



DESIGN SUMMARY: PACIFIC RUGBY LEAGUE PARTNERSHIP

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES THROUGH RUGBY LEAGUE

Project name: Pacific Rugby League Partnership (PRLP)

Investment	Partner Countries	Delivered by
AUD\$250 million from 2026-2034	Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga	The Australia Rugby League Commission (ARLC) alongside national rugby league federations, local communities, schools, and sporting organisations.

1. OVERVIEW

The **Pacific Rugby League Partnership (PRLP)** is a new **AUD 250 million** investment that will support the growth of rugby league across **Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga** for ten years through to **2034**.

The partnership recognises the unique role rugby league plays in bringing communities together across the Pacific and Australia. Through partnerships with governments, schools, rugby league organisations, and communities, the PRLP seeks to create stronger elite and grassroots competitions, visible and consistent pathway programs, and increased opportunities for women, men, girls and boys to participate in sport. The Partnership will use rugby league as a platform for positive social change and stronger, and deeper community and regional connections. It will also deepen people-to-people and institutional links between Pacific nations and Australia and drive positive social change through the growth of rugby league.

The PRLP will be delivered in close partnership with the national rugby league federations in PNG, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. Long-term sustainability is fundamental to the design, and the ARLC will work to build the skills, institutional capacity and financial viability of local federations.

A steering committee comprised of DFAT and the ARLC will provide high-level strategic oversight of PRLP and monitoring of broad risks, ensuring PRLP is responsive to shifts in priorities, with flexibility entrenched in the program design and implementation arrangements.

The design presents gender equality and disability inclusion as intermediate outcomes. PRLP presents strong opportunities to promote gender equality in rugby league across the four partner countries, aligning with DFAT's new International Gender Equality Strategy (2025).

Development Context

Rugby league is experiencing strong and sustained growth across the Pacific, fuelled by rising enthusiasm for Australia's NRL, where 52 percent of players—both men and women—identify as having Pasifika heritage. The Pacific Championships have emerged as a key fixture in the regional sporting calendar, with the 2024 tournament drawing an audience of 6.3 million viewers—a 42.5 percent increase from the previous year. The foundations for rugby league development are solid, with more boys and girls actively taking up the sport and a passionate supporter base rallying behind national teams and players.



With half the region's population aged under 23, future regional growth and stability will be driven by the Pacific's youth. At the same time, a range of social issues are impacting the health and wellbeing of this cohort in the four partner countries. Sport, and rugby league in particular, is viewed as an important vehicle to address some of these social issues and drive social change.

These social issues include:

Gender-based violence: Rates of violence against women in the Pacific are among the highest globally - estimated at about double the global average.

Low school retention rates: School retention rates are low in the Pacific. It is estimated that a third of Pacific Island adolescents and youth of secondary age are not enrolled in school.

Youth unemployment: Low wages, lack of opportunity and high levels of informal employment remain a challenge in many parts of the Pacific.

Poor health outcomes: Life expectancy across the four countries ranges from 66 years old in Papua New Guinea to 73 years old in Samoa – and 68 years in Fiji and 71 years in Tonga.

Drug abuse and HIV: Methamphetamine is a growing social issue, particularly in Fiji and Samoa, and drug-related disorders comprise 40 percent of Tonga's psychiatric ward admissions.

2. STRATEGIC INTENT AND RATIONALE

Australia's Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2032+ highlights the importance of Australia strengthening ties with the Pacific by leveraging global interest in Australian sports and its expertise in sport for development programming. DFAT's International Development Policy outlines a long-term vision for addressing the critical needs of partner nations and fostering sustainable development. Additionally, bilateral Development Partnership Plans and the Pacific Regional Development Partnership Plan emphasise the need to deepen engagement with Pacific partners through development and diplomacy—recognising sport as a powerful tool for connection, inclusion, and positive social change.

PRLP will make an important contribution to the success of the PNG Chiefs, announced by the Australian and PNG Governments in December 2024, and expected to debut in the NRL in the 2028 season. The partnership will leverage ARLC's brand and expertise to strengthen rugby league across four Pacific nations—enhancing talent pathways, coaching, facilities, and competitions. Major events will boost tourism and local economies, while expanded competitions stimulate local business. Development of coaches, officials, and administrators will improve employability and education. Governance will be reinforced through national federation capacity-building, complementing DFAT's broader regional development efforts. PRLP will promote collaboration across sports bodies, encouraging shared facilities, coaching resources, and gender-inclusive policies, particularly in resource-constrained settings like Samoa and Tonga. Beyond sport, PRLP reinforces Australia's strategic and development role, creating diplomatic opportunities and fostering regional ties through competitions and people-to-people engagement.

3. PROPOSED OUTCOMES AND DELIVERY APPROACH

The overarching long-term goal of the PRLP is 'Through the growth of rugby league, Pacific nations and Australia deepen people-to-people and institutional links and drive positive social change'. This goal reflects the unique but intersecting intentions of the two partners, DFAT and the ARLC. A central objective is to ensure: Rugby league is a vibrant and valued sport in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, and Tonga, driving positive social change and connecting Pacific and Australian communities.

The program's outcomes, logic and theory of change have been developed iteratively through multiple workshops with the design team, DFAT Canberra, Pacific posts and the ARLC. Over 250 stakeholders from throughout the Pacific were consulted including, Government, rugby league stakeholders, gender equity advocates, school associations and organisation for people living with a disability. The key enabling outcome is:



Strong rugby league federations and clubs: National rugby league federations and sub-national teams, clubs, and organisations are capable, well governed, investor ready and sustainable. Federations and clubs are keeping rugby league safe and fair, at all levels, for all participants.

The four End of Program Outcomes are:

- Increased and effective community and school competitions. Community and school competitions are safe and accessible for all (women and men, girls and boys).
- Enhancing community participation, gender equality and strengthening inclusivity. Women, men, girls, boys and their communities demonstrate healthy relationships and behaviours through participation in rugby league at all levels.
- Talent pathways increase opportunity. Pacific-led inclusive pathways for players, coaches, officials, and administrators grown sustainably in-country
- Sustainable elite and international rugby league. Greater Pacific representation in elite competitions and more high-quality international rugby league, deepening people to people and institutional links.

The target beneficiaries of the program are community, grassroots, emerging, amateur, and elite Pacific athletes, coaches, administrators, volunteers, officials and families seeking opportunities to engage at all levels of rugby league in the region, along with their local and national communities. A subset of beneficiaries are the rugby league federations that govern and are intended to deliver rugby league in participating countries. The federations will benefit from having access to skilled expertise, technical assistance, and capacity building to run stronger, more effective federations and build better corporate partnerships.

PRLP will also seek to achieve strong communication outcomes including to ensure Australia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Tonga, and the wider Pacific engage with PRLP's journey and impact.

PRLP will partner with the four national federations to deliver activities aligned with program goals. The upskilling and resourcing of national federations will be key to the long-term impact of the PRLP and the overall sustainability of rugby league in the Pacific. The ARLC will manage grants to these federations and other organisations in line with the Australian Government's Commonwealth Grants Rules and Principles (2024).

4. MONITORING, EVALUATION, REPORTING, RESEARCH AND LEARNING (MERL)

PRLP builds on existing successful initiatives and represents significant scale up of current programming, combining elements proven in programs such as Team Up and PacificAus Sports, including collaborations with the NRL. High-quality monitoring, evaluation, reporting, research, and learning (MERL) will be essential to demonstrate lasting impact. PRLP will be monitored and evaluated through quality data collection so both ARLC and DFAT know what is working, what isn't and how improvements can be made. PRLP will use participatory approaches to gain feedback and insights from players, clubs, communities, and partners to guide decisions and make sure the program stays on track. This approach will help ARLC show the impact of its work with partners, keep all partners accountable, and provide the information required to share the PRLP story with the wider public. DFAT will be actively involved in design and implementation of PRLP monitoring, evaluation, research and learning.

5. GENDER EQUALITY AND DISABILITY INCLUSION

The ARLC has experience supporting the integration of cross-cutting issues into its programming including in areas of gender equality, disability equity and safeguards.

Australia's new International Gender Equality Strategy commits to advancing the rights of women and girls by integrating gender equality across all areas of foreign policy. The Strategy prioritises ending gender-based violence, promoting women's health and leadership, supporting economic equality, and ensuring gender-responsive climate and peace efforts—aiming to build a safer, more inclusive Pacific. Gender equality is vital to regional stability,



especially in fragile contexts, where issues like gender-based violence and limited economic opportunities for women deepen existing vulnerabilities. The OECD emphasises that addressing gender inequality can break cycles of fragility and conflict by fostering inclusive, peaceful societies. Achieving sustainable stability requires systematic, gender-informed approaches to development that empower both women and men to contribute to, and benefit from, lasting change. While the four partner countries already have sports policies and gender equality strategies—some of which recognise sport as a key driver—significant challenges remain.

PRLP has strong opportunities to support gender equality in the rugby league ecosystem in the four partner countries, and in doing so, deliver against the objectives outlined in DFAT’s International Gender Equality Strategy (2025). The approach acknowledges that the participation of women and girls in sports (as athletes, coaches, and visibility as role models in marketing and media) increases individual self-efficacy, wellbeing and leadership, and challenges power imbalances and perceptions related to stereotypical gender roles beyond the field. It also seeks to take a gender transformative approach to strengthen policies and practices to support longer-term positive changes in biased social norms, attitude and behaviours. The risks of SEAH perpetuated by male players, coaches and other men in positions of power are high. PRLP acknowledges this reality and seeks to respond to these risks through strong and considered safeguarding approaches at all levels of the investment.

People of all abilities share a love for sport and rugby league in the Pacific. Comprehensive and comparable disability statistics across all Pacific nations are limited. People with disability face significant challenges in their participation in rugby league, including issues related to accessibility, transportation costs, the lack of specialised equipment, and the absence of structured development pathways. PRLP has a specific intermediate outcome on disability equity with PRLP aiming to expand access to rugby league for Pacific people with disability. Disability equity is also mainstreamed through EOPO 3 Healthy relationships, healthy behaviours with social change programs providing the vehicle for awareness raising and education about respectful relationships and positive social behaviours. Under PRLP, League for Life will be encouraged to provide more opportunities for students with disabilities to join in rugby league activities including through the provision of special equipment and tailored games.

The NRL celebrates Indigenous culture through initiatives like the Indigenous Round and All Stars match and supports First Nations youth through programs such as ‘School to Work’ and the Indigenous Youth Summit. PRLP offers strong opportunities to deepen connections between Australia’s First Nations communities and the Pacific, building on the NRL’s commitment to First Nations people and supporting Australia’s broader First Nations foreign policy. Many players are also cultural leaders and social justice advocates. Supporting First Nations participation in talent pathways and elite matches alongside Pasifika athletes will help strengthen people-to-people ties across the Pacific.

6. RISK MANAGEMENT AND SAFEGUARDS

The PRLP will be delivered in a high-risk environment. Risks are heightened by operating across Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, where institutional capability varies and local federations often face workforce, governance and financial management constraints.

Safeguarding risks are substantial given PRLP’s engagement with children, young people and communities. Child protection, prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH), gender equality, disability inclusion and participant welfare will have strong systems and oversight in place throughout delivery.

The operating context also presents significant environmental and contextual risks. Natural disasters, climate change, extreme weather, can disrupt competitions, community activities, infrastructure projects and travel.

Despite this challenging environment, the risk profile can be managed through strong governance, DFAT oversight, robust safeguarding measures, strengthened federation capability and comprehensive risk management processes, complemented by adaptive program delivery.