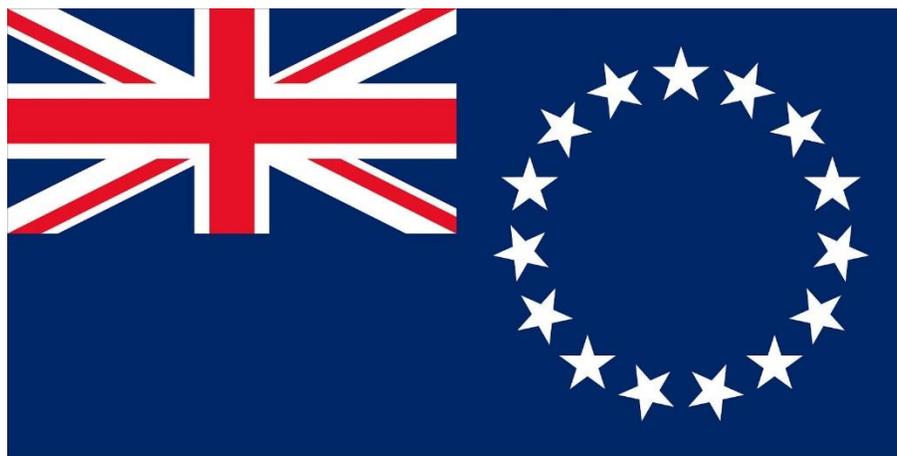


# Cook Islands CCA

First Conducted in November 2021



V.11.0  
Reviewed 20/12/2021

*This report has been prepared by the United Nations Resident Coordinator Office (UNRCO) for Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau, with contributions from participating UN agencies. Special thanks go to Magdy Martinez (international consultant) and James Gosselin (local consultant). The UNRCO expresses gratitude for all contributions made.*



***Common Country Assessments (CCAs)** have been developed within the framework of the 2030 Agenda with a focus on key development risks and transformational opportunities. Starting with a country context analysis, with a macroeconomic focus, zooming in on specific sectors, gathering evidence from UN agencies, Government and Development Partners' official documents and a variety of primary and secondary data sources, the CCA provides an SDG progress assessment with a view of key indicators at risk, a financial and partnership landscape and a multidimensional vulnerability analysis. The CCA concludes with the identification of the most likely and damaging risks to the development process, and the discussion of key development challenges and opportunities that stand to have the most catalytic impact in the achievement of the SDGs in the country. This CCA is to be read in conjunction with the regional analysis of the state of sustainable development in the Pacific Island Countries and Territories supported by the United Nations. The CCA is a living document that will be refreshed annually to reflect evolving trends and integrate new data. Subsequent iterations of the CCA will dig deeper into sociological and anthropological connections to the risks and challenges identified and explore further the pathways for green and inclusive growth in the Pacific.*

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## Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADO	Asian Development Outlook
BoP	Balance of Payments
CAT	Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
CCA	Common Country Assessment
CCCI	Climate Change Cook Islands
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CIIC	Cook Islands Investment Corporation
CIMS	Cook Islands Meteorological Service
CIN	Cook Islands News
CIPS	Cook Islands Police Service
CISO	Cook Islands Statistics Office
CITWC	Cook Islands Tsunami Warning Center
COP	Conference of the Parties
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
CPED	International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance
CPPO	Cook Islands Central Policy and Planning Office
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EDS	Economic Development Strategy
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EMCI	Emergency Management Cook Islands
EQAP	Educational Quality and Assessment Programme
ERP	Economic Response Plan
ERR	Economic Recovery Roadmap
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FFA	Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency
FMS	Fiji Meteorological Service
FY	Financial Year
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
GNI	Gross National Income
HH	Household

HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICERD	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICI	Infrastructure Cook Islands
ICMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
ICPED	International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ILO	International Labour Organization
INTAFF	Internal Affairs, Ministry of
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOC-UNESCO	Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO
JMP	WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene
JNAP	Joint National Action Plan
LFPR	Labour Force Participation Rate
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex and others
MFEM	Ministry of Finance and Economic Management
MTFS	Medium-Term Fiscal Strategy
NCD	Non-communicable Disease
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
NES	National Environment Service
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NSDA	National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+
NSDP	National Sustainable Development Plan
NZ\$	New Zealand Dollar
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
OPSC	Office of the Public Service Commissioner
PICS	Pacific Islands Climate Services
PICTs	Pacific Island Countries and Territories
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PILNA	Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment
PM	Prime Minister
PMC	Pacific Meteorological Council



PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PSDI	Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative
PTI	Punange Tauturu Incorporated
PTWC	Pacific Tsunami Warning Center
RCC	Regional Climate Center
RSMC	Regional Specialized Meteorological Center
SBMA	Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority
SCMS	Survival and Cash Management Strategy
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEIA	Socio-Economic Impact Assessment
SFPA	Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SOPAC	South Pacific Applied Geosciences Commission
SPC	Pacific Community
SPREP	Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme
SST	Sea Surface Temperature
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Math
STI	Sexually-transmitted Infection
SWFP	Severe Weather Forecast Programme
TMO/MoH	Te Marae Ora/Ministry of Health (Cook Islands)
UIS	UNESCO Institute of Statistics
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNPS	United Nations Pacific Strategy
UN RCO	United Nations Resident Coordinator Office
US\$	United States Dollar
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organization
WMO	World Meteorological Organization

## Country Profile

The Cook Islands is a Small Island Developing State in the South Pacific Ocean with 15 islands (12 permanently inhabited) comprising a total land area of 240 km<sup>2</sup> and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 1.9 million km<sup>2</sup>. The population of the country in 2016 was 17,434, of whom nearly 75% resided on Rarotonga, the main island. The climate of the Cook Islands alternates between a rainy season from December to March, and a mild and dry season from April to November.

The Cook Islands is a self-governing State in free association with New Zealand and a parliamentary democracy based on the Westminster system. Being New Zealand citizens, Cook Islanders have free right of access to New Zealand; they may also live, travel freely to, and work in Australia without restriction.

From 2014 to 2020, the Cook Islands economy witnessed steady growth, largely on the back of an expanding service sector led by tourism and related services as well as large infrastructure projects. However, with the global spread of COVID-19, the Cook Islands Government closed the country's border to incoming travelers between March 2020 and May 2021, and then again from August 2021 to date in order to reduce the risk of COVID-19 entering the country. Largely as a result of these measures, there have been no COVID-19 cases reported in the Cook Islands to date, and the Government has instituted a vigorous vaccination campaign resulting in over 97% of the eligible resident population having been vaccinated.

The closure of the border has had a profound and continued impact on the economy and on the implementation of the Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy (EDS) 2030. Supportive measures have been introduced to assist the private sector through the Government's Economic Recovery Programme. Nevertheless, the economic downturn has contributed to a growing number of Cook Islanders having left the country to seek employment abroad, especially in New Zealand. It has generated the need to recalibrate the Government's expenditure, including the speed of implementation of various new policy initiatives. To address that situation, the Government has had to introduce several compensatory measures, including a Survival and Cash Management Strategy (SCMS) in October 2021.

After detailed consideration, the Cook Islands Government has announced that the border will be reopened on a permanent basis from mid-January 2022, under strict conditions to deter the entry of COVID-19 into the country. It is forecast that the Cook Islands' GDP will return to a path of growth when the border is open and national debt levels will return to pre-pandemic levels within the next three years. At the same time, the Government recognizes significant uncertainties (e.g., possible new strains of COVID-19) and is planning accordingly.

Despite the closure of the border, essential Government services have continued to function, and the work has proceeded on the preparation of the Government’s National Sustainable Development Agenda for the future (NSDA 2020+). While the Cook Islands’ private sector is still in difficulties, it looks to recover over time with the reopening of the border. It is expected that when this happens, the tourism will once more drive the economy, supported by other sectors, at least for the short- to medium-term. At the same time, economic diversification efforts will receive increased attention by both the Government and the private sector. The COVID-containment measures have generated or aggravated certain social problems (e.g., domestic violence) that need to be addressed.

*Key Statistics for the Cook Islands*

Population & Demographics	Value	Year
Total population <sup>1</sup>	17,434	2016
Life expectancy at birth (years) <sup>2</sup>	75.7	2018
Children Population 0-17	4,580 (30%)	2021
Population growth rate (%) <sup>3</sup>	0.0	2017
Income & Inequality		
Avg. annual national per capita income (NZ\$) <sup>4</sup> /US\$	15,660/10,978	2015-16
Gini index (0-1)	0.36	2015-16
Economy		
GNI per capita, NZ\$ <sup>5</sup> /US\$	22,505/15,776	2020 <sup>6</sup>
Real GDP growth (projected % for FY2021)	-23.2	2020-21 <sup>7</sup>
Inflation (projected % for FY2021)	2.2	2020-21 <sup>8</sup>

Also central to the Cook Islands development strategies, as highlighted throughout the Economic Development Strategy 2030, the draft National Sustainable Development Agenda and other policy documents, is the need to address gender equality in society and to give special consideration to the gaps in services and development challenges of the Outer Islands (Pa Enea). For the implementation of the above and other development policies, the United Nations Development System and other development partners will continue to provide support and technical cooperation to the Cook Islands.

<sup>1</sup> Cook Islands Government. 2018. Cook Islands Statistics Office (CISO). Cook Islands Census of Population and Dwellings 2016 Report ([www.mfem.gov.ck/statistics](http://www.mfem.gov.ck/statistics)).

<sup>2</sup> TMO/MoH National Health Information Bulletin 2018. US Government. November 2021 Edition. The World Factbook. Cook Islands. Central Intelligence Agency, estimates it at 76.89 years for 2021.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations in the Pacific. 2017. UN Pacific Strategy 2018-2022. A Multi-country Development Framework in the Pacific Region. Pp. 85-86.

<sup>4</sup> Cook Islands Government. 2018. Cook Islands 2015/2016 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES). Cook Islands Statistics Office (CISO) and Pacific Community (SPC). P. 69

<sup>5</sup> Asian Development Bank (ADB). April 2021. Asia Development Outlook (ADO) 2021: Financing a Green and Inclusive Recovery. Pp. 362 & 373.

<sup>6</sup> Cook Islands Statistics Office.

<sup>7</sup> Cook Islands Economic Bulletin. November 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## 1. Country Overview

The Cook Islands is a Small Island Developing State in the South Pacific Ocean. Geographically, the Cook Islands comprises a Southern Group and a Northern Group of islands. The Southern Group consists of Rarotonga (the main island in the country), a high, mountainous island (the highest point, Te Manga, being 652 metres in altitude) and the following Outer Islands (Pa Enea): four raised coral islands with volcanic cores, Mangaia, Mauke, Mitiaro and Atiu; one atoll, Manuae; one near atoll with a volcanic core, Aitutaki; and a sand cay on a coral foundation, Takutea. In terms of Pacific distances, all islands are relatively close together, Outer Islands in the Southern Group all being within 280 kilometres of Rarotonga.

With the exception of Nassau, a sand cay on a coral reef foundation, the Northern Group of Pa Enea, Penrhyn, Manihiki, Rakahanga, Pukapuka, Suwarrow and Palmerston, are all coral atolls. While, overall, the Northern Pa Enea are spread over vast distances (from Penrhyn to Palmerston, for example, the distance is 1,150 km), Manihiki and Rakahanga are only 45 km apart while Nassau is 90 km southeast of Pukapuka. All are more than 500 km from Rarotonga, Penrhyn, the most distant island, being 1,370 km from the main island. The scattered nature of the Cook Islands and relatively small populations on each island raise the per capita costs of delivering essential services.

## Political System and Foreign Relations

The Cook Islands is a self-governing State that has been in free association with New Zealand since 1965, and a parliamentary democracy based on the Westminster system. There have been 11 Amendments to the 1964 Constitution of the Cook Islands. The most significant of these is the Constitution Amendment (No.9) Act 1980-81. This Amendment reflected the evolving political status of the Cook Islands. The Legislative Assembly was altered to Parliament; the Premier to Prime Minister; a High Court was established with three divisions: Civil, Criminal and Land. The Cook Islands Court of Appeal was established (abandoning the previous system of the New Zealand High Court sitting as the Court Islands Appellate Court) and appeals to the Privy Council were also established. The Constitution Amendment No.9 also introduced a form of Bill of Rights with the declaration that certain fundamental human rights and freedoms exist in the Cook Islands. The Cook Islands Parliament thus has the sole law-making authority for the Cook Islands.<sup>9</sup>

Parliament consists of a single chamber of 24 elected members, 10 of whom are from the main island of Rarotonga and the rest are from the outer islands. The Members of Parliament are elected by secret ballot on a “first-past the post” universal suffrage system. In 1980-81 the constitutional amendment also redefined the constituencies, increasing the number of

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<sup>9</sup> Browne Gibson Harvey P.C. Introduction to Law and Government in the Cook Islands. [accessed November 2021]. <http://cookislandslaw.com/index.html>

Members to 24. This was refined in 1991 where another constituency in Rarotonga was further divided into two to reflect a 25 Member Parliament. The status quo remained until 2003 when the overseas constituency that was created under the 1980-81 Constitution Amendment, was abolished.<sup>10</sup>

The legal system of the Cook Islands closely reflects that of New Zealand and most other English Common Law jurisdictions. The aforementioned High Court and a Court of Appeal of the Cook Islands are presided over predominantly by current or former New Zealand High Court Judges. The ultimate appellate court is the Privy Council in London.<sup>11</sup>

As part of the free association relationship, most Cook Islanders are citizens of New Zealand with a right to travel to New Zealand, live and work there without restriction. By virtue of being New Zealand citizens, Cook Islanders may also travel freely to Australia and live and work there without restriction. Approximately 80,000 persons of Cook Islands heritage live in New Zealand and approximately 22,000 reside in Australia.

In the conduct of its foreign affairs, Cook Islands interacts with the international community as a sovereign and independent State. Responsibility in international law rests with Cook Islands in terms of its treaty and other actions and the exercise of its international rights and fulfilment of its international obligations. Any action taken by New Zealand in respect of its constitutional responsibilities for the foreign affairs of the Cook Islands will be taken on the delegated authority, and as an agent or facilitator, at the specific request of the Cook Islands.

The country is included in the United Nations' list of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), a distinct group of UN member States and Territories that face unique social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities.

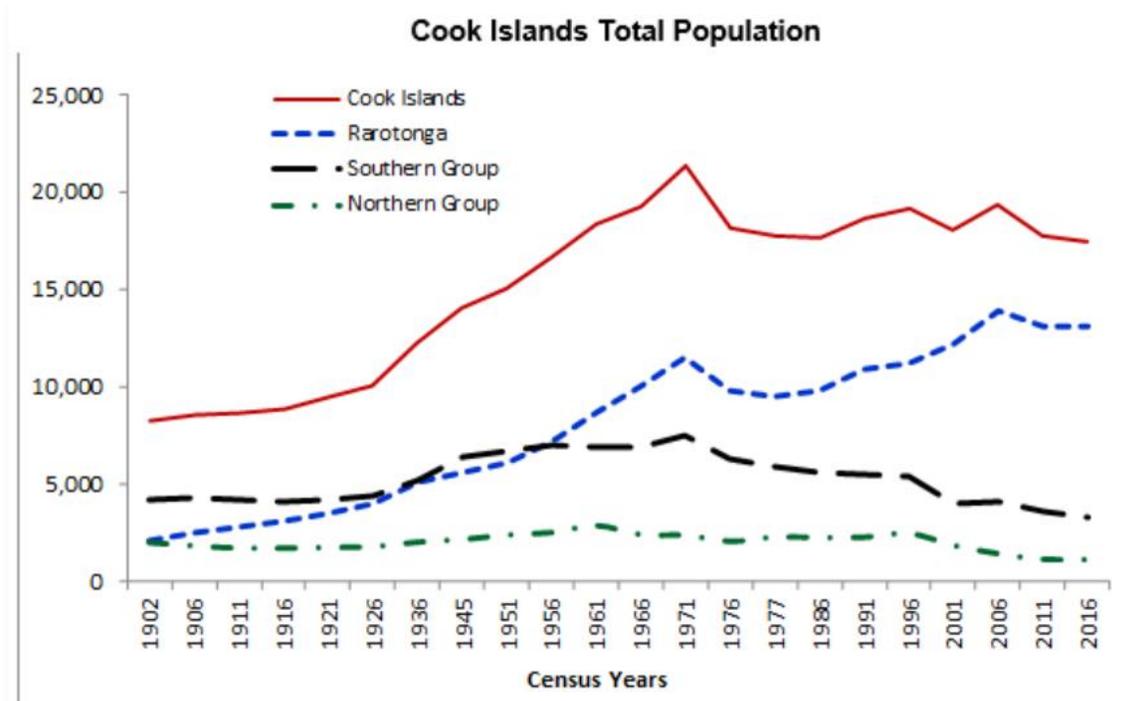
## Population

The Cook Islands' population steadily increased from 1902 to 1971 when it reached a high of 21,322. In subsequent years, however, the population has fluctuated owing to various factors. With the opening of the international airport on Rarotonga in 1974, many Cook Islanders took the opportunity to emigrate to New Zealand and Australia in search of employment and educational opportunities. While the population gradually increased again between 1986 and 1996, after that year the resident population once more declined, largely because of the reduction in size of the public service from 3,000 to less than 2,000 employees in 1996-97, due to budget cuts.

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://parliament.gov.ck/>

<sup>11</sup> Maritime Cook Islands Limited. 2019. Legislative and Political System of the Cook Islands. In <https://www.maritimecookislands.com/the-cook-islands/legislative-political-system/>



Source: SOCI 2016 Census Report

Between 2011 and 2016, the total Cook Islands population decreased from 17,794 to 17,434, and the resident population from 14,974 to 14,802,<sup>12</sup> with nearly 75% residing on the largest island, Rarotonga, 19% in the Southern Pa Enua and 6% in the Northern Pa Enua. During the same 2011-2016 period, the resident population under age 15 decreased from 4,332 to 3,997, 29% to 27% of the total resident population, while the resident population 60+ years of age increased from 1,922 to 2,214, 13% to 15% of the total resident population. The dependency ratio<sup>13</sup> (15-59 years of age) in both 2011 and 2016 was 72%, while the median age increased from 29 years in 2011 to 32 years in 2016. The Cook Islands has the highest rate of life expectancy at birth among the Pacific countries, at 72 years for males, and 80 years for females.

Of the resident population of the Cook Islands, the proportion of persons being neither Cook Islanders nor part-Cook Islanders has increased over the years, from 1,349 in 2006 to 1,825 in 2011 and 2,099 in 2016, reflecting at least in part the growing number of foreign workers in the domestic economy.

Emigration is a serious concern in the Cook Islands as movements from the Pa Enua to Rarotonga, as well as from the Cook Islands as a whole exerts great pressure on the country's social and economic fabric, and significantly impacts economic growth going forward.

<sup>12</sup> The population census includes in the total population those persons temporarily in the country on the date of the census as well as the resident population.

<sup>13</sup> People under age 15 and over age 59, relative to people 15-59 years old.

In line with its commitment made at the 2019 Nairobi Summit to advance the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Cook Islands is developing its first-ever policy to address population issues.<sup>14</sup> The population dynamics feature prominently in the Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030 (EDS) and the draft National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+ (NSDA) now under preparation.

A weak economic outlook and prolonged contraction in the key sectors of the economy has already influenced numerous Cook Islanders to emigrate in search of opportunities abroad, which could have long-lasting implications for the country's population dynamics, the size of its labour force and, ultimately, the ability of the Cook Islands to recover and further develop.

## COVID-19 Response

Because of the growing COVID-19 threat world-wide, the Cook Islands closed its borders to incoming passengers, both sea and air, on 24 March 2020. Between 17 May and 16 August 2021, the country opened its borders to its major tourism market, New Zealand, through a special “travel bubble” arrangement reflecting the then absence of COVID-19 cases in New Zealand. However, as a result of a recent increasing number of COVID-19 cases in New Zealand, that “bubble” was put on hold since August 2021. Apart from a few flights already implemented and a few more scheduled to repatriate Cook Islanders stranded in New Zealand when the “bubble” was suspended, travel restrictions on inward arrivals to the Cook Islands have been extended until the border reopens permanently on 13 January 2022.<sup>15</sup> The Government required extending the closure so that Government Agencies could finalize arrangements for the border opening. There are currently no COVID-19-related restrictions on Cook Islanders wishing to travel to New Zealand on the weekly Air New Zealand flights which continue to operate primarily to carry freight.

As of November 2021, the Cook Islands remains completely free of COVID-19, with no confirmed cases ever having been reported. A total of 24,346 vaccine doses had been administered in the country as of end-October 2021, with 97.5% of Cook Islanders 16 years of age and over (11,132 of 11,409 persons) having been fully vaccinated.<sup>16</sup> Voluntary vaccination of 12-15 years old living in the Cook Islands commenced on 8 October 2021, and the response to the extended vaccination programme has been positive. Before the border reopens mid-January 2022, the Cook Islands Government is planning to administer booster shots for Cook Islanders over 40 years of age and vaccinations for children 5-11 years of age.

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<sup>14</sup> Cook Islands Government. November 2019. National Statement of Commitment to the Nairobi ICPD25 Summit. <https://www.nairobisummiticpd.org/commitment/cook-islands-government-national-statement-commitment-nairobi-icpd25-summit-12-14>

<sup>15</sup> Cook Islands Government. November 2021. Media statement from the Prime Minister (PM) of the Cook Islands, Hon. Mark Brown.

<sup>16</sup> As reported by the Cook Islands TMO/MoH in October 2021. See [www.covid19.gov.ck/vaccination](http://www.covid19.gov.ck/vaccination)

Consumer prices accelerated in June 2021, pushed by an increase in the prices of transport and food, which could further depress national disposable income and growth prospects as well as stimulate emigration. When the border reopens, those entering will need to show a negative pre-departure COVID-19 test and be doubly vaccinated. The Cook Islands Government is considering opening the border with Australia after opening with New Zealand.

With the closure of the Cook Islands' border for more than a year beginning in March 2020, and the resultant severe contraction of the tourism sector and flow-on effects for related services, as well as delays in construction activities, the country was losing NZ\$1M (US\$0.7M) a day, inflicting a decline in real GDP of 5.2% in FY 2020 and 23.2% in FY 2021<sup>17</sup> (the largest rate of decline in the Pacific region). With an early opening of the border, the Cook Islands Government forecasts that the country's GDP will grow at a 12.3% rate for FY 2022.<sup>18</sup>

Besides the serious implications for the Cook Islands Government's financial position as a result of COVID-19 and the contraction of the economy, there have been other serious and broader implications for the country as well. When the border closed in March 2020, the Government announced a NZ\$61M (US\$42.7M or about 15% of GDP) COVID Economic Response Plan (ERP) that included income support for individuals, financial support for businesses, and tax support for individuals and businesses, costing the Government NZ\$1M (US\$0.7M) a week.<sup>19</sup> While that initiative was widely welcomed and provided much needed relief for the private sector that employs 69% of the country's labour force, the prolonged contraction in key sectors of the economy has resulted in the Cook Islands' private sector being recently described by the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce as "*still in survival mode*".<sup>20</sup> In the view of the Chamber, once the border is reopened and tourism is back on its feet, it would be necessary to consider economic diversification options. In that regard, there was a need for innovation in the Cook Islands' approach to education, tertiary training and professional development opportunities.<sup>21</sup> These are all areas also recognized in the EDS as important areas to be addressed.

The Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council has observed that every day the economy remained closed was another day of depopulation, suffering of businesses and livelihoods and potential economic downfall. It also emphasized the urgency for the Government to have a plan suitable for the Cook Islands, one that was smart, understanding, tolerant and would

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<sup>17</sup> Cook Islands Economic Bulletin, November 2021, Op. Cit.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> PM's statement 4 November 2021, Op. Cit.

<sup>20</sup> Cook Islands News (CIN). 2 October 2021. "Cooks 'still in survival mode', says new Chamber chairman. New Cook Islands Chamber of Commerce chairman Phillip Henderson says he is focused on getting the border reopened and tourism back on its feet."

<sup>21</sup> CIN,. 4 October 2021. "Businesspeople are passionate about Cook Islands".

ensure the economy and the Cook Islands people not only survived but thrived.<sup>22</sup> It welcomed the announcement by the Government to reopen the border permanently in January 2022.

Besides a strong vaccination campaign, lessons from around the globe suggest that the gradual and safe reopening of borders will require effective information systems in place to manage the vaccination status of visitors and residents and potential outbreaks. This will be an opportunity for the Cook Islands to accelerate the implementation of its digitalization agenda with the support of development partners and other countries in the region.

## The Economy and the National Development Strategy

The Cook Islands had experienced strong economic growth in the decade before the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2011 and 2019, the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rose from NZ\$375M (US\$263M) to NZ\$531M (US\$372M). In percentage terms, the Cook Islands' real GDP grew at 5.3% in the 2018-2019 Financial Year (FY 2019) and 8.9% a year earlier.<sup>23</sup> The tourism sector dominated the economy, with the services sector accounting for three-quarters of the total output in FY 2020. At the last peak of tourism to the Pacific (2017) Cook Islands was the third destination of choice with 8.1% of market share, only preceded by Fiji (42%) and French Polynesia (10%), and ahead of Samoa (7.8%).

Other sectors that also play key roles in the economy include construction, agriculture, forestry and fishing, especially in the Pa Enua, government administration and international financial services. Agriculture, employing more than one-quarter of the working population, provides an economic base with major exports of copra and citrus fruit. Black pearls are the Cook Islands' leading export. Manufacturing activities are limited to fruit processing, clothing, and handicrafts.

The Economic Development Strategy (EDS) 2030<sup>24</sup> sets out the economic and fiscal foundation for the Cook Islands' broader development agenda and aims to assist in addressing and limiting any long-term "economic scarring" from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>25</sup> The culmination of broad public consultations, the EDS focuses on a strategy of shifting from quantity to quality growth.

It has five key objectives:

- improving equity and access for all

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<sup>22</sup> CIN. 23 October 2021. "'Tough decisions need to be made, and soon!' The Cook Islands Government is being called on to make tough decisions, and make them soon, as New Zealand enters a new Covid-19 protection framework."

<sup>23</sup> The Cook Islands Government's financial year is from 1 July to 30 June.

<sup>24</sup> Cook Islands Government. January 2021. Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030 (EDS). Working Together to Build Quality Growth. pp.8-9

<sup>25</sup> EDS, Op. Cit., was developed in 2019 and was due for launch in 2020. Because of COVID-19, the launch was delayed until January 2021 although the EDS objectives remain relevant despite the pandemic.

- transforming the Cook Islands economy
- developing the Cook Islands’ people and culture
- investing in the Cook Islands; and
- greening the Cook Islands’ economy.<sup>26</sup>

The EDS provides a structure to assist in guiding decision-making to achieve the vision as articulated in the EDS, i.e., “Working together to build a dynamic, prosperous, economic future for Cook Islanders, that is in harmony with our culture and environment”. Many EDS activities aim to support achievement of the various outcomes and priorities reflected in the United Nations Pacific Strategy 2018-2022. Throughout the EDS there is a recognition of the need to address the particular constraints of the Pa Enea (Outer Islands) in implementing the Strategy.

The Government recognizes that, while employing to the full its own resources to implement the EDS, external assistance will also be required. However, because of the country’s strong economic performance in recent years, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) decided in accordance with established criteria that, from 1 January 2020, the Cook Islands would cease to be eligible for Official Development Assistance (ODA), being deemed by the OECD a developed country given the Cook Islands’ relatively high per capita GDP (NZ\$ 22,505 or US\$15,776) in 2020.

In many respects, however, the Cook Islands remains a developing country and – like other SIDS - is subject to serious challenges arising from its vulnerability, narrow economic base and other factors. Given the severe economic impact of COVID-19, the Cook Islands’ per capita GDP has already declined, and will likely remain lower than in pre-COVID-19 years in the short- to medium-term. In order to implement successfully, and in a timely manner the Government’s EDS and other development initiatives, development assistance will be required. The Cook Islands is intensifying its bilateral, regional and international efforts to secure access to that assistance on the same terms and conditions as other SIDS, regardless of the country’s status as determined by the OECD classification.

The Cook Islands’ National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP) covered the period 2016-2020.<sup>27</sup> The successor of this Plan is the new National Sustainable Development Agenda (NSDA)<sup>28</sup> as a national blueprint towards the Cook Islands’ 100-year vision for its well-being, for the country as a whole, for the community and for individual Cook Islanders.<sup>29</sup> The NSDA has been divided into 5-, 25- and 100-year periods and the latest draft sections have been circulated for public comment.<sup>30</sup> Although the NSDA has not been explicitly

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<sup>26</sup> In adopting this approach, the EDS recognizes the work of the UN in this area (EDS, pp.19-20).

<sup>27</sup> Cook Islands Government. January 2016. Te Kaveinga Nui. National Sustainable Development Plan 2016 – 2020. Office of the Prime Minister.

<sup>28</sup> See <https://www.pmoffice.gov.ck/nsda/>

<sup>29</sup> For general background see Cook Islands Central Policy and Planning Office (CPPO), “Our Cook Islands, Our Legacy” ([https://www.pmoffice.gov.ck/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Copy-of-InfoSheet\\_2\\_lowRes.pdf](https://www.pmoffice.gov.ck/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Copy-of-InfoSheet_2_lowRes.pdf))

<sup>30</sup> See the following documents of the CPPO at <https://www.pmoffice.gov.ck/nsda/>: Te Ara Aka’papa’anga Iti 2021-2026, Te Uki Akapapa’anga 25 Mataiti, and Turanga Meitaki no Toku Ora’anga 100 Mataiti. All documents are in English.

structured to mirror the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 15 Goals identified in the NSDA are comparable to the 17 SDGs and the various NSDA initiatives support achievement of the Outcomes discussed in the SDG chapter.

The Cook Islands Government national development vision is more clearly articulated in the major documents of development policy and economic planning. In addition to the Economic Development Strategy (EDS) 2030 and the upcoming National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+ (NSDA), the key planning instruments focus on climate, such as the Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028, the Cook Islands Climate Change Country Programme 2018-2030, complemented by pieces of legislation like the Agriculture Act (2021), and social and economic development plans like the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and Action Plan (2019-2024), the Education Policy on Equity, Access and Participation (2016), the National Youth Policy (2021-2026), the Strategic Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-Communicable Diseases (2021-2025), the Integrated National Strategic Plan for Sexual and Reproductive Health (2014 – 2018) and the National Infrastructure Investment Plan (Updated 2021).

## 2. Progress towards the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

The United Nations Pacific Strategy (UNPS) 2018-2022 laid out a strategic framework for the development priorities in the Pacific Islands, including the Cook Islands, to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Strategy listed six priorities or development outcomes to allocate resources and support the Pacific region:

<b>Outcome 1</b>	Climate Change, Disaster Resilience and Environmental Protection
<b>Outcome 2</b>	Gender Equality
<b>Outcome 3</b>	Sustainable and Inclusive Economic Empowerment
<b>Outcome 4</b>	Equitable Basic Services
<b>Outcome 5</b>	Governance and Community Engagement
<b>Outcome 6</b>	Human Rights

### Outcome 1: Climate Change, Disaster Resilience and Environmental Protection

The Cook Islands is highly vulnerable to climate change and recognizes the urgent need to protect its fragile environment. Many of the islands are either coral atolls (especially those in the Northern Pa Eヌua) or have fragile physical infrastructure and housing along low-lying shorelines. Together with its neighbours, the Cook Islands recognized in the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security<sup>31</sup> that climate change is the most serious security threat facing the region. The Government has been actively engaged in regional climate change-related activities.

The Cook Islands is a party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), as well as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. It submitted its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to the UNFCCC on 1 September 2016 and is currently working on a revised NDC. Along with other Pacific Island Countries and Territories, the Cook Islands has been participating actively in multilateral climate change negotiations through the Conferences of the Parties (COP) of the UNFCCC. The Cook Islands' Prime Minister is one of five High Level Political Climate Change Champions regionally appointed by Pacific Leaders to advocate for the region's priorities and influence decision-making in calling for urgent climate change action. The Cook Islands' PM's particular focus is on climate finance.<sup>32</sup>

Addressing climate change risks to the Cook Islands economy and society as a whole is a priority in both the EDS and the NSDA. Detailed planning has been developed in the Cook

<sup>31</sup> Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). 5 September 2018. Boe Declaration on Regional Security <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>.

<sup>32</sup> Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP). 6 October 2021. "Pacific Political Climate Champions Amplify Call For Urgent Action". <https://www.sprep.org/news/pacific-political-climate-champions-amplify-call-for-urgent-action>

Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028<sup>33</sup>, and the Cook Islands Climate Change Country Programme 2018-2030<sup>34</sup>, coordinated by the Climate Change Cook Islands (CCCI) Office in the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). CCCI is currently preparing a draft Climate Change Bill (yet to be titled) for Parliament which would include the formal establishment and functions of CCCI within the OPM, as well as mitigation, adaptation and resilience-building sections. The development of a climate response fund and a commission to provide technical and policy advice are also announced to be featured in the Bill.

As part of its climate action, the country has made remarkable progress on renewable energy. Since 2011, the Cook Islands has embarked on a programme of renewable energy development to improve its energy security and reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, with an initial goal of reaching 50% renewable electricity by 2015 and 100% by 2020.<sup>35</sup> Renewable energy is primarily generated by biomass and solar. By 2015, the energy needs of all of the Northern Pa Enea were met through renewable sources and by 2019 solar farms had been installed on Atiu, Mangaia, Mauke and Mitiaro in the Southern Pa Enea. Aitutaki is currently on 20% renewable energy supply, with Rarotonga achieving 15% with projects being implemented to bring 20% renewable energy supply. An Investment Plan is under preparation to advance Rarotonga and Aitutaki to zero net emissions and further support the sustainability of the Pa Enea renewable energy supply. A solar farm was commissioned at the Rarotonga International Airport in 2014.

The Cook Islands is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and natural hazards. Tropical cyclones, droughts, tidal waves and storm surges are considered to be the highest of the natural hazard risks.<sup>36</sup> Cyclones are the most frequently occurring disaster, causing casualties and severe damage to livelihoods, property and infrastructure. In 2005, a series of five Category 3-5 cyclones passed over one of the islands in a period of only six weeks,<sup>37</sup> while the latest severe cyclone to hit the Cook Islands, in February 2010, affected the entire population of Aitutaki island directly or indirectly.

The regional coordination of monitoring, detection, analysis and forecasting of tropical cyclones is guided by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) Regional Association V (South-West Pacific) Tropical Cyclone Operational Plan for the South Pacific and South-East Indian Ocean (WMO RA-V TCOP).<sup>38</sup> The Operational Plan is reviewed annually by the WMO RA-V Tropical Cyclone Committee for the South Pacific and South-East Indian

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<sup>33</sup> OPM. 2018. Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2022. CCCI Office.

<sup>34</sup> CCCI. 2018. Cook Islands Climate Change Country Programme 2018-2030. Aligning the Cook Islands Country Programme with the Development Agenda through Climate Financing.

<sup>35</sup> Government of the Cook Islands. Accessed November 2021. Renewable Energy. Ministry of Finance and Economic Management. <http://www.mfem.gov.ck/312-renewable-energy>

<sup>36</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2015. The Handbook on Law and Disaster Risk Reduction. Ibid. October 2015. The Checklist on Law and Disaster Risk Reduction. An annotated outline.

<sup>37</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Accessed November 2021. <https://www.unocha.org/office-pacific-islands/cook-islands>.

<sup>38</sup> WMO. Accessed November 2021. Tropical Cyclone Operational Plans. <https://community.wmo.int/tropical-cyclone-operational-plans>.

Ocean (WMO RA-V TCC).<sup>39</sup> The Cook Islands is a member of the WMO and participates in the WMO RA-V TCC. The Cook Islands Meteorological Service (CIMS) receives information, advisories and warnings on tropical cyclones from the WMO-designated Regional Specialized Meteorological Centre (RSMC) hosted in the Fiji Meteorological Service Headquarters in Nadi. The Cook Islands also has access to additional information on these events from the Severe Weather Forecast Programme (SWFP)<sup>40</sup> MetConnect.

The Cook Islands is susceptible to slow onset hydro-meteorological and ocean events such as El Niño and La Niña, droughts, Sea Surface Temperature (SST) rises and related impacts on peoples' livelihoods. A regional mechanism, the Pacific Meteorological Council (PMC),<sup>41</sup> the Pacific Islands Climate Services (PICS) Panel<sup>42</sup> and the WMO RA-V Pacific Regional Climate Center (RA-V Pacific RCC)<sup>43</sup> coordinate efforts to build the capacity of the CIMS and other Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) national meteorological services in climate prediction. The CIMS is progressing well in providing information and predictions of slow onset hydro-meteorological and ocean events via climate updates or outlooks.<sup>44</sup>

The Cook Islands is exposed and vulnerable to tsunamis generated by regional (Tonga-Kermadec Trench) and distant (Kuril Islands) or ocean-wide events. Since October 2009, the Cook Islands' Tsunami Plan<sup>45</sup> has been in place under the Emergency Management Cook Islands (EMCI) and the tsunami warning Standard Operating Procedures at the CIMS.<sup>46</sup> Today, the PTWC issues information, and national meteorological services issue tsunami warnings as the national tsunami warning center. CIMS is the initiator of the Cook Islands Tsunami Warning Center (CITWC), EMCI as the facilitator with the Cook Islands Police

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<sup>39</sup> WMO. Accessed November 2021. Tropical Cyclone Programme (TCP)

<https://community.wmo.int/activity-areas/tropical-cyclone-programme-tcp>.

<sup>40</sup> WMO. Accessed November 2021. Severe Weather Forecasting programme (SWFP).

<https://community.wmo.int/activity-areas/severe-weather-forecasting-programme-swfp>

<sup>41</sup> The Pacific Meteorological Council (PMC) is a specialized subsidiary body of SPREP, established at the Fourteenth Regional Meteorological Services Directors meeting in Majuro, Republic of Marshall Island in August 2011 to facilitate and coordinate the scientific and technical programme and activities of the Regional Meteorological Services. <https://www.pacificmet.net/pmc>

<sup>42</sup> The PMC Panels were established to provide technical advice to the Council on matters concerning the development of meteorological services in the region under each thematic area of the Pacific Islands Meteorological Strategy 2017-2026, namely the Pacific Island Climate Services (PICS) Panel, the Pacific Island Marine and Oceans Services (PIMOS) Panel, the Pacific Island Aviation Weather Services (PIAWS) Panel, the Pacific Island Communications and Infrastructure (PICI) Panel, the Pacific Island Education, Training and Research (PIETR) Panel and the Pacific Hydrological Services (PHS) Panel. <https://www.pacificmet.net/pmc/expert-panels>

<sup>43</sup> The WMO RA-V Pacific Regional Climate Centre (RCC) Network is a virtual Centre of Excellence that assists National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHSs) in the Pacific Islands region to deliver better climate services and products and to strengthen their capacity to meet national climate information and service delivery needs. <https://www.pacificmet.net/rcc>

<sup>44</sup> CIMS. Accessed November 2021. The Island Climate Update. <https://www.met.gov.ck/climate-update>

<sup>45</sup> Australian Government. June 2008. SOPAC Member Countries National Capacity Assessments: Tsunami Warning and Mitigation Systems: Cook Islands. AusAID, Bureau of Meteorology, Auditor General's Department, Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC).

[www.bom.gov.au/tsunamis/assessments/pdf/Cook\\_Islands\\_Status\\_of\\_Key\\_Systems\\_Components](http://www.bom.gov.au/tsunamis/assessments/pdf/Cook_Islands_Status_of_Key_Systems_Components)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Service (CIPS) having the mandate. At this stage, the Cook Islands Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System includes sirens, tsunami shelters, signage and community awareness. Priorities for strengthening the system are aligned with the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (IOC-UNESCO) Decision A-31/3.4.1v - specifically, the Ocean Decade Tsunami Programme endorsed at the IOC-UNESCO 31st Assembly in June 2021.<sup>47</sup>

A checklist of laws on disaster risk reduction in the Cook Islands has been prepared and published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).<sup>48</sup> Included in the checklist is the 2007 Disaster Risk Management Act that provides the framework for coordinating action to address disaster risk management issues in the Cook Islands. Given the growing importance of such issues and the numerous relevant actors involved, an initiative is now underway to strengthen the institutional arrangement for disaster risk management in the country, involving EMCI, other Government Agencies, the private sector and wider community groups. A successor to the Cook Islands 2<sup>nd</sup> Joint National Action Plan: A Sectoral Approach to Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management: 2016-2020 (JNAP II) is under development.

The Cook Islands is implementing multiple programs, services and activities relating to environmental protection, the Cook Islands National Environment Service (NES) being the central Government Agency charged with protecting, managing and conserving the environment.<sup>49</sup> Other Government bodies have specific responsibilities in particular areas.

The country has embraced the concept of Blue Economy. In 2017 the Government, along with traditional leaders and local communities, and following a robust consultation process across the country, turned the Cook Islands' EEZ into the world's largest national, multiple-use marine protected area. The Marae Moana marine park provides a framework for conservation and management of ocean resources, including support for coastal traditional marine protected areas, "to promote sustainable development by balancing economic growth interests such as tourism, fishing and deep-sea mining, with conserving core biodiversity and natural assets, in the ocean, reefs and islands".<sup>50</sup>

In July 2021, the European Union (EU) and the Cook Islands agreed to continue their fisheries partnership as part of the sustainable fisheries partnership agreement (SFPA) under revised terms for a duration of three years until the expiry of the agreement. The agreement allows up to four EU purse seine fishing vessels operating in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean to continue fishing in the Cook Islands fishery waters. In the framework of the new protocol, the EU and ship owners will contribute up to approximately €4M (NZ\$6.8M,

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<sup>47</sup> Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO

<sup>48</sup> UNDP and IFRC. 2015. The Checklist on Law and Disaster Risk Reduction in the Cook Islands.

<sup>49</sup> More info produced by the NES is available at <https://environment.gov.ck/about/>.

<sup>50</sup> EDS Op. Cit., p.94. See also <https://www.devex.com/news/how-small-islands-can-harness-the-ocean-economy-95290>.

US\$4.75M) over the next three years, of which €1M (NZ\$1.7M, US\$1.2M) will support Cook Islands' initiatives within the sectoral fisheries and maritime policy.<sup>51</sup>

The lawfulness of the above agreement was challenged in the Cook Islands High Court by a local conservation non-governmental organization (NGO), Te Ipukarea Society (approx. meaning: 'The Homeland Society') and a group of cultural leaders ('Aronga Mana'). The Cook Islands Court of Appeal ruled that the Cook Islands Government was in breach of its obligations by not conducting an environmental impact assessment (EIA) or taking the precautionary approach in dealings relating to the purse seine fishery. However, the Court of Appeal also found that the Government's decisions were "unlikely" to pose a significant threat to the fishery. The Cook Islands Attorney-General cross-appealed against the Court of Appeal's conclusions on the EIA and the precautionary approach. The final appeal is still to be heard by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London (the highest court of appeal under the Cook Islands Judicial system) in November 2021.<sup>52</sup>

Overall, next to improvements in the fisheries sector, securing bilateral fisheries access and revenues obtained such as through this SFPA contributes to the Cook Islands Government's efforts to enhance broader fisheries-derived benefits in support of rebuilding the country's economy and funding national priorities such as health, education and infrastructure. Recent work, using data from the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), suggests that the average annual tuna access fees for the Cook Islands for the period 2015-2018 was US\$13.5M, equivalent to 10.6% of Government revenue.<sup>53</sup>

Polymetallic manganese nodules are found in the Cook Islands' EEZ. Te Ipukarea Society and community leaders have expressed concern about the possible adverse effects on the environment of seabed exploitation in the Cook Islands' EEZ. Those environmental concerns are shared by the Cook Islands Government, which has consistently maintained that any future exploration and exploitation operations must apply a strict, precautionary approach so as to protect the marine environment. In line with that precautionary approach, the Cook Islands Government has put in place robust national laws to regulate seabed minerals activities. No commercial activities have yet begun, although applications for exploration licenses are under consideration by the Government.<sup>54</sup>

On a different issue, the Government has recognized multiple water quality challenges in both drinking water supplies and in lagoons as a result of wastewater discharge and environmental degradation. Two significant projects have been initiated to alleviate this; *Te*

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<sup>51</sup> European Commission. July 2021. Oceans and Fisheries. "Fisheries: The EU and Cook islands agree to continue their sustainable fisheries partnership". [https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/news/fisheries-eu-and-cook-islands-agree-continue-their-sustainable-fisheries-partnership-2021-07\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/news/fisheries-eu-and-cook-islands-agree-continue-their-sustainable-fisheries-partnership-2021-07_en);

<sup>52</sup> CIN and Meline Etches. 12 October 2021. "Privy Council to hear purse seine appeal. Rarotonga resident William Framhein's 2019 appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council on Cook Islands government's purse seine fishing agreement with the European Union will be heard on November 17."

<sup>53</sup> Bell, J.D., Senina, I., Adams, T. et al. 2021. Pathways to sustaining tuna-dependent Pacific Island economies during climate change. *Nature Sustainability* 4, 900–910.

<sup>54</sup> More information on the website of the Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority (SBMA) <https://www.sbma.gov.ck/>

*Mato Vai* (‘the source of water’) aims to provide access to a reliable and safe water supply and *Mei Te Vai Ki Te Vai* (‘from water to water’) aims to restore the water quality of the lagoons.<sup>55</sup> To strengthen the sustainability of these initiatives, a new crown-owned authority *To Tatou Vai* (‘Our Water’) has been created to manage the infrastructure.<sup>56</sup>

The Ridge to Reef Programme implemented by Infrastructure Cook Islands (ICI), working closely with the NES and *Te Mato Vai*, looks to address, inter alia, stormwater management and lagoon water quality through land-based solutions, such as using wetlands to treat and retain sediments. Desalination efforts are part of the SPC Water Security Project in the Cook Islands, providing access to supplementary water supplies such as emergency desalination, groundwater and additional storage reservoirs.<sup>57</sup>

In the Cook Islands, almost 100% of households benefit from access to basic water and sanitation services,<sup>58</sup> while 100% of schools have access to basic drinking water, sanitation and hygiene for an estimated school age population of just over 4,100 children in 2020.<sup>59</sup> In terms of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in health care facilities, currently 100% of healthcare facilities have access to basic water services and sanitation.

The Cook Islands Parliament has recently enacted the Agriculture Act 2021 to replace 1978 legislation, one of the primary purposes of the new legislation being to provide for the development of sustainable agricultural practices and new, more fit-for-purpose functions of the Ministry of Agriculture.<sup>60</sup> An agricultural census to begin in November 2021 will enable the Ministry of Agriculture to obtain the information necessary to the development of policies and projects to address the Cook Islands’ food security and nutritional requirements.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> ‘To Tatou Vai’ (Our Water) is a Crown Entity established to operate and maintain *Te Mato Vai* assets after the project is complete. Chaired by the Financial Secretary of the Cook Islands, the multi-agency Steering Group oversees both projects to provide a consistent direction for Government policy and funding. The Ministry of Finance and Economic Management manages the contract for the Project Management Unit. <https://www.tatatouvai.co/home>

<sup>56</sup> To Tatou Vai is responsible for the collection, treatment and transport of potable water to the Rarotonga community. <https://www.tatatouvai.co/ck/>

<sup>57</sup> UN Pacific Strategy 2018-2022, Op. Cit.

<sup>58</sup> WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP).

<sup>59</sup> Government of the Cook Islands. 2020. 2020 Education Statistics Report. Ministry of Education.

<sup>60</sup> For Cook Islands legislation see the Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute’s website at [www.pacii.org/countries/ck.html](http://www.pacii.org/countries/ck.html)

<sup>61</sup> CIN and Caleb Fotheringham. 18 October 2021. “Agriculture census helps ministry plan. An agriculture census which happens every 10 years is set to begin next month, lasting until December, with assistance from the Asian Development Bank.”.

## Outcome 2: Gender Equality

In 2011, the Government adopted the Cook Islands National Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment & Strategic Plan of Action (2011-2016).<sup>62</sup> A review of that Policy in 2018 revealed that while some progress had been made towards achieving the agreed goals, there were also areas of concern, challenges and barriers, as well as new and emerging issues relative to the priorities set in 2011.

Based on the review of findings and detailed public consultations, the Government subsequently adopted the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment and Action Plan 2019-2024.<sup>63</sup> The purpose of the Policy is to provide a comprehensive framework for accelerating and enhancing gender equality and the well-being of women in the Cook Islands under five main outcomes:

- a gender responsive Government
- gender equity in leadership and governance
- women engaged in economic development
- healthy women and girls; and
- eliminating violence against women.

The Cook Islands has the highest proportion of female parliamentarians in the Pacific region with 7 of 24 Members (29%) compared to 3 of 24 in 2014 (12.5%). Women have served as Speaker of Parliament and as Leader of a major political party. In 2020, one out of 10 Pa Enea Councils were headed by a Lady Mayor. In 2020, of 14 Government Ministries, eight were headed by women, as were two of 10 Pa Enea administrations.<sup>64</sup>

Efforts are being made in the Cook Islands to progress towards gender equality. In a number of Government Ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration and the Ministry of Justice), more than half the officers are females, including in senior management positions. The Cook Islands Ports Authority has a male/female employee ratio of 57% men to 43% women and aims at achieving equal or exceeding female representation in the Port’s operations.<sup>65</sup>

Women on average earn 8% less than men, work part-time more often than men (10% of women and 7.4% men are employed part-time), and do more unpaid home duties with 16.7% of women vs. 6.3% men reporting engagement in work at home. Both the EDS and the NSDA recognize the situation and have identified a number of initiatives to address the problem.

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<sup>62</sup> Government of the Cook Islands. May 2011. Cook Islands National Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment & Strategic Plan of Action 2011-2016. Ministry of Internal Affairs.

<sup>63</sup> Government of the Cook Islands. March 2019. National Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment and Action Plan 2019-2024. Ministry of Internal Affairs.

<sup>64</sup> Public Service Commissioner Annual Report for year ending 30 June 2020.

<sup>65</sup> CIN and Melissa Etches. 18 October 2021. “Striving for gender equality. The Cook Islands Ports Authority has a male/female gender employee composition of men 57 per cent and women 43 per cent, with the aim to achieve equal or exceed female representation in the ports business.”

In implementing the above 2011-2016 Policy on Gender Equality, a number of steps were taken to address domestic violence. These included the introduction of the Employment Relations Act and the Education Act in 2012 and the Family Protection and Support Act in 2017, which contained protections. Additional steps had been taken to improve the situation including better access to justice, specifically access to legal services, and better police enforcement and support in Rarotonga since the establishment of the Domestic Violence Coordinator position at the Cook Islands Police Service (CIPS) in 2006 and the adoption of the “No Drop” policy in prosecutions. Nevertheless, the Family Health and Safety Survey Report (2014)<sup>66</sup> identified high rates of both intimate partner violence (33%) and non-partner sexual violence (38%) reported by women in their lifetime, with rates varying significantly by island; 30.3% on women on Rarotonga, 43.6% of women in the Southern Pa Enuu, and 23.6% of women in the Northern Pa Enuu. Domestic violence reports have increased steadily from 123 cases in 2011 to 218 in 2016.

In formulating the 2019-2024 Policy it was found that, despite ongoing efforts to raise awareness in the community and strengthen justice and law enforcement services, domestic violence had increased over the past years and may have been under-reported. The 2019 Policy recognized, for example, that access to assistance was more difficult for women in the Pa Enuu, as well as for women with disabilities, women with limited formal education and women with a reduced income.

With the onset of COVID-19, reports of domestic violence cases on Rarotonga have continued to increase from an average of one case a week to two to three cases a week by June 2020.<sup>67</sup> In October 2021 the number of reported cases of domestic violence on Rarotonga had risen to 40, the highest monthly figure in the past five years.<sup>68</sup> A recent study has indicated, inter alia, the need to strengthen domestic and family violence referral pathways, system and prevention efforts through technical assistance, training and increased resourcing.<sup>69</sup>

Domestic violence cases are handled through several channels including the police, health workers, Internal Affairs and Punanga Tauturu Incorporated (PTI), the Cook Islands Women’s Crisis Centre. An earlier Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the CIPS and PTI expired in 2017 and discussions are currently underway to conclude a new, updated MOU. The CIPS will be providing further training to its officers in dealing with domestic violence cases and will strengthen CIPS’ working relations with other Government Agencies. The Gender Unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (INTAFF) is responsible for

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<sup>66</sup> TMO/MoH. June 2014. The Cook Islands Family Health and Safety Study. Cook Islands National Council of Women. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). AusAID.

<sup>67</sup> Gorman, Hilary. August 2020. Rapid Assessment of COVID-19 Preparedness, Mitigation and Response Measures and its Consideration of the Poor and Vulnerable Groups in the Cook Islands. P.2.

<sup>68</sup> CIN and Alana Musselle. 4 November 2021. “Domestic violence figures highest in years, say Police. Reported incidents of domestic violence are looking to surpass 2020 figures with last month holding the highest monthly figure recorded in the past five years, Cook Islands Police say.”

<sup>69</sup> Rapid Assessment, Op. Cit. Pp.6, 14-15, 34-35.

supporting implementation of CEDAW and leads on coordination to implement the 2019 Gender Policy. The Policy has not yet been systematically integrated into the programmes of central and local government.

Within the education sector, the Cook Islands Education Master Plan (2008-2023) presents the strategic direction for Education over a 15-year period. Underpinning the Plan are a set of policies targeted at equity and quality education for all. The 2016 strategic policy on Equity, Access and Participation ensures that all Cook Islanders, regardless of ability, gender, wealth, location, language or ethnic origin, will be able to participate in relevant, quality and appropriate learning experiences with a view to eliminating gender disparities and ensuring equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education by 2030.<sup>70</sup>

With respect to land rights, men and women alike can own, sell, lease or transfer their land. Women take an increasingly active part in land matters and are now holding some chiefly titles. Bilateral inheritance rights are recognized, and marital property is equally distributed between the spouses upon divorce.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Cook Islands Ministry of Education. May 2016. “Equity, Access and Participation” Policy.

<sup>71</sup> Singh, A. 2001. Philosophical Perceptions of Pacific Property: Women and Land Tenure. A study of Cooks Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu.

## Outcome 3: Sustainable and Inclusive Economic Empowerment

The Cook Islands Labour Force Survey (LFS)<sup>72</sup> undertaken in late 2019-early 2020 estimated the working age population (15 years of age and older) of the country at 11,445 people, comprising 74.9% of the total count. Of that total, 8,058 persons were in the labour force and 73.6% of the total were located on Rarotonga. The labour force participation rate (LFPR) was 70.4% on average, 77.8% for males and 63.4% for females. By age groups, the highest LFPR was amongst workers aged 25-34 (94%) and lowest in those aged 65+ years of age (31.7%). The youth (aged 15-24) LFPR was 58.9%. Women were more likely to be outside the labour force than men, with 36.7% of the female working age population not in the labour force, compared to 22.2% of the male working age population.

The service sector accounted for the largest share of employment (85.9%), followed by industry (11.5%) and agriculture (2.6%). The private sector provided 69.4% of all jobs. Persons who attained tertiary level of education had the highest LFPR at 80.2%. The unemployment rate stood at 1.3% in 2019, while youth unemployment was 10.2%, the highest unemployment rates being in the Pa Enua, especially in the Northern Group. The composite measure of labour under-utilization was 4.2% for the entire population. The male youth unemployment rate was 4.6%, while the rate for female youth was 1.6%.

The estimated average monthly wage in 2019 was NZ\$ 1,531 (US\$1,073). Men earned, on average, NZ\$1,565 (US\$1,097) per month, while women earned NZ\$1,490 (US\$1,044). The average monthly wage was highest in the industry sector (NZ\$1,834 or US\$1,286), followed by the agriculture sector (NZ\$1,701 or US\$1,192) and the services sector (NZ\$1,411 or US\$989).

Women's participation at the board/managerial levels in the Cook Islands economy is relatively high. According to a recent survey undertaken by the Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative (PSDI), Cook Islands women hold a third of board seats, a quarter of board chairs and 27% of Chief Executive Officer positions, well above regional and global averages.<sup>73</sup> While Cook Islands women business leaders recognize that great strides have been taken by women in the business sector over the years, there is also widespread recognition that there should still be more women in business leadership and decision-making roles.<sup>74</sup>

In March 2019, the Government issued the fourth iteration of the policy position of the Cook Islands to ensure a disability-inclusive development, the Cook Islands Disability Inclusive

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<sup>72</sup> Cook island Government. November 2020. Cook Islands Labour Force Survey 2019 Report. Ministry of Internal Affairs. ILO. SPC.

<sup>73</sup> PSDI. September 2021. Leadership Matters: Benchmarking Women in Business Leadership in the Pacific. Pp.25-28.

<sup>74</sup> CIN and Caleb Fotheringham. 2 October 2021. "Cooks leading the way for women in business. Cook Islands' representation of women in business has grown by leaps and bounds from the time young local women needed a signature of their father or husband in order to take out loans at the banks. According to a new regional report, representation of women in business leadership in the Cook Islands well exceeds global and regional averages."

Development Policy 2020-2025.<sup>75</sup> One of the priority areas identified in the policy relates to livelihoods and alleviating disadvantages in the labour market participation of persons with disability.

In January 2021, the Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs launched the National Youth Policy 2021-2026 with five key areas to guide youth development:

- youth are proud of their culture, traditions and country
- youth are learning and developing
- youth are healthy and resilient
- youth are accepted, respected and connected; and
- youth are environmental action ready.

Sustainable economic empowerment that includes all sectors of the community are key objectives of both the EDS and the NSDA. The EDS recognizes that the unemployment levels across the country and between different social groups further underline the need to ramp up the "leave no one behind" approach to fulfill the country's goal to evolve from 'quantity' to 'quality' growth. An objective of the EDS is to increase female participation in the workforce to 70% by 2030.

In the EDS, the Cook Islands Government has identified a number of policies to grow the labour force and prevent depopulation, including adoption of a targeted approach to attract Cook Islanders back to the country and possibly simplifying immigration requirements and reducing barriers to entry in order to grow the labour force and meet various needs of the Cook Islands economy.<sup>76</sup>

The NSDA highlights the importance of education as an enabler of economic empowerment and various strategies are being implemented towards that end. These include interventions through formal education as well as basic business training courses, technical assistance and small-scale loans for micro- and small businesses and those just starting out in business through collaboration between the Business Trade & Investment Board and Bank of the Cook Islands. Inputs from the 2021-2026 National Youth Policy will help to inform the NSDA.<sup>77</sup>

Both the EDS and the NSDA recognize the importance of economic diversification and identify a number of initiatives towards that end. As part of its ongoing Economic Response Plan (ERP), for example, the Government has been providing Smart Economy Grants as seed money to support innovative commercial ventures.<sup>78</sup>

Both the EDS and the NSDA also recognize the particular constraints facing the Pa Enua and emphasize the importance of including the Pa Enua in economic initiatives. This is

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<sup>75</sup> Cook Islands Government. March 2019. Cook Islands Disability Inclusive Development Policy. Rights, Responsibilities, Action. 2020-2025. Ministry of Internal Affairs.

<sup>76</sup> CIN. 28 June 2021. "Growing the labour force and preventing depopulation".

<sup>77</sup> Government of the Cook Islands. 2021. Cook Islands National Youth Policy 2021-2026. Te Mana o te Mapu. The Power of our Youth as Nation Builders.

<sup>78</sup> CIN. 20 February 2021. "Smart Economy Grant Supporting Innovative ICT commercial ventures".

highlighted, for example, in the actions to be undertaken to achieve the EDS' first objective, improving equity and access for all. An important element in inclusive economic empowerment is improved infrastructure. The Government has recently updated its National Infrastructure Investment Plan, including numerous projects to be undertaken in the Pa Enuu.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Cook Islands Investment Corporation. 2021. National Infrastructure Investment Plan (NIIP) Launched. See [www.ciic.gov.ck/national-infrastructure-investment-plan](http://www.ciic.gov.ck/national-infrastructure-investment-plan).

## Outcome 4: Equitable Basic Services

Both the EDS and the NSDA recognize the critical importance of health and education services for quality national development.

### Health

Te Marae Ora/Ministry of Health (TMO/MoH) is the main regulator and provider of health care in the Cook Islands. TMO/MoH's National Health Road Map 2017-2037 has three focal areas: health systems strengthening, health care service excellence, and public and private partnership. The Road Map identifies several challenges to be addressed, including a rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs), improving secondary health care in the Pa Enua, addressing tertiary health care demands, and addressing environmental health challenges.<sup>80</sup> Progress in addressing those challenges is measured through the 129 Health Indicators drawn from the NSDP, the SDGs, the Ministry's Healthy Islands Vision, and the Core Global Health Indicators of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Health care is provided free of charge to Cook Islanders under the age of 16 or over the age of 16 if attending a secondary school, persons 60+ years of age, the infirmed and destitute, those with chronic disabilities and those in the Pa Enua or Pa Enua residents using health services on Rarotonga. A range of modest fees are charged to other Cook Islanders, as well as tourists and other visitors, including for medicines not on the Government's prescribed list. Where specialist medical treatment is required, TMO/MoH refers Cook Islanders who are New Zealand citizens to New Zealand for treatment under special arrangements agreed between the Cook Islands and New Zealand Governments. Prior to the closure of the border, specialist medical practitioners from New Zealand would visit the Cook Islands annually to provide treatment.

The prevalence of NCDs (especially hypertension and diabetes) is the salient health risk facing the country. There have been about 5,000 cases of NCDs over the last 20 years (51% male, 49% female) with an annual average of 119 cases of hypertension during the period 2014-2018. The incidence of NCDs is the main cause of premature death, illness and disability in the Cook Islands. To address the problem, the Cook Islands Government in 2021 adopted a Strategic Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-Communicable Diseases 2021-2025.<sup>81</sup> Sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) continued to decline from 330 cases in 2009 to 178 cases in 2018. Chlamydia has remained the most prevalent type of STI, comprising 58% of all diagnosed cases in 2018.

The Cook Islands' total fertility rate is estimated at 2.5 in 2018 (down from a high of 3 in 2007), while the number of births to adolescent mothers (aged 15-19 years) was 38 per 1000

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<sup>80</sup> Cook Islands Ministry of Health. 2015. National Health Information Strategy 2015-2019 and Cook Islands Ministry of Health. 2017. Cook Islands National Health Road Map 2017-2036.

<sup>81</sup> Cook Islands Ministry of Health. 2021. Ngaki'anga Kapiti Ora'anga Meitaki. The Cook Islands Strategic Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-communicable Diseases 2021-2025.

women in 2018, unlike the previous three years when the rate was steady at 40 per 1000 women. At 48%, the Cook Islands' contraceptive prevalence rate is high compared to other PICTs, yet insufficient.

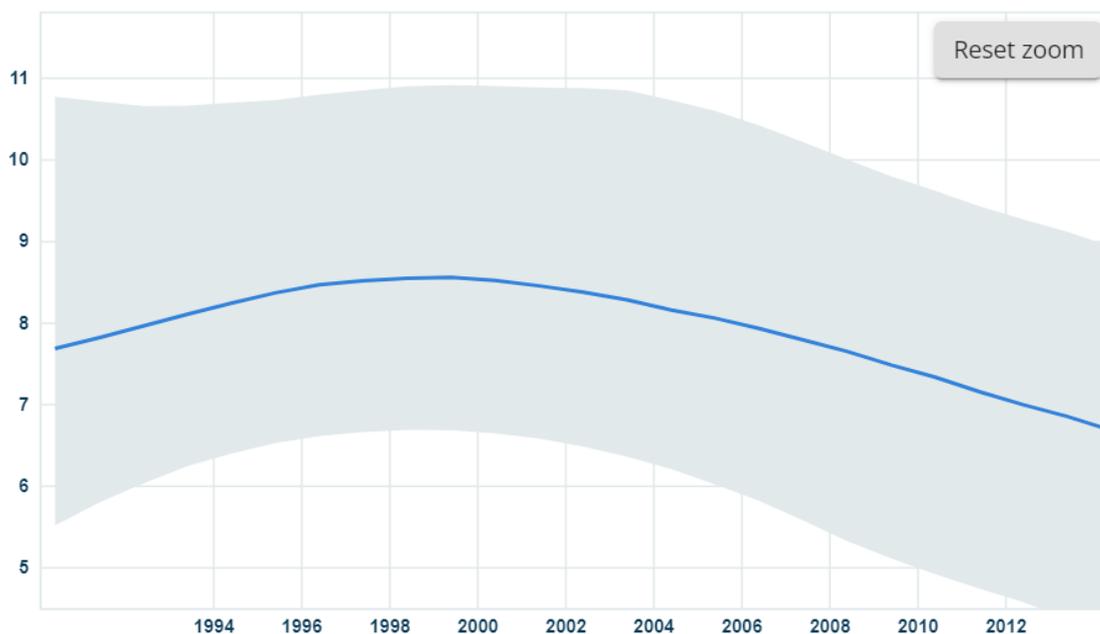
The Cook Islands continues to maintain a low under-5 years of age mortality rate of 7.2 per 1000 children and has achieved the SDG target for infant mortality rate (in 2018, 13 per 1000 children under the age of one). Given the fewer than 300 live births per year in total, slight variations in the annual rates can be expected.<sup>82</sup> There is a universal antenatal service coverage, while 100% of deliveries are attended by a skilled attendant. No maternal death has been reported since 1995, a testament to the universal skilled birth attendance.<sup>83</sup> Adolescent mortality is estimated at 5.84 per 1,000.<sup>84</sup> The Cook Islands has high coverage for all recommended vaccines.

## MORTALITY RATE AGE 15-19 - TOTAL

CHART ESTIMATES SOURCE DATA

Deaths per 1000 children aged 15

Estimation model: B3



Source: IGME 2019

<sup>82</sup> Health Bulletin 2018 Op. Cit., pp. 8 and 16.

<sup>83</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). April 2014. Population and Development Profiles: Pacific Island Countries.

<sup>84</sup> UN Interagency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (IGME). 2019. Graph generated through access in November 2021. <https://childmortality.org/data/Cook%20Islands>. The UN IGME is led by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and includes the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank Group and the United Nations Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs as full members.

The awareness and management of mental illnesses or disorders in the country has increased in recent years with better facilities and establishment of follow-up systems. Between 2009 and 2016 the number of diagnosed cases doubled to 85. The most common disorders were those related to anxiety, followed by insomnia and dementia.

The main dental facilities are located on Rarotonga. There were 3,555 dental consultations in 2016 and 2017, up 50% from 2012 and 2013. Dental visits were primarily for the purposes of fillings, general consultations and extractions.

The National Youth Policy 2021-2026 has prioritized youth reproductive health services with three specific indicators:

- demand for family planning satisfied with modern methods
- contraceptive prevalence rates; and
- antenatal and postnatal care coverage.

The launch of the Youth Hub through the ‘Empower Me Inc Group’, a youth NGO, is pivotal to young people owning and driving their right to health including universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.<sup>85</sup>

In reviewing the Cook Islands Report on its implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)<sup>86</sup>, the CRC Committee in 2020 indicated remaining concerns on the prevailing disparities within the country in access to health-care services, including primary and preventive health care, and that the neonatal and infant mortality rates and the mortality rate among children under 5 years of age are higher in the Pa Enua compared with Rarotonga. Other gaps include the need to strengthen measures to facilitate effective access for all adolescents to confidential reproductive health and counselling services and information, as well as to modern forms of contraception, including free emergency contraception; and to implement programmes on sexual and reproductive health education and expand them across the country, targeting adolescent girls and boys, with special attention given to preventing early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.<sup>87</sup> The Cook Islands noted those concerns and indicated that steps were being taken to address them.<sup>88</sup>

The EDS recognizes the gap in the level of health services between Rarotonga and the Pa Enua and is attempting to address the issue in a cost-effective way. TMO/MoH operates two hospitals, on Rarotonga and Aitutaki. The provision of basic health services to other islands is managed by nurse practitioners and on some islands by a registered nurse based at a local

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<sup>85</sup> See: [www.facebook.com/empowermeyouthhub](http://www.facebook.com/empowermeyouthhub).

<sup>86</sup> United Nations. Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). 28 March 2019. Combined second to fifth periodic reports submitted by the Cook Islands under article 44 of the Convention (received 18 January 2018). CRC/C/COK/2-5.

<sup>87</sup> United Nations. Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). 2 April 2020. Concluding observations on the combined second to fifth periodic reports of the Cook Islands. CRC/C/COK/CO/2-5.

<sup>88</sup> United Nations. Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). 30 January 2020. Replies of the Cook Islands to the list of issues in relation to its combined second to fifth periodic reports. [Date received: 17 October 2019]. CRC/C/COK/RQ/2-5

health center. To supplement those arrangements and facilities, the Ministry has recently introduced Kaveinga Ora - its flying doctor and dentist programme - into a more integrated, structured and comprehensive mobile health system that will support the Nurse Practitioners through regular doctor and dentist visits to the Pa Enuu.

The quality of Pa Enuu telecommunications services will also assist to connect the Pa Enuu medical workforce with Rarotonga so that Nurse Practitioners can access clinical advice more easily from specialist doctors on Rarotonga. Health facilities in the Pa Enuu are connected to MedTech32 via the internet, providing a link back to Rarotonga. The remaining information systems are being digitized, and there are future plans to have this data electronically stored as a component of a data warehouse.

## Education

The function of the Cook Islands Ministry of Education is to administer the Education Act 2012 and all matters relating to the public service of education. Education in the Cook Islands is inclusive, free and compulsory from 5 years to the end of the year in which the child turns 16, resulting in high rates of enrolment and literacy. In 2020, the gross primary enrollment rate was 113%, while the secondary enrollment rate was 96%.<sup>89</sup>

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is not compulsory, but enrollment remains high as a result of the commitment of families to and confidence in the value of early childhood development. Gross enrollment was at a rate of 87% in 2020 and 98% of children participated in ECE in the year before entering primary.<sup>90</sup>

In 2020, 27% of ECE teachers had their first degree, and 95% had the appropriate certificate in teaching. For primary school teachers, this was 44% and 98%, respectively, and at secondary level 70% of teachers had at least a first degree and 99% the required teacher training.<sup>91</sup> Only two PICTs, Cook Islands and Fiji, have all teachers in their workforce trained to teach in both primary and secondary education.<sup>92</sup> Significant support is provided to teachers studying to obtain their first degree while continuing to meet the professional teaching standards of the Cook Islands. Area schools in the Pa Enuu deliver education from ECE to senior secondary education on the same site.

Online learning programmes through Te Kura, the New Zealand Correspondence School, are utilized for senior students when senior subject expertise is not available. Pa Enuu students have access to a domestic scholarship programme hosted by the Ministry of Education to

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<sup>89</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). Accessed November 2021.

<http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/ck?theme=education-and-literacy>

<sup>90</sup> Pacific Community (SPC) Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP). 2021. The status of Pacific education: A sector analysis based on internationally comparable statistics. P. 15

<sup>91</sup> 2020 Education Statistics Report, Op. Cit.

<sup>92</sup> Pacific Community (SPC). 2021. The Status of Pacific Education.

allow them to continue with secondary education on Rarotonga when specific levels are not offered on particular islands.

An Inclusive Education policy supports integrated access and participation for students with a disability including the use of teacher aides.<sup>93</sup> The country renewed its Inclusive Education Policy to ensure that the education system is inclusive, equitable, fair and just and that the curriculum and programmes are accessible by all learners of the Cook Islands<sup>94</sup>. This includes provision of inclusive approach to disability.

In 2018, 78% of Year 6 students met or exceeded expectations in Literacy and 72% in Numeracy on the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA).<sup>95</sup> Girls perform better than boys in both education access and outcomes, with the greatest differences in favour of girls seen in ECE enrollment and in retention at the senior secondary level.

Adolescent pregnancy directly impacts the continued education of adolescent girls and their future. In the Cook Islands, the Education Act of 2012 provides for the continued education for adolescent girls and young women during and following pregnancy.

The Cook Islands Tertiary Training Institute (CITTI), established in 2013 provides full and part time vocational programmes and a range of community education courses in Rarotonga and the Pa Enua. The country's Education Master Plan 2008-23 calls for needs to significantly increase participation in tertiary education and provide access for second chance learning to achieve qualifications, skills and training<sup>96</sup>.

## Social Protection

The country has the most developed social protection system amongst the PICTs, providing social protection support for vulnerable sectors of the community including children, the elderly, women, persons with disabilities and those experiencing hardship or unable to work. That formal system is supplemented by traditional mechanisms of social support. The Cook Islands is one of four PICTs (with Fiji, Nauru, RMI) that deliver formal disability benefits to their population, and one of five (with Fiji, Palau, Niue, and Nauru) who have established benefits targeting children.

Under the Cook Islands National Superannuation Act 2000, membership in the Fund is compulsory for all employees in employment in the Cook Islands or employed outside the Cook Islands by an employer resident in the Cook Islands.<sup>97</sup> Extreme hardship and food poverty are almost non-existent, and the country has some of the best socio-economic indicators in the region.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> UNICEF. 2021. Inclusive Education Country Profile.

<sup>94</sup> Government of Cook Islands. Inclusive Education. 2017.

<sup>95</sup> The Status of Pacific Education, Op. Cit. P. 14.

<sup>96</sup> Government of Cook Islands. Learning for Life. Cook Islands Education Master Plan 2008-2023. 2008.

<sup>97</sup> Cook Islands National Superannuation Fund at [www.cinsf.com](http://www.cinsf.com)

<sup>98</sup> UN Pacific Strategy, Op. Cit.

## Outcome 5: Governance and Community Engagement

The Cook Islands has a unicameral legislature, the Parliament,<sup>99</sup> comprising 24 members, each elected for a four-year term based on a system of universal suffrage for persons 18 years of age and above. The last general election at the time of writing this Assessment was held on June 14, 2018.

To promote transparency and offer access to information, the Cook Islands Parliamentary Services have recently begun publishing the Parliament’s legislation and other parliamentary documents online.<sup>100</sup> In the 2020 session of Parliament, 20 Acts were adopted dealing with a wide range of matters, including transportation, COVID-19, property leases and appropriation of budgetary expenditure. In 2021, seven Acts have been passed dealing with agriculture, COVID-19, Police and seabed minerals. All sessions of Parliament are broadcast live over the local radio throughout the Cook Islands and on the Parliament Facebook page.

Public petitions have occasionally been presented for the consideration of Parliament. Complaints have been made, however, that, in one case at least, a petition was not considered in accordance with the Parliament’s Standing Orders. Those claims have been denied by the Cook Islands Government.<sup>101</sup>

While there has been progress in electing women to Parliament, the NSDA recognizes as a challenge that, in addition to women, other interest groups have also been greatly under-represented in politics, including the LGTBIQ+, youth and persons with disabilities. Some efforts have been made to improve the situation, including the conduct of the ELECT Cook Islands Youth Parliament organized by the Cook Islands National Youth Council in 2018<sup>102</sup> and the Youth Practice Parliament for College Students held in March 2021.

All inhabited islands in the Pa Enua except Nassau have an Island Council, the latter being incorporated into the Pukapuka constituency as all residents of Nassau are culturally linked to Pukapuka. Island Council elections are held every three years.

Since 1966, the Cook Islands Statistics Office publishes a wide range of social, economic and other statistical information essential for sound decision-making, including the five-yearly population census. The next national population census will be undertaken in late 2021.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> See [www.parliament.gov.ck](http://www.parliament.gov.ck) for further information.

<sup>100</sup> See [www.parliament.gov.ck/parliamentary-business/acts/acts-library](http://www.parliament.gov.ck/parliamentary-business/acts/acts-library)

<sup>101</sup> Radio New Zealand Pacific/Cook Islands. 23 June 2020. “Governance concerns in the Cook Islands - NGO”

<sup>102</sup> CIN and Rashneel Kumar. 18 May 2018. “Youth parliament discusses vital issues. Cook Islands National Youth Council (CINYC) has hailed the ELECT Cook Islands Youth Parliament, which ended yesterday, a success.”

<sup>103</sup> See Government of the Cook Islands, Ministry of Finance and Economic Management, Cook Islands Statistics Office (CISO) at [www.mfem.gov.ck/statistics/about-us-statistics](http://www.mfem.gov.ck/statistics/about-us-statistics).

The Cook Islands is a party to the United Nations Convention Against Corruption and has subscribed to the Teieniwa Vision adopted by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders as a regional approach to combating corruption. The Government has established an Anti-Corruption Committee and efforts are being made to strengthen anti-corruption initiatives in the country.<sup>104</sup>

The Office of the Public Service Commissioner (OPSC) of the Cook Islands has a key role to play in overseeing the implementation of numerous policies for the sound, professional operation of the country's public service.<sup>105</sup> In the formulation of Cook Islands Government policies, there are frequently widespread public consultations, including consultations in the Pa Enea.

There are two privately-owned newspapers in the country, the Cook Islands News ([www.cookislandsnews.com](http://www.cookislandsnews.com)), published six days a week, and the Cook Islands Herald ([www.ciheraklf.co.ck](http://www.ciheraklf.co.ck)), published weekly. Also privately owned and operated are Radio Cook Islands ([www.radio.co.ck](http://www.radio.co.ck)) and Cook Islands Television ([www.facebook.com/cookislandstelevisionnews](http://www.facebook.com/cookislandstelevisionnews)).

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<sup>104</sup> See Government of the Cook Islands, Ministry of Finance and Economic Management, [www.mfem.gov.ck/anti-corruption](http://www.mfem.gov.ck/anti-corruption) and CIN and Rashneel Kumar. 26 July 2019. "United Nations coaching on beating corruption. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime will advise Cook Islands authorities on how to run a session on anti-corruption at an Ombudsman investigator training which includes the Cook Islands."

<sup>105</sup> The Public Service Commissioner is appointed by the Queen's Representative on the advice of the Prime Minister and has collective accountability with Cabinet for the performance of the public service. The Commissioner provides strategic policy advice to Cabinet, sets human resources policy for the Public Service and is the Manager for Heads of Ministries. See <https://www.psc.gov.ck/about-us>.

## Outcome 6: Human Rights

Fundamental human rights and freedoms are enshrined in the Cook Islands Constitution. Of the various detailed provisions, Article 63 states that it “... is hereby recognized and declared that in the Cook Islands there exist, and shall continue to exist, without discrimination by reason of by reason of race, national origin, colour, religion, opinion, belief or sex, the following fundamental rights and freedoms:

- (a) the right of the individual to life, liberty, and security of the person, and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with law
- (b) the right of the individual to equality before the law and to the protection of the law
- (c) the right of the individual to own property and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with law...
- (d) freedom of thought, conscience and religion
- (e) freedom of speech and expression; [and]
- (f) freedom of peaceful assembly and association.”

Under Cook Islands law, consent to previous sexual conduct is not a proof of consent for the conduct which has been charged. Physical resistance is also not required in order to establish lack of consent. However, the Cook Islands law does not recognize marital rape as a crime.

Among the punishable offences under the Cook Islands Crimes Act 1969 is “indecent between males” although the provision has never been enforced. A Parliamentary sub-committee is currently examining revisions to the Act to bring it up to date. Whereas a number of PICTs have recently decriminalized same-sex relationships among consenting adults and introduced new laws to counter discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people in employment and education, Cook Islands (and others) still criminalize consenting relationships between adults of the same sex – a fundamental human rights violation – even if the discriminatory norm is applied with leniency, if at all.

The Religious Organizations Restrictions Act of 1975 limits the introduction of new religions to the only four authorized in the Act, and approval must be granted from the Minister of Justice before another religion may be established.<sup>106</sup> Since the passage of that Act a number of other religious organizations have been approved, and no applications have been rejected. The death penalty was abolished by the Cook Islands in 2007, making it the 92<sup>nd</sup> country to abolish the capital punishment for all crimes.<sup>107</sup>

While not a member of the United Nations, the Cook Islands is a full member of numerous specialized United Nations Agencies and collaborates with Funds, Programmes and the UN Development System as a whole. Consistent with the free association relationship existing between the Cook Islands and New Zealand, treaties signed by New Zealand since 1988 have not extended to the Cook Islands unless so agreed by the Cook Islands. Since 1973, the Cook

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<sup>106</sup> New Zealand Law Commission. September 2006. *Converging Currents. Custom and Human Rights in the Pacific*. Study Paper.

<sup>107</sup> Amnesty International. April 2008. *The Death Penalty Worldwide Developments in 2007*. P. 7.

Islands has itself entered into a wide range of international treaties in its own right including the CRC in 1997, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2006 and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2009.<sup>108</sup> The Cook Islands became a member of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 2015 and has since become a party to the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, and to the Convention Against the Worst Forms of Child Labor in 2018. In addition, it has also ratified the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, as well as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

The Cook Islands is not yet a party to certain core human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CPED), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW).

In reviewing the Cook Islands report on implementation of CEDAW, the CEDAW Committee in 2018 noted that gender-based violence, in particular domestic and sexual violence, remained underreported owing to lack of trust in the police and the criminal justice system. The CEDAW Committee also noted that the prohibition of discrimination provided in the Constitution of the Cook Islands (see above) does not comprise a comprehensive definition of discrimination against women.<sup>109</sup>

On child labor, a 2019 report by the United States' Department of Labor found no evidence of worst forms of child labor in the Cook Islands. However, it also noted that the country has made no advancements to prevent forced child labor, as the law does not criminally prohibit the use, procurement or offering of a child for prostitution, pornography, or illicit activities including the production and trafficking of drugs.<sup>110</sup>

Similarly, the CRC committee also stated in March 2020 that the minimum age for marriage in the Cook Islands remained at 16 years of age (or even younger with the consent of parents), and recommended revising the marriage legislation to ensure that the minimum age was established as 18 years for both girls and boys with no exceptions.<sup>111</sup> However, under the Marriage Act 1973 of the Cook Islands, persons under the age of 21 and above 16 years of age may marry with the consent of their parent(s).

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<sup>108</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). UN Treaty Body Database at <https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/>

<sup>109</sup> United Nations. Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). 25 July 2018. Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of the Cook Islands, para. 9. CEDAW/C/COK/CO/2-3.

<sup>110</sup> US Government. 2020. Child Labor and Forced Labor Report for Cook Islands. US Department of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs.

<sup>111</sup> CRC/C/COK/CO/2-5 2020 Op. Cit., para 20.

The Cook Islands has been a champion of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) since 1994. In 2019, the Cook Islands pledged its national commitments at the Nairobi ICPD25 Summit. The 2013 Ministry of Health Act repealed and replaced the previous requirement that women obtain spousal or partner consent before they could undergo sterilization.

The Cook Islands Disability Inclusive Development Policy 2020-2025 seeks to build on progress made during the previous policy period, 2014-2019. A range of actions were identified under the following priority areas to address the needs of persons with disability:

- awareness and advocacy on the rights of persons with disability
- support to families, caregivers and self-help groups
- education and training, cultural life, leisure, recreation and sports
- rehabilitation
- early identification and intervention
- livelihoods
- data and research
- partnerships, coordination and mainstreaming disability-inclusive development within the Government and civil society; and
- women and girls with disabilities.

A recent review of the CRPD in the Cook Islands assessed whether the rights of persons with disabilities were recognized in practice in the country. It was the first phase of a four-phase project between the United Nations and a local entity, the Kia Orana Collective, that aims to produce joint programmes to promote the rights of persons with disabilities.<sup>112</sup>

In a related development, the Government announced plans to install the country's first-ever elevator in the Ministry of Justice and Courthouse building to facilitate access by Cook Islanders, including the elderly and disabled, to offices and the courtroom on the building's first floor.<sup>113</sup> This followed other steps taken in recent years to facilitate access to the court room particularly during the period of travel restrictions, including the use of technology. Other Government Agencies, including Immigration and Customs, have also established offices in ground floor premises to facilitate access by the disabled, elderly and other members of the public.

The CRC Committee also noted in 2020 the high enrolment rates in primary schools, the high level of retention in secondary schools and the steps taken to facilitate access for children with disabilities to inclusive education, including by providing them with individualized support in mainstream schools and by improving the accessibility of school buildings. Concerns remain on the disparities between children in Rarotonga and those in the outer

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<sup>112</sup> CIN and Alana Musselle. 9 October 2021. "Understanding the rights of persons with disabilities".

<sup>113</sup> CIN. 14 October 2021. "Cook Islands to build its first-ever elevator. Funds have now been set aside for the installation of an elevator in the Ministry of Justice and Courthouse building in Avarua, confirmed the Cook Islands Investment Corporation (CIIC)."

islands, their access to quality education and effective pathways for vocational training. The Committee urged the Government to continue to provide individualized support to children with disabilities to ensure their full participation in inclusive education in mainstream schools, including by training and appointing a sufficient number of suitable teacher's aides.

While the Ministry of Education has a full-time Inclusive Education Adviser whose primary role is to assess and support children with unique training needs, and the delivery of professional development training opportunities to teacher aides, the scope of this work is far-reaching and individualized support needs to be increased in the Pa Enea.

The CEDAW Committee in 2018 noted the substantive measures taken to ensure equal access for girls and boys to education through the 2012 Education Act and supporting policy, and through the provisions of continued education for young women and girls following pregnancy. The Committee highlighted the need for appropriate sexual and reproductive rights education and addressing gender stereotypes, for example, the underrepresentation of girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

The CRC Committee in 2020 highlighted its concerns that despite the Committee's previous recommendations, the Government had not ensured access to day-care facilities for children younger than schooling age. The Government has since developed the EDS in which two relevant actions are identified: introducing regulation of childcare services for children under 3 (Action 3.10) and expanding Government support for early childcare education to children between the ages of zero to 3 (Action 3.11).

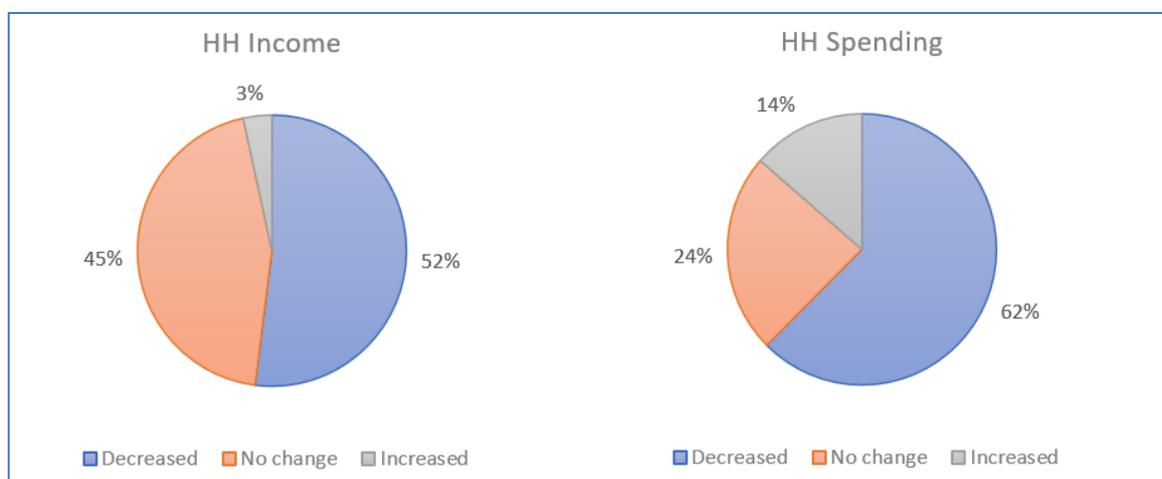
### 3. Multi-dimensional Risk Analysis

The main challenges faced by the Cook Islands are related to the economy, the environment, health and demographics, which pose risks to the country’s development and overall national security, taking into account the Cook Islands’ vulnerabilities. A mapping of these risks has identified a Covid outbreak, pervasive gender inequality and GBV, the lasting impact of the pandemic protection measures on tourism, the ripple effect on income and food security, potential economic turbulence, lack of economic diversification, NCDs and adolescent pregnancies, and the impact of climate change on the lives and livelihoods on Cook Islands.

The Cook Islands is substantially dependent on the tourism sector, which has been hit hard by the pandemic. The country hosted about 170,000 international visitors in 2019 (or about 10 visitors per capita), generating NZ\$421M (US\$295M) in tourism revenues (nearly 80% of GDP).<sup>114</sup> The tourism sector, with 2,386 jobs, accounted for 34.4% of the total employment. With a complete closure of borders between March 2020 and May 2021, and again from August 2021, the tourism industry took a massive hit, contributing to a significant economic contraction.

According to the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment (SEIA) conducted by the UN in 2020, over half of the households in the Cook Islands reported a decrease in their main source of income as a result of border closure measures imposed in response to COVID-19, while over 60% said their household spending had decreased, reflecting the magnitude of the economic toll of the global pandemic.

#### Change in Household Income/Spending due to COVID-19 Travel Restrictions



Source: Cook Islands Rapid SEIA Online Survey, 2020.

<sup>114</sup> 2018 GDP was NZ\$524M (US\$367M). Government of the Cook Islands, Ministry of Finance and Economic Management. National Accounts. <http://www.cookislands.gov.ck/statistics/economic-statistics/national-accounts;>

With the recent announcement that the Cook Islands border with New Zealand (which is providing some 70% of the Cook Islands international visitor arrivals) will reopen on 13 January 2022, and on the assumption that the border with Australia will reopen from June 2022 and other markets thereafter, the return to ‘full’ visitor arrivals is expected to follow a similar pattern to when the border opened between May and August 2021, with a return to pre-pandemic levels projected for FY 2025. At the same time, the Cook Islands Government recognizes the uncertainty of visitor arrivals should tourists be more cautious than they had been during the May-August 2021 interval.<sup>115</sup>

The Cook Islands Government forecasts that inflation will rise to 3.3% in FY 2022, and to about 4.7% in FY 2024 before moderating to 0.5% by FY 2025, as a result of expected increases in capacity constraints such as labour and skill shortages, demand having increased over the past two years, as well as rising inflationary pressures in New Zealand and elsewhere.<sup>116</sup>

Significant outflow of the young people to New Zealand and Australia, in combination with an aging population and relatively low fertility compared to the PICTs (2.5 children per woman), contribute directly to the demographic challenges the Cook Islands will need to address. Should there be large-scale emigration from the Cook Islands when the border opens fully as has happened twice before, this could also have a negative impact on the economy and the broader society.

The country relies significantly on imports, representing 30% of GDP, while exports make up only 4%.<sup>117</sup> Prior to the pandemic, the trade deficit (NZ\$158.1M, US\$110.8M) would be offset by a much larger service sector (tourism) surplus (NZ\$250M, US\$175M). However, this economic stabilizer is not currently available.<sup>118</sup> Food and live animals account for 23.7% and fuel 15.3% of the total imports.<sup>119</sup> The Cook Islands have been among the eight PIF Members who ratified and have been Party to the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus Agreement since its entry into force on 13 December 2020.

This heavy reliance on imports indicates that any global price shock would translate into rising domestic prices, threatening food security and malnutrition. The border closures as a result of the pandemic have already demonstrated some of these vulnerabilities. According to the SEIA survey, nearly 42% of the households were forced to reduce the quantity of food consumption in the wake of COVID-19, while a third also reported that the quality of their food had worsened, as shown below.

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<sup>115</sup> Cook Islands Economic Bulletin. November 2021.

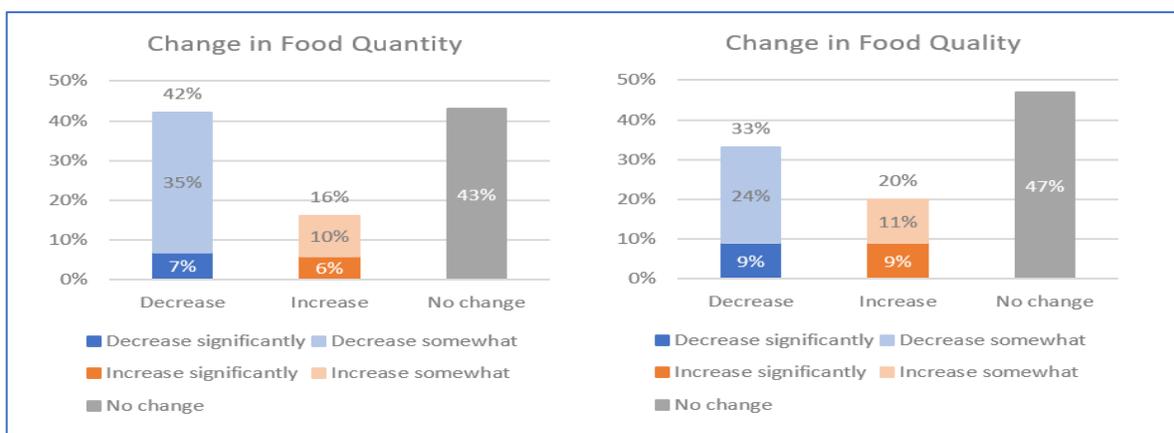
<sup>116</sup> Cook Islands Economic Bulletin, November 2021.

<sup>117</sup> The 2018 imports and exports values were NZ\$178.6M (US\$125.2M) and NZ\$20.5M (US\$14.4M), respectively. See Government of the Cook Islands. Ministry of Finance and Economic Management. Balance of Payments (BoP) 2019. <http://www.cookislands.gov.ck/statistics/economic-statistics/balance-payments>;

<sup>118</sup> However, imports have also declined post-Covid; for example, Q2, 2020 imports were NZ\$32.3M (US\$22.6M) vs. Q2, 2019 imports of NZ\$49.5M (US\$34.7M).

<sup>119</sup> BoP 2019, Op. Cit.;

Change in the Consumption of Food Quantity/Quality due to COVID-19



Source: Cook Islands Rapid SEIA Online Survey, 2020.

The country has limited scope to expand traditional sectors, such as agriculture and fisheries. A total land area of 240 sq. km. precludes any significant expansion of the agriculture sector, which accounts for only 2% of the GDP. The remote location and lack of natural resources also impede diversification of the economy in those sectors to reduce its reliance on imports. Diversification of the economy into other sectors, such as cultural industries and artificial intelligence requires time and investments.

Besides economic vulnerabilities, an outbreak of COVID-19 in the Cook Islands would be a major shock with which to deal. The Cook Islands is currently among the remaining few countries in the world that are completely free of COVID-19. Further mutations of COVID-19 might also reduce the efficacy of vaccines and have a negative impact on the recovery.

Beyond the crisis inflicted by COVID-19, the high incidence of NCDs and a relatively older population are also among the developmental risks facing the country. Approximately 24% of the population in the Cook Islands (and Samoa) have diabetes, the third most-affected PICT after Chuuk Island in FSM and Kiribati. Cook Island has established policy measures to restrict trans-fat in the food supply and marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children. It has also established a multi-sectoral NCD taskforce to oversee the implementation of the national NCD plan.

Of fundamental security concern is the fact that temperature and sea levels are expected to continue rising, the latter at a rate slightly higher than the global average. By 2030, under a high emissions scenario, the increase in temperature is projected to be in the range of 0.5–0.9°C in the northern Islands and 0.4–1.0°C in the southern Islands.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, extreme rainfall is expected to occur more frequently and, by 2030, the rise in sea level is projected

<sup>120</sup> Australian Government. 2011. Current and future climate of the Cook Islands. The Cook Islands Meteorological Service. Pacific Climate Change Science Program. The Australian Government's International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative. Australian Bureau of Meteorology and Department of Climate Change and Energy. Efficiency. AusAID. Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

to be in the range of 4-15 cm. Greater rises are anticipated in succeeding decades of this century with potentially existential consequences, at least for certain of the islands. Moreover, ocean acidification is at such levels that it threatens the coral systems.<sup>121</sup>

The indirect impact of COVID-19 has highlighted the effects of cascading or systemic risks to the Cook Islands' overall national security. Natural hazard events affecting the country directly are expected to have considerable systemic impacts as well. Further assessments are needed to characterize the interdependence of physical, socio-economic and other aspects of disasters in the country as well as to formulate appropriate responses, including strengthening resilience where necessary.

Cutting across each of these issues, the particular situation and challenges faced by women in the Cook Islands, as identified in the EDS, the NSDA, other policy documents, statistics and testimonial evidence, must be addressed based on implementation of the strategies clearly identified in those documents, if the Cook Islands is to achieve the SDGs and make optimum use of the full range of talents of both Cook Islands women and men.

Similarly, as also stressed by the EDS and the NSDA, special attention will need to be given to the needs of the Pa Enuu, a particularly challenging endeavour given their dispersed nature, distance from Rarotonga and limited human and other resources.

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<sup>121</sup> UN Pacific Strategy Op. Cit.

## 4. Financial Landscape

The Cook Islands witnessed strong economic growth before the COVID-19 global outbreak. To mitigate against the impact of the pandemic, the Cook Islands Government launched the Economic Recovery Plan (ERP), followed from June 2021 onwards by the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Roadmap (ERR) with a view to paving the way for the economy to recover and reach pre-pandemic levels as rapidly as possible. The Roadmap includes a mix of policy and expenditure for both public and private sectors and focuses on the following eight areas to drive and facilitate the Cook Islands economic recovery over the next 12-18 months:

- reducing the cost of borrowing
- managing the burden of public debt
- investing in infrastructure
- reducing barriers to competition and business
- increasing productivity
- improving public sector efficiency
- growing the labour force and preventing depopulation; and
- attracting foreign investment that will benefit the Cook Islands.

Actions in each of these areas are intended to reinforce the EDS.<sup>122</sup> In October 2021, the Cook Islands Government issued its Survival and Cash Management Strategy (SCMS)<sup>123</sup> to mitigate fiscal risks and uncertainty. According to the Strategy, this will be achieved by:

- implementing the Economic Recovery Roadmap (ERR) policies that will accommodate both contingency and recovery, driving the economy back to pre-pandemic levels
- setting short-term (12 months) policy targets using the Medium-Term Fiscal Strategy (MTFS)<sup>124</sup> to manage general cash reserves and attain the debt to GDP target
- setting a cash management strategy to mitigate liquidity risks.

With the announced opening of the border for tourism in early 2022, the Government projects a GDP growth rate of 12.3% for FY 2022 and a continued growth in FY 2023 of 13.6%, moderating to 9% in FY 2024 and 4.1% in FY 2025.

Government stimulus expenditure has been the main economic driver during the pandemic, with the ERP and ERR providing significant transfers. As economic recovery takes hold, the Cook Islands Government will cease stimulus payments in order to address the repayment of debt that has been incurred in to fund the stimulus package.

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<sup>122</sup> Government of the Cook Islands. May 2021. COVID-19 Economic Recovery Roadmap (ERR). Economic Planning Division. Ministry of Finance and Economic Management.

<sup>123</sup> Government of the Cook Islands. October 2021. Survival and Cash Management Strategy (SCMS).

<sup>124</sup> Government of the Cook Islands. December 2018. Medium-term Fiscal Strategy 2019/20-22/23. Economics Division and Budget Management Division. Ministry of Finance and Economic Management.

Fortunately, the Cook Islands' carried-over net debt ratio (debt measured against GDP) was low (14.2% of GDP in FY 2019), with an additional NZ\$56.7M (US\$39.7M) deposited in the Economic Stabilization Fund. In June 2021, the Cook Islands' net debt ratio had grown to 41.9%, or NZ\$280M (US\$196M). The Cook Islands Government has recently announced that, with the opening of the border and resumption of normal commercial activities, it was now estimated that the net debt ratio would decrease to 22% by FY 2026.<sup>125</sup>

While this picture appears positive, the Cook Islands Government does recognize key risks involved in meeting the above projections, including those related to the uncertain time and volume of the return of visitors to the Cook Islands, the risk of emigration of young Cook islanders, and potential COVID-19-related negative evolutions. Other extrinsic risks could originate in an eventual economic downturn in the New Zealand economy (the Cook Islands' largest trading partner) and a reduction in public spending that might result from an unforeseen shock, or development partners unwilling or unable to provide additional support to the Cook Islands.<sup>126</sup>

Even though not being a member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank, and despite the impact of the loss of ODA-eligibility, the Cook Islands can access IBRD-equivalent financing on concessional terms from the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The country has been solidly supported by the UN system. In 2021, the UN committed to provide more than US\$3.5M to buttress key development areas in alignment with the Cook Islands' national priorities.<sup>127</sup> Climate change adaptation and mitigation, disaster risk reduction and environmental protection received the majority of funding and technical support with more than 65% (US\$2.3M) of funds committed to those priority areas. From this allocation, more than US\$1.3M was committed to strengthen the capacity of Cook Islands Government Agencies to collect, analyze and provide climate information and knowledge services. In comparison to 2020, investment in the above listed areas increased from US\$1.1M to US\$2.3M reflecting Cook Islands continued commitment to invest in building resilience to climate change.<sup>128</sup>

Additionally, the UN almost doubled resourcing to the health and education sectors from US\$ 470,000 in 2020 to US\$ 807,000 in 2021. This represents around 22% of total UN support to the Cook Islands for 2021. The increase also reflects the immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its emerging challenges. The investment looks to strengthen access to sexual and reproductive health services and information, reinforce the health system's response to COVID-19, enhance national capacities on health and nutrition policies and legislation, roll-out the COVID vaccination programmes and provide health

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<sup>125</sup> CNI and Caleb Fotheringham. 12 November 2021. "Debt back to pre-pandemic levels in three years: PM. The border opening on January 13 means the economic outlook is now "much rosier" and debt will be back to normal by 2025/26 says, Prime Minister Mark Brown."

<sup>126</sup> Cook Islands Economic Bulletin, November 2021.

<sup>127</sup> UN Joint Country Action Plan 2021 & 2020 (CKI).

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.



commodities and supplies, including personal protective equipment (PPE) for COVID. In addition to the above investment portfolio, the UN Agencies have successfully secured funding support from the SDG Fund totaling US\$566,400 for a 2-year (starting January 2022) Joint Programme focusing on utilizing digitalization and innovation to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs in the Cook Islands.

## 5. Conclusion

Although the Cook Islands is a Small Island Developing State highly vulnerable to economic, environmental, health and other risks, in the years preceding the spread of COVID-19, the country had made significant progress developing its economy and achieving the SDGs. At the same time, through widespread public consultations with relevant stakeholders, both on Rarotonga and in the Pa Enea (Outer Islands), economic and other policies were either set in place and being implemented or being actively prepared to make further developmental progress or to address outstanding areas of concern, including those highlighted in this Assessment.

With the arrival of the pandemic and the imperative closure of the country's borders, the Cook Islands economy has been stalled. Progress in its developmental aspirations has been delayed. A number of actions identified in the Economic Development Strategy 2030, for example, have been paused or deferred until resources are once more available for their implementation. More fundamentally, key survival strategies have had to be put in place to avoid even more detrimental effects of COVID-19 on the Cook Islands economy and society as a whole.

Nevertheless, there is widespread commitment both within the Government and the wider Cook Islands community to resume what will be normal operations in a post-COVID19 world, one featuring efforts to diversify the economy, strengthen the resilience of infrastructure and institutions, and encourage Cook Islanders to remain in, or return to the country. There will be risks ahead, including global health pandemics materializing on-island or serious cyclones striking the country, and preparations must be made to prepare for such contingencies.

As this CCA indicates, the Cook Islands is a multifaceted society with numerous needs, aspirations and challenges, many similar to those of other SIDS, others specific and different, unique to the country. The Cook Islands has accomplished much with the valuable assistance and support of bilateral, regional and multilateral partners, including the UN System. As the country embarks on its post-pandemic recovery programme, the support and expert assistance of the United Nations will become even more important in the months and years ahead.

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