



Empowering the Vulnerable in Tonga: A Success Story on Social Protection Services

A Andrew Fakaanga reaches into a blue cardboard box and pulls out a yellow rubber rabbit. It squeaks as he sets it down, but his attention has already turned entirely to a cartoon book about vegetables that his mother sets on his lap.

It's Wednesday at 11:00 a.m., which means playtime for Andrew with his sister, brother, mother, and caregiver. Andrew can barely contain his excitement.

Andrew is 3 years old and lives with his family in a small fishing village east of Nuku'alofa, the capital of Tonga. He was born prematurely and failed to thrive. At first, his parents did not know how to care for a child with special needs. Without support, they were struggling financially and did not have the birth certificates they needed to enroll their children in school.

Mafi Fakaanga, Andrew's mother, explains, "When we were first discharged from the hospital, Andrew was using a feeding tube. We used the little money we had to buy baby formula, and anything that was left over was for our food. The hospital referred us to Ma'a Fafine Mo e Famili (MFF) when he was 11 months old, and we felt financially lighter. They provided the formula, and we could use the money for other things. Now they're helping us get the papers to put our kids into classes." MFF is a nongovernment organization that promotes a just society by empowering women.

Andrew's caregiver, Lenny, has been visiting the Fakaangas for over 2 years. Each week, she brings a box of toys and books. She also brings a wealth of knowledge about young people with disabilities and about supporting them and their families to lead dignified and fulfilling lives.

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Since she started working with the Fakaangas, Lenny has helped the MFF staff fundraise for a new home, which they built in 2019, and install a vegetable garden with free seedlings provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food, Forests and Fisheries. Her full-time job is to support the Fakaangas and families like theirs to thrive.

While Lenny is playing with Andrew, she talks with Mafi about her son's well-being. Every month, she gathers the Fakaangas and 20 other families for their get-together.



Morning playtime and learning. Andrew Fakaanga reads about vegetables and plays with his mother Mafi Fakaanga and trainee child development worker Roland Salt, who they call Lenny (photo by Eric Sales).

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Manu Kailopa Vehikite
Case Manager, Early Intervention Program

“The meetings are so emotional because parents feel free to tell their stories. They all have children with disabilities, and they feel they belong in the little community. Everybody's trusting with their stories. At the same time, we talk about education, health, and well-being. It has motivated them to get up and do something because now they know that these opportunities are there for them,” notes Manu Kailopa Vehikite, the case manager for MFF's Early Intervention Program (EIP).

Lenny's support to the Fakaangas comes at no charge through EIP, one of Tonga's first formal social protection initiatives. EIP was designed to ensure children with disabilities get the help they need, regardless of their family's financial situation.

ADB's Support for Vulnerable Groups

Tonga's EIP started in 2012 which was funded by the Government of Japan through the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction and administered by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for a project called Social Protection of the Vulnerable in the Pacific. It was designed to (i) identify social protection gaps in the Cook Islands, the Marshall Islands, and Tonga; and (ii) support the respective governments in piloting new solutions.

In Tonga, the project came at a time when formal social safety nets were still in their infancy and introduced solutions that are still in place today. Crucially, ADB's support engaged the government and local civil society organizations (CSOs) like MFF to ensure strong community ownership and sustainable results.

Partnering with the Government and Local Civil Society Organizations

MFF opened its doors in 2008 with a focus on helping empower women with human rights awareness, but has since extended its reach to provide essential services to vulnerable groups across Tonga.

Tonga's Ministry of Internal Affairs—in large part through its Social Protection and Disability Division—has played an essential role in shaping the direction of social protection programs and advocating for the vulnerable in recent years.

“In terms of our nation, it's not going to be equality in Tonga and progress in Tonga until our vulnerable people are in the same boat in terms of health, employment, and education. When we [Ministry of Internal Affairs' Social Protection and Disability Division] came about in 2015, the main focus of the government was to provide better care and better support for the vulnerable population. I reckoned this was the first time the Government of Tonga started to include vulnerable people in their plans and strategic actions, policies, and programs. This division is out to address these areas one by one,” explains Ministry of Internal Affairs' deputy chief executive officer (CEO) Lu'isa Manuofetoa.

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Using funds from the project, MFF was one of the first organizations to design and implement social protection services in Tonga. Working closely with ADB and government counterparts, MFF played a key role in identifying some of the nation's most vulnerable groups—children with disabilities and elderly people in need of care—and designing formal support measures for them.

Today, in addition to carrying out its original mandate to support women and their families, EIP provides full-fledged assistance to some 50 families of children with disabilities, as well as 200 elderly people in need of care. They have scaled up these numbers up over time, from the original project scope of 25 children with disabilities and 150 elderly people.

The partnership between MFF, the government, and ADB is indicative of broader changes in social protection structures across Tonga.

Tonga's Formal Safety Nets Build on its Traditional Support Structures

Tonga's sense of community is exceptionally strong. With large and close-knit families, Tongans have a long-standing history of caring for one another and helping each other in times of need.

Fifteen years ago, formal social protection programs like the EIP and elderly care initiative would have been unthinkable in Tonga. The project had to address considerable cultural barriers.

When ADB launched the Social Protection of the Vulnerable in the Pacific in 2012, most Tongans felt it was the family's responsibility, and nobody

else's, to care for the vulnerable. However, certain groups simply weren't getting the care they needed. MFF's founder, Betty Blake, reflects on the recent development of formal social protection services in Tonga:

"This is a new initiative for Tonga, which is almost against our culture. We have pride in our elders. We love them. We care for them. But when this project came into existence, it really showed the other side. Some people were hidden. Some of them were being ignored."

Young people with disabilities—particularly in small and isolated nations like Tonga—struggle to access key resources. Special education programs are still new and often nonexistent, with very few professionals with the appropriate training to help them and their families succeed. Like the Fakaangas, not all families can afford the help they need.

Similarly, not all families have the time and resources to care for their elderly. As more and more young people in Tonga move overseas to find work, there are fewer people back home to care for the elderly. While the Tongan community treats its elders with the utmost respect, the gap widens between what the community would *like* to do and what individual family members *can* do.

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The Tongan Community Gives Back—Caregivers for the Elderly

About 15 minutes down the road from the Fakaangas, Matelita Fataua lies quietly in bed, covered with a light wool blanket. Her caregiver, Puatiasia Fatai, strokes her hair gently before getting up to tidy the room and prepare lunch.

Matelita is 81 years old and suffered from a stroke 3 years ago, which left her bedridden. Her daughter works full-time and has children of her own to take care of. There simply isn't enough time in a day to earn a living, raise children, and provide the full-time support that Matelita needs to stay healthy and happy. Tonga's elderly care program is designed to help in exactly these circumstances.

Since 2018, Puatiasia has become a loving part of the Fataua household. She visits almost every day for several hours and cares for Matelita as if she were family, helping her eat, use the restroom, wash her clothes, and keep her mind active. Puatiasia earns a living by giving back to the Tongan community.

“My mom also got support from MFF's elderly care program. That's how I heard about it,” reflects Puatiasia. “[My mom's] caregiver was so helpful when she was sick that when my mom passed away, I told MFF I wanted to help families with similar needs. I've been doing this ever since.”

Puatiasia's experience with the elderly care program reflects Tonga's strong sense of community. It also shows that, if designed properly, formal safety net programs can be a tool for deepening community support. Formal social protection structures like the elderly care program and EIP are not replacing informal

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Caregiving. Lying in bed, Matelita Fataua talks with her caregiver, Puatiasia Fatai (photo by Eric Sales).

support—they are enriching it. They integrate with the community and enable it to provide more comprehensive support to those in need.

When asked for advice on replicating the program's success in other Pacific island countries, another MFF caregiver, Linda Vi, smiled and said, “Love is the first thing, to do this type of work. That is the greatest remedy for all other problems. To care is to treat her [my patient] like my own mum.”



Reading activity. Amelia Akauola reads at home with her caregiver, Linda Vi (photo by Eric Sales).

Lessons on Sustainable, Scalable Care for the Pacific

ADB seeks to ensure that its interventions are sustainable and create opportunities to scale up. Owing to the program's initial success, the Government of Tonga has provided the funds to sustain the program, and domestic stakeholders now have the skills and capacity to increase support. The Ministry of Internal Affairs manages the program, and the Ministry of Health provides additional support with capacity building for MFF. The next steps will be to increase the number of people that receive care and extend services to the outer islands. Some key lessons from the project include the following:

Work with government and service providers to ensure local ownership. In Tonga, the project's success was largely due to close collaboration with the government and local CSOs. ADB supported safety net initiatives across the region. MFF and

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the government—specifically through its Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Finance—took ownership of ensuring that the intended outcomes were delivered and sustained. This collaboration was essential for designing a solution appropriate for the people of Tonga and for delivering sustainable results.

Train the trainers. Local capacity to provide care for vulnerable groups, more specifically children with disabilities, was limited when the project began. During the program's initial phases, a volunteer trainer from Australia worked closely with the MFF team. Skills transfer from expatriate caregivers has proven to be a key feature of the program's continued success. MFF will be able to increase support to more families across the nation as funds become available, largely because its staff now have the skills to train new caregivers. By the time the project's funding cycle was complete, Tonga had 19 skilled staff capable of passing down their knowledge and helping extend impactful support.

Collaborate with development partners to scale up success. The government is currently financing the EIP and elderly care programs but does not have enough resources to scale them up. The CEO of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Fotu Kuohiko Valeli Fisi'iahi, notes:

“We can afford so much, but not everything. We will still need other partners to come to the game and help us build this. We are so thankful for ADB, but there are still more than 1,000 people out there living with disabilities, and many more elderly. Everyone is included in our mission. We hope that with ADB’s support, and with other partners, we can become self-sustainable and leave no one behind.”

Engage the community and encourage self-advocacy. Public perception was a barrier at the start of the project; now, it is a key factor for continued success. Extensive community outreach and close, caring interactions in homes, villages, and communities across Tonga’s main island of Tongatapu have transformed opinions. By the time the project closed in January 2018, community members were so enthusiastic about the program.

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CEO, Ministry of Internal Affairs

Farewell from Nuku’alofa

Vika Tuifua is a sprightly woman. She grew up with her seven brothers and four sisters on one of Tonga’s outer islands. In 1957, the family moved to Nuku’alofa for school. Vika and her sister Alice have lived in the same white-paneled wooden house ever since. Most of her family live abroad, spread across England and New Zealand. Although Vika has traveled extensively, she loves her home and plans to stay put.

The Tuifua sisters live a few minutes’ walk from MFF’s office on Salote Road. Vika is 80 years old. Although her health and memory aren’t as they were a decade ago, she is committed to caring for herself and her sister. She is strong, joyful, and caring, but misses having the full family around to spend time with.

When Vika found out about the elderly care program, she marched down the road and knocked on MFF’s door. They welcomed her in and asked how they could help. Years later, Vika and Alice still get excited each time their caregiver comes by—nearly every day of the week. The three of them eat together, tidy up, and talk.



Grooming assistance. Siutiti Osamu, a caregiver at MFF, brushes Vika Tuifua’s hair (photo by Eric Sales).

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Tonga’s strong community and sense of pride mixes in seamlessly with the new formal safety nets designed under the project.

Betty Blake
Founder, Ma’a Fafine Mo e Famili

“Before this program, children in Tonga would put food on the table for the elderly and disappear for the rest of the day. Now you have two ladies who come in every morning, and they treat their elderly differently, no? The atmosphere changes—we laugh, we talk, we share news. That is the kind of support they look for,” explains Betty Blake.

Vika and her sister are yet another example of where Tonga’s strong community and sense of pride mix seamlessly with the new formal safety nets designed under the project. Vika and Alice advocate the program themselves. They spend time with family when they can and, at the same time, enjoy the support their government can provide.



Thanking caregivers. The Tuifua sisters bid their caregivers goodbye in the late afternoon, thanking them for coming and looking forward to tomorrow’s lively banter (photo by Eric Sales).



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Caregivers taking care of the elderly Tongan women as part of the social protection services by Ma’a Fafine Mo e Famili for Tonga’s most vulnerable groups.



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