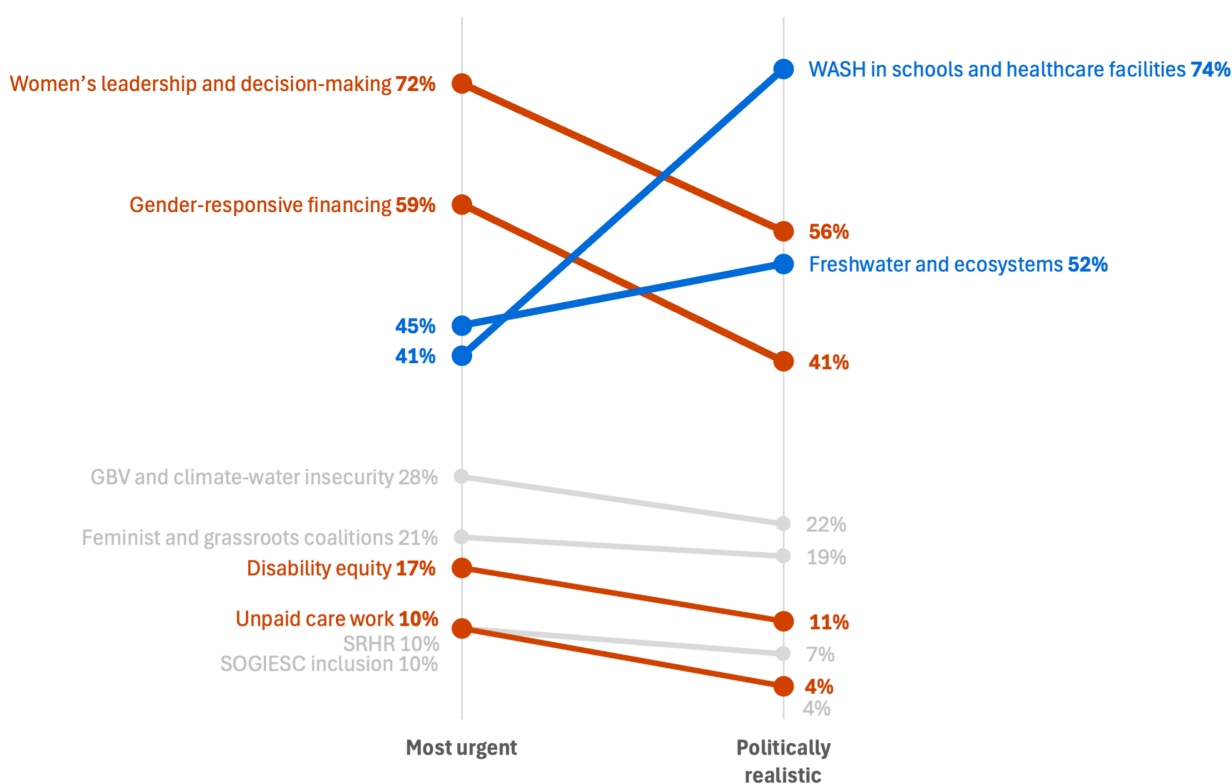
Gendered impacts related to water quality and infrastructure damage from extreme weather events were perceived as urgent, but already receiving sufficient attention.

2. Defining Pacific gender, climate and water advocacy priorities

Feminist, disability and climate advocates know what is most urgently needed: women’s leadership, gender-responsive financing, and protection of freshwater and ecosystems. Yet the current political environment is pushing advocacy toward safer, less structural priorities. It is important to acknowledge the tension between what is urgent and what is possible.

Advocating for [WASH in schools and healthcare facilities](#) seems the **most politically realistic priority right now**, even if not the most urgent.

% of survey respondents selecting each option (multiple selections permitted)



Survey respondents identified women’s leadership and decision-making in climate and water governance as the most urgent advocacy priority for the next two to three years (72%), followed by gender-responsive financing (59%). Yet, when asked what is most politically realistic right now, the results are very different. WASH in schools and healthcare facilities ranked first, with an increase in 33 percentage points between most urgent and most politically realistic. Although a more modest increase of only 7 percentage points,

freshwater and ecosystems was also considered more politically realistic than it is considered to be urgent. Women’s leadership and gender-responsive financing dropped by approximately 18 percentage points.

The two priorities that advocates consider most achievable right now would also appear to be the ones that would challenge the current power structures and systemic inequalities the least, as they do not necessarily require redistributing power, naming gendered

oppression, or transforming governance. At the same time, the priorities that would most directly address the root causes of inequality, such as women's exclusion from decision-making, disability equity, unpaid care work, and inclusion of people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), sit at the bottom of the political realism rankings.

This is a rational response to a difficult current political and economic environment, and is also aligned to what advocates described as deliberate caution around language and framings that might inhibit conversations with people that need to be influenced, as they may carry political risk and must be navigated carefully. For example, in Vanuatu, advocates described deliberately moving away from the term "feminism" in public-facing work because the word itself created backlash that closed conversations.

The data reflects strategic choices from Pacific advocates who are navigating constrained political environments while holding firm to longer-term goals for gender equality, disability

equity, climate justice, and water security. Prioritising technically grounded advocacy may be an informed response to contexts where more structurally challenging approaches could carry organisational and personal risk.

Pacific advocates' experiences point to community-embedded, locally led approaches as a durable pathway toward the structural change that survey respondents identified as most urgently needed. In PNG, one advocate described building government influence incrementally through sustained community presence, strategic engagement with customary leadership, and the integration of traditional ecological knowledge, demonstrating that structural change may not require waiting for favourable political conditions, but can be cultivated from within existing community structures over time.

"You cannot be waiting for the government. You need to do something for yourself. You went and got educated so you could take these services back home." – Advocate from PNG

We pick our battles: Adjusting language to manage backlash and facilitate a more effective conversation

"In 2022, our organisation held Vanuatu's first National Feminist Forum. At that time, the name was deliberate because our organisation is proud to be a feminist organisation. We are the only organisation in the country that uses the term 'feminist'. But around the time of the forum, there was a lot of backlash about the term. People were asking big questions about why we were using that word. It carries a lot of baggage for many people. And so the feminists started to become nervous to call themselves feminists. They worried about how other would perceive them.

This year, in 2026, we held another forum, but this time we decided to change the name to the Vanuatu Women's Festival. The principles

around feminism are the same. It's just the approach, the language that we use that is different. We're now trying to use 'women's movement' instead of 'feminist movement.' Just adjusting that language, and helping people feel more comfortable. It was a compromise we had to make to be strategic. Getting people into the room to have the conversation matters more than winning the argument about what to call it. We pick our battles. Nobody would participate in the conversation if they felt we were disregarding the wider community by standing by just this one word that would separate us from meeting the bigger need."

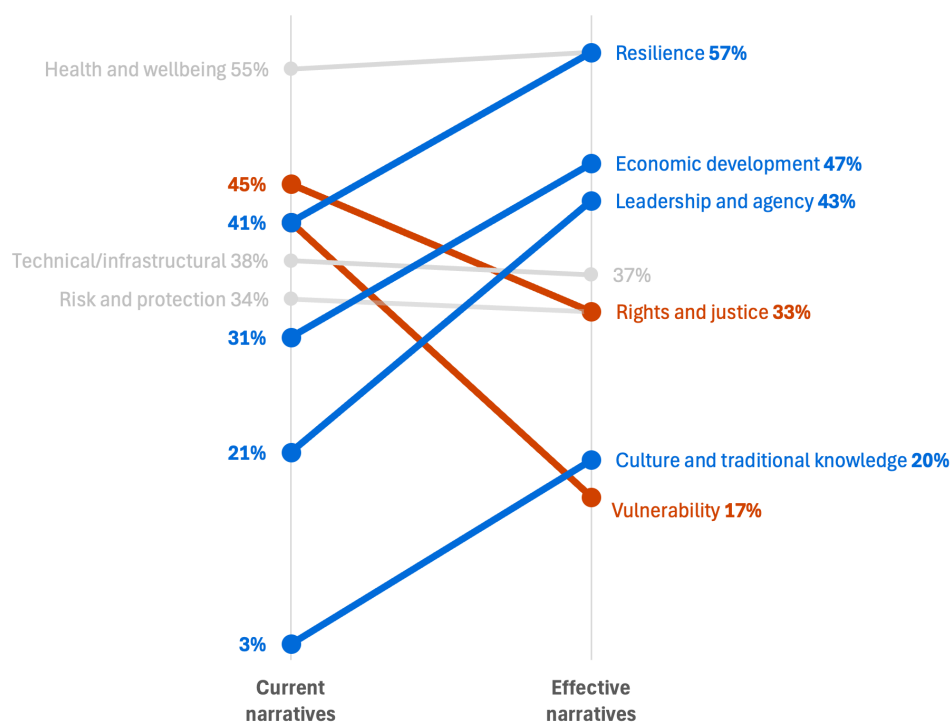
- Advocate from Vanuatu

3. Unpacking current gender, climate and water narratives that shape advocacy now

A health and wellbeing framing dominates current advocacy and remains effective, but the most important opportunity lies in shifting away from vulnerability towards strengths-based narratives that highlight stories of leadership, resilience, and cultural knowledge.

There are several gaps between current and most effective narratives in advocacy. Use more: [leadership and agency](#), [resilience](#), [cultural knowledge](#); use less: [vulnerability](#) and [rights and justice](#).

% of survey respondents selecting each option (multiple selections permitted)



Respondents identified health and wellbeing as both the most common current narrative (55%) and among the most effective (tied with resilience at 57%). This consistency suggests a foundation of advocacy that is already working.

The more revealing finding is the gap between the high prevalence of vulnerability narratives and their perception as least effective for advocacy in the Pacific. Rights and justice framings also showed a pattern of being commonly used, but ineffective in the current political context. While they may not be regarded as effective right now, human rights and justice narratives are crucially important for

promoting human rights and gender equality.

Other narratives that present the clearest opportunities to strengthen advocacy are economic development and livelihoods, leadership and agency, and cultural and traditional knowledge, as they are underused relative to their perceived effectiveness in the Pacific context.

Multiple interviewees described the gap between how global forums talk about the Pacific and how Pacific communities talk about themselves.

“The talk is about us drowning, always making people feel so vulnerable. How do we get away from always feeling like the victim? How do we actually talk about things that show our strengths?” – Advocate from Samoa

For example, an advocate from Kiribati pushed back against the sinking island narrative that dominates international climate discourse, insisting that Kiribati is changing shape, not disappearing, and that framing the country as such risks erasing the agency of its people and the complexity of what is happening on the ground.

“Pacific communities are not just vulnerable small islands at the mercy of climate change. They have resilience, knowledge, and leadership, but structural inequalities make these harder to exercise.” – Advocate from Fiji

Kiribati is changing shape. It is not sinking

“Every time I see a video online claiming that Kiribati is sinking, that in fifty years it will be underwater, it makes me mad. So as soon as I see these posts and claims, I always I respond. I actually have a fake Facebook account I use specifically to challenge those posts. Yes, Kiribati is affected by climate change. I know coastal erosion is happening, drought is real, plants and trees are dying, fish breeding seasons are changing, the heat is intensifying. I have seen all of this with my own eyes.

But sinking is not the right word. I call it changing shape. My village is shifting, the coastline is moving. But it is not disappearing. It is becoming something different. I’m writing a book about it. I want to document what I have witnessed, as someone who has lived in this place my whole life, so that the world’s understanding of Kiribati is not only the image of water rising over a country passively awaiting its end. Kiribati is changing shape. It is NOT sinking.”

- Advocate from Kiribati

An advocate from Samoa described communities who moved inland after a tsunami twenty years ago and never returned to the coast, because the narrative of danger and fear displaced their connection to the ocean.

“We moved away from the ocean, but the ocean is our life, it feeds us, cleanses us, that’s the story of our people, but we’ve taken that away.” – Advocate from Samoa

Cultural and traditional knowledge emerged as one of the most underused narratives in the sector currently. However, advocates interviewed described their experiences of oral storytelling traditions, community-based dialogue formats such as Talanoa and Storian being impactful and locally grounded. More evidence and research may be needed to test the effectiveness of cultural and traditional knowledge as an effective advocacy tactic.

Advocates who are already using strength-based approaches offered important reflections and examples.

“There is good work happening on the ground, and most of it led by women for women, together with the support of our men folks. And the world needs to know about this, how this is an integral part of the Pacific way.” – Pacific practitioner

In Kiribati, an organisation of persons with disabilities built their advocacy identity around the phrase ‘our disability is our strength’ and used theatre, music, and humour to mobilise communities and advocate for disability equity. In Vanuatu, a grassroots organisation produced a documentary sharing the story of three women in politics, which contributed to one of them being elected to parliament. These successes are evidence of the effectiveness of strengths-based, story-led advocacy.

Pacific advocates are calling for a shift from deficit and vulnerability narratives to strength and resilience.

Storian and Talanoa: the Pacific way of getting the message across

“In Vanuatu, we call it Storian, in Fiji, they call it Talanoa, but the principle is the same across the Pacific: you sit together, you talk, you tell the story. You share with people, you don't present at them. In Vanuatu, we're very community focused, we have very strong family values, and when people share a story or an experience they've had, everyone has that open mind and open heart to be able to relate, to give advice. For our organisation, this principle shapes how we approach every

advocacy conversation. Before a project begins, we talk about it in the office. We do our research and come back and keep talking. When everything is clear, we take it to partners. The conversation is never one-way. We focus on really creating that informal setting, just being down-to-earth with everyone. It helps bring out the conversations and those difficult topics. When you make it very formal, that's when everyone is silent.”

- Advocate from Vanuatu

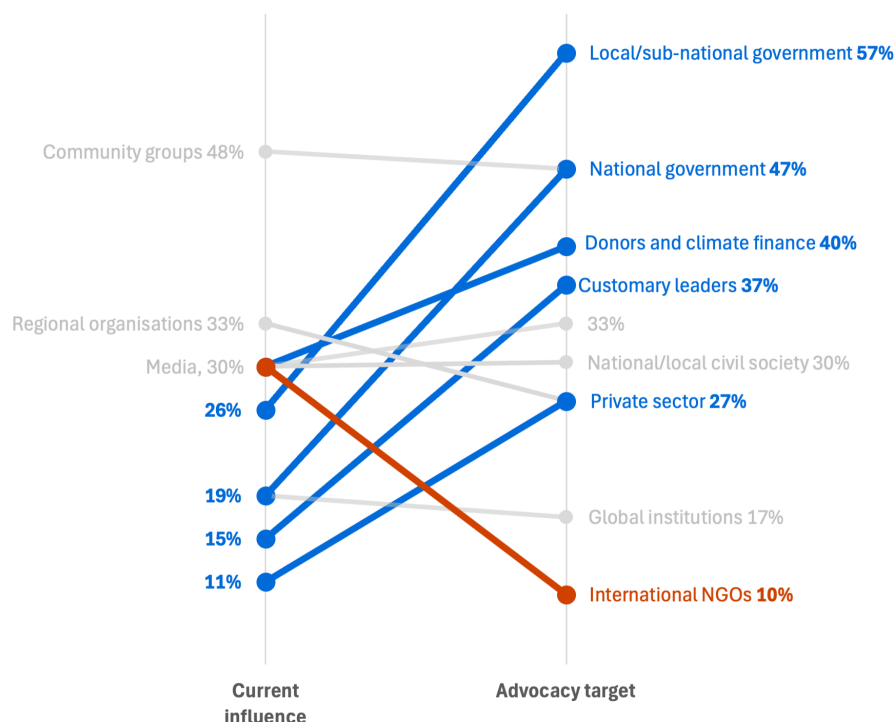


4. Understanding who has the power to drive change

Pacific grassroots and feminist organisations have strong community and civil society influence, but there are significant opportunities to engage with government at all levels, donors, and the private sector, where decision-making power and funding are concentrated.

Pacific advocates need to target **government, customary leaders, donors, and the private sector**; they already have **international NGO** influence

% of survey respondents selecting each option (multiple selections permitted)



Survey respondents identified local and sub-national government (57%) and national government (47%) as the top advocacy targets, yet both ranked among the lowest for current influence. The gap is similarly significant for donors and climate finance (22 percentage points difference), private sector (16 percentage points), and customary leaders (10 percentage points). International NGOs showed the inverse pattern, currently ranked highest for influence but lowest as an advocacy target, suggesting Pacific advocates feel that influence is already well-established and efforts are better directed elsewhere.

The government and donor influence gaps were the most consistent structural finding across interviews. For example, interviewees described how Pacific governments have received funding from the Green Climate Fund, but it is not reaching communities or Pacific grassroots organisations.

“The biggest push at every Pacific meeting I’ve been at was for climate funding, for green funding to come to the projects that are community level. And getting community-level knowledge and traditional knowledge. People talk about it all the time, but there hasn’t been any funding for it.” – Advocate from Samoa

At the same time, advocates shared concrete wins that demonstrate what closing the influence gap looks like in practice. In Vanuatu and Fiji, disability-inclusive early warning systems were achieved through sustained coalition lobbying that brought together organisations of persons with disabilities, government, and civil society. In PNG, one advocate described deliberately recruiting the village councillor as the first and most strategic move before approaching anyone else in the community.

“Because the councillor is so supportive, when we ask him to come with us, he actually makes time, because he knows his influence will help everyone else buy into what we’re doing. It’s because of him that we can now talk to other elders, and there are community champions coming up to us saying: we want to work with you.” – Advocate from PNG

Influencing government and donors jointly is essential because funding rarely reaches grassroots organisations directly. Funding largely flows from donors through national governments, and grassroots organisations often need to fit their work within externally set priorities to access it. The result is that community needs shape neither the funding agenda nor its distribution.

“Zero point zero one percent of climate finance reaches grassroots women’s organisations. We have to go through so many hoops just to access it.” – Pacific Advocate

The opportunity is for grassroots organisations to influence governments to then advocate to donors on their behalf, alongside a need for donors to set agendas based on what communities actually want and need.

“Donor-driven projects are the problem. Projects need to come from a needs basis for Pacific communities.”
– Survey respondent

How a global movement’s focus on anti-fossil fuels messaging was not the climate action that Samoa needed

“For a time, I ran the Samoa campaign of a global movement for climate action. I was committed to it and believed in it. But the movement wanted us to focus only on fossil fuels. People in Samoa don’t even contribute to fossil fuel use. Yes, it’s good for people here to understand it and how it is linked to climate change, but that’s not what’s relevant here. I need people here to know the reality of why we can’t eat rainbow fish, because people are still eating them and they don’t even know the explanation. This is what is relevant here: why are the fish seasons changing? Why is the water turning brackish? Why are the plants dying? These are the things people need to understand and act on.

A campaign focused solely on fossil fuels, which is the framework of wealthy, industrialised nations, has little to offer those questions. The global movement people didn’t want us to do other campaigns and talk about other things that are relevant here, so I was like, get away from me. And I gave it away.”

– Advocate from Samoa

Lastly, in the Pacific, power is not held by government alone. Churches, traditional governance structures, and customary leaders all shape what is possible on the ground.

“Here in the Pacific, government is not the only entity that holds influence and power. It’s also the church; it’s also our traditional government. Just being able to manoeuvre ourselves, create discussions, and see those as opportunities rather than barriers, that’s what I mean when I say contextualise things to the Pacific.”
– Advocate from Fiji

About this research

This project was developed by Chelsea Huggett, WaterAid Australia, and the research was led by Diana Gonzalez, Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney (ISF-UTS). Thank you to the advisory group for guiding this project (Dani Barrington; Pisey Chea; Sisi Coalala; Anne-Shirley Korave; Alice Ridge; Nalini Singh; Antoneta Soares; Hannah Tamata; Viva Tatawaqa; Doris Tulifau). It was supported by Australian Aid and Sida.

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