

A woman wearing a yellow headwrap and a patterned dress is shown from the side, leaning over a pile of harvested potatoes in a field. She is holding a small potato in her hands. The background shows green foliage and a tree. The image is framed by a dark blue shape that also contains the text.

ACTION ON POVERTY

Evaluation of the Water Access and Health Security Project

Updated: May 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About the WAHS Project

The Water Access and Health Security (WAHS) project (2023–2026), funded by the Australian NGO Cooperation Program through Action on Poverty (AOP) and implemented by the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific – Kiribati (FSPK), aimed to improve health and wellbeing across three outer islands of Kiribati by addressing the interconnected issues of water access, food production, hygiene, and women’s leadership. It delivered community-based activities including water needs assessments, gardening and hygiene training, and support for local infrastructure and behaviour change. The project was built on prior work in the same communities.

About this Evaluation

AOP commissioned the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney (UTS-ISF) to undertake an end-of-project evaluation between November 2025 and April 2026. The evaluation assessed the project’s relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability, while identifying lessons to inform future programming and strengthen the AOP-FSPK partnership.

The evaluation adopted a qualitative, learning-oriented approach designed to generate practical insights rather than measure impact quantitatively. Methods included document review, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions with 50 community members in Aranuka Island. Findings were further refined through validation and sensemaking workshops with AOP and FSPK.

The evaluation focused on Aranuka due to funding and travel constraints that prevented fieldwork in Kuria and Marakei. Other limitations included the absence of baseline data and reliance on interpretation support from FSPK.

Evaluation Findings

Relevance:

The WAHS project was highly relevant to community, Island Council, national, and DFAT priorities related to food security, nutrition, and health. However, water security, identified by communities as the most significant challenge, received limited attention under the project. This reflected funding and programmatic dependencies rather than design limitations, as WAHS activities were intended to complement other anticipated water-focused initiatives that were subsequently reduced or withdrawn.

Coherence:

The project complemented existing initiatives related to water access and gender equality and extended food and health programming into outer island contexts where such activities had previously been limited.

Effectiveness:

Partnerships with Island Councils and existing community structures strengthened local ownership and participation. FSPK played an important facilitative role by providing training, coordination, and technical support, although community members did not always distinguish FSPK’s contribution from that of local institutions.

The project achieved strong uptake of home gardening, nutrition, hygiene, and household cleanliness practices. However, many of these behaviour changes were difficult to sustain due to ongoing water scarcity. Efforts to promote gender equality and disability inclusion were evident, although disability inclusion remained relatively limited and could be further strengthened.

Efficiency:

Project delivery was inherently costly due to the geographic isolation of Kiribati's outer islands and the need for travel-intensive implementation. Budget variations reflected both annual funding arrangements and activity sequencing across the project period.

While no concerns were identified regarding expenditure, limited financial reporting detail made it difficult to assess value for money and the drivers of budget variances. Future programming could explore more efficient delivery approaches, including greater use of local facilitators and community-based implementation models.

Impact:

The project contributed to increased knowledge, skills, and adoption of improved practices related to gardening, nutrition, hygiene, and household health. Participants reported positive changes in diet, cleanliness, and wellbeing.

However, longer-term adoption of gardening and food production activities remained constrained by water scarcity. Continued support may also be required, as intensive vegetable cultivation represents a relatively new practice in many communities.

Sustainability:

Participants and Island Council representatives consistently emphasised that improvements in food security, nutrition, and hygiene can only be sustained if water scarcity is addressed through climate-resilient and sustainable solutions.

Community health committees established through the project are expected to continue operating beyond project completion. However, ongoing support for gardening, food production, and nutrition promotion was seen as important for sustaining benefits.

Conclusion

Participants and Island Council representatives consistently emphasised that improvements in food security, nutrition, and hygiene can only be sustained if water scarcity is addressed through climate-resilient and sustainable solutions.

Following completion of the evaluation, the water access issues identified by communities were addressed through a separate AOP and DFAT-funded project, which supported community wells powered by a solar system in the same outer-island context. This follow-on support helped respond to the evaluation's key finding that water security is a foundational condition for sustaining gains in food production, nutrition, hygiene, and health.

Community health committees established through the project are expected to continue operating beyond project completion. However, ongoing support for gardening, food production, and nutrition promotion was seen as important for sustaining benefits.

Evaluation Recommendations

Recommendations for FSPK

1. Continue and adapt food and nutrition programming to local conditions, prioritising drought-appropriate approaches and designing activities that align with local participation patterns.
2. Clarify FSPK's role and value-add alongside Island Councils to strengthen visibility, accountability, and learning.
3. Strengthen gender equality, disability inclusion, and participation approaches, moving beyond one-off training to more sustained, inclusive strategies.
4. Align delivery models with intended depth of impact, making an explicit choice between broad reach and deeper engagement.
5. Explore locally anchored delivery models (e.g. community facilitators, Island Council staff) to improve continuity and reduce reliance on travel.
6. Strengthen financial reporting and transparency through clearer explanations of budget variances and cost drivers.
7. Prioritise learning and documentation, particularly on water systems and community-level experiences.
8. Pursue context-appropriate scaling pathways, including strengthening water governance and linking to government programs.

Recommendations for AOP

1. Strengthen integrated programming across water, food, and health, ensuring water security is treated as a foundational condition.
2. Invest in joint, island-specific context analysis at the design stage to better tailor programming.
3. Mitigate the effects of funding variability, including through staged or tiered planning approaches.
4. Support more predictable, multi-year funding arrangements to enable continuity and improve value for money.

Joint recommendations for AOP and FSPK

1. Revisit and strengthen the partnership framework, using existing agreements more actively to guide roles, expectations, and ways of working.

Recommendations for DFAT

1. Prioritise integrated water-food-health investments in the outer islands of Kiribati, recognising water security as a foundational constraint on other outcomes.
2. Invest in community-based monitoring and evaluation of water solutions to build evidence on sustainability and maintenance.
3. Support scaling approaches suited to outer-island realities, including funding for learning and adaptation.
4. Ensure efficiency expectations reflect structural constraints such as remoteness, transport costs, and limited economies of scale.



Contact

P: +61 2 9906 3792

E: info@actiononpoverty.org

W: actiononpoverty.org

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ABN 42 002 568 005