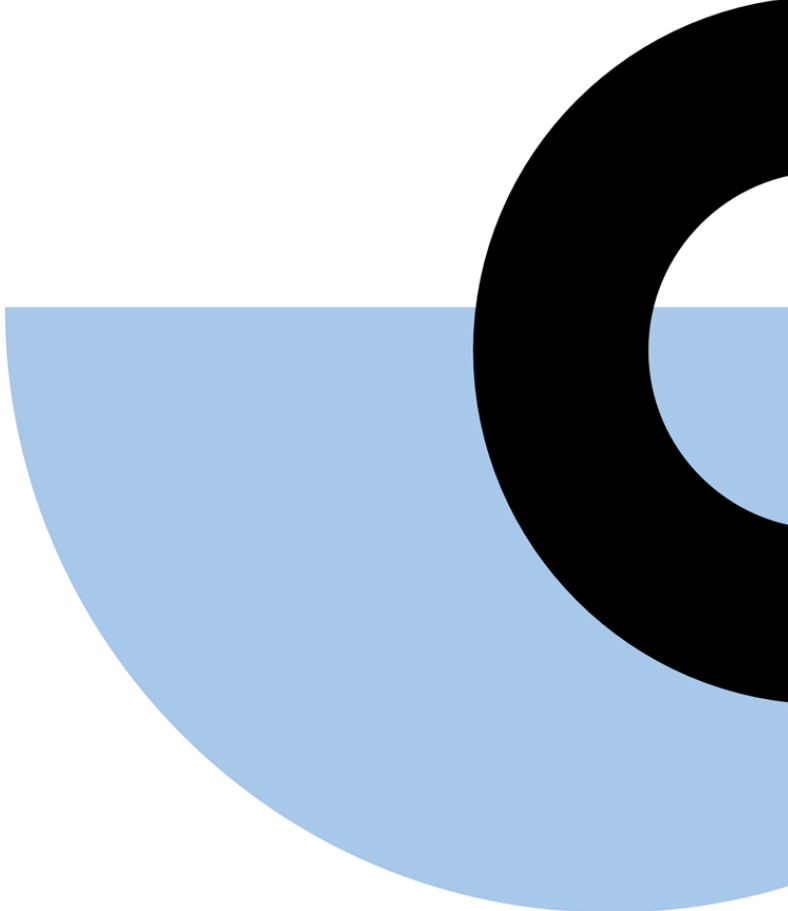




PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

CSDN Regional Briefing Paper

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) has been classified as an official Dialogue Partner of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) since 1991. In 2025, the Leaders Policy on Partnerships replaced this classification with a dual framework for partnership: Strategic Partnerships, for broad and long-term cooperation, and Sectoral Partners, for targeted support in specific areas. Going forward, only Strategic Partners will engage directly with Forum leaders, while Sectoral Partners will instead engage at ministerial level. In September 2026, it was announced that **the EU will serve as a Strategic Partner to the PIF.**

This new framework reflects a **clear emphasis on Pacific leadership and ownership of regional priorities.** As Palau President Surangel Whipps Jr, who chaired the 2026 Forum, put it: “Our partners are welcome to sail with us, but they do not choose our destination.”¹ For the EU, being designated a Strategic Partner should therefore not be seen simply as a status, but as **a responsibility to demonstrate that it is a genuinely supportive and responsive partner to Pacific Island Countries (PICs),** respecting and reinforcing Pacific priorities rather than seeking to shape them. The partnership classification will be reviewed after one year, informed by an accountability and reporting framework, providing PICs with an important opportunity to assess whether partners are living up to this principle in practice. Partners will be evaluated against measurable indicators, including aid volumes, trade, participation, reporting, and alignment with priorities under the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent as well as analysis of political, strategic, and multilateral contributions.²

Against this backdrop, this Regional Briefing Paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of how the EU can act as a strategic partner to the region, with a particular focus on peace and security. It does so by first examining the multiple and interconnected challenges facing Pacific Island Countries³ and how these affect human security, social cohesion, governance and community resilience, before considering the EU's role, engagement and potential contribution. The paper draws on desk research and a series of semi-structured interviews conducted between May and June 2026 with EU officials, international and local NGOs and other stakeholders working on peace, security and related issues in the Pacific. It does not attempt to establish consensus among interviewees but provides a snapshot of their perspectives. The key points and recommendations should not be attributed to any individual or organisation, and do not necessarily represent the views of all interviewees, EPLO, or its member organisations.

¹ Pacific Island Times News Staff, “‘Our Ocean Is Not Empty Space for Rivalry,’ Forum Leader Says amid China-Taiwan Clash,” *Pacific Island Times*, 1 September 2026. <https://www.pacificislandtimes.com/post/our-ocean-is-not-empty-space-for-rivalry-pacific-islands-forum-leader-says>

² Pacific Islands Forum, “Annex 2: Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Policy on Partnerships,” in *Fifty-Fourth Pacific Islands Forum: Forum Communiqué*, Honiara, Solomon Islands, September 8–12, 2025.

³ The fifteen Pacific Island Countries as defined by the EU are Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Republic of Naoero, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Timor-Leste.

EU engagement with Pacific Island Countries

The EU's engagement with the PICs is framed by the **EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific**, adopted in 2021, and encompasses development cooperation, climate action, economic and trade relations, and peace and security. Economic cooperation is governed in part by the **EU-Pacific Economic Partnership Agreement**, which currently applies to Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, with the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Niue, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu in the process of acceding to the Agreement. The EU is also seeking to deepen economic ties through **Global Gateway**, including by investing in sustainable infrastructure and convening the first **EU-Pacific Business Forum** in 2025 to promote business cooperation between the two regions and to identify investment opportunities.

More broadly, the EU supports the implementation of the Pacific Islands Forum's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, including through the **Green Blue Alliance for the Pacific**, a Team Europe initiative under the Global Gateway strategy. This includes support for renewable energy infrastructure in Fiji, roads, jetties and airstrips in Papua New Guinea, and measures to strengthen the climate resilience of ecosystems, economies, and communities through nature-based solutions in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Timor-Leste.⁴

The EU also supports cooperation on peace and security in the region. Together with Germany and France, the EU funds the regional project **Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia and the Indo-Pacific** (ESIWA+), which has operated since 2020 across four areas: counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism, crisis management and addressing hybrid threats, cybersecurity, and maritime security. The project has also begun addressing the security implications of natural disasters, including through a regional workshop on this issue. Other EU-supported activities across the region have included work on **Women, Peace and Security, peacebuilding and climate**, as well as support for **Fiji's Truth and Reconciliation Commission**.⁵

Peace and security challenges

Pacific Island Countries are facing a polycrisis of interconnected and mutually reinforcing threats to peace and security. The challenges that emerged most consistently across the interviews included climate change, economic and energy insecurity, organised crime, gender-based violence, geopolitical competition and the legacies of colonialism. These are not isolated challenges but intersect and compound one another. These pressures increasingly affect social cohesion, livelihoods, governance and community resilience,

⁴ European Commission, Directorate-General for International Partnerships. "Green Blue Alliance for the Pacific." Capacity4dev. Accessed August 28, 2026. https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/resources/team-europe-tracker/partner-countries/middle-east-asia-and-pacific/green-blue-alliance-pacific_en

⁵ Interviews with NGO representatives.

creating complex challenges for peacebuilding. Addressing them therefore requires approaches that connect conflict prevention and peacebuilding with human security, climate resilience, inclusive governance and regional cooperation.

■ Climate change

As recognised in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, “**climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.**”⁶ Pacific Island countries are among the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. Average elevation is just one to two metres above sea level, 90 percent of the population lives within five kilometres of the coast and approximately half the critical infrastructure is within 500 metres of the sea.⁷ For some states and their inhabitants, like Kiribati and Tuvalu, the **threat is existential**. In 2023, Tuvalu amended its constitution to assert that the state “within its historical, cultural, and legal framework shall remain in perpetuity in the future, notwithstanding the impacts of climate change or other causes resulting in loss to the physical territory of Tuvalu”.⁸

Climate change has a profound effect on human security across the region. Rising sea levels, coastal erosion and saltwater intrusion **threaten land, freshwater supplies, and agricultural production, contributing to food and water insecurity**. Warmer oceans, ocean acidification, and increasingly frequent marine heatwaves cause coral bleaching, damage marine ecosystems, and threaten fish stocks, **undermining livelihoods and food security in communities that depend heavily on the ocean**. Pacific Island countries are also experiencing increasingly **severe climate-related hazards**, including cyclones. Rising sea levels are amplifying the impacts of annual spring tides, contributing to more frequent and severe coastal flooding. These pressures can function as threat multipliers, exacerbating existing social and economic vulnerabilities and increasing pressure on land, water, and other resources.

The climate crisis is already driving the loss of lives, land and livelihoods across the PICs and is increasing pressures on social cohesion and peace. The **relocation** of not only villages but entire islands can increase **tensions at both inter- and intrastate levels**. At inter-state level, climate-related mobility increasingly has implications for regional diplomacy and security. **Bilateral arrangements on enhanced mobility and special visa pathways link mobility and migration to broader strategic and security interests**, including efforts to limit China’s growing role in the region. In doing so, they also place constraints on the foreign and security policy autonomy of these small island states. Under the Falepili Union, for example, in exchange for a special mobility pathway, Tuvalu must agree with Australia on any partnership, arrangement or engagement with another state or entity concerning security and defence, including policing, border protection, cyber security and critical infrastructure.⁹ In order to unlock enhanced mobility pathways

⁶ Pacific Islands Forum, *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, September 6, 2018.

⁷ World Meteorological Organization, “Climate Change Transforms Pacific Islands,” August 27, 2024. <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/climate-change-transforms-pacific-islands>

⁸ Tuvalu, Constitution of Tuvalu Act 2023 (2023), sec. 1(2).

⁹ Australia and Tuvalu, *Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union* (2023), 3.

for Vanuatu, the Nakamal Agreement similarly prohibits foreign military bases or infrastructure on Vanuatu's territory and requires consultation with Australia on third-party engagement in critical infrastructure.¹⁰ While such arrangements can provide important opportunities for climate-affected populations, they also raise questions about how climate mobility should be governed, including **the extent to which mobility pathways respond to Pacific priorities, human rights and climate justice** rather than primarily to the strategic interests of larger partners.

At the national and community level, **relocation is generating disputes over access to and ownership of land**, particularly where communities leave ancestral territories to settle on customary land belonging to other groups. It is also **disrupting livelihoods and food security**: communities that traditionally depend on fishing may be forced to move inland, where they must adapt to farming and often lack the infrastructure, land or resources needed to sustain themselves. Where newly planted crops take several months to mature, households can face prolonged periods without sufficient food or income, leaving communities dependent on external assistance while they establish new livelihoods.¹¹

Beyond direct displacement and relocation, climate change can also exacerbate the socioeconomic pressures that contribute to labour mobility within and beyond Pacific Island countries. Young and working-aged people may leave rural communities for urban centres or overseas employment, including through labour mobility schemes, in search of economic opportunities. In some cases, declining agricultural productivity or other climate-related pressures on livelihoods may contribute to these economic pressures, while employment, education and other socioeconomic factors remain important drivers of mobility. The **departure of working-age people can leave farms and communities with fewer people to maintain livelihoods, care for children and older people, and carry out essential agricultural work**. As one interviewee noted, in some farming communities there is increasingly "nobody left to harvest the sugar cane."¹² This can place strain on social relationships and community structures, while efforts to fill labour shortages by recruiting workers from other parts of the country, including across ethnic and cultural lines, can introduce new social tensions and put pressure on community cohesion.

The PICs have long been at the forefront of **framing climate change as a security issue**, while advocating approaches centred on human security, climate justice, resilience and the preservation of their sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, the ability of Pacific Island countries to adapt to these pressures is constrained by **significant gaps in climate finance**. Adaptation is particularly important for Pacific states, given the scale of their exposure to sea-level rise, extreme weather and threats to food and water security, yet **international climate finance continues to fall short of identified needs**. At the same time, competing global crises and rising defence expenditure risk diverting political

¹⁰ Australia and Vanuatu, *Vanuatu–Australia Nakamal Agreement*, June 29, 2026, 4.

¹¹ Interviews national NGO representatives.

¹² Interview with national NGO representative.

attention and resources away from climate resilience.¹³ Insufficient adaptation finance therefore represents not only a development challenge but a peace and security concern, as inadequate resilience can increase displacement, livelihood insecurity, competition over resources and pressure on already limited state capacities.

■ Energy security

Pacific Island countries are highly dependent on imported fossil fuels, leaving them particularly exposed to global price and supply shocks. The recent fuel crisis following conflict in the Middle East has highlighted this vulnerability. Rising prices and shortages have placed pressure on transport, electricity, food prices, and essential services, with some governments considering measures such as electricity rationing and reducing fuel use in schools. For households already facing high living costs and the effects of climate change, **higher energy prices compound existing pressures on food and water security, health, livelihoods, and access to essential services.** At the state level, dependence on imported fuel also places pressure on public finances and constrains governments' ability to invest in other areas of human security, including climate resilience and social protection.

■ Militarisation, geopolitics, and regional cohesion

Two interconnected geopolitical dynamics are reshaping the regional security environment in the Pacific. First, **intensifying US-China strategic competition is driving growing militarisation in the Pacific**, including increased military activity, defence cooperation, and security infrastructure. This brings geopolitical tensions into a region whose own conception of security centres on human security, climate change, and community wellbeing, and can affect communities through **land use, environmental impacts, and the expansion of military infrastructure.** Second, **growing bilateralism is testing regional cohesion.** Pacific Island countries are increasingly entering bilateral security agreements with partners including Australia, China, and the US. While these arrangements may respond to national priorities, their proliferation can reinforce transactional relationships and **fragment collective decision-making**, putting pressure on the Pacific Islands Forum's emphasis on regional solidarity and a Pacific-led approach to security.

■ Drug trafficking and organised crime

Transnational organised crime is an increasingly significant threat to peace and human security in the Pacific, with **drug trafficking, human trafficking and illicit trade expanding across the region.** PICs are increasingly used as transit points and, in some cases, as growing domestic markets for drugs. The 2026 Pacific Security Outlook Report highlights the growing presence of international criminal networks and their connections with criminal groups in Pacific Island countries.¹⁴ Policing these activities is particularly challenging across the Pacific's vast maritime territories, where **governments often have**

¹³ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Pacific Fusion Centre, The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2026 (2026), 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

limited surveillance, enforcement, and judicial capacity. The growing availability and **use of methamphetamines** are having significant impacts on health, wellbeing, and security, while **rising HIV rates** are adding to public-health pressures. Fiji, which has long served as a transit hub for methamphetamine bound for Australia and New Zealand, saw an uptick in domestic circulation when borders closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. With use of crystal meth widespread, particularly among youth, Fiji is now facing the fastest-growing HIV epidemic in the world, with the government recently declaring a national emergency.

Relocation to urban centres can compound these vulnerabilities, as rapid population growth, limited employment opportunities and pressure on housing and services can increase exposure to exploitation, illicit substances, and organised crime. These pressures place further strain on already limited health, social welfare, policing, and justice systems.

■ **Gender inequality and violence against women and girls**

Many interviewees emphasised that the greatest source of insecurity for women in the Pacific is not geopolitical competition or the rise of transnational crime, but violence in their own homes. **Violence against women and girls remains widespread** across Pacific Island countries, at a rate estimated at around twice the global average.¹⁵ Intimate-partner violence and domestic violence are among the most prevalent forms. Violence against women and girls threatens their physical security and has wider consequences for health, education, economic participation, and social cohesion.

Gender inequality and economic insecurity, increasingly **compounded by climate change**, have distinct impacts on women and girls. Women are disproportionately affected by shortages of food and water, while the loss of land and livelihoods can increase household financial pressures and make **practices such as early marriage more likely** as families seek to reduce economic burdens or secure their daughters' futures.¹⁶ Climate-related displacement can further increase these risks, particularly where **women and girls lose access to established support networks**, livelihoods and essential services.

Economic hardship is also linked to increased exposure to exploitation and violence. In some communities, declining household incomes and limited economic opportunities have contributed to **transactional sex and increased substance use**, exposing women and girls to **greater risks of sexual exploitation and gender-based violence**, while leaving young men more vulnerable to involvement in crime and related harmful behaviours. These dynamics demonstrate how economic, environmental, and social pressures intersect with existing gender inequalities, undermining individual and community security and resilience.

¹⁵ UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, "Ending Violence against Women," *UN Women Asia and the Pacific*, accessed September 3, 2026. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries/fiji/ending-violence-against-women>

¹⁶ Pasifika Peace Talanoa. *Advancing Gender Equality, Inclusive Peacebuilding, Conflict Prevention and Human Security* (2026), 8.

■ The legacy of colonialism

The legacies of colonialism continue to shape peace and security across the Pacific. Colonial powers imposed political boundaries, administrative systems and economic structures that often cut across existing political, cultural, and social systems. These **legacies continue to shape political institutions, access to land and resources**, and relationships between Pacific states and external powers.

Questions of **self-determination** remain particularly important. Kanaky (New Caledonia) and Ma'ohi Nui (French Polynesia) remain on the UN list of Non-Self-Governing Territories, while Bougainville and West Papua continue to face unresolved questions over political status and self-determination. In Kanaky, **tensions over political representation, land, economic inequality**, and the **territory's relationship with France** contributed to renewed violence in 2024. In West Papua, the unresolved conflict over self-determination continues to be accompanied by **militarisation, displacement and disputes over land and natural resources**. In Bougainville, the legacy of conflict over political autonomy and resource extraction remains closely linked to the independence process following the 2019 referendum.

Colonial rule also reshaped the **demographic composition** of Pacific societies, creating social and political divisions that continue to affect access to land and political decision-making. In Fiji, the British colonial administration brought tens of thousands of Indian indentured labourers to work on sugar plantations between 1879 and 1916. The resulting divisions between Indigenous iTaukei and Indo-Fijian communities have continued to shape political competition and periods of instability. They also intersect with contemporary climate-related displacement: **different systems of land ownership and decision-making apply to Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities**, meaning that relocation in response to sea-level rise and other climate impacts can involve **different processes** and generate tensions over access to land.

Colonial **resource extraction** has also left a lasting imprint on contemporary conflicts. The Panguna mine in Bougainville, developed under Australian administration, became a major source of **grievances over land rights, environmental damage and the distribution of resource revenues** and contributed to the outbreak of armed conflict in 1988.¹⁷ In Kanaky, control over the territory's substantial nickel resources remains closely connected to **debates over economic inequality, political autonomy and the distribution of wealth**.¹⁸

Colonial and Cold War-era activity has also **left significant environmental and health legacies**. Between 1946 and 1958, the United States conducted 67 nuclear tests at Bikini and Enewetak atolls in the Marshall Islands, resulting in **displacement, radioactive**

¹⁷ Anthony J. Regan, "Causes and Course of the Bougainville Conflict," *The Journal of Pacific History* 33, no. 3 (1998): 269–85.

¹⁸ Christine Demmer, "The Decolonisation Process Without Independence in the Light of Changes in the Nickel Sector in New Caledonia-Kanaky," in *Geographies of New Caledonia-Kanaky: Environments, Politics and Cultures*, ed. Matthias Kowasch and Simon P. J. Batterbury (Cham: Springer, 2024), 103–15.

contamination and long-term health impacts.¹⁹ Communities remain affected by the consequences of the testing programme, including unresolved questions around compensation, environmental remediation and resettlement. These legacies continue to shape relationships between Pacific states and external powers and inform contemporary debates about sovereignty, security, and climate justice.

■ **Cybersecurity, cybercrime, and hybrid threats**

Cybersecurity threats in the region are increasing, targeting government systems, critical infrastructure, businesses, and individuals. In 2024, a **large-scale cyberattack in Palau disrupted the country's financial management systems**. In 2025, healthcare systems in several Pacific Island countries, including Tonga and Samoa, were targeted. Samoa has also issued an advisory on APT40, an alleged Chinese state-sponsored cyber group, warning of its growing activity and the threat it poses to government and critical infrastructure networks across the Pacific.²⁰ Alongside state-linked cyber activity, transnational cybercrime is increasingly reaching the Pacific. **Scam networks** operating from Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos are expanding their reach into the region, **exploiting governance gaps, weak regulatory frameworks and limited enforcement capacity**.²¹ The high degree of social and community interconnectedness in Pacific societies can also be exploited by cybercriminals through **phishing and social-engineering scams**, including attempts to impersonate trusted family or community members. These threats extend beyond financial losses: attacks on government and critical infrastructure can disrupt essential services, undermine public trust, and expose weaknesses in state capacity.

Pacific Island countries continue to be targeted due to significant capability and resource constraints. The **gap in cyber capacity between many Pacific Island governments and the EU** is so wide that even well-intentioned EU support can struggle to address their most immediate needs. As one interviewee put it, “these governments need a cyber emergency response team, not a roundtable.”²² In many cases, **governments lack dedicated cybersecurity structures** and need resources to recruit the specialist staff needed to establish them. The priority is therefore not only short-term training or technical assistance, but sustained investment in basic institutional capacity. With limited resources, governments face difficult choices between priorities such as hiring cyber specialists, establishing response teams, and developing the necessary legislation and systems.

¹⁹ United Nations, International Law Commission, “The Nuclear Testing in the Marshall Islands: Compensation Claims Commission and the Cases Brought to the Court in the United States,” A/CN.4/700 (2016), paras. 213, 215, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/863247/files/A_CN.4_700-EN.pdf

²⁰ Samoa National Computer Emergency Response Team (SamCERT), *Advanced Persistent Threat 40 (APT40) Advisory*, February 11, 2025.

²¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment: Southeast Asia 2026* (2026), 38.

²² Interview with INGO representative.

Role and perception of the EU

Despite the breadth of its engagement, the **EU continues to be perceived primarily as a development partner** in Pacific Island countries, rather than as a political or peace and security actor. This is particularly apparent at community level, where the EU's presence is more tangible through development cooperation, including support for WASH, sustainable agriculture, climate resilience, and other initiatives that directly affect livelihoods and access to essential services. At government level, the EU is also regarded as one of a number of important development partners, alongside Australia, New Zealand, the United States, China, Japan, and South Korea.

Interviewees suggest that the **EU is seeking to develop a stronger political and security profile**, including through engagement on cybersecurity, hybrid threats, justice, and the electoral and constitutional processes. However, this engagement is **not always** equally visible to Pacific partners or **aligned with their immediate priorities**. For example, when the EU explored capacity-building support around Fiji's local elections and constitutional review, the government showed greater interest in practical financial support, for example vehicles to promote voter participation and laptops to support public awareness campaigns, than in capacity-building activities.²³ This highlights the importance of responding to priorities identified by Pacific partners and of mapping existing initiatives to ensure that EU support complements rather than duplicates the work of other actors.

There is therefore a **gap between the EU's growing engagement in areas related to peace and security and its visibility as a political partner in the region**. Strengthening this profile will require not only greater awareness of existing EU support but also **sustained engagement on issues identified by Pacific partners as relevant to their own security and resilience**.

Recommendations for EU engagement

1. **Put Pacific priorities and local leadership at the centre of EU peace and security support**, ensuring that funding responds to priorities identified by Pacific governments, communities, and civil society rather than externally defined security agendas.
2. **Invest in locally led peacebuilding and community mediation**, including flexible, long-term support for local organisations and community actors working on land disputes, climate-related mobility, social cohesion, gender-based violence and other local sources of insecurity.

²³ Interview with EU representative.

3. **Strengthen inclusive local governance and participation**, particularly by supporting women, young people, people with disabilities, marginalised communities and other groups that are often underrepresented in decision-making on security, climate adaptation, and development.
4. **Link climate adaptation with peacebuilding and human security**, including support for communities facing relocation, livelihood disruption and competition over land and resources, while ensuring that climate mobility and relocation processes are grounded in human rights, customary land systems, and Pacific priorities.
5. **Provide sustained, needs-based support to essential local and state capacities**, including justice, policing, maritime surveillance, and cyber emergency response, prioritising the resources, personnel, and infrastructure that Pacific partners identify as their most urgent needs over short-term training or one-off activities.
6. **Support women and girls as agents of peace and security**, combining action on gender-based violence with economic empowerment, access to services and meaningful participation in local and national decision-making.
7. **Ensure EU support complements rather than duplicates existing initiatives**, mapping the work of Pacific governments, regional organisations and other partners and directing EU resources towards gaps identified by Pacific stakeholders.