




Informal social protection in Pacific Island countries – strengths and weaknesses

Informal social protection mainly refers to ‘traditional safety nets’ i.e. the ability of traditional Pacific societies to ensure an adequate subsistence living for everyone and prevent them from suffering hunger and deprivation in the event of personal misfortune. The received wisdom is that this continues to work well, a view that is increasingly challenged. Beliefs about efficacy need to examine evidence on outcomes. As indicated in the poverty and social transfers briefing paper, traditional safety nets do not entirely avert poverty and social exclusion in PICs, and ‘holes in the safety net’ are observable.

Traditional safety nets are embedded in extended kinship or clan-based Pacific social networks, known as *kastom* and *wantok* (‘one talk’) in Melanesia, *fa’fa Samoa* and *aiga potopoto* in Samoa, and *veiwekani* and *kerekere* in Fiji. There are variable ways these networks function across Pacific islands yet they all share lineage systems of inheritance, communal rather than individual ownership of land, the power of chiefs or elders to allocate land, a strong sense of social belonging and obligation (in extended kinship groups), ceremonial gift giving as an integral part of this obligation, and redistribution of gifts in such a way that no community member should experience lack of food or basic needs.

Informal social protection is eroded by diminishing flexibility in land allocation, increasing reliance on markets, rising overall poverty (“too poor to practice reciprocity”), weakening commitment to social obligations, greater inequality, and the growth of urban settlements where clan identities are diluted. These causes vary in strength and impact across Pacific societies. In many PICs, traditional safety net transfers fulfil their role to a degree, although more unevenly and haphazardly than is sometimes supposed. Particular personal circumstances may invite social exclusion (divorce, separation, absence seeking work), and migration reflects not just the pull of prospective higher standards of living, but also the push of inadequate social support and lack of economic opportunity in villages. The incidence of hunger and destitution rises in shanty towns and squatter settlements, reflecting the decline in traditional reciprocity that occurs with separation from kin.

Remittances make significant contributions to social protection in the Pacific, although their aggregate flow varies widely between PICs, and a varying proportion of this flow specifically addresses the circumstances of the deprived back home. The main ways that remittances have a social protection function is by responding to need (personal shocks and natural disasters) and by enabling customary obligations to be met or increased. Evidence from Fiji and Tonga reveals a greater impact of remittances on poor households than rich. Remittances also have a broadly positive effect on investment and growth in



Pacific societies. Strengthening the remote job market for Pacific islanders (for example, by extending seasonal migration schemes) remains a favourable policy objective.

It is sometimes argued that the provision of formal social transfers such as pensions or child support grants merely substitutes for, or undermines, traditional safety nets. However, there is scant evidence worldwide for this effect; indeed, Samoa, which has one of the strongest systems of traditional reciprocity also has an effective universal pension scheme. Formal social transfers can complement traditional provision by addressing important gaps, for example by providing consistent and reliable coverage of the weakest members of society such as older persons, young children and people with disabilities.