

#### **Our Stories**

Realising our potential and reaching further	5
Building resilience and connection in Suva	8
From volunteer to professional	12
Advancing gender-inclusive climate finance in Timor-Leste	16
Education and support for all children in Tongatapu	18
Stronger, sustainable communities in Kiribati	22
A journey of service and inspiration	24
The impact of volunteers in Samoa	28
Together, we can achieve great things	31





#### Realising our potential and reaching further

This year we have continued to grow our partnerships and assignments reaching our goals for both quality and delivery. The team at Volunteer Service Abroad | Te Tūao Tāwāhi (VSA) has come together strongly to drive our progress and realise our potential. The evidence base for our volunteering has been building since the COVID years, and we now have the data and the stories to truly demonstrate the value of volunteering.

Our five year strategy, Te Matau-ā-Māui | the fishhook of Māui, draws on this pūrākau | story of navigation and venturing as we cast out into Te Moana-nui-ā-Kiwa | the great Pacific Ocean. It launches us into the next horizon building on 60+ years of history. Through this strategy, we will see more Māori & Pacific based New Zealanders serve as volunteers and greater decision making from local communities in our model. I'm proud to lead this mahi and the team are excited for the shifts.

Mā te mahi tahi, ka ora katoa | By working together, we can all thrive.

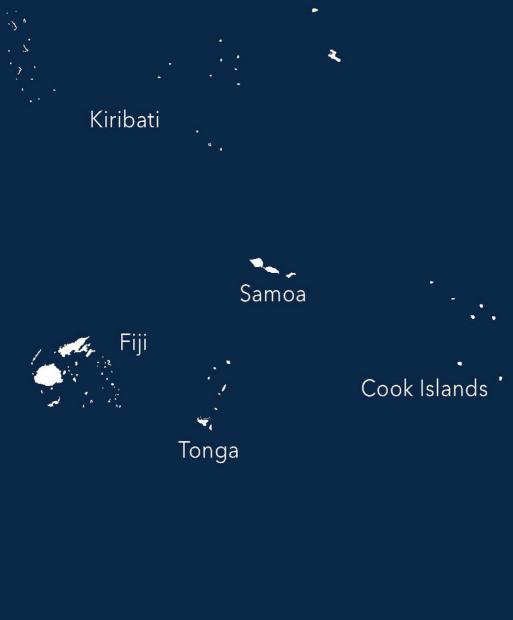
Vista is our flagship publication, dedicated to sharing some of the stories of the past year from our partner organisations and volunteers.

We hope you enjoy reading this year's edition. Thank you for your continued support of VSA, I know the incredible impact of volunteering for both communities and individuals, and I hope these stories inspire you too!

Kate Wareham Te Tumu Whakarae | CEO Volunteer Service Abroad Te Tūao Tāwāhi



Timor-Leste





## Building resilience and connection in Suva

Fresh from completing his Harvard degree and concluding four years at Health New Zealand's cybersecurity programme, Daniel Jang arrived in Suva with more than technical expertise – he brought a passion for creating meaningful impact. When Volunteer Service Abroad advertised an Information Security Advisor role with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), the timing couldn't have been better. Daniel felt it was the perfect opportunity to use his skills in a meaningful way.

The sense of purpose was accompanied by a few nerves. As the first VSA volunteer in Fiji since VSA's in-country office establishment in 2022, Daniel knew he was stepping into something new – not just for himself, but for the organisation as well. "I felt a real sense of responsibility," he says. "I was excited, but also wondering – will I be able to make a difference here?"

His new home at the Pacific Theological College offered both comfort and challenge. His accommodation was comfortable but tucked away from the heart of campus and located next to a construction site. With limited options for transportation and no shops nearby, rainy evenings in particular could feel quite isolating. But, like many volunteers, Daniel found that resilience often grows in unexpected ways.

One of those ways came in the form of a small, gentle stray dog who began showing up near his door. She had a scarred leg and flinched at sudden movements, showing signs of a difficult past. Daniel offered her food and kindness – and in return, she stayed. Daniel named her Coco.

"She became a constant presence," he recalls. "Waiting for me at the door, following me to the gate when I left for work. It was a simple relationship, but incredibly grounding." Coco didn't just ease the loneliness; she opened the door to new connections. Children living nearby would stop to play with her, creating moments of laughter and community connection that became part of Daniel's everyday life.

At PIFS, Daniel tackled the critical task of strengthening information security across the Secretariat. He methodically laid the foundations for lasting change by conducting a comprehensive security assessment, developing a five-year strategic roadmap, and creating tailored policy frameworks that aligned with PIFS's long-term goals. But his approach went far beyond the technical. "I wanted to work alongside the team, not just hand

over documents," he explains. He created tailored training resources – including Al-powered awareness videos – and supported the team in building their own capability. The goal wasn't just to deliver solutions, but to leave behind something sustainable.

Outside of work, Daniel made a point of getting involved in the community. Weekly futsal games at the University of the South Pacific offered both exercise and connection. Sunday services at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church became a source of reflection and grounding. He explored local destinations like Leleuvia Island and the village of Navala, and joined the PIFS staff retreat – memorable not just for the stunning Coral Coast views, but for the deeper



relationships that it helped to build.

Looking back, Daniel says many of his most memorable moments came not from planned outcomes, but from everyday interactions – feeding Coco, chatting with neighbours, and sharing meals. "The relationships, the sense of trust and community – those are the things that really stayed with me."

As his time in Fiji came to an end, Daniel felt confident in the systems he'd helped put in place and the people who would carry them forward. Saying goodbye to Coco was harder – but knowing that two incoming VSA volunteers would continue to care for her brought some peace of mind. "I joked that Coco's VSA assignment had been extended, even if mine was ending."

Reflecting on his experience, Daniel observes that the most profound impact often happens beyond formal assignments. "When you work without expectation of reward, you find yourself empowered to give more deeply," he says. "True impact emerges from the connections you build, not just the work you deliver. And sometimes, it's the unexpected relationships – even with a stray dog – that leave the deepest mark."











### From volunteer to professional

Rose Donovan's path to a career in international development began with a simple desire – to make a difference. As a young woman with a deep passion for social justice and global issues, she was determined to find a way to contribute meaningfully to the world. After living and studying abroad, Rose gained a broader understanding of the global challenges that she

wished to address and knew that international development was the path that she wanted to pursue.

Driven by this passion, Rose applied for an assignment through VSA's UniVol graduate programme, hoping to gain hands-on experience in the international development sector. She applied to volunteer as a Monitoring, Evaluation, Research

and Learning (MERL) Assistant in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, eager to develop practical skills in a field that is both competitive but impactful. "I just knew I wanted to work in international development, and trying to get into the sector is so competitive.... so the VSA UniVol [programme] was the perfect opportunity for that." This opportunity not only allowed her to immerse herself in a new culture, but also provided invaluable on-the-ground experience that would shape the path towards her future career.

During the first three months into her assignment, Rose encountered some logistical challenges, however, she overcame these obstacles by

Rose (left) teaching her neighbour how to sew

maintaining a positive mindset, and staying focused on the broader community and cultural experience. "You've just got to keep a positive mindset, turn up every day, take the small wins." She emphasised the importance of not only focusing on the assignment itself but also connecting with the local community and neighbours. One project that stood out to her was teaching community members how to sew sanitary pads, which had a lasting impact by shifting the mindset of the locals and encouraging a new set of practical skills that would benefit women and girls in the community for years to come. "Outside of my partner organisation, I think I got to have a really amazing impact on the community that I was living in, with my village."

Rose's volunteer experience in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville played a crucial role in laying out the pathway to her current job in the international development sector, allowing her to develop a range of valuable skills that are directly applicable to her work today. By engaging with Pacific partners and colleagues, she has gained a deeper understanding of geographical isolation and the patience required to navigate these challenges. In addition to her cultural knowledge, Rose further developed important hard skills such as monitoring and evaluation, Wash, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), and disaster risk reduction, all of which have proven vital in her role. Equally

important were the soft skills she honed, including engaging with diverse groups of people and adapting to local contexts qualities which are highly valued in the NGO sector. "I definitely have a better understanding of the challenges that they're [Pacific partners] facing, the issues in the communities, and also, the geographical isolation that a lot of our Pacific partners are facing." These experiences, combining technical expertise with interpersonal skills, have been instrumental in helping Rose secure her job and succeed in the field.

Volunteering abroad through graduate programmes such as UniVol can be a transformative experience, and Rose believes it has a lasting impact on a young person's career, no matter what field they eventually pursue. Her advice for future volunteers is to engage deeply with local communities. "It's important to embrace and appreciate the local culture and the interactions that come with it, as this helps to encourage genuine connections."

Rose encourages young volunteers to step outside of their comfort zones, as doing so will not only contribute positively to the community they are serving but will bring personal growth and self-discovery. "You're going to give a lot more than you think." Ultimately, she believes that volunteering will shape volunteers in ways they may not expect, offering invaluable skills, insights, and experiences that will benefit them far beyond their time abroad.





# Advancing gender-inclusive climate finance in Timor-Leste

Volunteer Service Abroad volunteer Teall Crossen, who served as a Climate Finance and Climate Change Advisor with Oxfam, was a driving force in Timor-Leste's efforts to create sustainable livelihoods, build resilience, and foster inclusive development. Her work focused on ensuring that climate finance – essential for strengthening communities – is accessible to everyone, especially marginalised groups in Timor-Leste like women.

Despite Timor-Leste securing significant climate funding, women have historically faced barriers in accessing and benefiting from these resources. One of Teall's standout achievements was addressing this gap by leading a scoping study that examined Timor-Leste's climate policies through the lens of gender equality, transparency, accountability, and disability inclusion. By engaging with government officials, international donors, and local NGOs, Teall ensured that this research was finalised and launched.

Beyond policy development, Teall's initiative to support local partners engage with rural women has provided invaluable insights into their lived experiences with climate change and their pressing need for financial support. As her counterpart,

Lucio Savio, noted, "One of the areas that Teall has significantly contributed to is the research on women's experiences with climate change...the government will use this data to develop appropriate policies and allocate sufficient resources to support women and other vulnerable groups who are most affected by climate change."

The assignment has also spearheaded efforts in climate finance tracking, monitoring contributions from 10 development partners, international climate funds and multilateral development banks. The capacity building and mentoring has significantly enhanced Lucio's knowledge of climate justice and finance tracking, equipping Oxfam in Timor-Leste with skills that remain essential to the project's success.



According to Lucio, there is now a structured system that continues to guide Oxfam and the Timor-Leste government in understanding financial flows. The assignment has also helped strengthen Lucio's professional communication skills that has enabled the team to engage more effectively with international partners:

#### "Teall's patience and guidance not only improved my technical skills but also boosted my confidence in communicating with stakeholders."

The assignment's impact continues to resonate with Oxfam and its partners, ensuring a lasting framework for gender-responsive climate finance. Teall's contributions have not only strengthened Timor-Leste's approach to climate finance but have also helped advance gender equality in this space. By ensuring that women's voices are heard in climate policy and resource allocation, her work has helped to lay the foundation for more inclusive, equitable, and effective climate action. As Timor-Leste navigates the growing challenges of climate change, the methodologies and insights introduced by Teall will continue to shape policies that will help to ensure that no one is left behind.

# Education and support for all children in Tongatapu

Building inclusivity in developing communities involves VSA volunteers working hand-in-hand with local organisations and communities to support healthcare and education initiatives, promote sustainable development and empower local leaders. Through this work – whether launching community-driven programmes or improving access to education for children with special needs – these organisations, with the support of our volunteers, create life-changing impacts.

One such volunteer who has made a profound impact is Tevita Mafi who worked in Tongatapu, the main island of Tonga, on a VSA assignment as a Special Needs Education Advisor. His efforts have transformed the lives of children and their families. In Tongatapu, the work of 'Uluaki Faiako, a local organisation that partners with first-time parents and caregivers, has had a meaningful impact not only on the children but also on their families and the broader community. Tevita supported them by sharing his skills and expertise, encouraging the integration of children with special needs into everyday life and educating others on how to treat them as equal members of society.

One mother shared how Tevita's training encouraged fathers to become more involved in their children's care and education, noting that, before Tevita's work,

only mothers attended the training sessions. Now, both parents are equally invested in the well-being of their children, fostering a more inclusive and supportive family dynamic.

"[His trainings] really helped because now the fathers realise that it is their responsibility as well to come and play with the kids, not just the mothers. This is one major difference I have witnessed as a result of Tevita's work."



Tevita's approach was both practical and transformative. With his background in special education, he shared his expertise with families and staff in Tongatapu, where resources and formal training for special needs education are limited. His training sessions have equipped both caregivers and local staff with the skills to support children with special needs, ensuring that these lessons will continue to benefit the community long after the completion of his volunteer assignment.

A past colleague from 'Uluaki Faiako expressed her gratitude in what she had learnt after working with Tevita. "We work with disabled children who have many types of disabilities, and I have come to understand how to deal with those with cerebral palsy through Tevita's trainings. I had no idea how to handle such cases, and I now know through his training... we have learnt so much."

The staff now have the tools to implement these techniques well beyond Tevita's assignment, ensuring sustainable change in the community.

Through Tevita's example, both families and staff learned to integrate children with special needs into daily life, including them in household chores to help them strengthen their muscles and develop important physical skills. This approach not only improved the children's physical abilities but also fostered a sense of belonging and purpose for the child within their family and community.

The local organisations that VSA partners with, such as 'Uluaki Faiako, are essential to building stronger communities. 'Uluaki Faiako plays a crucial role in providing access to education, therapy, and essential resources to children with special needs and their families. Together with the partnership with VSA and volunteers such as Tevita, 'Uluaki Faiako ensures that children with special needs receive the assistance they need to develop skills, gain independence, and participate fully in their homes and wider communities.







## Stronger, sustainable communities in Kiribati

Teitoiningaina is the National Catholic Women's Association of Kiribati. The association aims to empower and equip women in the community, reduce poverty and build food security and climate change resilience. In particular, Teitoiningaina offers nutrition, cooking, and hand craft classes from its headquarters in Teoraereke, implements nutrition and healthy living programmes throughout the atolls through the Teitoiningaina Kiribati Health Champions, and promotes family healthcare programmes. Its facilities include a kitchen, craft shop, offices, training and sewing rooms, and vegetable gardens. Located in South Tarawa, Kiribati's populous capital, the faith-based organisation has a direct impact on the lives of its over 35,000 members across the country. While Teitoiningaina has a tangible impact on the community through its activities, it currently needs a clearer vision, mission and strategic plan to guide its future development.

VSA volunteer Matthew Power took up an assignment as an Organisational Development Advisor at Teitoiningaina. His assignment was geared towards updating the organisation's strategic plan for 2022-2026 – and indeed, over the course of his time at Teitoiningaina, the organisation began drafting this document. The strategic development plan aims to bring Teitoiningaina's goals in line with the broader objectives of Kiribati's 20-year vision development plan 2016-2036 (KV20).

The plan was not completed while Matthew was in Kiribati. However, Teitoiningaina Director Ioanna Taraia explains that Teitoiningaina members have been empowered to continue their work. "We all worked together with Matthew who explained everything on how to do a strategic plan," she said. "That's our first experience on how to come up with ideas on the plan. Our executive members are now capable

of continuing the work from where Matthew stopped."

As a result of Matthew's sharing of knowledge – particularly around Microsoft Office, internet use, and accounting applications – loanna says Teitoiningaina staff have significantly developed their skills and confidence. In particular, the organisation's finance officer is now able to quickly do the accounts and reconcile them with bank statements on the computer, and Teitoiningaina's data officer learnt how to promote programmes on Facebook, resulting in a better reach and profile across Kiribati.

Additionally, thousands of women the organisation supports will get to enjoy learning to cook healthy food for their families at Teitoiningaina's newly upgraded kitchen in the near future. According to loanna, "One of the highlights from Matthew's contribution is that the organisation managed to get

Volunteer
Service
Abroad

Matthew and partner Kirsty in Kiribati

donor funding from DFAT. We managed to get funds for setting up an upgrade for our kitchen, procurement of new cooking equipment and for cooking training."

She explained that during past years, Teitoiningaina had never managed to secure donor funding and she believes one reason is to do with lack of knowledge and experience around completing grant templates among the organisation staff. The funding to support the upgrading of the training kitchen will have an impact on the livelihoods of the thousands of women who will benefit from Teitoiningaina's training on healthy cooking.

Ultimately, the impact of Matthew's work is not only to Teitoiningaina itself but extends to the wider network of women and youth Teitoiningaina supports. As Ioanna says, "When they go back to their respective communities and women's groups, they will be able to pass on what they have learnt from their trainings here."

As for Matthew, the experience of working at Teitoiningaina was a very positive experience. Not only was it a great experience being able to help such a significant organisation, he enjoyed learning about Kiribati's culture and getting to know the locals. "I hadn't been to Kiribati before this role," Matthew explained. "But there were so many highlights – particularly discussing different ways of life with Teitoiningaina's director and attending some of the festival celebrations."

"I hadn't realised the amount of international development that goes into the Pacific. It was really great to be part of that joint effort."



### A journey of service and inspiration

Volunteering is more than just an act of service – it is a way of life for those who dedicate themselves to making a difference. For Marie Aekins, volunteering overseas through VSA has become her passion. In the past five years, she has completed four assignments in three different countries and recently travelled to Vanuatu to start her fifth volunteer assignment with VSA. Marie has immersed herself in diverse cultures, supporting communities in need and creating a

lasting impact in many communities across the Pacific. However, her story of volunteering started a long time before her first VSA assignment.

Marie's love for volunteering started in her early childhood growing up in both Fiji and Vanuatu, where she had her first contact with VSA volunteers. She recalls "the VSA [volunteers] were so cool... they came all this way to do this work and not be paid anything, and as an 11 year-old kid I thought, that is amazing. One day

I want to do this." VSA volunteers are skilled people who share their experience and knowledge directly with local people and communities. Witnessing the impact of the work of volunteers first hand, as well as the respect and admiration that the local community had for them, had planted the seed of volunteering for Marie as a child and she would pursue this dream of hers later in life. In 2019 after working in New Zealand for over 30 years, Marie decided it was time for a change.

"I saw an assignment on the [VSA] website that resounded with me." Marie recalls. "It was working at a school, and it was a place I had never been before, but I just really wanted to get back to the Pacific Islands which was where I had had such an amazing, happy time as a child." After applying, getting accepted, and going through the "intense and robust, but fantastic" briefing process and preparation, Marie was on her way to the Autonomous Region of Bougainville where she worked as a Finance and Administration Mentor at Buin Secondary School for the next 12 months. She remembers how adjusting to a new and isolated environment in Bougainville was one of the most challenging things of the assignment. However, the personal and professional growth was a highlight for her - evident in her return to volunteer some more! After the international borders had reopened following the COVID outbreak, Marie found herself on a plane to the Cook Islands where she worked as a Financial Systems Trainer in the Civil Society sector -"an absolute highlight of my VSA

journey", and then in 2023-2024, she volunteered in Tonga as a Financial and Administration Systems Trainer.

For many VSA volunteers, the true essence of their experience goes far beyond the formal tasks of their assignment. Marie has discovered that the impact of volunteering often unfolds in the moments and actions outside the scope of official duties, where unexpected connections and lasting change happen. While her primary focus was training and mentoring colleagues in finance and administration, Marie's contributions stretched well beyond that. She helped to raise funds to support Buin Secondary School, including organising the shipment of 50 donated dictionaries from New Zealand to Bougainville. She even found herself teaching a colleague in Tonga how to drive, gently encouraging her to take her driver's licence test. "She passed first time," Marie laughed as she reminisced. "It was so cool. I'm so proud of her!" For Marie, staying engaged beyond the structured responsibilities of her role has brought a deep sense of fulfillment. "It's a real highlight," she says, "just to see and experience a completely different culture from the one you're used to." It's in these moments - the small, seemingly insignificant acts - that volunteering becomes a life-changing journey, not just for the communities served, but the volunteers themselves.

Marie has recently embarked on her fifth volunteer assignment with VSA and, in a beautiful full-circle moment, she has returned to familiar shores in Vanuatu where she spent her childhood. Now as a volunteer on an official assignment, she is ready to give back to the community that helped to shape her. She looks forward to "getting stuck into the role." Looking back on her journey, Marie has one simple piece of advice for anyone considering volunteering: "Just do it – go in with an open mind and open heart – you will get so much out if it in return." For Marie, like many other volunteers, it's not just about the work – it's about the transformation that happens within, for both the volunteer and the community that they serve.





### The impact of volunteers in Samoa

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF), a governmental body, provides the policies, regulation and technical support to agriculture and fisheries production in Samoa. With a wide network of stakeholders, including subsistence and commercial farmers, importers and exporters, NGOs and industry service providers, MAF is a busy organisation and key to implementing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals in Samoa. VSA has been working in partnership with MAF for eight years and recently had three volunteers placed with MAF in Samoa.

At present, MAF's focus is on reviewing Samoa's Agriculture Sector Plan (ASP) 2016-2020, which has had many of its goals delayed by COVID. MAF leads the implementation of the ASP, which aims to increase food, nutrition and income security in Samoa. It does this by increasing investment in food security and inclusive commercial agriculture and fisheries practices, increasing the supply and consumption of domestic food products, improving the sustainability of production and resource management, and strengthening climate resilience efforts.

Our recent volunteers with MAF include Alex Whyte, Jacqueline Neave and Michael Baer. Alex, a Biosecurity Advisor, was involved in analysing import risks for animal products and training local biosecurity officers, while Jacqueline, a Biosecurity Advisor specifically in the Quarantine Division, was involved in strengthening the Samoa Quarantine Service to limit the spread of pests and diseases. Jacqueline was also the Senior Biosecurity Advisor during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting event held in Samoa in 2024. Michael, a Production Animal Veterinarian. helped with building veterinary capability in the local sector.

For Jacqueline and Alex, working with MAF to provide biosecurity support and enhance staff capability and confidence through the development of worksite procedures, systems and processes has been a positive experience. "A highlight of our volunteering journey is helping the individuals and teams we work with to realise their full

potential and achieve their goals," they said.

MAF CEO, Seuseu Dr Joseph Tauati, says VSA volunteers have been a great help in building capacity across the organisation, both now and in the past. "The current and past volunteers have been very good," he said. "I'd say they are instrumental and, honestly, if they were not involved with the Ministry, we would not have made this much progress so far."

He particularly highlights the fact that volunteers are building capacity in the local sector. "For example, Michael is training the paravets. That means when he leaves, the knowledge will remain in Samoa. It's instrumental to our success."

In the future, MAF hopes to benefit from volunteer assistance in the area of writing. "Writing proposals, that's very important for the Ministry and that's where the Ministry really lacks. It's not that the Ministry cannot write, it's just that there's no time." In particular, Seuseu Dr Joseph Tauati hopes that volunteers may be able to help build local capacity for writing succinct proposals. "Each person will have a different line of thought when they're talking to a funding body," he explained. "But if you have a proposal that has synchronised all the Ministry's thoughts [into one document], it's very easy for the funding body to provide accurate assistance where it's needed."





#### "Together, we can achieve great things."

- Sir Edmund Hilary, Founding President of Volunteer Service Abroad Te Tūao Tāwāhi.

This spirit of shared purpose continues through those who choose to support VSA's work into the future. Bequests play a vital role in supporting our work. By leaving a gift to VSA in your Will, you help us build a future where communities thrive and lives are transformed.

By leaving a gift in your Will to VSA, you're helping people and communities shape their own future—supporting local aspirations through the sharing of skills, knowledge, and heart.

Your legacy becomes part of a powerful story of transformation that lives on through every volunteer, every project, and every connection made across the Pacific and beyond.

A bequest also helps us plan with confidence, ensuring that our work remains strong, sustainable, and guided by values of partnership, respect, and shared humanity.

Even a modest gift—such as 1% to 5% of your estate—can make a meaningful and lasting difference, while continuing to honour and care for your loved ones. Please discuss options with a trusted legal advisor.

To make leaving a bequest easier, we've partnered with Safewill, a trusted online Will-writing platform. You can create your Will in just 20 minutes and three simple steps—at a special price of \$80 (50% off). Visit: safewill.com/nz/vsanz.

If you have any questions or would like to talk further, we'd love to hear from you.

Contact us at fundraising@vsa.org.nz or visit vsa.org.nz.

