Good Ancestors Policy

Empowering Pacific Islands in the AI Era: Protecting Local Interests, Shaping Global Norms

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Good Ancestors is an Australian charity dedicated to improving the long-term future of humanity. We care about today's Australians and future generations. We believe that Australians and our leaders want to take meaningful action to combat the big challenges Australia and the world are facing. We want to help by making forward-looking policy recommendations that are rigorous, evidence-based, practical, and impactful.

Good Ancestors has been engaged in the AI policy conversation since our creation, working with experts in Australia and around the world while connecting directly with the Australian community.

This project originates from the Good Ancestors AI Governance Summer Fellowship. The Fellowship, a collaborative initiative between Good Ancestors and Arcadia Impact's AI Governance Taskforce, integrates participants into focused research projects addressing critical challenges in AI safety policy and governance, including catastrophic risk. The paper reflects the research and opinion of the authors and not necessarily the policy recommendations of Good Ancestors or Arcadia Impact.

Our thanks go to the fellows who care so passionately about being good ancestors to future generations.

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Executive summary

Artificial intelligence is a transformative technology with global implications. This report examines how Pacific Island nations can safeguard their interests by shaping global AI governance through multilateral cooperation.

Pacific Island nations are in the early stages of AI development with critical governance gaps. Most Pacific Island states lack formal AI strategies, ethical guidelines, or regulatory frameworks. This regulatory vacuum stems from the region's focus on broader digital transformation initiatives, leaving AI risk management largely unaddressed.

Despite limitations, the early developmental stage of AI governance in the region creates strategic opportunities for collective action. Without established frameworks, nations can align approaches and advocate together in global governance forums, especially when approaching AI safety as a shared transnational concern.

This regional alignment is further strengthened by common factors across Pacific Island nations: shared sustainable development goals, similar vulnerabilities in key economic sectors, and mutual interest in ensuring inclusive AI governance that minimises potential harms while maximising benefits.

Pacific Island nations possess remarkable leverage in multilateral governance systems. Within UN processes where each nation holds one vote, Pacific Island states have approximately one vote per million citizens—representing over 300 times the voting power per US citizen and 1,000 times that of Chinese or Indian citizens. This may be Pacific Island nations' most powerful tool to protect their interests.

By building on their successful history of unified advocacy in areas like climate change and nuclear disarmament, Pacific Island nations can form a powerful bloc of 12votes to influence global AI safety governance. This collective approach can ensure AI development addresses their unique regional interests while helping to mitigate serious global risks, demonstrating how smaller nations can meaningfully shape the future of transformative technologies.

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Introduction

This report discusses Pacific Island nations leveraging multilateral cooperation and coordination to protect their interests by shaping global artificial intelligence (AI) safety governance.

The report focuses on:

1. The AI-related risks and harms posed to Pacific Island nations
2. The existing AI landscape in Pacific Island nations
3. The potential for multilateral AI safety governance for Pacific Island nations

The report uses “Pacific Island nations” to refer to the Small Island States in the Pacific with the exclusion of Australia and New Zealand.

The researchers and Good Ancestors chose to pursue this research project because, while Pacific Island nations are disproportionately vulnerable to potential harms posed by the rapid development and adoption of AI technology, they currently lack the expertise and governance structures required to leverage their strategic influence to participate in the global conversations around AI and protect their interests.

The research process combined desktop research and conversations with domain experts. The research contained is exploratory and our work should not be treated as definitive as we recognise significant knowledge gaps remain.

Artificial intelligence—transformative technology, global implications

AI may be the most transformative technology of our era, with the potential to reshape economies, societies, and the global order. Like electricity or the internet, AI's impact will span every sector, varying significantly in speed and intensity. AI is characterised by the ability to perform tasks traditionally requiring human intelligence: decision-making, pattern recognition, language processing, and increasingly sophisticated problem-solving capabilities.

What makes AI particularly significant is its capacity to perform cognitive tasks at scale and speed far beyond human capabilities, with increasingly sophisticated learning and

adaptation. As AI systems advance, they offer opportunities for human development, from improving healthcare access to accelerating climate solutions. Simultaneously, they present profound risks ranging from economic disruption and social destabilisation to potential catastrophic outcomes that could affect global stability, security, and the long-term trajectory of human civilisation.

How AI is developed, deployed, and governed will determine whether its benefits are broadly shared or narrowly concentrated, and whether its most serious risks are effectively mitigated. This is particularly important for Pacific Island nations, which face both unique opportunities to leverage AI for development and disproportionate vulnerability to its potential harms.

The governance challenge

Global interest in AI is accelerating across public and private sectors. Over half of global venture capital funding in late 2024 went to AI companies.[1] McKinsey reports that AI adoption among businesses grew from 50% to 72% between 2023 and 2024.[2] The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that nearly 40% of global employment is exposed to AI-driven change.[3] Nations including the United States, China, and the United Arab Emirates are investing billions in AI infrastructure and governance mechanisms.[4]

Although the implications of AI are increasingly clear, the economic benefits will be unevenly distributed. Nations with the computing infrastructure necessary to run powerful AI systems may dramatically pull ahead of countries without significant computing power. The value created by knowledge work will go to those with AI systems. This risks creating another dimension of "haves and have-nots" where technological capacity determines economic prosperity. How AI governance evolves, particularly regarding access to technology and distribution of benefits, will significantly influence whether the technology narrows or widens existing global inequalities.

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[1] fDi Intelligence, "AI dominates venture capital funding in 2024," https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/data-trends/ai-dominates-venture-capital-funding-in-2024-84500.
[2] McKinsey & Company, The state of AI in 2024.
[3] International Monetary Fund, "AI Will Transform the Global Economy. Let's Make Sure It Benefits Humanity," January 2024, https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2024/01/14/ai-will-transform-the-global-economy-lets-make-sure-it-benefits-humanity.
[4] Good Ancestors, AI Safety as Economic Opportunity: Pre-budget Submission 2025 – 2026, January 2025.

While the benefits of AI will go to tech leaders, the risks of AI will at best be evenly distributed and at worst accrue disproportionately to the most vulnerable. As with cybersecurity, those with resources to protect themselves can mitigate their risks, while those with fewer resources will be exposed.

We are at a critical juncture for AI governance. Capabilities are improving rapidly, adoption is accelerating globally, and the world is increasingly recognising both the extraordinary benefits and the serious risks that AI presents. The potential gains are substantial—but they are not guaranteed. Realising them while preventing harm will depend on careful stewardship, especially to ensure the technology is trustworthy, safe, and aligned with public values.

Benefits and opportunities of AI

AI is already contributing to human development:

- **Healthcare**: AI models are assisting in precision diagnostics, predicting disease outbreaks, and accelerating drug discovery processes.[5] These innovations could support longer, healthier lives and more equitable access to care, particularly in regions with limited healthcare infrastructure.

- **Climate change and sustainability**: AI systems are increasingly applied to optimise energy use, manage natural resources, model climate scenarios, and enhance early warning systems for extreme weather events.[6] These tools offer potential advantages for both mitigation and adaptation strategies, particularly relevant to climate-vulnerable Pacific Island nations.

- **Economic opportunity**: By automating routine tasks and augmenting human capabilities, AI has the potential to significantly boost productivity and create

[5] McKinsey & Company, The State of AI in 2023: Generative AI's Breakout Year, November 2023, https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai; World Economic Forum, AI Is Revolutionizing Medical Diagnostics – Here's How, September 2024, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/09/ai-diagnostics-health-outcomes/; Prasad Patil et al., "Artificial Intelligence in Infectious Disease Surveillance," Lancet Regional Health – Southeast Asia, 2024, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S266644962400015X.

[6] Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI, "Environment," chap. 6 in AI Index Report 2024, https://aiindex.stanford.edu/report/.

new industries.[7] It can also help democratise access to knowledge and services, with particular promise for addressing longstanding development challenges and expanding economic opportunities in low- and middle-income countries.[8]

The theory behind these impacts is straightforward: AI systems increasingly perform tasks previously requiring human expertise with growing speed, accuracy, and scale. By lowering the costs of intelligence-driven processes, AI can improve access to services, address skill constraints, and enable better decisions across sectors and scales.

Risks from advanced AI

AI presents a range of risks. Some of these risks are occurring already and are forecast to become more consequential as AI becomes more capable.

Immediate risks

AI presents a range of risks, many of which are already manifesting:

- **Disinformation and manipulation**: Generative AI tools are enabling the rapid creation and distribution of misleading or entirely false content, from deepfakes to synthetic news articles.[9] These capabilities threaten to undermine information integrity, democratic processes, and social cohesion.
- **Cybersecurity vulnerabilities**: AI-powered tools have increased the sophistication of phishing attacks, vulnerability identification, and malware development.[10] The automation of cyber attacks lowers barriers to entry for malicious actors and increases the scale and precision of potential attacks.
- **Bias and discrimination**: Algorithmic decision-making systems frequently reproduce or amplify societal biases, particularly in high-stakes domains like hiring, lending, and criminal justice.[11] Without rigorous oversight, these systems risk entrenching structural inequalities and discriminatory practices.

[7] McKinsey & Company, The Economic Potential of Generative AI: The Next Productivity Frontier, June 2023, https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/the-economic-potential-of-generative-ai-the-next-productivity-frontier.
[8] World Bank, Developing AI for Development: Accountability Matters, March 2024, https://accountability.worldbank.org/en/news/2024/Developing-AI-for-development.
[9] International Scientific Report on the Safety of Advanced AI, January 2025, 67-72.
[10] Ibid., 72-75.
[11] Ibid., 92-97.

- **Privacy erosion**: AI-enhanced surveillance applications raise serious privacy concerns, especially in jurisdictions with limited legal protections or democratic oversight.[12] The combination of facial recognition, behavioural analysis, and predictive analytics enables unprecedented tracking and profiling capabilities.

There are also broader structural concerns with potentially far-reaching implications:

- **Economic disruption**: Rapid adoption of AI could displace jobs across sectors. The International Monetary Fund estimates that AI could affect nearly 40% of jobs globally, with higher-income economies seeing even greater exposure.[13] Without inclusive policy responses, this shift risks worsening inequality both within and between nations. In the extreme, most value created by knowledge work could be extracted by AI companies who use AI products to undercut human knowledge work.
- **Environmental impacts**: The development and operation of large AI models entail significant environmental costs. Training of OpenAI's GPT-3, for instance, consumed approximately 1,287 megawatt-hours of electricity—emitting an estimated 552 tonnes of CO_2.[14] As model sizes and usage increase, energy demand and hardware production could place growing strain on natural systems and climate goals.

Catastrophic risks

Advanced AI is increasingly recognised as a potential global catastrophic risk (GCR)—an event capable of causing severe worldwide harm to human society on an unprecedented scale. Historically, natural hazards such as supervolcanoes and asteroid impacts were the most prominent GCRs. Today, however, anthropogenic threats—including engineered pandemics, extreme climate change, and advanced artificial intelligence—are viewed as more pressing. The severity of such risks places a responsibility on governments to not only prevent them but also to prepare for, and respond to, worst-case outcomes.

[12] Ibid., 139-142.
[13] International Monetary Fund, Gen-AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work (IMF Staff Discussion Note, January 2024), https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Staff-Discussion-Notes/Issues/2024/01/14/Gen-AI-Artificial-Intelligence-and-the-Future-of-Work-539633.
[14] Patterson et al., "Carbon Emissions and Large Neural Network Training," arXiv, April 2021, https://arxiv.org/abs/2104.10350.

Recent policy analysis stresses that national strategies should treat GCRs, including catastrophic AI risk, as central priorities.[15] Researchers have identified several pathways by which advanced AI could contribute to catastrophic outcomes:

1. **Loss of control**: As AI systems potentially surpass human capabilities in many domains, we may become unable to reliably direct or constrain them. Systems with objectives misaligned with human wellbeing might pursue unintended goals, resist correction, or actively evade oversight.[16]

2. **Malicious use**: Powerful AI models in the hands of bad actors could be used to design novel biological weapons, launch unprecedented cyberattacks, or automate disinformation at scale. The lowering of expertise barriers to develop dangerous capabilities represents a significant risk multiplier.[17] OpenAI assesses that its models are "on the cusp" of being able to help novices build bioweapons.

3. **AI-enabled conflict**: Autonomous weapons, sophisticated misinformation campaigns, and automated cyber operations could increase the risk of rapid escalation and conflict between states. The speed of AI-driven military applications may compress decision timeframes and increase instability in crisis situations.[18]

4. **Safety-innovation trade-offs**: International or corporate competition may incentivise actors to deploy increasingly powerful AI systems without adequate safeguards. The perceived first-mover advantages in AI development could lead to compromise on crucial safety measures.[19]

These scenarios, though uncertain, have serious potential consequences. Despite their severity, catastrophic AI risks have received comparatively less attention in policy discussions than more immediate concerns, highlighting the need for greater focus on these high-consequence scenarios in global governance efforts.[20] This has started to

[15] Global Shield, How Governments Can Better Understand Global Catastrophic Risk, July 2024, https://www.globalshieldpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Global-Shield-How-governments-can-better-understand-global-catastrophic-risk-July-2024-for-Website.pdf.
[16] Dan Hendrycks, Mantas Mazeika, and Thomas Woodside, An Overview of Catastrophic AI Risks, 2023, https://arxiv.org/abs/2306.12001.
[17] International Scientific Report on the Safety of Advanced AI, January 2025, 79-80.
[18] Ibid., 72-80.
[19] Safe.ai, "AI Race Dynamics," https://www.safe.ai/ai-risk#ai-race.
[20] Hendrycks et al., An Overview of Catastrophic AI Risks, 23-25.

change. Some governments, including the United Kingdom and the United States, have launched initiatives focused specifically on frontier AI safety. International bodies, including the OECD and the United Nations, are also engaging with the issue.[21] The International Scientific Report on AI Safety, released in early 2025, highlighted that while expert opinions vary, a substantial number of scientists consider extreme AI risk plausible enough to warrant urgent mitigation efforts.[22] Nonetheless, many AI governance efforts continue to focus on non-GCR, rather than addressing systemic or catastrophic-level concerns.

Taken together, these risks—from bias and surveillance to catastrophic misuse—underscore the urgent need for robust, coordinated governance. By embedding risk assessment, foresight analysis, and international collaboration into AI policy, governments can help ensure this transformative technology is developed in ways that maximise societal benefit and minimise harm.

Pacific Island nations, opportunities and vulnerabilities

Pacific Island nations have both opportunities to leverage AI for sustainable development while being disproportionately vulnerable to its risks. This vulnerability stems from several factors: small populations, limited regulatory capacity, geographic isolation, dependence on narrow economic sectors, and existing challenges, including climate change and digital infrastructure gaps.

Development and growth

AI offers potential solutions to long-standing development challenges in the Pacific. Remote healthcare delivery enhanced by AI diagnostic tools could help address limited medical infrastructure and specialist shortages.[23] AI-powered educational technologies could expand access to quality education across dispersed island communities. Agricultural applications might improve resilience to climate variability through optimised crop management and early warning systems.

[21] International Scientific Report on the Safety of Advanced AI, 13-15.
[22] Ibid., 247-258.
[23] AI Asia Pacific Institute, The State of Artificial Intelligence in the Pacific Islands (Singapore: AI Asia Pacific Institute, 2024), https://aiasiapacific.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/The-State-of-Artificial-Intelligence-in-the-Pacific-Islands.pdf.

However, these benefits depend on accessible, locally relevant AI applications and are not guaranteed from the simple importation of systems designed in different contexts and not trained or reinforced with relevant data and context. Without strategic investment in relevant AI applications, infrastructure, and skills development, Pacific Island nations risk falling further behind in the global digital economy. The IMF warns that without proactive labour market and social policy responses, AI is likely to worsen global inequality.[24] This disparity may be particularly pronounced for Pacific economies already challenged by geographic isolation and limited integration into global digital markets.

Cybersecurity vulnerabilities

Cybersecurity represents one of the most immediate AI-related threats to Pacific Island nations. According to the International Telecommunication Union's Global Cybersecurity Index, most Pacific Island nations have low levels of cyber preparedness, with several scoring below 30 out of 100.[25]

A stark demonstration of this vulnerability occurred in November 2022, when a ransomware attack on Vanuatu disabled the country's internet infrastructure for 11 days. This crippled government operations, disrupted schools and hospitals, and affected access to essential services for hundreds of thousands of citizens.[26] While not directly AI-enabled, this event illustrates the fragility of digital systems in the region.

AI advancements are already lowering barriers for sophisticated cyber operations. Modern generative AI tools can produce human-like phishing messages, automate the discovery of software vulnerabilities, and generate convincing deepfake content for social engineering.[27] These capabilities significantly increase the exposure of Pacific Island nations to cyber threats, potentially affecting critical infrastructure, government services, and financial systems. In the extreme, future AI tools could grant small organisations or individuals cyber offensive capabilities currently limited to the most

[24] International Monetary Fund, *Gen-AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work*, IMF Staff Discussion Note, January 2024.
[25] International Telecommunication Union, Global Cybersecurity Index 2020, https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Pages/global-cybersecurity-index.aspx.
[26] "Vanuatu Government Crippled by Ransomware Attack," ABC News, November 10, 2022, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-10/vanuatu-government-cyber-attack-ransomware/101637480.
[27] International Scientific Report on the Safety of Advanced AI, January 2025, 67-75.

sophisticated actors, causing a new cybersecurity paradigm where only AI defenders can match AI attackers.

Biosecurity risks

Pacific Island nations face heightened vulnerability to biosecurity threats, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite relatively low infection rates due to early border closures, Pacific Island countries experienced some of the most severe economic impacts, with GDP contractions of up to 21% in tourism-dependent economies like Fiji.[28] This experience highlights the region's vulnerability to biological threats, which could be further complicated by AI developments.

The World Health Organization has identified that AI could accelerate both beneficial research in pathogen detection and harmful misuse of biological knowledge.[29] For Pacific Island nations, limited healthcare infrastructure and geographic isolation create challenges in responding to pandemic events. The Pacific Humanitarian Pathway established during COVID-19 demonstrated the need for regional coordination mechanisms to address biosecurity challenges, a model that could be applied to emerging AI-related biosecurity considerations.[30]

Cultural heritage and digital colonialism

Generative AI models, such as large language and image models, are predominantly trained on data that underrepresents Indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultural perspectives. Without intervention, this could marginalise Pacific cultures in digital spaces and reinforce colonial-era epistemologies—a form of "digital colonialism."[31]

Inadequate intellectual property protections and lack of Pacific input in AI model development mean that traditional knowledge and cultural expressions may be exploited or erased by commercially deployed systems. However, with inclusive design and ethical data practices, AI also offers opportunities to transcribe oral traditions,

[28] Asian Development Bank, "Pacific Economic Monitor – December 2020," https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/658721/pem-december-2020.pdf.
[29] World Health Organization, "Ethics and governance of artificial intelligence for health," 2021, https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240029200.
[30] Pacific Islands Forum, "Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19," 2020, https://www.forumsec.org/pacific-humanitarian-pathway-on-covid-19/.
[31] Arora, Payal, and Ulises A. Mejias, "After the Digital Revolution: Decolonising Digital Development," International Journal of Communication 17 (2023).

preserve Indigenous languages, and empower communities to shape their cultural narratives through digital tools.

Climate change and resource management

Climate change presents an existential threat to many Pacific Island nations. AI offers powerful tools for climate modelling, adaptation planning, and resource management that could benefit the region. Applications include improved weather forecasting, disaster early warning systems, renewable energy optimisation, and marine ecosystem monitoring.

However, AI development itself carries significant environmental costs. Large model training and operation require substantial energy and water resources. While Pacific nations may not host major data centres, they bear the disproportionate burden of global climate impacts. The expansion of energy-intensive AI infrastructure without commitments to sustainability risks deepening environmental injustice—contributing to sea level rise, ocean acidification, and resource scarcity in regions least responsible for these emissions.

Widening digital divide

The region's low digital readiness, coupled with high connectivity costs and infrastructure challenges, creates vulnerability to a widening AI divide. Most Pacific Island nations rank low on the Government AI Readiness Index, with few having formal AI strategies or regulatory frameworks.[32] This makes them more vulnerable to the disruptive impacts of AI, such as job displacement in agriculture, tourism, and other key industries.

Without targeted investment in capacity-building, digital education, and equitable access to infrastructure, these countries risk being left behind by global AI advances.[33] Gender disparities and the marginalisation of rural communities further compound the risk that AI systems will exacerbate existing inequalities rather than alleviate them.

[32] AI Asia Pacific Institute, The State of Artificial Intelligence in the Pacific Islands (Singapore: AI Asia Pacific Institute, 2024), https://aiasiapacific.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/The-State-of-Artificial-Intelligence-in-the-Pacific-Islands.pdf.
[33] World Bank, "Digital Transformation in the Pacific," World Bank Brief, 2022, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2022/06/23/digital-transformation-in-the-pacific.

These distinctive vulnerabilities and opportunities position Pacific Island nations as important stakeholders in global AI governance discussions. Pacific Island nations have demonstrated their capacity to effectively advocate for global action on critical challenges like climate change, nuclear disarmament, and ocean conservation (see Appendix A).

Through active participation in multilateral governance processes, Pacific Island nations can help ensure AI systems are developed and deployed in ways that respect cultural diversity, promote sustainability, distribute benefits more equitably, and—crucially—reduce the risk of catastrophic outcomes. Their voice in shaping global AI governance serves both their specific regional interests and broader global goals of creating trustworthy, beneficial AI that advances human wellbeing while preventing potentially devastating harms to humanity.

Pacific Island nations lack AI strategies and governance frameworks

Pacific Island nations have limited readiness for safe AI deployment.[34] Despite growing attention to AI safety in recent years, it remains an underserved policy area across the region.

Key gaps in governance:

- Most Pacific Island states have not developed formal AI strategies, ethical guidelines, or regulatory frameworks.[35] Fiji has released a digital strategy while Papua New Guinea is working on an AI adoption framework.[36]
- Most countries lack robust regulatory ecosystems for AI adoption and oversight.[37]
- Critical enabling legislation is missing, including data privacy, intellectual property, and consumer protection laws.[38] This contributes to a fragmented

[34] AI Asia Pacific Institute, *The State of Artificial Intelligence in the Pacific Islands* (Singapore: AI Asia Pacific Institute, 2024), 29-31 https://aiasiapacific.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/The-State-of-Artificial-Intelligence-in-the-Pacific-Islands.pdf.
[35] Ibid., 29.
[36] Fiji Government, National Digital Strategy 2025-2030, 2025, https://mobile.digital.gov.fj/fnds.pdf; One PNG, "AI Adoption Framework Key to PNG's Digital Future, Says ICT Minister," 2024, https://www.onepng.com/2024/11/ai-adoption-framework-key-to-pngs.html.
[37] AI Asia Pacific Institute, The State of Artificial Intelligence in the Pacific Islands (Singapore: AI Asia Pacific Institute, 2024), 32 https://aiasiapacific.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/The-State-of-Artificial-Intelligence-in-the-Pacific-Islands.pdf
[38] Ibid.

governance landscape for digital technologies with limited regulatory harmonisation.
- Existing legal frameworks require reform to address AI's unique characteristics (dynamic learning, limited explainability, non-deterministic behavior).[39]

This regulatory vacuum reflects the region's focus on broader digital transformation and ICT initiatives. While some states are reportedly considering AI regulation, details remain scarce.[40]

Early development creates opportunities for collaboration

The region's early-stage AI development presents challenges and opportunities for multilateral engagement. The absence of established AI frameworks may facilitate collective mobilisation in global AI decision-making, particularly if Pacific nations view AI safety governance as a transnational rather than domestic concern.

Government AI Readiness Index scores reveal potential groupings of Pacific nations based on AI maturity levels (see Table 1). While these differences could lead to divergent positions on AI governance—similar to patterns observed in ASEAN—several factors may promote regional alignment:

Unifying priorities:

- Urgent need to advance UN Sustainable Development Goals.[41]
- Shared dependence on critical sectors vulnerable to AI risks.
- Common interest AI governance that minimises negative externalities.

Table 1. Categorisation of different countries by AI maturity level in the context of the Pacific Island region rather than by comparison to other countries in the Asia-Pacific or globally. Adapted from the Government AI Readiness Index 2024.[42]

[39] Ibid.
[40] Damian Kelly, "AI regulation - Australia and the Pacific", *Pacific Legal Network*, accessed March 4, 2025, https://www.pln.com.au/single-post/ai-regulation-australia-and-the-pacific.
[41] United Nations, United Nations Pacific Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023-2027 (Fiji: United Nations, 2022), 33-34, https://pacific.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/9669_UNSDF_pacific_A4_5.7.23_SHORT_FINAL_version_low_res_0.pdf.
[42] Oxford Insights, Government AI Readiness Index 2024 (Oxford Insights, 2024), 5.

Category	Possible characteristics in the coming years	Potential example countries
Digital leaders	• Highest AI readiness index scores in the Pacific Island region • Relatively advanced digital infrastructure, highest internet connectivity rates, higher digital literacy • More proactive adopters and innovators of AI with aspirations of regional leadership (e.g., establishing an AI hub) • More mature AI policy frameworks, initiatives, pilot projects	**Fiji** (score of 44.22, rank 90)
Emerging players	• Middle of the pack for AI readiness index scores in the Pacific Island region • Some investment in digital infrastructure and AI capability • Early-stage AI policy frameworks, initiatives, pilot projects	**Vanuatu** (score of 39.04, rank 116) **Marshall Islands** (score of 37.62, rank 123)
Developing players	• Lowest AI readiness index scores in the Pacific Island region • Limited digital infrastructure and capacity for AI adoption. Lagging behind on internet connectivity, digital transformation, ICT initiatives, digital literacy rates • AI policies are non-existent, minimal, or ad-hoc	**Kiribati** (score of 34.45, rank 142)

The 2024 UN Summit of the Future highlighted the AI and Digital Divide as priority issues. The Global Digital Compact details the multi-stakeholder actions required for effectively governing digital technology and AI for inclusive development.[43] Objective 5

[43] United Nations, *Global Digital Compact* (New York: United Nations, 2024) https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/sites/default/files/2024-09/Global%20Digital%20Compact%20-%20English_0.pdf.

of the Digital Compact mentions assessing the implication of AI on the SDGs and governing AI in the public interest and to uphold safety. Given the emphasis of AI and Digital Divide at the Summit of the Future, the Pacific Island nations must take initiative to ensure AI is used to reach the states' SDGs objectives, while ensuring the risks are minimised.[44]

The region's limited variance in AI readiness scores suggest that policy positions on AI governance remain undeveloped. This presents both a challenge in anticipating future policy divergences and an opportunity for coordinated regional engagement with global AI governance initiatives.

Multilateral governance as a pathway for equitable AI safety

Cooperation makes global challenges manageable

Multilateral governance[45] is typically the most impactful tool smaller counties have to manage complex and transnational risks like climate change, pandemics or AI.

For smaller nations, such as Pacific Island and Caribbean states, multilateral forums provide a strategic opportunity to advocate for their interests while serving as a safeguard against the dominance of larger powers. These rules-based international frameworks enable smaller nations to more effectively navigate relationships with major powers while seeking protection from emerging threats. The multilateral system has demonstrated a strong track record of addressing humanity's most significant challenges at relatively low costs (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of significant problems and their costs and impact. Source: Simon Institute for Longterm Governance, used with permission.

Problem	Problem size	UN response	Cost in $	Time to	Impact

[44] United Nations, Global Digital Compact (New York: United Nations, 2024) https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/sites/default/files/2024-09/Global%20Digital%20Compact%20-%20English_0.pdf.

[45] This refers to the soft and hard regulation developed through cooperation among multiple states via forums such as the United Nations, ASEAN, or the G20.

				develop*	
Risk of nuclear war	5bn deaths	• Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) • International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)	~686MM/year	NPT: 4-18 years IAEA: 4 years	• Reduction of nuclear stockpiles
Risk of chemical weapon use	10,000-1,000,000 deaths/year	• Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)	88MM/year	~30 years	• Led to the destruction of 96% of all chemical stockpiles
Risk of use of biological weapons	5bn deaths	• Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)	3MM/year	~6 years	• Forbade the retention of biological weapons • Set global consensus and norms against bioweapons
Risk of pandemics and other diseases	$700bn/year; 5bn deaths	• World Health Organization (WHO)	6.7bn/year	~2 years	• E.g. averted 2.7MM deaths in COVID-19 pandemic
Ozone layer depletion	See here	• Montreal Protocol	~207MM/year	~14 years	• A 99% reduction in ozone-depleting substances • 2 million people saved from skin cancer per year

Harmful imbalances require global governance

AI risks are unequally distributed. Development and deployment are concentrated among a few private companies in select Global North nations. The AI systems and models they make inherently reflect their values and priorities.[46] This imbalance highlights the necessity of global governance mechanisms.

The United Nations is uniquely positioned to provide legitimacy through inclusive international representation and being grounded in international law and committed to peace, human rights, and sustainable development.[47]

Fragmented approaches to AI governance are inadequate. Industry self-governance will likely prove insufficient as companies prioritise market share and profits over societal interests. [48] This is evident in rapid development cycles that already lack adequate safeguards and accountability mechanisms.[49]

Geopolitical tensions—particularly between the US and China—risk accelerating an AI "race to the bottom" on safety standards while fracturing the technological ecosystem.[50] Excluding the Global South from governance discussions creates frameworks that fail to address diverse developmental concerns, infrastructure challenges, and cultural values beyond those prioritised by the Global North.[51]

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[46] Aubra Anthony, Lakshmee Sharma, and Elina Noor, *Advancing a More Global Agenda for Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/advancing-a-more-global-agenda-for-trustworthy-artificial-intelligence?lang=en.

[47] United Nations AI Advisory Body, *Governing AI for Humanity: Final Report* (New York: United Nations AI Advisory Body, 2024) https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/governing_ai_for_humanity_final_report_en.pdf.

[48] Tom Wheeler, *The three challenges of AI regulation* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute, 2023) https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-three-challenges-of-ai-regulation/.

[49] Esmat Zaidan and Imad Antoine Ibrahim, "AI governance in a complex and rapidly changing regulatory landscape: A global perspective," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, no. 1 (2024): 1-18.

[50] Jose-Miguel Bello y Villarino et al., *Standardisation, trust and democratic principles: the global race to regulate artificial intelligence* (Sydney: United States Study Centre, 2023) https://www.ussc.edu.au/standardisation-trust-and-democratic-principles-the-global-race-to-regulate-artificial-intelligence.

[51] Aubra Anthony, Lakshmee Sharma, and Elina Noor, *Advancing a More Global Agenda for Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024) https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/advancing-a-more-global-agenda-for-trustworthy-artificial-intelligence?lang=en.

Multilateral guidelines can transform national policies for safer AI

Guidelines developed through multilateral institutions directly shape national policies. Global norms around AI would help ensure ethical standards are upheld—preventing discriminatory bias and malicious activities while promoting inclusive development that shares AI's benefits broadly. These principles were endorsed in the Paris AI Action Summit Statement, signed by 61 countries.[52]

However smaller multilateral approaches are failing without the input of smaller nations drawing attention to their vulnerabilities and the need for larger players to not cause global risks for local benefits. No Pacific Island nations were signatories to the Paris Summit, where both the US and UK failed to sign the Statement, signalling that they value perceived local advantage more than efforts to manage risks.[53] More inclusive multilateral governance is key to safeguarding against actions by dominant states that undermine global safety efforts. Pacific Island nations should add their voice.

Pacific Island nations possess a unique leverage point in multilateral AI governance

For Pacific Island nations, multilateral decision-making represents the most impactful pathway to ensure their perspectives and interests are protected. While domestic regulation could partially address some risks, many risks from blackbox AI systems can only be addressed by developers.

Within UN processes where each nation holds one vote, Pacific Island nations possess remarkably high voting power per capita—approximately one vote per million citizens. This represents more than 300 times the voting power per US citizen and over 1,000

[52] Masha Borak, "US and UK refusal to sign Paris declaration shows divergence in AI strategy", *Biometric Update Newsletter*, February 13, 2025 https://www.biometricupdate.com/202502/us-and-uk-refusal-to-sign-paris-declaration-shows-divergence-in-ai-strategy.
[53] Ibid.

times that of Chinese or Indian citizens. This disparity is further increased when Papua New Guinea is not included.[54]

Pacific Island nations have demonstrated their capacity to exert outsized influence in areas such as climate change and nuclear disarmament by unifying as a bloc (12 votes) and mobilising support from other nations (see Appendix A).[55] Their particular vulnerability to AI's potential adverse impacts may similarly generate sympathy and support for their safety concerns. This has been demonstrated in climate change conversations where they have an outsized voice due to suffering an outsized impact. These factors suggest Pacific Island nations could play a pivotal role in shaping global AI safety governance despite their smaller populations and economies.

Conclusion and next steps

AI presents both significant opportunities and serious risks for Pacific Island nations. While vulnerable to AI-enabled risks, the benefits of AI could be transformative, including by accelerating sustainable development and helping address challenges like climate change. Global AI governance will be crucial to address the transnational aspects of AI, which no country can undertake alone.

The international and philanthropic communities have an opportunity to support Pacific Island nations to engage through multilateral forums and ensure AI is developed and deployed in a way that protects the interests of the region.

Good Ancestors will be exploring next steps around multilateral governance pathways and strategic capacity-building, leveraging existing efforts and advancing new initiatives where policy gaps exist.

[54] AI Asia Pacific Institute, *The State of Artificial Intelligence in the Pacific Islands* (Singapore: AI Asia Pacific Institute, 2024), 22 https://aiasiapacific.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/The-State-of-Artificial-Intelligence-in-the-Pacific-Islands.pdf.

[55] Matthew Bolton, "The '-Pacific' part of 'Asia-Pacific': Oceanic diplomacy in the 2017 treaty for the prohibition of nuclear weapons." *Asian Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 3 (2018): 371-389; Markus Gehring and Marie-Claire Cordonier Segger. "Climate Justice through International Courts and Tribunals: Advisory Opinions in the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ)." *University of Cambridge Faculty of Law Research Paper* no. 4 (2025).

Good Ancestors Policy

Appendix

Appendix A: Precedents of Pacific Island multilateralism having an outsized influence

Case study	Influence on multilateral processes and outcomes
The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) - a treaty which bans all activities related to nuclear weapons among state parties[56]	• The Pacific Island region was instrumental in advocating for the inclusion of positive obligations around remedial mechanisms for nuclear-contaminated environments and assisting the victims of nuclear use and testing in the TPNW.[57] Most TPNW primary champion states (Austria, Mexico, South Africa, New Zealand) were initially hesitant to endorse these obligations out of fear it would be overly ambitious and fail to gain broad political support.[58] However, the region was able to mobilise and gain the sympathies of smaller states towards their cause (e.g., the Caribbean Community states, Costa Rica, Holy See) which allayed these concerns and eventually led to these obligations being included. These efforts ensured TPNW went beyond having a narrow effect of legally banning nuclear weapons to enabling meaningful accountability for the consequences on human and ecological welfare • The region's efforts have been described as a "diplomacy of resistance" which highlights the agency and power that Pacific Island nations have in shaping international political discourse and outcomes

[56] "Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)", The Nuclear Threat Initiative, July 8, 2024, https://www.nti.org/education-center/treaties-and-regimes/treaty-on-the-prohibition-of-nuclear-weapons/.
[57] Matthew Bolton, "The '-Pacific' part of 'Asia-Pacific': Oceanic diplomacy in the 2017 treaty for the prohibition of nuclear weapons," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 3 (2018): 385.
[58] Ibid., 383.

	in their interests despite their small delegations, significant resource constraints, and fierce opposition by the nuclear armed states and their allies.[59] • At the time of the TPNW being concluded the region comprised 10 out of 50 ratifications and as of February 2025 it has 94 signatories and 73 ratifying or acceding parties.[60]
The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030) - a General Assembly Resolution which establishes 17 goals as a shared blueprint for global prosperity and peace[61]	• The Pacific Island nations played a crucial role intervening in UN policy debates surrounding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to advocate for the inclusion of a SDG dedicated to the ocean and marine resources under Agenda 2030.[62] They conducted a coordinated diplomatic campaign to gain the support of the UN Secretary General and the non-Pacific member states of the Alliance of Small Island States.[63] This ultimately led to the adoption of what is now known as Goal 14 of the SDGs which shifted Agenda 2030's terrestrial focus to recognise the importance of the ocean to human wellbeing and economic development.[64] This highlights the region's capacity for coalition building and political effectiveness at UN negotiations.
The Global Plastics Treaty (GPT) - an	• In the most recent round of negotiations for the GPT, Pacific Island nations formed a coalition with the Alliance for Small Island Developing States to call for the inclusion of stronger remediation measures

[59] Nick Ritchie and Kjølv Egeland, "The diplomacy of resistance: power, hegemony and nuclear disarmament", *Global Change, Peace, & Security*, 30, no.2 (2018): 121-141.
[60] "TPNW signature and ratification status", International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, accessed March 14, 2025, https://www.icanw.org/signature_and_ratification_status
[61] "Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development: The 17 Goals", United Nations, accessed March 14, 2025, https://sdgs.un.org/goals
[62] Genevieve Quirk and Quentin Hanich. "Ocean diplomacy: The Pacific Island Countries' campaign to the UN for an ocean sustainable development goal." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Ocean Law and Policy* 1, no. 1 (2016): 93.
[63] Ibid., 77, 93.
[64] Ibid.

agreement that aims to regulate the production, design, and disposal of plastic materials and is currently under negotiation[65]	that address legacy and existing plastic pollution by countries beyond their national jurisdiction.[66] This aims to go beyond "relatively soft commitments to simply cooperate" and to ensure they are not disproportionately burdened in addressing problems largely caused by the conduct of other states.[67] This highlights how the Pacific Island nations can form a powerful regional voice advocating for more stringent treaty obligations aimed at ensuring more effective and fair outcomes are realised in multilateral instruments.
Request for an Advisory Opinion submitted by the Commission of Small Island States (COSIS) on Climate Change and International Law[68]	• COSIS – a group of eight small island developing states including Vanuatu – requested an advisory opinion from the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) concerning the climate action obligations of states under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The Tribunal delivered an unanimous advisory opinion that would become the first international judicial opinion on climate change duties: that all state parties have due diligence obligations to take all necessary measures to prevent, reduce, and control marine environmental pollution associated with climate change and ocean acidification caused by anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions.[69] • Many signatory states welcomed and supported the advisory opinion, and some observed that the views and reasoning of the ITLS could be reflected in cases held before other international tribunals.[70]

[65] Mitota P. Omolere, "The Outcome of the Global Plastic Treaty Negotiations in Busan: A Pivotal Moment or a Missed Opportunity?", *Earth.org*, January 2, 2025, https://earth.org/the-outcome-of-the-global-plastic-treaty-negotiations-in-busan-a-pivotal-moment-or-a-missed-opportunity/.
[66] "Pacific SIDS calls for stronger measures in the Plastics Treaty to address legacy pollution", Pacific Regional Environment Programme, November 27, 2024, https://www.sprep.org/news/pacific-sids-calls-for-stronger-measures-in-the-plastics-treaty-to-address-legacy-pollution.
[67] Ibid.
[68] "Request for an Advisory Opinion submitted by the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law", Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, accessed March 11, 2025, https://climatecasechart.com/non-us-case/18416/.
[69] Khng, Nathaniel Yong-Ern, "Advisory Opinion on the Request for an Advisory Opinion Submitted by the Comm'n of Small Island States on Climate Change and Int'l Law (ITLOS)," *International Legal Materials* 63, no. 6 (2024): 999.
[70] Ibid., 999-1000.

	This illustrates how the region can influence state behaviour by approaching international judicial bodies for advisory opinions around the interpretation of, or compliance with, treaties.
Request for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the obligations of States in respect of climate change[71]	• Vanuatu spearheaded with a cross-regional diverse core group of 18 states a General Assembly resolution seeking an advisory opinion from the ICJ clarifying: (1) climate action obligations associated with anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases under international law and (2) legal consequences for non-compliance for these obligations particularly as it concerns small island developing states.[72] • The proposed resolution was unanimously adopted by the General Assembly without a vote and was co-sponsored by 132 countries and endorsed by over 1700 civil society organisations across supporting states.[73] Vanuatu's success highlights how the Pacific Islands could influence international norms around AI governance in the form of soft law by initiating and supporting General Assembly resolutions which advance global commitment to action around policy issues that affect them • The landmark case is currently underway and is expected to be highly influential in shaping international climate law, governance, and politics despite having non-binding status. It is anticipated that it could provide support for transnational climate litigation, clarify how human rights law is understood in the context of climate change, and encourage greater international cooperation and financing for vulnerable countries.[74]

[71] "Request for an advisory opinion on the obligations of States with respect to climate change", Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, accessed March 11, 2025, https://climatecasechart.com/non-us-case/request-for-an-advisory-opinion-on-the-obligations-of-states-with-respect-to-climate-change/.

[72] Nathaniel Khng, Kevin Chand, and Lucía Solano, "Res. 77/276 on Request for an Advisory Opinion of the ICJ on the Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change (UNGA): Request for an Advisory Opinion Submitted by the Comm'n of small Island States on Climate Change (COSIS): Request for an Advisory Opinion on the Climate Emergency & Human Rights (Chile & Colom.)." *International Legal Materials* 63, no. 1 (2024): 47-64.

[73] "EXPLAINED: The International Court of Justice considers climate change", *International Union for Conservation of Nature*, December 13, 2024, https://iucn.org/story/202412/explainer-international-court-justice-considers-climate-change.

[74] Zunaida Moosa Wadiwala, "Historic climate change advisory: what the case before the International Court of Justice might mean",*The Conversation*, December 12, 2024, https://theconversation.com/historic-climate-change-advisory-what-the-case-before-the-international-court-of-justice-might-mean-245550.