



STRENGTHENING PACIFIC HEALTH SYSTEMS:

Evaluating ten years of Australia's support



Photo: Nurses take part in an Australian funded training program at Vaiola Hospital in Nuku'alofa, Tonga. Photo taken by Connor Ashleigh.

Good health is essential to sustained economic and social development and poverty reduction. Well-functioning health systems enable countries to provide the essential health services people need.

While child mortality has declined substantially in this evaluation's seven Pacific island focus countries, challenges remain, including the impact of non-communicable diseases on Pacific Islanders' health and economies.

Pacific island health ministers are committed to strengthening primary health care, including preventive services, so they achieve their Healthy Islands vision and universal health coverage (UHC) of essential services and financial protection by 2030.

This evaluation

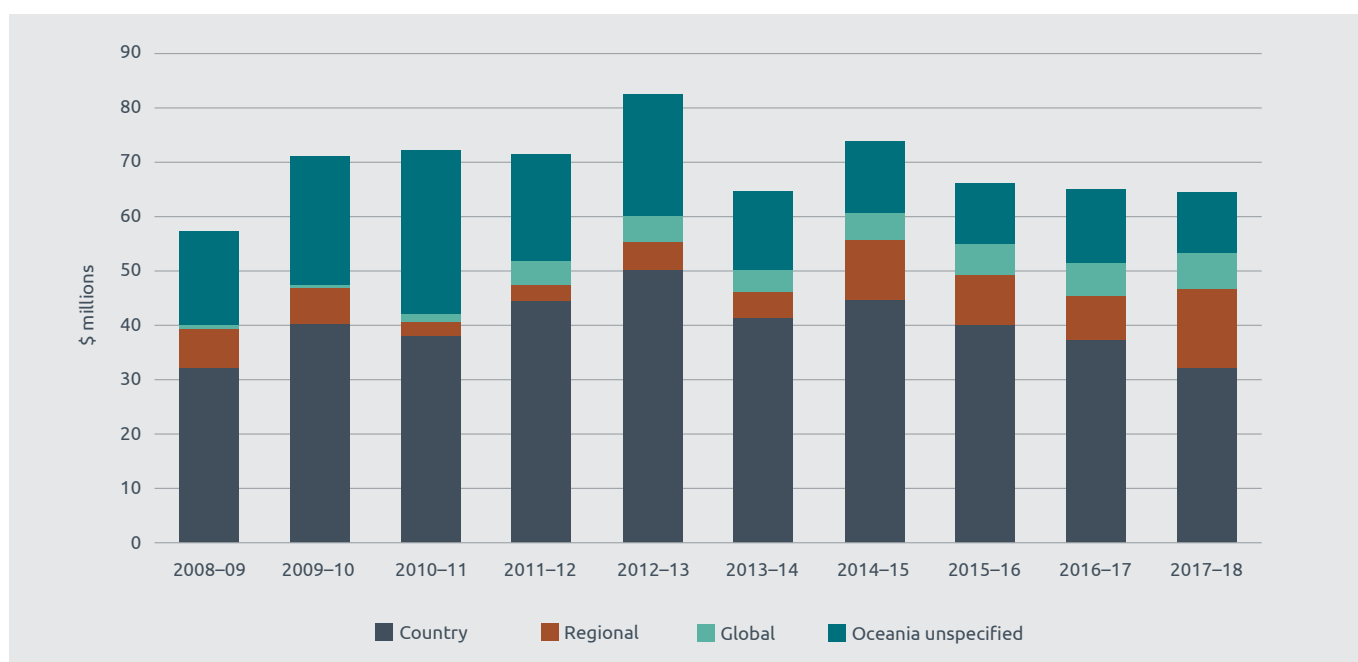
The Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE), commissioned this evaluation to assess Australia's support, as administered by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), for strengthening health systems in Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu (2008–2009 to 2017–2018).

According to the World Health Organization, health system building blocks include service delivery, health workforce, information systems, medical products, vaccines and medical technology, health systems financing, and leadership and governance.

While health systems in the focus countries strengthened during the evaluation period, much is still needed. If present slow trends continue, all seven focus countries will fall short of achieving UHC by 2030.

This evaluation backs taking partnerships to a new level. It recommends changes in how DFAT works with partner countries in health, in five strategic areas.

Figure 1: DFAT health funding to seven Pacific island focus countries by program type, 2008–09 to 2017–18



Country programs are funded bilaterally. Regional programs target a number of specific Pacific countries. Oceania unspecified programs have a Pacific-wide benefit. Global programs are funded across regions, including in the Pacific.

What did DFAT fund in health?

DFAT provided \$689 million in total assistance for health in the seven focus countries during the evaluation period through four types of funding:

- » country (bilateral) programs (\$402 million)
- » regional programs, benefiting a number of the specific Pacific countries (\$71 million)
- » global programs, benefiting the specific Pacific countries (\$40 million)
- » Oceania unspecified programs, which have a Pacific-wide benefit (\$176 million).

Over the evaluation period, the proportion of funding between the types of programs changed. Since 2013–14, the proportion of funding to country-level programs has decreased compared to that provided to regional and global programs.

Did programs contribute to strengthening health systems?

Fifteen country or bilateral health programs across the focus countries were assessed, comprising 81 per cent of country health program expenditure in the evaluation period.

Most assessed programs included ‘umbrella’ programs, which included a range of activities to strengthen health systems in the focus country, in five-year repeated program cycles.

Over the evaluation period, coverage of essential health services in the seven focus countries gradually increased, and Australia contributed to making Pacific island health systems stronger in a number of ways, as highlighted in Table 1.

Australia’s support also contributed to strengthening the capacity of individuals and institutions, especially through health workforce training institutions and scholarships.

Table 1: Good practice examples of strengthening health systems

More qualified health workers		Better information systems	
Fiji, Solomon Islands and Tonga		Fiji and Solomon Islands	
Planning, budgeting and financial management improved	Better supply chain management of pharmaceuticals	Role delineation policy helping to guide health system towards UHC	
Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu	Solomon Islands	Solomon Islands	

What helped and hindered health system strengthening?

DFAT's ways of working helped strengthen health systems in many ways. In some cases, DFAT's approach also hindered the full effect of the support given.

 HELPED	 HINDERED
DFAT's health and development policies and strategies	
Setting the broad framework for support.	Adopting siloed approaches to system strengthening.
Partnerships between Australia and Pacific island countries	
Engaging around shared objectives, with the right representation on both sides and discussions informed by evidence.	Engaging in transactional rather than strategic policy dialogue and adopting approaches that were not flexible or adaptable.
Types of aid	
Working through partner government systems provided opportunities to strengthen them.	Inadvertently imposing high transaction costs.
Approach to capacity building	
Providing technical assistance strengthened organisational capacity.	Conducting limited high-quality systematic analysis of country capacity and priorities, over-relying on technical assistance and implementing a limited mix of capacity building approaches.
Networking and attending meetings to share data fostered technical and leadership skills and confidence in Pacific ministry and health staff.	
Coherence within DFAT's health portfolio	
Implementing programs which had complementary effects on health system strengthening.	Implementing multiple programs lacking coordination and coherence in country.
Monitoring and evaluation	
Improving, and using, partner government health information systems to monitor progress.	Insufficiently supporting the qualitative evaluation, operational research and research capacity development needed to understand better health systems and program progress.
DFAT capability	
Providing technical health, development and Pacific expertise.	Inconsistently providing access to technical health expertise, inadequately tapping into the expertise of locally engaged staff and Pacific island health expertise.

Recommendations: maximising the effectiveness of DFAT's health programs in the Pacific

This evaluation identifies five strategic areas for improvement with recommendations.

Five strategic focus areas	Recommendations
Making universal health coverage central	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » ensuring UHC is the overarching goal of DFAT's health commitments » recognising the importance of primary health care and including public health services designed to promote better health and prevent illness » supporting strategic country tailored approaches » embracing the Sustainable Development Goal principle that no-one should be left behind » continuing to support sustainable health system strengthening » supporting critical inputs to service delivery when required
Taking partnerships seriously	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » ensuring more deliberate and structured partnerships with DFAT's Pacific island health partners and ongoing monitoring of the quality of the partnerships » engaging with partners and being more transparent about the choices and trade-offs made in what and how programs are supported » exploring the lessons learned on working in partner systems and performance-linked funding » reinforcing Pacific island government health plans, processes and structures for better decision making to improve coherence and coordination » investing in country capacity to engage in partnerships
Driving change through knowledge and evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » continuing to support and use country information systems » exploring whole-of-government approaches to information systems » investing more in analytical and research capacities within countries » fostering co-analysis with partner governments of program effectiveness and using this to inform future investments
Investing in Pacific leaders and solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » prioritising investment in Pacific health leaders » basing capacity building investments on joint analysis of needs and priorities » moving beyond a heavy reliance on international technical advisors to using a mix of approaches: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – supporting and encouraging Pacific-led innovations – making greater use of Pacific diaspora as technical advisers for program design and evaluation
Lifting DFAT performance through team effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » strengthening DFAT's own technical, development and Pacific-island related capacity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – increasing access to health and Pacific expertise – building skills in facilitating genuine partnerships » quality assuring external technical health expertise provided

Office of Development Effectiveness

ODE is a unit within DFAT which monitors the quality and assesses the impact of the Australian aid program. The full evaluation report, including the management response, is available at dfat.gov.au/ode