


Digital Capitalism in the Pacific Islands: Opportunities, Challenges, and Local Realities

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ABSTRACT

Digital capitalism is transforming the Pacific Islands in ways that present opportunities for economic development, increased availability of financial resources, and improved service provision. However, it also poses significant challenges for residents of these island nations who are concerned about their overreliance on technology developed outside the region, losing control, and the degradation of their respective cultures due to the influx of digital technology. Projects like the Pasifika Data Chain (PDC) blockchain initiative, Starlink's arrival in the region, and new policy developments such as the Lagatoi Declaration highlight that Pacific islands are not simply being swept up by the tide of digitalisation; they are proactively making choices about how they will utilise and adapt technology to their values and priorities. A common theme across all of these initiatives is the concept of digital sovereignty. Who has control over the collection and use of data? Who owns the infrastructure that supports an increasingly digital society? How do new technologies co-exist or conflict with established methods of living and doing business? Policy analysis, case studies, and quantitative data illustrating levels of access to the internet across the Pacific region demonstrate significant disparities in access to, and use of, the internet among Pacific island communities. Some communities within the Pacific Islands have made substantial advances in developing their digital future; others are left behind. In order for Pacific island nations to develop sustained digital futures that meet the needs of their people, they must develop digital futures that are based on traditional Pacific Island methods.

Keywords: digital capitalism, Pacific Islands, digital sovereignty, techno-colonialism, digital transformation

1. Introduction

Today, the Pacific Ocean is not just vast amounts of blue and many scattered islands, but it has become a marketplace with thousands of ships, planes, underwater cables, and digital signals bouncing off satellites. For the many growing island nations that are scattered across this vast ocean, digital technology also offers them significant opportunities and challenges. The Minister for ICT (Information Communication and Technology), Papua New Guinea, in

2025, simply stated that “the Pacific is not just a collection of small islands; it is really a large digital world.” Rapidly developing this digital economy means that our economies will be forever changed; this will define how we build our future as a region; rather than just defining who succeeds and fails.

What is driving the establishment of a digital economy in the Pacific? Digital economies (i.e., those that use platforms, data, and the internet as their primary tools for conducting

business and economic activity) have had tremendous impacts on Pacific Island nations. COVID-19 did not simply disrupt daily life but has also accelerated the transition to a digital economy in the Pacific Islands. Today, children learn through using the internet and online platforms; businesses have developed customer service via mobile applications; fibre-optic cable systems are being positioned along the bottom of the ocean connecting previously isolated countries; and Starlink is bringing high-speed internet to even the most remote atolls. Meanwhile, large technology companies (e.g., Facebook, Amazon, Google) are opening up new markets for Pacific Island entrepreneurs to reach customers located far away from their own homes through the use of these digital platforms, providing significant income opportunities.

The Pacific Islands remain subject to effects from history, dependency on foreign countries for aid, and obstacles to development due to things like small populations, minimal technical skills, distance from large markets, and vulnerability to climate related natural disasters. In this regard, the above mentioned realities contribute to more than just slowdowns; there is also a construction of digital capitalism and the way it operates or benefits people.

This article examines digital capitalism in the Pacific Islands by providing three perspectives. First, it will incorporate exploration of new opportunities such as larger economies, improved public services, and sub-regional and international cooperation. Second; it will attempt to resolve critical issues such as dependence upon foreign nations for digital infrastructure and issues of sovereignty with respect to technocolonialism. Third; it will also examine how communities and local governments are responding to these challenges through the development of local programs, establishment of their own regulations/rules, and sub-regional collaboration.

The main study of this paper is that the Pacific Islands are more than mere spectators or willing participants in the copying of outside practices; they are negotiating for ownership of and ideas for things through various digital technologies. The primary variable involves the goal for "digital sovereignty" - the ability to completely control their own data/infrastructure and determine how the future of their digital lives will transpire.

2. Methodology and Scope

2.1 Research Approach

I integrate qualitative policy analysis, case studies, and quantitative data synthesis to examine how digital capitalism is transforming multiple levels of the Pacific

region in my research. By layering these methodologies, I am able to create a comprehensive view of the reality of digital transformation within the different regions of the Pacific.

2.2 Data Sources

To conduct my research, I consulted multiple resources, including policy documents from: (a) Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat; (b) UNCTAD; (c) select national governments. I reviewed scholarly literature on digital development, postcolonial studies, and pacific studies, and monitored regional media sources for news (e.g., RNZ Pacific; NZ Herald) as well as selected international media to keep abreast of relevant current events. I also reviewed technical documents from various projects (e.g., Pasifika Data Chain and Smart Island Digital Hubs). For statistical information, I used data collected through various sources such as: (a) International Telecommunication Union; (b) UNESCO; and (c) the Pacific Digital Economy Report.

2.3 Case Study Selection

Key aspects of digital capitalism in the Pacific are highlighted in these four case studies. The Niue.nu domain dispute delves deeply into questions of sovereignty and the initial stages of digital governance in the area. The Pasifika Data Chain investigates how Indigenous groups use blockchain technology to innovate and assert their own data sovereignty. The launch of Starlink raises further concerns about reliance on infrastructure and the larger geopolitical landscape. Lastly, Smart Island digital centers show how communities deal with digital exclusion in practical, day-to-day ways.

2.4 Limitations

There are challenges associated with this research. It is made simpler by the abundance of information released by major participants such as Papua New Guinea and Fiji on their digital economies. However, it's difficult to get any statistics at all for small countries like Tuvalu and Niue. Due to the rapid advancement of digital technology, any findings from this study may soon become outdated. Furthermore, it is simple to overlook important viewpoints stated in local languages since the majority of the study mainly relies on English-language sources.

3. The Digital Landscape of the Pacific: Infrastructure and Access

3.1 Connectivity Infrastructure

The internet environment in the Pacific has rapidly evolved during the last 10 years. By the end of 2025, all of the Pacific

Island countries will be connected by submarine fiber-optic cables, which are already the primary means of communication in the area (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2025). The Google-led Bulikula Project is one

such initiative. It provides vital internet connection to tiny countries like Tuvalu and extends fiber lines from Fiji to Guam.

Table 1: Submarine Cable Connectivity in Pacific Island Countries

Country	Submarine Cable(s)	Year Connected	Redundancy
Fiji	Southern Cross, Tui-Samoa, Bulikula	1998	Yes
Papua New Guinea	PIPE Pacific Cable, Kumul Submarine Cable	2006	Partial
Samoa	Samoa-American Samoa Cable, Tui-Samoa	2009	Partial
Tonga	Tonga Cable	2013	No
Vanuatu	Interchange Cable	2014	No
Solomon Islands	Coral Sea Cable	2019	No
Kiribati	East Micronesia Cable	2023	No
Tuvalu	Tuvalu Submarine Cable	2024	No
Niue	Niue Cable	2024	No
Palau	SEA-US Cable	2017	No

Source: Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (2025); compiled from multiple sources

There are particular challenges associated with building infrastructure in the Pacific. Because most of the islands have tiny populations and are dispersed across vast distances, installing standard land-based infrastructure is costly and sometimes unfeasible. Because submarine cables are brittle, particularly in the event of a natural disaster, they are also not an ideal option. Tonga's only underwater fiber optic connection was severed when the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano erupted in January 2022. The nation's digital connection to the outside world was cut off over night (Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, 2025). Similar events occurred in Vanuatu in December 2024 when an earthquake disrupted its communication systems (Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, 2025).

People in the Pacific have begun looking for alternatives as a result of these hazards. Starlink and other low-Earth orbit (LEO) satellite internet have quickly gained popularity.

Compared to conventional wires, it often offers better rates and quicker speeds (Park, 2025). Starlink intervened during Tonga's eruption and assisted in swiftly reuniting the nation. This isn't an ideal solution, however. Relying on satellite internet gives private businesses that are located far from the Pacific a lot of influence, making the area more vulnerable.

3.2 The Persistence of Digital Divides

Despite ongoing improvements in connection, there are still significant digital gaps. Pacific Small Island Developing States have made strides, but there are still significant gaps, particularly in digital infrastructure, entrepreneurship assistance, and trade facilitation, according to the Pacific Digital Economy Report 2024. Full participation in the global digital economy is nevertheless hampered by these issues (UNCTAD, 2025, p. 12).

Figure 1: Internet Usage Rates in Selected Pacific Island Countries (2024)

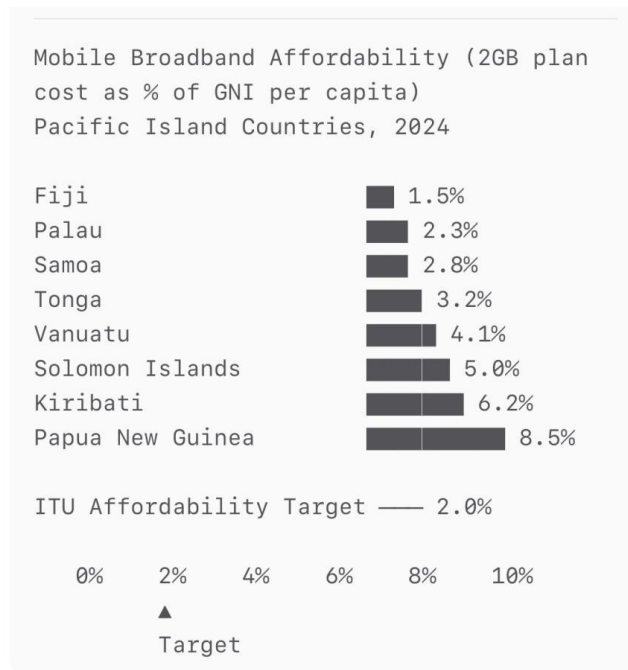
Country	Internet Users (% of population)
Fiji	78.2%
Palau	60.1%
Samoa	55.3%
Tonga	52.7%
Vanuatu	40.5%
Solomon Islands	33.8%
Papua New Guinea	27.1%
Kiribati	25.4%
Tuvalu	24.8%
Marshall Islands	23.2%
Niue	21.5%
Micronesia (FSM)	20.3%

Source: UNCTAD (2025); ITU (2025)

According to UNESCO’s Internet Universality statistics, there is a glaring disparity between how many people have access to the web today and how many don’t (UNESCO, 2026). In a city, over 70% of the population accesses the internet. In rural areas, however, that percentage drops to under 20%. Take, for example the island of Palau, where 42.5% of residents lack access to the internet despite the government’s efforts to promote digital innovation by starting a stablecoin in 2021 (Park, 2025).

Cost is a significant barrier to accessing the internet. For many Pacific Islanders, the cost of device and internet connection is prohibitive (UNCTAD, 2025). The International Telecommunication Union has developed the idea of ‘Universal and Meaningful Connectivity’ which extends beyond simply being able to access the internet; therefore, in order for everyone to enjoy full participation in the digital environment, access must be appropriate, reliable, and offer real value.

Figure 2: Mobile Broadband Affordability in Pacific Island Countries (2024)



Mobile broadband cost as a percentage of Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, with ITU affordability target of 2%. The above graph illustrates how much basic mobile broadband service with 2GB monthly usage will cost as a percentage of each country’s GNI per capita for the month of January 2024 across different Places in the Pacific Basin. The trend is clear, there are some areas where broadband access is considered economically feasible while there are also places that are unable to affordably access broadband services.

Fiji stands out from its regional competitors. Due to technological advancements in digital infrastructure, competitive market forces, and contemporary policy measures, basic broadband service is not nearly as expensive relative to GNI Per Capita in Fiji when compared with many other islands. Additionally, Fijians operate their own government payment systems as well as their own data systems, thus further fortifying the nation’s digital resiliency; however, on the other hand outside of Fiji and throughout other regions of the Pacific, broadband service is typically priced substantially above average due in large part to their geographic isolation, placement on small remote islands, and limited supply chain competition.

As indicated by the Pacific Digital Economy Report 2024, there has been incremental progress (i.e., through the creation of additional mobile telephony infrastructure throughout the region and developing new undersea cables that facilitate basic connectivity). Unfortunately, there continue to be key barriers to entry for many people hoping to achieve full access to the digital world—including prohibitively high-cost internet service, limited availability

in rural areas, and high-priced devices. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has no reservations in its sincere declaration that the number one impediment to achieving true ubiquitous connectivity is the issue of affordability—affordability is directly tied to inadequate infrastructure, lagging investment, and low levels of salary.

Digital development stops when Mobile Broadband costs exceeds 5% of a person's GNI-per-capita. People can't use Government Services, do internet commerce or gain access to greater economic opportunities. As a result, both national and global digital divides continue to get wider. Adding cables and providing lower-cost phones are part of the solution, but they aren't the only ways to reduce this digital divide. In addition to adding infrastructure and increasing competition within markets, policy makers need to consider how to subsidize digital development. If nothing is done to reduce the cost of Mobile Broadband, many Pacific nations will continue to struggle in achieving the 2% affordability goal.

3.3 Community-Level Responses: Smart Island Digital Hubs

The area is seeing local initiatives trying to fix the ongoing lack of connectivity. In the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Marshall Islands, Tonga, Nauru, Kiribati and Vanuatu — all of which have, historically, been some of the world's most isolated places — there are now Digital Hubs where people can find out how to connect to the internet, this is because of the ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau’s Smart Villages and Islands Project. (International Telecommunication Union, 2025).

Table 2: Smart Island Digital Hubs - Selected Locations

Location	Country	Services Offered	Year Established
Tonoas	FSM	Computers, internet, digital skills training	2023
Rotuma	Fiji	Connectivity, e-learning resources	2023
Outer Islands	Kiribati	Digital literacy, government services	2024
Malaita	Solomon Islands	E-commerce training, connectivity	2024
Tafea	Vanuatu	Digital skills, business support	2024
Niuas	Tonga	Connectivity, disaster communication	2024

Source: International Telecommunication Union (2025)

The Digital Hub program also recognizes the need for digital literacy development within marginalized communities,

and therefore works to create digital literacy training programs using knowledge and skills developed through its

projects. As highlighted by one student from Tonoas in the Federated States of Micronesia: "Our school doesn't have any of these [computer/internet] facilities." The International Telecommunication Union reports (2025) that digital literacy training is a critical precursor to pursuing employment after schooling. For example, a principal in Rotuma, Fiji, has observed that, while students generally perform very well on external tests, "When students come to the mainland, they are totally lost." (International Telecommunication Union, 2025, para. 8) The Digital Hub initiative will develop digital literacy skills in conjunction with existing and new digital access infrastructure in order to fill this gap.

While these initiatives focus on developing digital access infrastructure, they are also focused on building digital inclusion from the ground up. Digital capitalism is more than just establishing connections through physical means like cables and computers; it requires establishing an appropriate choice of community-based skills and support in order to create a truly participatory digital experience. Development partnerships will play a key role in this effort. The Smart Villages initiative is a collaborative effort between the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Joint Sustainable Development (SDG) Fund, and the governments of Australia and Japan (International Telecommunication Union, 2025). However, these

initiatives will not address the critical issue of ensuring sustainability and ongoing ownership.

4. Opportunities: Digital Capitalism as Development Catalyst

4.1 Economic Diversification and Market Access

The economies of the Pacific Islands are challenged by their small geographic isolation, lack of industrial base diversity and market scale. These islands have limited diversity in what they can manufacture, so they face real challenges providing jobs to their citizens. However, through digital platforms some of these challenges may be addressed through global access to customers. According to the Pacific Digital Economy Report, digital platforms allow locally owned businesses opportunities to extend their customer base globally and also create new opportunities locally (UNCTAD, 2025, p. 8). The phrase "e-commerce" will be changed to read "the sale of goods and services on-line," and include products made by independent craftsmen/woman, farmers or other small business owners. As independent business owners increase their ability to sell beyond their immediate community or island, they will become less dependent on tourism and will help create real economic independence.

Table 3: E-commerce Readiness Indicators in Pacific Island Countries (2024)

Country	Digital Payment Infrastructure	Logistics Capacity	E-commerce Policy Framework	Overall Readiness Score (1-10)
Fiji	High	High	Comprehensive	7.8
Papua New Guinea	Medium	Medium	Developing	5.2
Samoa	Medium	Medium	Developing	5.1
Tonga	Medium	Low	Developing	4.6
Vanuatu	Low	Low	Basic	3.8
Solomon Islands	Low	Low	Basic	3.5
Kiribati	Low	Very Low	Basic	2.8
Tuvalu	Very Low	Very Low	None	1.9

Source: UNCTAD (2025); compiled from multiple sources

Fiji is recognized as the most technologically advanced country in the Pacific, with its government not only depending on international solutions, but also has its own solutions for online payments, authentication, and the exchange of data, which are managed internally (Asian

Development Bank, 2025). They have implemented electronic registers for civil and corporate records, and they are planning to implement electronic property records to lay a foundation for electronic commerce.

While Fiji faces a real challenge of linking its scattered islands, the National Digital Strategy will advance Fiji's digital economy and contribute to regional prosperity (Tonga Ministry of MEIDECC, 2025).

There are greater opportunities to export digital services than for export services that use traditional methods. According to the Pacific Digital Economy Report, the feasible areas for Fiji include electronic learning and business process outsourcing (UNCTAD, 2025). For smaller nations with an abundance of educated populations and limited job opportunities, internet technology provides an opportunity for individuals to access the global market of jobs without having to travel abroad. This is especially relevant for an area known for high mobility of workers and for brain drain.

4.2 Financial Inclusion and Digital Payments

Many people experience financial exclusion due to geographical barriers associated with Pacific Island communities (i.e., many remote localities cannot be reached by traditional banks). In addition, a large portion of these communities still use cash regularly, posing a further barrier to economic participation. Digital financial services are beginning to address these issues by providing an alternative method to access financial products, and, therefore, provide people in these communities with respect and real alternatives to participate in the broader economy.

Figure 3: Financial Inclusion Indicators in Pacific Island Countries (2024)

Here you see the percentage of people aged 15 and older who have access to formal financial services, own mobile money accounts, and actually use digital payments.

Country	Formal Account (%)	Mobile Money (%)	Digital Payment Usage (%)	Key Observations
Fiji	81%	12%	10%	Highest formal inclusion in region; 16 fintech solutions in market
Samoa	55-60%	25-30%	15-20%	Strong mobile money adoption; digital payments system launched 2023
Tonga	50-55%	25-30%	15-20%	Mobile-based products gaining significant traction
Solomon Islands	30-35%	35-40%	10-15%	Highest mobile money penetration; cash-based economy
Vanuatu	37%	8-12%	5-8%	20% rely on informal sources; digital payments system launched 2023
Papua New Guinea	25-30%	5-10%	5-8%	Lowest inclusion; significant rural access barriers

Sources: International Monetary Fund (2024), Devpolicy Blog analysis of IMF data, The Fintech Times (2024), UNCDF

The table displays the ways that adults from certain Pacific Island Countries have been making use of Financial services in the year 2024, which includes digital payments, such as mobile and online payments, mobile money, and bank accounts. Of the Pacific Island Nations, Fiji has the largest, or greatest, share of its population using Financial Services formally. In 2014, only 64% of Fijian adults had access to formal Financial services; however, this number increased to 81% by 2020. While this was not by chance it can be attributed to the introduction of Fiji's first National Financial Inclusion Strategy (NFIS), created in 2010, which focused on bringing banking services to every region of Fiji.

In contrast, adults living in either Vanuatu or Papua New Guinea are still experiencing major issues accessing financial services. In Vanuatu, 20% of all adults rely on the informal sector for their Financial needs (i.e., credit unions, money lenders, family, etc.). As a whole, there are many adults that are simply not part of the formal Financial services sector. Another major barrier to accessing formal Financial services is geography; in some instances, individuals in particular communities may be required to travel for hours to reach a bank or travel across bodies of water in order to access a bank; this presents a significant barrier.

There are many digital mobile payment systems available today that can impact how people access their finances. For

example, Fiji has created a robust digital infrastructure, which includes M-Paisa, to enable formal financial instruments to previously unbanked individuals (Asian Development Bank, 2025). While the Solomon Islands rely heavily on cash and primarily earn income from agriculture, these mobile money tools will allow them to eventually move toward modern payment methods (Asian Development Bank, 2025).

Although new technologies do frequently integrate into existing cultural practices, (e.g. in the Solomon Islands' case) this does not mean the same level of interaction occurs when the two are combined together. For example, although some institutions will still request a letter from elders as proof of identification, the use of digitised solutions is only just beginning to affect how verification is performed. Nevertheless, the introduction of the above-mentioned solutions often finds a way of living within and honouring the older forms of practice, rather than replacing the older forms. (Asian Development Bank, 2025)

4.3 Public Service Delivery and Government Efficiency

According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2025), most people in the Pacific region see digital transformation as just putting government services online. The goal of e-government initiatives is to improve the speed, transparency, and accessibility of governmental services. Considering how many settlements are dispersed over many islands, it is a major concern here.

Table 4: E-Government Development Index for Pacific Island Countries (2024)

Country	EGDI Score (0-1)	Rank (out of 193)	Online Service Component	Telecommunications Component	Human Capital Component
Fiji	0.742	78	0.801	0.689	0.736
Papua New Guinea	0.512	138	0.534	0.458	0.544
Samoa	0.498	142	0.512	0.476	0.506
Tonga	0.476	148	0.489	4.67	0.472
Vanuatu	0.423	162	0.445	0.412	0.412
Solomon Islands	0.398	169	0.423	0.389	0.382
Kiribati	0.312	182	0.334	0.312	0.290
Tuvalu	0.287	187	0.312	0.78	0.271

Source: UNCTAD (2025); United Nations E-Government Survey (2024)

Fiji is well-known for its digital government initiatives; they have created their own payment system, a data-sharing system, an identity-management system, and many other systems. Thus, they can manage the data of their citizens and rely less on foreign vendors (Asian Development Bank, 2025). Other smaller Pacific island nations are following suit. For example, Tonga and Tuvalu are each creating digital public goods (such as OpenCRVS) to assist them in managing civil registration (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025).

Nonetheless, Tuvalu represents a unique story because its goals for digital transformation exceed merely enhancing its economy; rather, the risks involved in digital transformation for Tuvalu are much higher due to the threats presented by rising sea levels. In response, Tuvalu's government is currently pursuing an initiative called "digital nationhood strategy," which aims to create a way for Tuvalu to stick together as a nation while the island nation gradually disappears (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). Hence, even if the island itself goes away, so too does e-residence, and government services/cultural records become digital files online, thus allowing Tuvalu to continue existing via online verification of digital citizenship.

The Pasifika Data Chain is extremely significant because it is "the first blockchain that has been built BY Pacific Islanders FOR Pacific Islanders" (Pasifika Data Chain, 2025a, para. 1). The Pasifika Data Chain represents a bold assertion of Pacific agency in the digital world. The project began in October 2025, but it is much more than a technological accomplishment. The Pasifika Data Chain also provides a framework through which Pacific ideals can be realised and claims digital sovereignty.

In addition to the architects of this system, the methodology implemented in its creation makes this a one-of-a-kind platform. The Pasifika Data Chain/PDChain will utilize a Proof-of-Authority consensus method, as opposed to either a completely decentralized and ostensibly anonymous validation network or a Proof-of-Work protocol that consumes large amounts of energy. This decision was made intentionally. Validators are selected in advance; everyone knows who they are; therefore, any action taken by them directly impacts their reputation. This method was selected based on the fact that 'In Pacific tattooing, reputation and accountability are typically valued much more highly than anonymity' (Pasifika Data Chain, 2025a, para. 4). The PDChain was built as a technological architecture to mirror existing practices within their corresponding communities.

4.4 Indigenous Innovation: The Pasifika Data Chain

Table 5: Pasifika Data Chain - Technical Specifications and Applications

Feature	Specification
Consensus Mechanism	Proof-of-Authority (PoA)
Validator Nodes	Pacific-based institutions
First Application	Tonga Post DePIN GIS
Transaction Cost	Zero (compared to \$1-50 on public blockchains)
Efficiency Improvement	30-40% delivery route optimization
Fuel Cost Reduction	25-30%
Planned Applications	Customs and border management, business registration, regional postal consortium

Source: Pasifika Data Chain (2025a, 2025b)

The Tonga Post DePIN GIS (Decentralized Physical Infrastructure Network Geographic Information System) is the inaugural application to operate on this new infrastructure, establishing Tonga as the world's first postal service to utilize blockchain technology (Pasifika Data

Chain, 2025b). The system achieves some remarkable outcomes, including a reduction in transaction fees to zero (from \$1 to \$50 on public blockchains), the implementation of real-time parcel monitoring, and a 25 to 30 percent decrease in fuel costs (Pasifika Data Chain, 2025b).

Additionally, delivery routes are 30 to 40 percent more efficient.

However, efficacy is only one aspect of the narrative. The Pasifika Data Chain is a symbol of economic independence, climate resilience, and data sovereignty. The endeavor is not merely considering the minor. Their message is unambiguous: "Our infrastructure, our data, our rules" (Pasifika Data Chain, 2025a). They intend to broaden their operations to include business registration systems, customs and border administration, and ultimately the establishment of a Pacific-wide postal consortium on blockchain (Pasifika Data Chain, 2025b).

This is not merely about the introduction of digital tools to the Pacific; it is about Pacific Islanders taking the lead, establishing their own technology agenda, and demonstrating to the world what is achievable when local priorities and global innovation intersect.

5. Challenges: The Perils of Digital Dependency

5.1 Technocolonialism and Digital Sovereignty

As digital infrastructure establishes itself throughout the Pacific, individuals express apprehension regarding novel forms of control that bear a striking resemblance to colonial patterns from the past. The term "technocolonialism" is frequently used to characterize the process by which digital instruments result in the establishment of new dependencies. The power is concentrated in areas that are least accessible to the Pacific nations themselves, as a result of the influence of big tech companies and the countries that support them (Park, 2025).

Park (2025) is uncompromising. He asserts that the current colonial overlords are tech titans and their oligarch proprietors, rather than governments (para. 3). The Pacific is particularly affected by this. Pacific Island nations are ensnared in a technological "Great Game" as the number of Starlink satellites continues to increase. They are inundated with "gifts"—internet access and connectivity—but each one is contingent upon certain conditions.

The dilemma was articulated by President Surangel Whipps Jr. of Palau with remarkable candor: "We have a substantial debt that we must repay, so allowing Starlink to operate unregulated would result in a decrease in revenue to cover the cost of the cables" (Park, 2025, para. 12). In order to establish digital infrastructure that it could control, Palau utilized substantial borrowing. Currently, the investments appear to be financially untenable and uncertain in light of the arrival of Starlink.

This is not solely about financial gain. Weaponization of digital services occurs. The rapidity with which technology can be used to advance personal or political interests was demonstrated when X (formerly Twitter) banned journalists from its platform for criticizing Elon Musk, who is the owner of both X and Starlink (Park, 2025). The peril is not abstract for Pacific nations that are dependent on Starlink. Through private channels, political pressure from abroad can infiltrate these countries, rendering them vulnerable and reliant.

5.2 The Niue .nu Domain Case

The ongoing conflict over Niue's.Nu internet domain sheds light on digital colonialism. In the late 1990s, an American entrepreneur went in and promised to connect Niue to the Internet. Is there a catch? He desired ownership of the.nu domain. In comparison to Tuvalu's.tv domain, which was previously seen as a goldmine. Niue's leaders opted for it even though it didn't seem to be very promising (NZ Herald, 2024).

It turns out that.nu become a jackpot. "Nu" means "now" in Danish, Swedish, and Dutch, and thousands of Scandinavians demanded such addresses. By 2000, Niue had terminated the agreement and has been fighting ever since to reclaim the name from the Swedish Internet Foundation, which now manages it. Prime Minister Dalton Tagelagi puts it bluntly: "We are victims of digital colonialism." This domain.nu, acknowledges Niue as a sovereign nation. This demonstrates how significant it is to our identity" (NZ Herald, 2024, para. 7).

Table 6: Niue .nu Domain - Key Chronology

Year	Event
1997	Niue granted .nu domain by IANA
1997	Agreement signed with American entrepreneur Bill Semich
2000	Niue cancels agreement, seeks domain return

2000-2024	Domain operated by Swedish Internet Foundation
2024	Niue takes case to Swedish courts
2024	Niue seeks US\$30 million in damages

Source: NZ Herald (2007, 2024)

This action is being heard in Swedish courts, and Niue seeks around \$30 million in damages. That is tremendous for Niue—enough to shake up its whole economy and help finance the price of joining the United Nations. At the same time, some wonder if Niue concentrated too much on money, disregarding alternative options for resolving the disagreement. The.nu domain is about more than simply money. It is integrated into the digital life of Swedish consumers and large organizations.

What's interesting about Niue's battle is how decisions taken in the early, murky days of internet governance continue to affect debates about digital sovereignty. The instance shows how unequal things are. Small island states, such as Niue, continue to face significant challenges when

attempting to negotiate with corporations that control critical components of the internet.

5.3 Infrastructure Vulnerabilities and Climate Risks

The islands of the Pacific face an ongoing threat to their infrastructure. The remote locations of the islands provide challenges to receiving assistance quickly but climatic disasters continue to take place in these areas. In Tonga, for instance, when the volcanic eruption occurred and the undersea cable broke, the country lost power to the rest of the world. Cyclones are increasing in intensity; sea levels are rising; severe weather is the norm. The infrastructure of the islands is not just in danger of being damaged, it is under constant attack.

Table 7: Digital Infrastructure Climate Risks in the Pacific

Risk Factor	Affected Infrastructure	Pacific Vulnerability
Sea-level rise	Submarine cable landing stations	High - many stations at or near sea level
Cyclones	Terrestrial networks, towers	Very high - Pacific cyclone belt
Extreme heat	Data centers, equipment	Moderate - increasing with climate change
Flooding	Power systems, terrestrial networks	High - low-lying coastal infrastructure
Earthquakes	Submarine cables	Moderate - Pacific Ring of Fire

Source: Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (2025)

Although submarine cables form the core of how we connect to each other today, they represent a concentration of risk at one point in the ocean. In many parts of the Pacific, a single cable serves as the only means for a nation to communicate with the rest of the world; therefore, fewer cables equals greater distance between potential failure events. Most of the world's smallest island nations do not have that luxury. They do have satellites as backup; however, satellites rely on expensive, complex, and remotely operated technology that is located hundreds of miles above the earth's surface.

In addition, there are the effects of climate change. The threat posed by rising sea levels is not limited to land; it also

threatens the cables and networks that countries have used for many years to maintain their place in the global economy. Tuvalu's goal of becoming a digitally connected country as a way of protecting itself as sea levels rise and recede is an ambitious and innovative initiative, but it is based on technologies that are just as subject to the same environmental threats as the islands. The reality is sobering: the places that are experiencing the greatest impact from climate change — the islands of the Pacific — are also relying on digital means of communication that are equally at risk.

5.4 Donor Dependency and Unsustainable Models

External donors play an essential role in the ongoing digital revolution of the Pacific Islands. All but a handful of the digital development projects in these countries are funded by the United States, Canada, the European Union, New Zealand, and most recently, China (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). Without aid and support, these small island nations would not be able to afford the necessary infrastructure. Funding is very important, but it is not provided without cost. Funding comes with strings attached based on the priorities of the donor, which will then dictate the process used to build that project and what the project is built for.

The Carnegie Endowment outlines a repetitive cycle. Donors provide funding for the bulk of the initial investment (servers, fibre optics, etc.) but often do not provide funding for necessary support items (like ongoing maintenance, support, or training) needed for the successful operation of the system. The end result is oversized technology and a complex arrangement of technology that do not align with day-to-day living conditions on the islands.

Tuvalu serves as an illustration of how the pressure of meeting a World Bank grant deadline forced rapid digitalization of their Health Ministry, Attorney General's Office, and Immigration Control System. Not due to readiness of the institutions but rather because of the deadline imposed by the donor, all three of those entities

quickly digitized everything without due diligence (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025).

A small difference exists between Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Both countries are larger than Tuvalu and have stronger economies, making it easier for them to attract private investments into their economies. Therefore, given the relatively high levels of donor aid that both Fiji and Papua New Guinea receive, they have more independence/authority over their digital development compared with other smaller Pacific countries (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025); however, the typical case is for digital development in smaller Pacific nations to be donor-driven, with the exception of extremely rare instances.

5.5 Talent Flight and Capacity Constraints

The region of the Pacific is undergoing a sustainable digitisation process that is being hampered by an ongoing loss of technical expertise in the region; this "talent flight" is a continuous challenge for all Pacific nations, as identified by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. While many skilled personnel may decide to remain in their present locations, they are also attracted to developed countries that provide them both a higher income potential and a more laid back lifestyle than they can find in their current country. Additionally, there are migration pacts with Australia and New Zealand that are making it easier for them to leave.

Table 8: ICT Talent Flight Indicators

Country	ICT Graduates (annual)	Estimated Migration Rate	Primary Destinations
Fiji	250-300	40-50%	Australia, New Zealand, USA
Papua New Guinea	150-200	30-40%	Australia, New Zealand
Samoa	50-80	50-60%	New Zealand, Australia
Tonga	40-60	55-65%	New Zealand, Australia
Solomon Islands	30-50	35-45%	New Zealand, Australia
Vanuatu	20-40	40-50%	New Zealand, Australia

Source: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2025); compiled from multiple sources

Due to limitations in their respective nations of origin, proficient professionals may find the situation even more complicated when attempting to find ways to work. Low opportunity environments are also extremely limited, primarily because of the limited resources and people who

provide a diverse number of options. However, talented individuals are leaving their home countries, in search of higher-quality employment internationally, while their governments are offering training programs and skills-building opportunities funded by local dollars. According to

the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2025, p. 17), the continued departure of specialised professionals and their skills is further complicating Digital Development. Furthermore, investing in infrastructure alone will not fix the problem. Pacific Islands will be unable to attract and retain skilled professionals and/or utilise the talents of those within the diaspora, unless they do something to develop sophisticated Digital Systems and operate them long-term financial success.

6. Local Realities: Navigating Digital Capitalism on Pacific Terms

6.1 Digital Sovereignty as an Organising Principle

In recent years, the idea of digital sovereignty has become increasingly important to many Pacific Islands communities who wish to shape their future through technology. Instead of focusing solely on where data is kept, the goal of developing digital services and having local ownership of infrastructure, technology, and data is paramount.

The Pasifika Data Chain (PDC) is based on these principles. The people behind the PDC are not seeking out blockchain hype or to make quick profits off of cryptocurrencies. Their goal is self-determination. Their motto describes it well: "our infrastructure, our data, our rules" captures what they are trying to achieve. They wish to use blockchain technology to collaborate as equals within the Pacific, much like how the term "vā" describes the deeply valued

relational space of Pacific Islander cultures. Genuine innovation is needed for the PDC; therefore, they want to prevent people from exploiting relationships and abusing trust without needing to be monitored continuously (Pasifika Data Chain, 2025a, para 12).

Fiji's digital governance strategy aligns with this approach. They rely on no outside sources to administer their systems. By creating its own middleware to use for exchanging data, authenticating users and processing payments, the Fijian government has strong control of both the technology it uses and the data of the citizens of Fiji. This gives Fiji the ability to develop technology that meets Fijian-specific needs rather than relying on foreign interests for direction (Asian Development Bank 2022).

6.2 Regulatory Strategies and Geopolitical Balancing

The countries of the Pacific, rather than being on the outside looking in, are creating standards for digital connection in an attempt to best serve their citizens. Fiji's legislators have implemented new, strict laws regarding the protection of data and storage of such data in Fiji (Asian Development Bank 2025). Vanuatu takes a different approach; they make sure that they are not relying heavily on one technology company, and they do not want to be relying on a foreign government as the sole provider of their telecommunications, hence they have integrated their old telecommunications system with satellite service to create redundancy (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2025).

Table 9: Pacific Digital Regulatory Frameworks

Country	Data Protection Law	Data Localisation	E-commerce Legislation	Digital ID System
Fiji	Yes (2018)	Yes (sensitive data)	Yes (2017)	Yes
Papua New Guinea	in progress	No	in progress	in progress
Samoa	Yes (2021)	No	Yes (2019)	in progress
Tonga	in progress	No	in progress	in progress
Vanuatu	in progress	No	in progress	in progress
Solomon Islands	No	No	in progress	No

Source: Asian Development Bank (2025); UNCTAD (2025)

Pacific nations face an ongoing challenge with proposals from global powers. An example would be Tuvalu's strategy breaking through the clutter. Communications Minister

Simon Kofe succinctly wrote: "Starlink's importance is rooted in its technology; everything Musk thinks should be discounted." Subsequently, Tuvalu asked Japan for

assistance with cybersecurity and signed the Falepili Union Treaty with Australia to strengthen its security. In short, this process constitutes maneuvering. It also is similar to the historic way small states maintained an independent existence through interacting with larger states to balance their influence. Today the conduct is driven by digital infrastructure, not by troops and ships.

6.3 Integrating Custom and Digital Systems

The unique aspect of the Pacific's digital transformation compared to the rest of the world is that it has not only updated outdated practices, but also improved upon them through new technology. For example, in the Solomon Islands' Banks do not refuse to serve people who cannot produce a passport or driver's license; they accept letters from respected elders in the community as proof of identity

(Asian Development Bank, 2025). This is not just a temporary fix, but rather an example of how digital transformation is providing greater value to traditional ways of doing things, rather than eliminating them (Asian Development Bank, 2025).

The important point to note is that digital systems must fit well into our everyday lives. Trust in the Pacific is very much a personal issue. Trust is based on the social ties that we have with one another, not on some bureaucracy that has no connection to our local communities. Therefore, if technology does not consider our existing relationships then we are likely to either resist or become disillusioned with technology. It really does not matter how innovative an idea is if it does not take into account the social relationships on which people already rely.

Table 10: Customary Practices and Digital Integration

Practice	Digital Application	Example
Letters from elders	Identity verification	Solomon Islands banking
Village council decision-making	Digital consent mechanisms	Fiji land registry consultations
Extended family networks	Mobile money trust structures	Samoa remittance systems
Oral tradition	Digital archives	Tuvalu cultural preservation
Reciprocity (kerekere)	Platform economy adaptations	Local e-commerce variations

Source: Asian Development Bank (2025); author's synthesis

6.4 Regional Cooperation and Collective Agency

Pacific Island nations are aware that collaboration is beneficial, particularly in the context of digital capitalism. The Lagatoi Declaration on Digital Transformation of the Pacific was endorsed by ICT ministers from thirteen

countries in 2023. They concentrated on six primary objectives: digital transformation, innovation and entrepreneurship, digital security and trust, the development of digital skills, and the reinforcement of regional cooperation and representation (Lagatoi Declaration, 2025).

Table 11: Lagatoi Declaration - Priority Areas and Commitments

Priority Area	Key Commitments
Digital Transformation	Accelerate digital government, develop national digital strategies
Innovation & Entrepreneurship	Support digital startups, create innovation hubs
Digital Security & Trust	Strengthen cybersecurity, develop data protection frameworks
Digital Capacity Building	Enhance digital literacy, develop technical skills
Regional Cooperation	Share best practices, coordinate policy approaches

Regional Representation	Amplify Pacific voice in global digital governance
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Source: Lagatoi Declaration (2025); Tonga Ministry of MEIDECC (2025)

The significance of regional solidarity is underscored by informal cooperation. Palau did not wait for red tape or official protocol when the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau were both hit by ransomware attacks. They merely contacted FSM, disclosed the specifics of the incident, explained their response, and ensured that FSM did not have to commence from zero (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). Countries are able to fortify their defenses through this peer-to-peer support, particularly when there is a lack of a major formal structure.

In contrast, the Pacific Digital Economy Programme, which is supported by the European Union, the governments of Australia and New Zealand, and UNCDF, UNDP, and UNCTAD, provides a more structured approach to digital

cooperation throughout the region (UNCTAD, 2025). The Pacific Digital Economy Report establishes a common framework and provides policymakers with the dependable information necessary to achieve tangible results.

7. Discussion: Pathways to Sustainable Digital Futures

7.1 Synthesis of Findings

This research paints a mixed picture: digital capitalism delivers significant changes to Pacific Island states, both positive and negative. Table 12 summarizes the primary possibilities and difficulties that arise in each area we examined.

Table 12: Synthesis of Opportunities and Challenges

Dimension	Opportunities	Challenges
Economic	Market access, financial inclusion, services exports	Dependence on external platforms, limited local value capture
Governance	Improved service delivery, transparency	Donor-driven timelines, capacity constraints
Infrastructure	New connectivity, redundancy options	Vulnerability to disasters, dependency on external providers
Sovereignty	Indigenous innovation, regional cooperation	Historical digital governance arrangements, data extraction
Cultural	Integration with custom, digital preservation	Risk of cultural disruption, intergenerational divides
Human Capital	New skills development, diaspora engagement	Talent flight, limited local career pathways

7.2 The Digital Sovereignty Imperative

The relationship that various Pacific Island countries have towards their approach to digital commerce is subject to their understanding of what digital sovereignty means for them; this does not necessarily mean that there is one singular “yes” or “no” but instead exists on a continuum where each country has developed an understanding of where they sit on this continuum. The Pasifika Data Chain is working towards achieving true sovereignty through the

use of local infrastructure that reflects the values of the Pacific Islands. However, this is still hindered due to the fact that the Pasifika Data Chain leverages blockchain technology that was created outside of the region, and also due to the limited number of people with relevant technical skills within the Pacific Islands.

7.3 Implications for Policy

As a result of these findings, Pacific nations are now better equipped to improve their governance and influence

development. The first argument is that infrastructure spending alone cannot achieve development; people must also be empowered through investing in themselves. Too many programs, which rely on philanthropy or other external funding sources, focus on very visible improvements without regard to support services such as training and maintenance over time. This cannot continue. Pacific nations should work toward development agreements that afford them the ability to provide long-term support services that include real technical assistance, genuine training opportunities and effective strategies to retain highly skilled people in their economy.

The second recommendation is to put digital sovereignty at the top of their priority list. Governments must impose stricter restrictions on how digital services and data will be used within their respective jurisdictions. This will require true competition standards, consumer protection mechanisms that are trusted and specific criteria for how data must be stored. However, the regulations must also be practical and realistic; if they are too complicated, they will be ignored, making them ineffective.

The importance of regional cooperation cannot be overstated. Despite the commitments established by the Lagatoi Declaration, achieving unity is still a difficult task. By collaboratively developing a regional digital policy, Pacific countries will significantly increase their leverage against global technology corporations and share resources to develop digital infrastructure. In the rush to modernize, we must not lose sight of tradition. The Solomon Islands' digital identity project is an example of how technology can complement tradition. Any digital policy must take local cultural values into account, rather than forcing them to conform to technology standards.

Technical talent is at the core of this transformation. In addition to creating fair migration arrangements that enable individuals to share their expertise and return home, Pacific governments must find ways to engage with those who have migrated abroad and create job opportunities locally. Addressing these issues will ensure that digital transformation becomes more than just a buzzword, but rather an actual opportunity for the region as a whole.

7.4 Implications for Development Partners

Certainly! Development partners should re-evaluate how they do business. They should not think of infrastructure as temporary; they should provide a sustained commitment and work with local teams to help them develop their capacity and ensure ongoing functionality of their systems and the development of their own solutions. Countries are not developed and do not have the capacity to be self-

sufficient; they are kept dependent due to funding provided for large funding initiatives.

Donor boxes should not be used as the only determining factor for funding. Allow the views and perspectives of Pacific people to guide what is on the agenda. The Lagatoi Declaration and the digital roadmaps for each country should assist you in developing your strategy. Also, work together and not compete; there is too much confusion created by multiple initiatives and different organisations trying to do the same thing.

Also, support regional initiatives as much as possible. Countries can serve a larger number of people with less work when they work together. The Pacific Digital Economy Programme is an example of how multiple programs working together can accomplish what they could not do individually by pooling their resources and capabilities.

Lastly, do not forget about the brain drain; don't just look at the people leaving Australia or New Zealand as an opportunity to gain skilled labour. Migration agreements must include a genuine commitment to provide training, transfer of knowledge and provide opportunities.

7.5 Future Research Directions

There are many opportunities for future study stemming from this investigation, as prospective, genuine, effective Pacific context digital transformation initiative strategies may be confirmed via continued observation over time. Assessing the development of digital sovereignty within the Pacific region can be undertaken by conducting a direct comparative analysis of Pacific nations. Investigating the contribution of the Pacific diaspora to the development of digital technologies demonstrates that diaspora perspectives provide additional support to local initiatives. Furthermore, researchers can provide significantly useful information to enrich and evolve policy development from observing the day-to-day use and adaptation of digital tools by members of Pacific communities.

8. Conclusion

Digital capitalism disrupts the Pacific Islands in ways unforeseen only a generation ago. Now, all geographically-separated communities are connected to the digital core of the world via cables and satellites. There is much excitement in the islands regarding digital connections. Online platforms allow local businesses to integrate into global markets, and government services will operate more efficiently and with less red tape. However, the changes occurring in the Pacific do not reflect a neutral force above the islands as they are impacted by the residual effects of

colonialism, a reliance on larger economies, and geographic proximity to the world's risk factors. Therefore, the digital transition is a non-linear progression in the Pacific.

This study investigates three aspects of digital capitalism in the Pacific by identifying three different themes. First, we consider the opportunities presented by digital capitalism; second, we recognize the challenges that people face; and third, we will consider how digital capitalism is currently perceived after the dust has settled. The opportunity exists in the form of economies free of the traditional tourism and raw material export-based economic systems; second, public service provision increasingly agile; third, improved access to banking and payments systems; and lastly, innovative initiatives such as Tuvalu's proposed vision of digital nationhood. The efforts are not without costs; the Pacific faces many barriers to achieving digital capitalism—continued brain drain as skilled professionals migrate to areas where they perceive greater opportunity; unstable telecommunications infrastructure; large reliance on international development assistance; and the influence of global technology corporations ("technocolonialism").

Despite this, the Pacific Islands have established their own course of action and continue to resist the direction of the tide. The Pasifika Data Chain is an ambitious initiative aimed at achieving dominion over blockchain technology within these islands. A digital backbone is presently being developed in Fiji. Efforts are currently underway in the Solomon Islands to develop a mechanism for combining new forms of digital identity verification with traditional types of identification. Leaders from across the Pacific are making decisions based on their own principles as well as compliance with external regulations.

Digital Sovereignty provides a tangible basis for existence; it represents more than just a captivating phrase; it is a battle for the control of the data, the creation and management of the networks and infrastructure through which or within which those data exist and the decision-making processes associated with those data. It means building a digital world that conforms to and satisfies the cultural values and needs of Pacific Island nations and not adopting the design of the world by others. This is not a concession to the forces of globalization but rather a demand for choices, as opposed to parameters imposed upon them from outside of their borders that cannot be modified.

Presently, there are multiple possibilities for what a digitally enabled future will hold for the Pacific. The actions taken towards creating this future are dependent upon wise legislation, the development of local talent, true

infrastructure investment, pooling resources from across the islands, and proving compatibility between new technology and traditional Pacific cultures and ways of life. Once these elements are in place, the digital wave can do much more than enhance economic opportunities. It can support the Pacific's efforts to establish true sovereignty in their own terms; develop culture; and give greater voice to the Pacific.

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