



Investment Concept: Pacific Media Assistance Scheme Phase 5

Investment Concept Title: Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (PACMAS) Phase 5
Start date: 1 January 2027
End date: 31 December 2036
Total proposed DFAT funding: AUD25 million plus additional bilateral contribution of up to AUD50 million (10 years, 2027-2036, including an initial grant term of 5 years plus an option to extend by 5 years) – with the potential total contribution increasing to AUD70 million if a funding commitment decision is made to integrate PNG's Media Development Initiative (MDI) during the term of the grant
Current program fund annual allocation: AUD2.5m per annum from Pacific regional budget, plus additional capacity of up to AUD2.5m per annum from bilateral contributions or AUD4.5m per annum from bilateral contributions if a decision is made to integrate MDI and subject to funding availability
AidWorks investment number: INP008
Initial Risk: Medium
Value: Medium
Proposed design pathway: Partner-led design-implement grant via ADAPT pathway
Concept endorsed by DPC: N/A
Quality Assurance: Independent appraisal and peer review planned at Investment Design Summary phase
Policy Approval: Delegate at Post: N/A Delegate in Canberra: Charlotte Blundell, FAS PED

A. Development Context (What is the problem?)

Trusted public-interest information is needed more than ever in the Pacific to support democratic resilience, social cohesion, and effective disaster and climate response, and to counter growing mis- and disinformation. At the same time, digital disruption, declining advertising revenue, skill and infrastructure constraints, and weak sector institutions are undermining the independence, relevance and financial sustainability of media organisations across the region.

The Pacific State of the Media report 2025, delivered under PACMAS Phase 4, highlights key changes in the Pacific media landscape over the past decade. Digital disruption has transformed how information is produced, distributed and consumed. While mobile internet and undersea fibre-optic cables have expanded reach and access to regional and international content, they have also outpaced digital literacy and newsroom adaptation, drawing audiences and advertising revenue away from traditional media. Many outlets now use social media to engage audiences but face significant barriers to generating revenue from these platforms.

These pressures are compounded by constrained public funding, the high cost of producing local content, ageing infrastructure, staff attrition and shortages in core media tradecraft and technical skills. Operational demands also limit staff capacity to participate in training and development.

AI presents opportunities for small newsrooms to improve efficiency, audience engagement, transcription and translation, but also increases risks around misinformation, synthetic or misleading content, and pressure on already stretched newsrooms to verify information quickly to maintain public trust. Practical guidance, safeguards and targeted skills development are needed to support responsible AI use and protect editorial standards and information integrity.

In parts of the Pacific, political pressure, legislative restrictions and uneven protections for press freedom continue to constrain independent reporting. Non-traditional actors are increasing their influence while support from traditional partners declines. Many media associations and networks lack the governance, resources and coordination capacity to advocate effectively, uphold standards and provide practical support to members.

Together, these challenges risk undermining editorial independence and the Pacific media sector's ability to provide consistent, accurate, locally relevant information and remain a trusted source of truth for Pacific audiences. Addressing these challenges requires sustained, practical and institutional support at multiple levels that strengthens media organisations, professional networks and the broader enabling environment for public-interest journalism. Media organisations need support not just for journalism skills, but for business sustainability, digital transition, leadership and institutional resilience.

Australia's media development investments respond through complementary mechanisms: the Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (PACMAS), Australia's flagship media development investment, which is evolving from traditional capacity building to support organisational transformation and institutional capability, resilience and sustainability in the Pacific; and the Regional Media Support Fund (RMSF), which provides flexible support for discrete and immediate media sector needs across the Pacific, Southeast Asia and South Asia.

B. Strategic Intent and Rationale (Why should Australia invest?)

Australia has a strong national interest in supporting and empowering a trusted, independent and resilient Pacific media sector. A vibrant media sector supports informed public debate, transparency, accountability and democratic resilience, and helps protect the rules and institutions that underpin regional peace, stability and prosperity. Strong national media institutions are also central to national storytelling, social cohesion and sovereignty. They help Pacific countries tell their own stories and strengthen a shared sense of national purpose. Investment in media resilience contributes to national resilience, unity and confidence in the face of external information pressures.

PACMAS Phase 5 is needed to protect and build on Australia's long-term investment in Pacific media at a point of accelerating disruption. Continued investment will also help maintain Australia's reputation as a reliable and responsive partner, deepen people-to-people and institutional links, and reinforce Australia's standing as a partner of choice in a strategically important sector. Strengthening the Pacific institutions and platforms through which local stories are told and shared also provides a practical way to support Pacific priorities, elevate Pacific voices, and amplify Pacific-led storytelling, including stories that could showcase and enhance our connections through sports, labour mobility, faith, culture and so on.

The Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy (IPBS) provides a framework for expanding Australian broadcasting and media engagement, increasing the availability of Australian content, deepening media connections and strengthening the resilience of media outlets in the region. PACMAS advances this agenda by strengthening the media institutions and professional networks that underpin access to credible information and public-interest journalism in the Pacific.

It also plays to Australia's comparative strengths as a partner with free and open media, international broadcasting experience and respected Pacific news coverage. Consistent with the IPBS, PACMAS Phase 5 will play a role in mobilising the full range of Australian media capability for all media platforms as part of a broader whole-of-nation effort. This includes drawing on Australia's national, commercial and community broadcasters, independent production expertise, journalism training and research institutions, media sector services, and other expertise to meet evolving needs.

Over the past 20 years, PACMAS has given Australia a trusted, long-term platform for media sector engagement in the Pacific. Its value lies not only in capacity building to date, but in relationships and institutional access built over successive phases. Phase 5 should preserve this platform while adapting it to the expanding information landscape and sharper pressures now facing the sector: digital and AI-driven disruption, declining revenue, workforce constraints, and the need for more practical, organisational support.

PACMAS Phase 4 shifted towards institution-wide strengthening, focusing on media viability, digital capability, content quality and the enabling environment for a professional, independent and inclusive Pacific media sector. An independent evaluation found Phase 4 to be strategically sound, relevant and effective. It recommended continued investment focused on media viability, digital capability and sector resilience, and identified the need for Phase 5 to place greater emphasis on practical, sustained and organisation-level support. Its findings will inform the Phase 5 design.

PACMAS Phase 5 will combine long-term institutional strengthening with practical, implementation-focused support that helps media organisations apply learning, solve operational problems, produce content, reach audiences and sustain change. This will mean providing practical learning, and embedded mentoring, newsroom and operational support.

It will strengthen enterprise-wide workforce capability, digital transition, audience development, business adaptation, leadership, inclusion, wellbeing, editorial standards, and Pacific-to-Pacific mentoring. It will integrate skills development, technical and advisory support, content co-production, leadership development, women's networks and association support to achieve deeper, more sustainable impact. It should also consider ways to strengthen public understanding of the value of independent media and trusted news, while growing the capacity of the media enabling environment in partnership with media associations.

PACMAS Phase 5 should support Pacific media institutions as they evolve, backing trusted legacy institutions while also engaging new voices and strengthening constructive links between traditional media and other information actors. This may include targeted engagement with social media/digital content makers and influencers, faith-affiliated broadcasters, government communications officers, youth and community networks, including diaspora networks, where they contribute to accurate, locally relevant and trusted public-interest information, while maintaining PACMAS' core emphasis on mainstream independent journalism, editorial standards and media sector resilience.

The design should also consider partnerships with Pacific universities and media associations to encourage uptake (and retention) of journalism as a career, and explore opportunities to leverage complementary Australian education, skills and leadership programs — including International Media Visit programs, Australian Volunteers Initiative, Australia Awards, Pacific training initiatives and alumni networks — to strengthen media capability, leadership pathways, academic and professional exchange.

Similarly, the program could consider connecting with DFAT Pacific regional gender programs such as Pacific Women Lead or the Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women, and Australian media initiatives that promote women and persons with a disability, both in the profession and in media content, to increase the positive representation of women, girls and persons with a disability across the diversity of media, and to help counter stereotypes, stigma and bias.

By the end of PACMAS Phase 5, Pacific media organisations, associations and networks will be better able to produce accurate, trusted content, understand and reach audiences, adapt to digital and AI-driven disruption, strengthen business viability, support inclusive local leadership and sustain the institutional foundations of an independent media sector.

ODA eligibility

PACMAS is an ODA-eligible investment funded through the Pacific Regional Development program and supplemented by targeted bilateral ODA contributions from selected posts.

PACMAS Phase 5 will continue to focus on the following priority countries: Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu; and include a more tailored small-state strategy for the following: Kiribati, Tuvalu, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Naeoro, Niue and Palau, for as long as they remain ODA eligible. Once countries graduate from ODA eligibility, they will no longer be eligible for PACMAS funding.

Solomon Islands benefits from PACMAS programming, but also has a complementary, bilateral media support program (the Solomon Islands Australia Media Sector Partnership, SIAMSP), managed by the Australian High Commission Honiara, that may be integrated into PACMAS in Phase 5.

In Papua New Guinea, media capacity-building support is delivered through the bilateral Media Development Initiative (MDI), managed by the Australian High Commission Port Moresby. The PACMAS Phase 5 design will consider including PNG in regional activities (with PNG bilateral funding contributions) to complement PNG-bilateral activities delivered under the MDI. Consideration may be given to integrating MDI into PACMAS at a later stage of Phase 5.

C. Proposed Outcomes and Investment Options (What?)

The **proposed goal** of this investment is to strengthen Pacific media institutions so they can continue to provide trusted, independent and locally relevant information to Pacific audiences in a rapidly changing digital and AI-driven environment.

The **proposed objective** is a more adaptive, trusted and professional Pacific media sector. The **preliminary end-of-program outcomes** (EOPOs) for this investment are:

EOPO 1: Targeted Pacific media organisations are more viable, resilient and adaptive, with the capability to respond to digital and AI-driven change and help counter growing information threats.

EOPO 2: Pacific audiences have access to, value and engage with trusted, accurate, independent and locally relevant public-interest content.

EOPO 3: Pacific media organisations, associations and networks are stronger, more inclusive, professional and locally led.

Note: Proposed outcomes are indicative only and will be tested and developed in the early phases of the investment design.

Core principles

The investment will be underpinned by core guiding principles, which will include:

- long-term institutional strengthening;
- practical, implementation-focused support;
- Pacific leadership and locally led expertise and implementation;
- fit-for-purpose and adaptive programming;
- coordination and complementarity;
- gender, disability, climate and evidence-based impact.

Budget

PACMAS Phase 5 is estimated at AUD25 million, plus additional bilateral contributions that may total up to an estimated AUD50 million over ten years (or up to AUD 70 million over 10 years, pending the potential integration of MDI) and subject to funding availability. This includes costed extensions, subject to performance and available budget. It will retain a hybrid regional/multi-country funding model, with core funding from the Pacific Regional Development program (AUD2.5 million per year) supplemented by country program contributions. Consideration should be given to scalable proposals, should the estimated budget envelope change.

To manage ambition within the available budget, PACMAS Phase 5 will prioritise deeper support in selected countries, organisations and regional institutions, while maintaining flexibility for emerging priorities.

GEDSI

Gender and disability will be included as **significant objectives** and inform at least one intermediate outcome each. The program will support gender and disability participation in media organisations and institutions and improve media reporting on gender and disability issues. The design will include development of an intersectional GEDSI strategy and ensure GEDSI engagement across workstreams.

Building on Phase 4's support for Women in Media, Phase 5 will continue to foster women's leadership and participation and add a dedicated focus on disability inclusion, including partnerships with organisations of people with disability, accessible and representative content, inclusive workplaces and leadership pathways for people with disability.

Climate

Climate will be included as a **significant objective**. It will be a strong focus of at least one intermediate outcome, reflected in lower levels of the program logic, including outputs and activities, and a cross-cutting theme across the investment overall. The design will include development of a Climate Change Strategy, including consideration of the GEDSI-climate nexus, to help ensure activities consider climate risks and opportunities, including energy efficiency and renewable energy options and inclusive climate and disaster resilience throughout program implementation. The approach will support science- and evidence-based climate reporting and countering of mis- and disinformation on climate change. The design should test how PACMAS 5 can strengthen disaster reporting, accessible emergency information, technical resilience and climate-informed journalism, without displacing the core focus on media viability and institutional resilience.

D. Implementation Arrangements and Delivery Approach (How will DFAT deliver it and engage?)

DFAT will undertake a competitive selection process to identify a suitable implementing partner through a request for proposal. DFAT will provide the selected partner a grant to deliver a partner-led design-implement process. In 2027 the successful partner will develop the Phase 5 design while delivering core activities in parallel as a transition phase. Subject to design approval, the successful partner will proceed to implementation of the design from 2028 to 2032 (with an extension option from 2032 to 2036).

The selected partner could be one organisation, or a consortium which draws together a combination of relevant expertise. A single partner/consortium is preferred to ensure coherence and efficiency.

Governance arrangements will need to ensure Pacific leadership, transparency, access to specialist expertise and sufficient flexibility to avoid over-centralisation or dependence on a single delivery model. The successful partner must be able to draw on Pacific and Australian expertise across newspapers, radio, television, digital and multi-platform media, as well as related technical areas such as media business development and management.

DFAT's Media and Broadcasting Unit, within the Office of the Pacific, will review the investment design and performance, set strategic direction and approve annual plans, reports and key documents. The successful partner will engage regularly with PBS and establish formal governance mechanisms to engage DFAT Canberra and posts. PBS will lead on and support coordination with like-minded partners/donors. PACMAS Phase 5 will coordinate with MDI, SIAMSP and RMSF to leverage synergies and avoid duplication, and explore linkages with complementary education, skills and leadership programs where relevant.

PACMAS will focus on longer-term institutional capability, strategic sector coordination and sustained capability development. RMSF will complement PACMAS through shorter-term, discrete, urgent or opportunistic support, including innovation pilots that may inform broader PACMAS programming.

E. Risks

The overall risk rating for the investment is medium. Key strategic risks to meeting investment objectives include:

- Objectives are too ambitious for the value of the investment – mitigated through clear prioritisation, sequencing and deeper support in focus countries;
- Key partners are disappointed with the extent to which their capacity building needs can be met and look to others for support – mitigated through transparent prioritisation and coordination with RMSF and like-minded partner programs;
- Operating environment challenges, for example, governance challenges, natural disasters, travel and operating cost pressures, hamper progress – mitigated by monitoring and contingency planning;
- The program is not sufficiently adaptive, strategic, fit-for-purpose or coordinated – mitigated through adaptive programming, work planning, governance and coordination mechanisms.

Lessons learned from previous phases will be used to guide risk mitigation.

F. What are the next steps? ¹

PACMAS Phase 5 will follow a partner-led design-implement pathway. This will allow early activities to proceed while stakeholder engagement informs the final design to transition from Phase 4 to Phase 5 for continuity.

From January 2027, the investment will indicatively follow a 1 + 4 + 5-year structure. The first year will enable the partner to deliver early activities in year one while the design is developed. Subject to DFAT's acceptance of the design, two extension options will provide for the implementation phase that can be exercised at DFAT's discretion.

This approach gives DFAT and the partner time to develop a long-term implementation plan while maintaining continuity and responding to urgent sector needs. At the end of year one, DFAT can approve the investment design and proceed, or reject it if unsuitable and terminate the grant agreement.

Quality assurance for the design process will be implemented as per DFAT's International Development Programming Guide. As per the guide, the design will undergo independent appraisals and peer review.

Milestone reporting will test value for money throughout implementation. As in Phase 4, this may include annual workplans, progress reports and quarterly update meetings. A mid-point review in year four and a final evaluation in the penultimate year will inform future programming.

¹ See [DFAT Design and MEL Standards](#) and the [Investment Design Quality Assessment Tool and Scoring Matrix](#).