



1. PURPOSE

This briefing paper has been prepared by the Pacific Community (SPC) as an information resource for Pacific Island Country delegations attending the UN 2023 Water Conference at UN Headquarters New York City. It presents a general overview of the status of water security in Pacific Island Countries and Territories that will be further discussed at two complementary, Pacific-focused side-sessions:

- A virtual side-session “*Meeting SDG6 in the Pacific: Challenges and Actions*” hosted by Fiji Government¹ agencies with the Pacific Water and Wastewater Association (PWWA) and University of NSW (Monday 20 March, 1800-1900 New York time, on-line event, registration at <https://www.globalwaterinstitute.unsw.edu.au/meeting-sdg6-in-the-pacific>); and
- An on-site side-session “*Accelerating Water Security Action for Pacific Resilience*” hosted by SPC in collaboration with PIFS and SPREP through the Pacific Resilience Partnership (Wednesday 22 March, 1700-1815 New York time, UN Headquarters Conference Room C).

Data presented in this brief is derived from the latest country reporting reflected in the UNICEF/WHO Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP), unless otherwise stated.

2. PACIFIC WATER SECURITY CONTEXT

The Pacific continues to endure some of the lowest levels of access to safe water and sanitation of any region in the world and remain disproportionately impacted by the water-related impacts of disasters and climate change - including floods and drought that continue to impact Pacific Island Countries even during the week of this Conference.

Latest data gathered by Pacific Island Countries and Territories² indicate that approximately half of the Pacific population lives without access to basic drinking water facilities, and more than two thirds live without access to basic sanitation³. These whole-of-Pacific numbers remain relatively stagnant compared to other global regions that have seen significant improvements in access over the past decade.

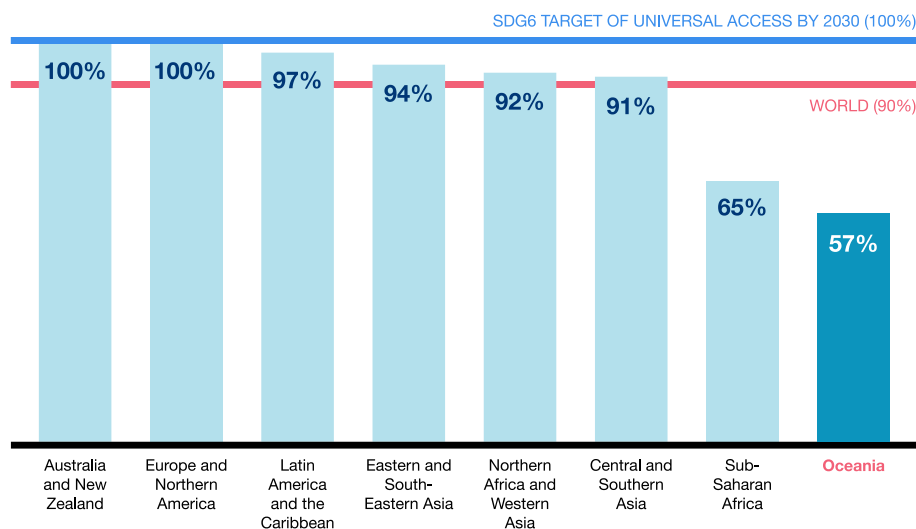


Figure 1: JMP data (2020) show the Pacific as a whole (Oceania sub-region⁴, including PNG) lagging behind the world in rates of access to at least basic drinking water facilities. [date source: WHO and UNICEF 2021]

¹ Water Authority of Fiji, Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport and the Department of Water and Sewerage.

² Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) data (2020) compiled by UNICEF and WHO (2021)

³ JMP defines “basic” services as: **drinking water** from an improved source, provided collection time is not more than 30 minutes for a round trip, including queuing; and use of improved **sanitation facilities** that are not shared with other households.

⁴ The JMP Oceania region comprises the following 21 Pacific Island Countries and Territories (and excludes Australia and New Zealand): American Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna Islands.

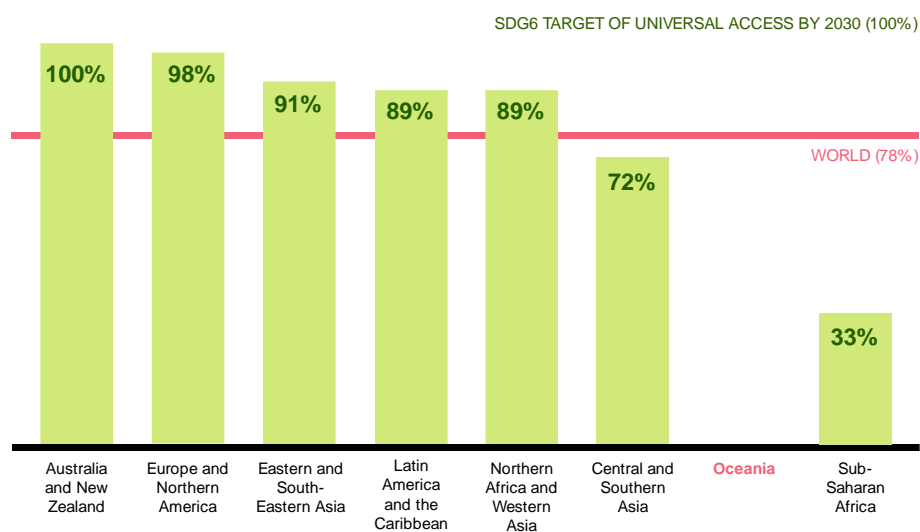


Figure 2: JMP data (2020) show the Pacific as a whole (JMP Oceania sub-region, including PNG) significantly behind other sub-regions in securing access to at least basic sanitation facilities. [data source: WHO and UNICEF 2021]

While every Country and Territory in the region remains active in improving the water security of their vulnerable communities, in many cases these efforts are not keeping pace with the pressures of population growth and movement, disaster setbacks and the accelerating impacts of climate change.

For example, in the period from 2000 to 2020, the population in the Solomon Islands increased by approximately 275 thousand people. Over the same period, 138 thousand gained access to a basic drinking water service, leaving an additional 137 thousand people **without** such services. Similarly in PNG, the population grew by approximately 3.1 million over the same period, whereas only 659 thousand people gained access to a basic sanitation facility. The population **without** a basic sanitation facility in PNG therefore increased by 2.44 million between 2000 and 2020.⁵

If current trajectories persist, millions of Pacific islanders will continue to endure water insecurity for generations to come, with profound implications for public health, socio-economic development, food and energy security, the environment, and human rights.

Significant contributing factors to this situation are persisting **low levels of engagement** in water security compared to other sectoral issues, and inadequate consideration of water security issues in regional frameworks and decision-making fora – particularly with respect to consideration of water security as a critical component of disaster and climate resilience.

While the significant economic, health, environmental, and resilience benefits of improved water and sanitation have been well demonstrated, the issue is yet to receive the levels of attention proportionate to both the scale of the challenge and its critical role in supporting Pacific resilience. Similarly, while the issue is framed by a number of established high-level regional policy frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Boe Declaration, and the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP), none of these frameworks is currently fully engaged in water security issues nor driving the coordinated efforts required across multiple sectors and stakeholders.

Pacific nations and development partners are progressing water security across multiple fronts, and these are not listed in detail here. However, while many of these efforts are focused and effective, as a whole they are not making a significant impact on the persistently high percentage of Pacific islanders exposed to the serious health, social and environmental impacts of unsafe water and sanitation facilities, particularly in rural and remote areas where water and sanitation is managed at a household or community level. The implications for meeting the 2030 SDG6 targets of universal access are illustrated in the following chart, which shows the region *as a whole* significantly off-track to meeting the 2030 targets for both water and sanitation.

⁵ JMP: Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Pacific Region and Pacific Islands

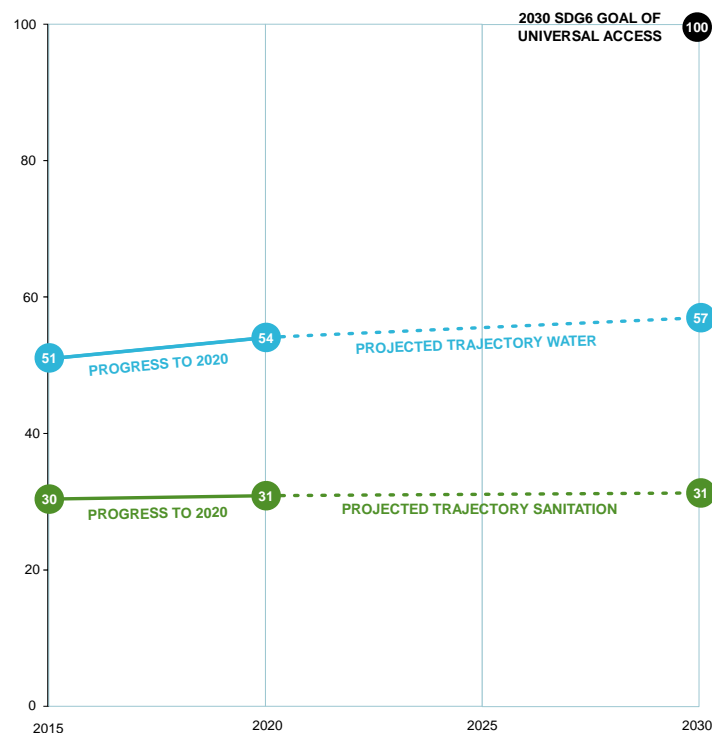


Figure 3: JMP data (2020) indicate that the Pacific as a whole (JMP Oceania sub-region, including PNG) is significantly off track in meeting the 2030 SDG6 Goal of universal access to at least basic sanitation [data source: WHO and UNICEF 2020]

3. EXISTING AND EMERGING PARTNERSHIPS FOR ACTION

Water security is a cross-cutting issue affecting multiple sectors, and a number of partnerships are active across the region in sharing knowledge and approaches and progressing action. While not all partnerships can be listed here, examples include:

- The **Pacific Water and Wastewater Association (PWWA)** supports the capacity of its water utility members to provide sustainable water and wastewater services, including through the convening of annual conferences, capacity building, benchmarking and Ministerial meetings. The 2022 Ministerial meeting produced a communique, which was requested by Ministers to be presented to the UN 2023 Water Conference and will be further discussed and promoted at both Pacific side-sessions of the Conference.
- The **Pacific Resilience Partnership (PRP)** provides high-level strategic guidance on climate and disaster resilience, including through the planned development of a *Regional Engagement Strategy on Water Security and Resilience* by a newly formed Technical Working Group on Water Security.
- **Pacific Health Ministers** meet biennially and are active in progressing the Healthy Islands vision to “take action to ensure universal access to safe water and sanitation”, including through the development of a Pacific Strategy on WASH for Health with the support of Heads of Health.
- The **Pacific Meteorological Council (PMC)** and related Ministerial meeting convene a hydrology technical panel that advises on how to best support national capacities to collect and manage information essential to the management of water resources and water-related risks.
- The **Pacific Regional Infrastructure Facility (PRIF)** is a multi-partner coordination and technical assistance facility that includes a working group on water and sanitation to support information sharing and coordination of relevant development partner activities.

- Regional and National **WASH Clusters** are active in supporting the coordination of WASH-related disaster response at the national and sub-national levels amongst WASH Cluster partners and other actors outside the WASH Cluster.
- The **Pacific Partnership for Atoll Water Security** is a S.A.M.O.A. Pathway registered partnership of eight atoll and raised limestone island countries supported by SPC and the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) to share local knowledge and approaches to better anticipate, prepare for and withstand the impacts of drought.
- **Sanitation and Water for All (SWA)** is a UN-hosted global partnership of governments, civil society and development partners supporting high-level action towards meeting SDG6, and currently including representation from PNG and Fiji.
- Asian Development Bank (ADB) partnership **Strengthening Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Practices and Hygiene Behavioral Change in the Pacific** is working with governments and stakeholders to identify vulnerable groups and target behavioral change to meet the needs of women, children, girls, and elderly people.

While each of these partnerships, and others active in the region, are providing tangible support to the efforts of PICTs, there remains a gap in ensuring that the critical learnings and recommendations of partnerships such as these are effectively communicated to leaders at all levels. There is significant scope to better connect the work of these partnerships to existing regional goals and reporting frameworks, such as those of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific, and the Boe Declaration.

The recent formation of a Technical Working Group on Water Security under the Pacific Resilience Partnership is one mechanism to promote effective dialogue between the water and sanitation and resilience communities. While in its early stages, it is intended that the group provide a working platform for partners and stakeholders active in the fields of water security and resilience (including PWWA representation) to come together to identify ways that the PRP can promote increased and meaningful engagement on water security as a resilience issue and strengthen coordinated action on water security to support progress towards FRDP Goals.

4. LEARNINGS FROM THE DATA AND COUNTRY EXPERIENCE

Analysis of country data and experiences sheds some light on the nature of the water security challenges facing the region, and eight key learnings are outlined below.

(1) Too many Pacific people are being left behind

Country data compiled through the JMP demonstrate that, for SDG6, the Pacific **as a whole** is tracking worse than any other region in the world, including:

- **43%** (approx. **5.3M** people) lacking access to at least basic drinking water facilities.
- **65%** (approx. **8.1M** people) lacking access to at least basic sanitation facilities; and
- **15%** (approx. **1.8M** people) relying on the bush or beach for their toilet.

(2) Large inequities and disparities persist across the region, and within countries

Safe WASH access is distributed unevenly across the region. Large disparities exist between and within countries, across urban and rural areas, and between the rich and the poor:

- Despite the region's poor collective performance, **16 out of 20** countries appear to be progressing relatively well against the SDG6 targets for access to at least basic services, with more than **90%** of their populations enjoying access to at least basic drinking water facilities.
- **94%** of those Pacific Islanders without access to basic drinking water facilities live in rural PNG (approximately **4.9M** people).

- Our region’s rural populations without access to basic drinking water facilities outnumber our urban populations without access by approximately **24 to 1 – the highest disparity in the world**.
- The Pacific is **the least urbanised region of the world**, and our urban water utilities reach less than a quarter of our total population⁶, far less than other global regions, and with significant investment required to ensure safe and reliable coverage to growing formal and informal urban populations.
- For the region’s comparatively large rural populations, drinking water, sanitation and hygiene are primarily managed at the **household, village, settlement, and island levels**.

(3) SDG6 indicators alone do not fully capture intensifying Pacific resilience challenges

Access to basic water and sanitation facilities is far from the whole story in the Pacific, as PICTs are disproportionately affected by the intensifying water-related impacts of disasters and climate change:

- Already, 5 of our countries have been counted amongst the world’s 15 most vulnerable⁷, with climate change expected to significantly increase the likelihood of hydro-meteorological disasters that already account for over 75% of the region’s reported natural disaster events.
- For many communities, access to safe water and sanitation is seriously constrained by local capacity to manage current water-related risks, such as those arising from floods and drought, let alone those intensified by the impacts of climate change
- The impacts of disasters and climate change on the water sector are not yet well captured in Government led processes such as Post Disaster Needs Assessments (PDNA) and National Adaptation Plans. Increased effort is required to ensure such processes properly factor in risks and future costs associated with water and wastewater services affected by disaster events and climate change.

(4) “Safe” access is critical to support resilient communities, but poorly understood

Access to basic services is only part of SDG6, and doesn’t fully measure progress:

- Recently completed Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) studies by UNICEF in five countries have highlighted that on average **70%** of the populations are drinking water contaminated with faecal coliforms⁸.
- The high levels of contamination identified should be a driver for all countries to seek safer water for their populations.
- Achieving ‘safe’ access to water and sanitation services has a far higher cost attached than basic services.

(5) Water and sanitation services remain critical to effective national COVID-19 responses

The COVID-19 pandemic renewed the Pacific regional focus on hand hygiene, particularly within healthcare facilities, and also highlighted significant disparities in access to safe hygiene facilities:

- COVID-19 has a disproportionate impact on communities without access to suitable quality water, soap, and knowledge about handwashing for personal hygiene, reducing the effectiveness of response measures and increasing health risks to wider populations⁹.
- Prioritising access to WASH services should be a key public health intervention for COVID-19, and other health emergencies, alongside scaling-up of locally successful solutions, experience sharing, and education.

⁶ <http://www.pwwa.ws/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PWWA-10-years-of-improvement-FINAL.pdf>

⁷ WorldRiskReport 2021 – note that risks to island nations are less prominent in the 2022 WorldRiskReport, which changed its methodology to focus more on risks to larger population countries.

⁸ UNICEF MICS results for Faecal contamination of household drinking water: Tuvalu 84%, Samoa 47%, Tonga 78%, Kiribati 91%, Fiji 45%

⁹ A. Lal, R.M. Lucas and A. Slatyer. Water access as a required public health intervention to fight COVID-19 in the Pacific Islands. The Lancet Regional Health - Western Pacific 1 (2020) 100006

(6) Despite some progress, the Pacific still has the largest water and sanitation data gaps

While basic data exists for most countries on access to WASH at the household level, there remain significant gaps in tracking access to higher level services including water quality and treatment of wastewater:

- In 2020, only **11%** of Oceania reported data on safely managed water and **3%** data availability on safely managed sanitation. While some progress has been made, tracking of access to WASH within schools and healthcare facilities remains at an early stage with many data gaps.
- Data collection through individual studies and surveys is expensive and irregular. Embedding SDG-aligned indicators within existing country-owned monitoring systems can reduce duplication and achieve significant savings.
- The PWWA carries out regular benchmarking¹⁰ of services that mostly target urban populations, and alignment of these data with SDG monitoring requirements could significantly improve data tracking for urban centres.

(7) Water resources management must be part of Pacific solutions

Much of our region relies on limited and fragile water resources that require careful management and protection from human impacts, sometimes adding to the cost of water and sanitation solutions:

- For many Pacific communities, the availability of freshwater resources is confined to small and fragile groundwater lenses, streams and springs, and/or rainwater collected from roofs.
- These scarce resources are vulnerable to overexploitation and contamination, particularly in atoll environments, where limited potable groundwater sources can be threatened by over-pumping, land use activities, inappropriate sanitation facilities, and the accelerating impacts of climate change.
- Efforts to achieve Pacific water and sanitation targets therefore need to consider the water cycle as a whole, and wherever possible use Integrated Water Resource Management approaches to protect the sustainability of freshwater resources from “ridge to reef”.

(8) The cost of action is significant but far less than the cost of inaction

While more needs to be done to accurately determine the cost of achieving universal access to water and sanitation, it is already clear that the cost of action is less than that of inaction:

- Past rudimentary analyses have estimated infrastructure costs associated with achieving SDG6 drinking water targets of about USD 83 million per annum for the region as a whole (approximately 0.35% of the region’s GDP). The infrastructure costs of achieving SDG6 sanitation targets was estimated at approximately USD 80 million per annum, representing 0.33% of the region’s GDP¹¹.
- While the costs of action are significant, the costs of inaction are profound. A study on the costs of inadequate drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in South Tarawa, Kiribati, found an economic cost per annum equivalent to 2–4% of the 2013 GDP.
- Efforts are currently being made to better understand needs and attach appropriate cost estimates to the maintenance of existing facilities as well as investment in new infrastructure. For example, the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership (currently joined by Fiji and PNG) is supporting the development of tools and methodologies for estimating the cost of capital works programmes necessary to achieve progress towards SDG6 targets.

5. WAYS FORWARD

Regardless of individual country performance against SDG6 targets for access to safe facilities, serious issues of **drinking water safety, sustainability** and **resilience** persist across all Pacific Island Countries and Territories. The

¹⁰ <http://www.pwwa.ws/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PWWA-10-years-of-improvement-FINAL.pdf>

¹¹ Sanitation, drinking-water and health in Pacific Island Countries : 2015 update and future outlook. SPC, UN-HABITAT, UNICEF, WHO 2017

scale of the challenge for the region as a whole requires a fundamental recalibration of government priorities and investments, along with a meaningful shift in the scale and type of support provided by development partners.

Given the enormity of the task, coordinated, risk reduction approaches are needed to empower communities and households to establish, operate and maintain affordable and appropriate water and sanitation systems, while also maintaining safe drinking water and hygiene practices in homes, schools and health care facilities – including incorporating resilience to the intensifying impacts disasters and climate change. This is particularly relevant for the region’s rural, remote and small island populations, including the significant and growing populations of rural PNG.

Pacific Water and Wastewater Ministers Communiqué

On 14th and 15th November 2023, Pacific Water Ministers and their representatives met in Nadi alongside the PWWA conference to discuss the urgent water and sanitation challenges facing the region. The meeting agreed on a communiqué that recommends ways forward to address the region’s urgent water and sanitation challenges, and recommended that the communiqué be tabled at the UN 2023 Water Conference by PIC delegations. Amongst other findings, the communiqué (provided in full as a separate document) recognised the urgent need for:

- **Accelerated efforts at all levels to prioritise urgent action on sustainable financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation and governance;**
- **Strengthened engagement in water security as a key component of Pacific resilience, and greater participation of the sector in dialogue for action supporting climate and disaster resilience at the local, national and regional levels.**
- **Scaling up of national and regional investments to support the science, infrastructure and local capacity needed to establish and maintain locally appropriate and sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene solutions resilient to the impacts of climate change and disaster (requiring support from development partners to enhance accessibility of the sector to funding mechanisms such as climate financing).**
- **Targeted and collaborative action by governments, development partners and civil society to address open defecation – a relatively neglected development issue with profound impacts on human health, livelihoods and resilience.**
- **Increased and targeted support to countries to improve the monitoring, regulation, treatment, reuse and safe disposal of wastewater.**

6. REFERENCES

JMP data on WASH access is available at www.washdata.org

Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2020: five years into the SDGs. Geneva: WHO and UNICEF 2021.

A. Lal, R.M. Lucas and A. Slatyer. Water access as a required public health intervention to fight COVID-19 in the Pacific Islands. The Lancet Regional Health - Western Pacific 1 (2020) 100006

Pacific Water and Wastewater Association, Benchmarking Report 2020 - 10 years of Performance Improvement Recorded (2009 – 2019)

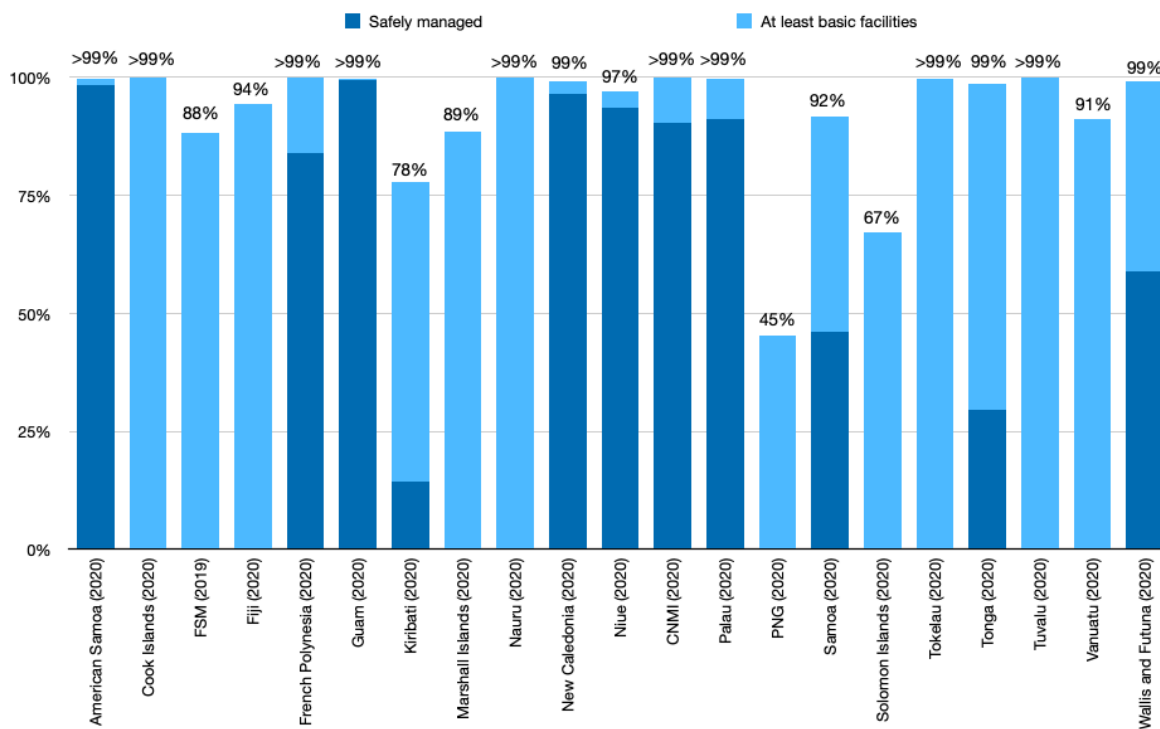
Sanitation, drinking-water and health in Pacific island countries : 2015 update and future outlook. SPC, UN-HABITAT, UNICEF, WHO 2017

WorldRiskReport 2021. Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft, Ruhr University Bochum

For further information: contact SPC’s **Dave Hebblethwaite**, Water Security and Governance Coordinator, and **Mary Alalo**, Project Coordinator (daveh@spc.int and marya@spc.int)

ATTACHMENT: LATEST JMP DATA ON PICT ACCESS TO WATER & SANITATION

2022 JMP data on access to safely managed and at least basic drinking water



2022 JMP data on access to safely managed and at least basic sanitation services

