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Final Independent Evaluation of ‘Advancing the SDGs by Improving Livelihoods and Resilience via Economic Diversification and Digital Transformation’

Countries: Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu

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BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure

To address complex, interlinked challenges in the Pacific related to frequent climate related disasters and the ongoing socio-economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Joint Programme (JP) “Advancing the SDGs by Improving Livelihoods and Resilience via Economic Diversification and Digital Transformation” was launched. ILO led the joint programme with collaboration from OHCHR, UNESCO, UNOPS, UNODC and ITU. It combines policy reform with community-level interventions to enhance economic resilience and digital readiness. The JP promotes decent work, environmental sustainability, human rights, and improved social protection. It targets Pacific SIDS, aiming to build local capacity, modernize legal frameworks, and create enabling environments for inclusive and sustainable economic participation; particularly in digital and high-productivity sectors.

The JP’s two key outcomes focus on: first, strengthening workers and Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in vulnerable communities, especially women, youth, and persons with disabilities; and second, enhancing policy frameworks and digital infrastructure to support this transformation. These efforts align with national SDG strategies and support several goals, including SDGs 5, 8, 9, 10, and 14, as well as the UN Pacific Strategy Outcomes on economic empowerment and human rights. By enhancing skills, digital access, and entrepreneurial ecosystems, the programme seeks to position Pacific communities for long-term resilience, prosperity, and equitable growth in an increasingly digital global economy.

Present situation of the project

The JP concluded implementation on 31 May 2025

Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation

To address these complex, interlinked challenges, the Joint Programme (JP) “Advancing the SDGs by Improving Livelihoods and Resilience via Economic Diversification and Digital Transformation” was launched. It combines policy reform with community-level interventions to enhance economic resilience and digital readiness. The JP promotes decent work, environmental sustainability, human rights, and improved social protection. It targets Pacific SIDS, aiming to build local capacity, modernize legal frameworks, and create enabling environments for

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Methodology of evaluation

The evaluation of the JP used a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data to produce credible and useful findings. Methods included document reviews, semi-structured interviews with 55 out of 79 stakeholders approached across five Pacific SIDS and globally, and analysis of monitoring frameworks. The evaluation followed UN and United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) standards, applying a human-centered and rights-based approach to ensure cultural appropriateness, inclusivity, and ethical engagement. Interviews were conducted independently of the UN to uphold confidentiality, and data was disaggregated by gender, age, disability, and location. Findings were triangulated across sources, analysed using OECD DAC criteria, and validated through a stakeholder meeting to support transparency and feedback integration.

Despite its strengths, the evaluation encountered several limitations. Six interviewees were unaware of the JP, reflecting weak programme visibility or late-stage engagement in certain contexts. Participation was also affected by logistical and personal constraints. Additionally, reliance on self-reported documents and the absence of finalized policies posed challenges to data validation, although consultations helped fill some gaps. Measuring long-term outcomes and sustainability was constrained due to the short two-year duration of the programme and the late implementation of several activities. The absence of formal impact studies further limited the ability to assess enduring effects, especially for initiatives recently operationalized in 2025. Note that the programme

MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

has continued beyond the data collection phase of the evaluation; results reported here are those achieved to 30 April 2025.

Relevance. The JP demonstrates strong responsiveness to the needs of tripartite constituents across the Pacific SIDS by tackling challenges like youth unemployment and skills shortages. Demand-driven initiatives, such as Tonga's Quality Apprenticeship Programme and Fiji's SEEP, highlight the programme's ability to foster collaboration between public and private sectors, enhancing education-to-employment pathways. These efforts align with regional priorities, particularly national security and economic and social development, with maritime domain awareness a key focus for countries like Vanuatu, Tonga, and Fiji.

Coherence. The JP has strengthened internal coherence through mechanisms like revised results frameworks, joint accountability processes, and regular meetings, aimed at improving responsiveness to national priorities. These improvements have facilitated transparent communication among agencies, although full coherence in delivery has been hindered by weak integration among participating UN agencies and some national stakeholders.

Design Validity. The JP's design remains valid in addressing ongoing structural challenges faced by Pacific SIDS, such as skills shortages, poor digital infrastructure and vulnerability to climate and economic shocks. However, design improvements could be made. There was an underdeveloped ToC, weak coherence among implementing agencies, limited initial stakeholder engagement and tenuous integration into national systems and SDG reporting.

Effectiveness. The JP has shown effectiveness in promoting inclusive entrepreneurship, improving policy coherence, and enabling digital transformation. Significant progress has been made in job creation, MSME support, and the inclusion of women and youth in economic activities, with positive impacts on business resilience and formalizing informal enterprises. However, outcomes for PWDs lag behind, indicating the need for improved outreach. Despite successes, gaps in national engagement, cultural integration, and strategic alignment hinder the sustainability and depth of the programme's impact, especially in digital transformation and sectoral integration.

Efficiency. While some project elements faced delays, the JP demonstrated efficiency in adapting to challenges, including securing a no-cost extension for continued progress. Issues like delays in AIS receiver installations and the release of Solomon Islands Digital Transformation Policy were addressed with proactive planning and consultations. However, logistical challenges, such as the late procurement of country concurrence letters and delayed infrastructure deployment, hindered the programme's ability to reach populations promptly. Despite these setbacks, the JP has continued to advance towards its goals, albeit with some inefficiencies.

Sustainability. The sustainability of the JP's results is mixed. Successful initiatives like Fiji's National Employment Policy and Solomon Islands Labour Division reforms show potential for long-term sustainability.

Cross-cutting. The JP has made uneven progress in promoting gender equality, disability inclusion, and non-discrimination. While initiatives in Solomon Islands and Tongan Women in ICT reflect efforts to integrate these principles, gaps remain, particularly in disability inclusion, with limited targeted programming for PWDs. Structural challenges, including staffing shortages and inconsistent cross-agency collaboration, have hindered the implementation of gender equality and social inclusion. The JP has been more successful in enabling social dialogue, particularly through the Tripartite Labour Advisory Board in Solomon Islands, but national participation in broader dialogues has been limited. Environmental inclusivity, while not a core focus, has been addressed sporadically, with scope for future efforts in integrating sustainability into programme design.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Main findings & Conclusions

Recommendations apply to future programmes as there is no follow on 'Advancing SDGs programme' planned. Specific implementation suggestions are therefore limited.

1. Strengthen joint programming design & monitoring

- Develop a unified Theory of Change and results framework for the strongest PUNO proposals, with strong indicators for gender, disability, environment and PUNO interdependencies. Integrate learning-oriented monitoring using accessible tools.
- 2. Deepen stakeholder engagement**
- Ensure early and continuous involvement of technical ministries and subnational actors through consultations, tailored communication, and participatory reviews.
- 3. Mainstream inclusion**
- Implement targeted strategies for gender equality, disability inclusion, and environmental sustainability, including consultation with relevant groups and staff training.
- 4. Improve cross-agency coordination**
- Strengthen joint planning and delivery among PUNOs, establish shared accountability mechanisms, and institutionalize governance and knowledge-sharing platforms.
- 5. Enhance operational efficiency**
- Simplify and accelerate fund disbursement processes, allow budget flexibility, and institutionalize regular financial reviews and updates.
- 6. Build long-term institutional capacity**
- Partner with local institutions for decentralized delivery and sustainable reach, leveraging agencies with strong subnational presence.
 - Commit to multi-year programming aligned with national plans to ensure institutional sustainability and reduce reliance on external funding.
- 7. Scale successes**
- Replicate successful models across the region via regional exchange platforms, leveraging achievements for greater impact and joint funding initiatives.

Main lessons learned and good practices

The JP experience offers lessons for improving the design, management, and implementation of joint programmes in complex, dynamic environments. Effective joint programme design requires clear linkages, accountability mechanisms, and strong coordination among UN partners to avoid fragmentation and ensure synergies are realized. Realistic timelines, long-term financing, and integration into national systems are essential for sustainability, especially when targeting structural reforms such as digital transformation or employment policy development. The use of contextually aligned indicators and adaptive log frames enhances learning and programme responsiveness. Flexibility is vital in managing external shocks like natural disasters or political instability, which demand responsive planning.

On the management and implementation side, stronger inter-agency coordination and communication systems would strengthen joint accountability. Proactive staffing and agile funding mechanisms are necessary to maintain momentum, particularly in regions affected by high turnover or operational delays. Inclusive, rights-based approaches added significant value but require more consistent integration of gender, disability, and environmental considerations. Sustained stakeholder engagement, tailored to local contexts and backed by flexible collaboration, is vital for relevance and ownership. Future programmes must prioritize local capacity-building and embed adaptive management strategies to strengthen resilience, impact, and sustainability in similarly complex settings.

Three good practice examples have been developed:

- Partnering with local institutions with subnational reach, using alternative transport options, and decentralizing implementation are essential for overcoming these persistent access barriers.
- The alignment with international conventions, such as Solomon Islands' ratification of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, has served as a catalytic gateway for accessing global networks and support, enhancing national visibility and legitimacy.
- Building on developed and larger existing programs to address new context through programs like Smart Islands (ITU/UNOPS) and the AIS programme (UNODC) have helped access ready expertise and volume of buy for procurements.

