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► The future of seafarers: Emerging challenges, opportunities and achieving decent work for seafarers in selected Pacific Island countries

Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu



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decent work for seafarers in
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First published 2025.



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54394/GWOR8974>

ISBN : 9789220427064 (print)

9789220427071 (web PDF)

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Printed in Fiji

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Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by ILO consultant Dr Anastasiya Kozubovskaya with technical review by Federica Ninni, Legal/Labour Law Specialist, Maritime Unit, Geneva. The overall coordination of the report was managed by Mahanam Mithun, Technical Officer in the ILO Office for Pacific Islands Countries.

The report author and the ILO would like to sincerely thank all the respondents for the valuable insights they provided, as well as those who participated in the fruitful and lively discussions during the validation workshops. Also appreciated are the technical contributions and feedback received from Angelica Neville (ILO), Lynette SIFA (IOM).

This report has been produced under the Pacific Climate Change, Migration and Human Security – Phase II (PCCMHS) programme. The PCCMHS programme is implemented by the ILO, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) along with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD). The PCCMHS programme is supported by the New Zealand International Development Cooperation Programme.



Maritime Labour Convention Regional Meeting © ILO

Foreword

For the Pacific Island countries, the maritime industry represents an important means by which to achieve sustainable development and regional cooperation. The Pacific Ocean has always been a source of identity, sustenance and opportunity for the peoples of the Pacific Island countries. For generations, the seafaring tradition has not only connected these nations to one another, but also to the world beyond. In the face of profound global shifts – climate change, post-pandemic recovery, digitalization and evolving labour mobility – the maritime sector remains a cornerstone of resilience and economic livelihood for Pacific communities.

This report offers an in-depth exploration of the realities facing seafarers in Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Through careful research and stakeholder input, the study highlights the structural, regulatory and social barriers that continue to impede the realization of decent work for Pacific seafarers.

This report is also a call to optimism and ambition. It outlines pathways for reform, opportunities for innovation in maritime training and employment, and stresses the importance of regional partnerships. Most importantly, it affirms the ILO's commitment to ensuring that men and women seafarers in the Pacific enjoy full rights, protection and the dignity of decent work.

The ILO is deeply grateful to the Government of New Zealand for its generous support in funding this important research through the Pacific Climate Change, Migration and Human Security (PCCMHS) Phase II programme.

We also acknowledge the dedicated efforts of our national partners, including governments, trade unions, employers' organizations, maritime training institutions and civil society actors, who contributed their knowledge and insights to this study. Special thanks go to Dr Anastasiya Kozubovskaya, whose rigorous and thoughtful research underpins the findings and recommendations presented here.

This report is not only a reflection of the challenges faced by Pacific seafarers, but a call to collective action. It urges us all to invest in resilient, inclusive and rights-based maritime systems that can adapt to a changing world, while honouring the deep maritime heritage of Pacific peoples.

The ILO stands ready to support Pacific Island countries in transforming these findings into concrete actions towards a future where all seafarers can work in safety, dignity and equality.



Martin Wandera

Director

ILO Office for the Pacific Island Countries



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Abbreviations and acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AMC	Australian Maritime College
CEACR	ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
FISUI	Friendly Islands Seafarers Union Incorporated [Tonga]
GDP	gross domestic product
GT	gross tonnage
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMO	International Maritime Organization
IMO GISIS	IMO Global Integrated Shipping Information System
ITF	International Transport Workers' Federation
KIOSU	Kiribati Overseas Seafarers Union
KIT	Kiribati Institute of Technology
KTUC	Kiribati Trade Union of Congress
MEHR	Ministry of Employment and Human Resources (Kiribati)
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSAF	Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji
NEMO	Northeast Maritime Online
NMI	Northeast Maritime Institute
PCMS	Pacific Centre for Maritime Studies (Fiji)
PIC	Pacific Island country
RIF	French International Register
RSE	Recognised Seasonal Employer (New Zealand)
SIDS	small island developing States
STCW (1978)	International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978, as amended
STCW 1995	International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978, with its amendments of 1995

TASTTI	Tuvalu Atoll Science and Technology Training Institute
TFD	Tuvalu Fisheries Department
TMPI	Tonga Maritime Polytechnical Institute
TMTI	Tuvalu Maritime Training Institute
Tokyo MOU	Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control in the Asia-Pacific Region
TOSU	Tuvalu Overseas Seamen's Union
VMSA	Vanuatu Maritime Safety Authority
VMSL	Vanuatu Maritime Services Limited

Executive summary

The study explores the challenges and opportunities faced by seafarers in Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, with a focus on achieving decent work conditions. The research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis post-COVID-19 based on accessible online resources and answers to study questionnaires provided by stakeholders in the five selected Pacific Island countries.

Key recommendations of this research include enhancing regulatory compliance, improving capacity-building and education as well as addressing the low attractiveness of domestic maritime jobs. Addressing gender equality is crucial to ensure women have better access to training and employment opportunities in the maritime sector. Strengthening partnerships with international shipping companies and developing incentives for employing national seafarers are recommended strategies to secure jobs for Pacific seafarers. These proposed measures aim to foster a more resilient and equitable maritime workforce across the region.

From the regulatory perspective, ratification and implementation of the main international instruments supporting the labour rights and well-being of seafarers – the [Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, as amended](#) (MLC, 2006) and the [Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention \(Revised\), 2003, as amended \(No. 185\)](#) – remain inconsistent among the study countries, impeding comprehensive protection for seafarers.

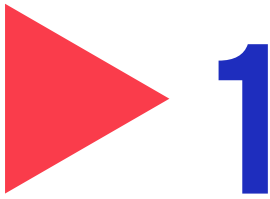
All five Pacific countries have maritime training institutions. International recognition of training and certification¹ plays a crucial role for seafarers to be employable in the job market. Some countries, such as Tuvalu and Tonga, appear to face challenges in maintaining the necessary level of compliance, and therefore may require specific assistance in this regard.

The level of seafarers' education provided in the studied countries varies, with higher education in line with Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers and its amendments (hereafter referred to as "STCW") being offered by Fiji's Pacific Centre for Maritime Studies (Master Class Levels 2 and 1 starting in 2025), with the Centre likely being the most advanced training institution among the study countries, particularly in terms of the range of diplomas offered.

Upskilling seafarers, providing remote and blended-learning courses (when appropriate), and incorporating new trends of the shipping industry (such as decarbonization, digitalization, automation, and remote monitoring and control) into the curriculum of the training institutions would help in creating a skilled workforce that is marketable and aligned with the current and future demands of the shipping sector.

More detailed recommendations are provided in the report for each of the five study countries, as well as more broadly for the region. The feasibility and relevance of these recommendations are expected to be addressed in the follow-up research, which will also allow for the collection of best practices in relation to seafaring, both among the five study countries and worldwide.

¹ As per the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978, as amended.



Introduction

This report represents part of the desk research “The Future of Seafarers: Emerging Challenges, Opportunities and Achieving Decent Work for Seafarers in Selected Pacific Island Countries” commissioned by the ILO as part of the Pacific Climate Change, Migration and Human Security (PCCMHS) Phase II programme. The report aims to examine the evolving circumstances of seafarers in the post-COVID-19 era in selected Pacific Island Countries, to identify emerging challenges and opportunities, and to provide recommendations for addressing these challenges.

This report serves as a follow up to an Inception Phase Report, in which the following countries were selected for inclusion in this research: Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

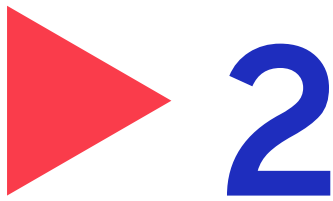
The scope of this follow-up research was formulated along the following five axes:

1. Regulatory compliance;
2. Capacity-building and education;
3. Working conditions and welfare;
4. Partnerships and employment incentives; and
5. Gender equality.

The ultimate aim of the action was to offer recommendations concerning areas to concentrate further action, including:

- Enhancing collaboration and partnerships (strengthen/rebuild partnerships between the maritime schools, shipping companies and international donors).
- Modernizing training infrastructure and curriculum of the maritime training schools.
- Ensuring compliance of training and certification standards with International Maritime Organization (IMO) requirements as per the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978, as amended.
- Strengthening regulatory compliance.
- Fostering career advancement and professional development, including gender equality and women's empowerment.
- Addressing challenges and mitigating measures in domestic shipping.
- Collecting best practices.





Methodology

The current research builds on the findings of the Inception Phase Report, delving deeper into each of the selected countries. Conducted remotely, the study explores data available from open sources, including international and regional organizations, financial institutions, and government websites. The research received substantial support from ILO officials throughout its course.

Given the limited documentation available in open sources, the research also examined general country information, including demographics, economic profiles, employment dynamics and migration schemes. We also explored the impact of COVID-19, the maritime profile of each country and the existing maritime training systems. Understanding these broader trends, particularly in regard to education and employment as well as in domestic shipping, offered a comprehensive view and aided in identifying the root causes of the challenges and opportunities within the seafaring sector.

Additionally, detailed country-specific questionnaires were prepared and sent to representatives from the five selected countries, including social partners, maritime training institutions and government officials. The data collected from these questionnaires was then incorporated into the respective country reports.

To date, questionnaire responses and additional documentation have been received from the following organizations:

- Fiji – Pacific Centre for Maritime Studies (PCMS);
- Kiribati – Kiribati Trade Union Congress (KTUC);
- Tuvalu – Tuvalu Maritime Training Institute (TMTI);
- Vanuatu – Vanuatu Maritime Safety Authority (VMSA); and
- Tonga – Friendly Islands Seafarers Union Incorporated (FISUI), as well as a consolidated set of responses from several stakeholders in Tonga that was compiled by the Tongan Government.²

The information and data received were not consistent across all countries, with some questions left unanswered. In some cases, responses were provided by maritime training institutions; while in others, the responses came from social partners or ministries/government agencies. This unevenness in the data explains why certain country profiles focus more on specific issues than on others.

² Tonga authorities specified that “the answers represent a consolidated response from relevant stakeholders, which include governmental agency, training institute and seafarers’ worker association in Tonga. The responses do not reflect the position of the MTED [Ministry of Trade and Economic Development].”

The data collected has provided a preliminary picture of each country, with varying levels of detail depending on the availability of information. In some cases, more relevant data was accessible online for certain countries than for others.

This research examined potential partnerships, policies, and incentives to improve employment in the region. It not only provides initial recommendations where appropriate but also identifies best practices that could be adapted and applied in other countries across the region. The study considered various employment opportunities for Pacific seafarers, including:

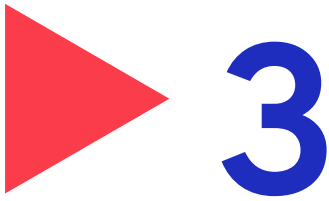
- employment on vessels flagged by Pacific Island countries (commercial, cruise and fishing vessels);
- opportunities in national and inter-Pacific shipping;
- positions on board foreign vessels;
- employment on foreign vessels licensed to fish within the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of Pacific countries; and
- prospects aligned with new trends in the maritime industry, such as the growing demand for skilled labour, digital and decarbonized shipping, and remotely operated vessels.

Challenges and current dynamics of the national maritime training schools have been also examined in the study. The study touched, inter alia, on the issues of STCW recognition for the maritime training schools and the content of the courses provided by these schools.

Challenges around equal opportunity for Pacific women seafarers, which are often exacerbated by the local cultural and social contexts (for example, in Kiribati and Tuvalu), were also considered.

Employment opportunities for all types of seafarers – that is, not limited only to those involved in the nautical operation of the vessel – were considered, in accordance with Article II(f) of the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, as amended (MLC, 2006), which states that “seafarer means any person who is employed or engaged or works in any capacity on board a ship to which this Convention applies”. The ILO has recalled on many occasions that the Convention applies to any person employed in any capacity on board a seagoing ship, and therefore the term “seafarer” is not limited to those involved in the nautical operation of the vessel. Seafarers also can be persons who perform repair and maintenance work on ships, special ship personnel, as well as cleaning and catering personnel who have been engaged to work at sea on board a ship. All these personnel require protection, as ships remain one of the most dangerous places to work, with high casualty figures for seafarers.

In the current context, these non-nautical jobs appear to be more accessible for Pacific female seafarers, but it is expected – if appropriate measures are put in place – that countries can achieve equality of opportunity for female seafarers in regard to education for and employment in nautical positions over the long term. Empowering women in seafaring also depends on gender equality in education from the earliest stages of the general education system.



General overview of seafarer employment in the Pacific

The maritime employment sector in the Pacific Island countries (PICs) has long been an important source of economic livelihood, deeply rooted in the region's history and culture. For Pacific Islanders, the ocean has always been a vital part of their daily lives, serving as a communal pathway that connects islands and people. This intrinsic relationship with the sea has cultivated a cultural affinity in the region for navigation and maritime skills, making the transition to professional seafaring a seamless extension of a traditional way of life.³

However, this sector faces numerous challenges that have been exacerbated by recent global events, notably the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic profoundly disrupted the maritime industry, leading to significant economic and social repercussions, including a repatriation crisis, that impacted the competitiveness of PIC seafarers and strained long-standing partnerships with international shipping companies.

These disruptions also exposed vulnerabilities in labour mobility in the region, particularly in relation to youth and women. High unemployment rates among young people and persistent gender gaps in the workforce reflect broader socio-economic challenges that are yet to be addressed. Moreover, the attractiveness of local employment opportunities in seafaring is diminishing, leading to increased labour migration and raising concerns about the sustainability of the maritime workforce in the Pacific.

Understanding current trends and challenges is essential for developing strategies that can support the resilience and growth of employment in the maritime sector in the Pacific, ensuring its continued contribution to the region's economic and social development.

3.1. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

In economic and fiscal terms, small island developing States (SIDS) were, on average, hit the hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. They experienced, on average, a contraction in gross domestic product (GDP) of 7.1 per cent in 2020, compared to 4.4 per cent in developing countries. Remittances are the largest source of external financing for many SIDS. Thus, it was of high concern during the COVID-19 crisis that many SIDS recorded the largest falls in remittances in recent history (OECD 2022).⁴

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the PICs. Challenges include curtailed tourism and fishing, sharp cost increases for imports and reduced government revenues. Border closures stopped the flow of workers in and

3 "It is 'a natural' that Pacific Islanders are keen to become trained seafarers because for them the vast Pacific is embraced as a part of their shared living: simply a highway upon which to travel" (Human Rights at Sea 2019).

4 Fiji, however, was an exception, as the total inflow of remittances actually increased in 2020 (OECD 2022).

out of the PICs, reducing overseas income, affecting remittances and constraining investments and activities dependent on imported skills.

Repatriation issues during the COVID-19 pandemic fragilized the competitiveness of the PIC seafarers. A crew-change crisis left groups of seamen stranded for nearly two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic (ICS 2022). While shipping companies employing i-Kiribati seafarers have been supporting the nation's maritime workforce, the cost and apparent risk of employing them proved unsustainable during pandemic (Human Rights at Sea 2021). Integrated shipping company Maersk was among the companies who made an official decision to freeze the enlistment of i-Kiribati nationals.⁵

It is therefore crucial to assess whether and to what extent the PICs successfully addressed the challenges posed by COVID-19, particularly in relation to their long-term partnerships with shipping companies. This includes evaluating the possible establishment of appropriate mechanisms, protocols or guarantees to ensure operational continuity in the event of similar future crises. Alternatively, it is worth considering whether shipping companies have chosen to accept these risks going forward, while implementing mitigation measures.

Another key factor is the psychological impact of seafarers being stranded, which could influence their decision to return to work at sea. Other labour mobility schemes – notably in Australia and New Zealand – may appear more attractive and could also draw away a portion of the seafarer workforce.

According to the ILO (2024), economic recovery in the Pacific has been uneven and more recently has been slowing down. By contrast, however, job growth has remained resilient, with decreasing unemployment rates.

3.2. Youth unemployment

High youth unemployment rates in the PICs remains a concern. The share of youth who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is at staggering levels in some PICs, with young women more likely to be in NEET status than men.

The financial, family or psychological consequences of seafarers being stranded abroad during COVID-19 may affect the decision of some seafarers to return to work on board a ship. This may also be a deterrent for youth who have witnessed their friends or family members being stranded, discouraging them from entering this profession. Therefore, it is important that governments establish reliable guarantees and suitable protocols to ensure full cooperation in the repatriation of seafarers in future situations of crisis.

3.3. Gender gaps

Gender gaps in the PICs continue to persist. Unemployment rates among women are, in general, higher than those seen among men.

Women have been deterred from working as seafarers due to a variety of factors, including social contexts (the lower hierarchical position traditionally allocated to women in local communities), discrimination and harassment by men on board vessels. Measures should be taken to address harassment and discrimination and to provide equal access to training and employment opportunities for women in the maritime sector.

As an effort to address gender tensions, the New Zealand Aid Programme recommended offering scholarships for i-Kiribati women to train at the New Zealand Maritime School, aiming to prepare them for officer roles on ships not crewed by i-Kiribati men.

⁵ Maersk comment: "Sadly, and to our disappointment, our efforts with local government and authorities have not produced a successful outcome. As a result, and in order to safeguard our colleagues from a potential tightening of either national, regional or global travel restrictions, we had to make the decision to repatriate all our seafarers from Kiribati and freeze the enlistment of Kiribati nationals. As consequence, we are no longer participating in the partnership between Kiribati, New Zealand and South Pacific Marine Services" (Human Rights at Sea 2021).

According to the ILO (2009), the Tuvalu Maritime Training Institute (TMTI) appeared to enrol only males. In their questionnaire response, the TMTI explained in this regard that “female trainees were a likely possibility in previous years, but the problem is that women never attended the examinations and therefore never enrolled”.⁶

Gender equality initiatives should begin at the school level to address the traditional power imbalance between men and women in some Pacific communities, which would allow women to later gain positions of authority and influence as officers and subsequently as instructors at maritime training institutions.

PIC governments can also put in place various incentives and long, middle and short-term strategies to promote the employment of women in the seafaring, such as financial incentives for ship operators to employ women on board national flagged ships.

3.4. Local employment

While there are local employment opportunities in seafaring, they may not always be sufficiently attractive or offer enough compensation to be taken up by Pacific Islanders, leading to increasing labour migration outflows for work in other sectors.

Although domestic shipping could be seen as a first source of employment for Pacific seafarers, allowing them to work close to home, some in the region deplore the poor working conditions, insecurity and low wages that make this type of work less attractive to national seafarers. Tonga’s Friendly Island Seafarer’s Union Incorporated (FISUI), for example, has condemned, among others, the substandard condition of Tonga’s domestic fleet and its poor operational aspects – including quasi-non-existent safety culture and systems. In 2016, for example, the FISUI highlighted that in “the last two years Tonga has had its worst maritime disasters in history, where 77 fatalities resulted” (FISUI 2016).

At the same time, labour shortages of qualified seafarers prevent the filling of vacancies with adequate matches, creating adverse impacts for the sector and undermining the potential to create decent jobs.

Employment and skills policies, as well as policies that foster entrepreneurship, increase social protection, enable a just transition and promote labour standards are key to enhancing social justice in the Pacific, and to creating decent jobs for all, including women, youth, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups (ILO 2024a).

The main in-depth studies on the working conditions and welfare of seafarers have been carried out for i-Kiribati crews, identifying both the challenges faced and the socio-economic benefits that Pacific seafarers may experience (Borovnik 2003; Borovnik 2011; ILO 2019). As indicated by the ILO (2019), Pacific seafarers can be vulnerable to exploitation if the migration process (including what ILO calls “a temporary migration into seafaring”) is left unregulated. Research undertaken on i-Kiribati seafarers has notably raised concerns about their working conditions and the resulting health and safety implications. Key issues identified included exceptionally lengthy work periods at sea, frequent security controls and speedy turnarounds leading to sleep deprivation and decreased shore time, with problematic implications for physical and emotional health. These pose particularly significant challenges in the light of community dependence on seafaring incomes and low levels of social protection (ILO 2019).

6 Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

3.5. National fleets

► **Table 1. Numbers of national seafarers and size of national fleets according to various sources**

Country	No. of national seafarers 2021 ¹	No. of national seafarers 2024	No. or % of unemployed national seafarers	National fleet equal or over 300GT ²	Tokyo MOU White, Grey or Black List ³
Fiji	1 221	n/a	n/a	60	Not listed
Kiribati	474	920 active KIOSU members as of 2020 ⁴	n/a	78	Grey
Tonga	203	600 ⁵ or 1 500 ⁶	more than 300 ⁵ or around 40% ⁶	70	Not listed
Tuvalu	3 384	1 964 ⁷	n/a	477	White
Vanuatu	786	around 3 000 ⁸	around 1 000 ⁸	533	White

n/a = not available; GT = gross tonnage; Tokyo MOU = Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control in the Asia-Pacific Region; KIOSU = Kiribati Overseas Seafarers Union.

Sources: 1 Data from UNCTADstat referring to BIMCO report of 2021; 2 Data from IMO GISIS, 26 May 2024; 3 Tokyo MOU Secretariat 2022; 4 Questionnaire response by KTUC; 5 Consolidated questionnaire responses from Tongan stakeholders, July 2024; 6 Questionnaire response by FISUI, July 2024; 7 Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024, which states that from TMTI's inception in 1979 to now there were 1,964 qualified seafarers. 8 Questionnaire response by VMSA, September 2024.

To address the employment challenges faced by seafarers from the study countries, it was crucial to understand the total number of qualified national seafarers, as well as the number that are currently unemployed. Table 1 above organizes the collected data.

The data provided by national authorities for 2024 is not uniform; some provided figures only for qualified seafarers, others included data for all national seafarers, including those who have emigrated abroad, while others provided data on active members of seafarers' associations.

For instance, as regards Tonga, according to the FISUI, "the projected number of qualified Tongan seafarers for 2024 is approximately 1500, considering those who have migrated. In May 2023, the number of qualified active member seafarers at the Friendly Island Seafarers Union Incorporated (FISUI) dropped from 368 to 180. Each year, 15 to 20 new seafarers are recruited from the Maritime School, and approximately half become FISUI members"⁷.

However, other national authorities from Tonga said that "there is no centralized database for collecting data on seafarers, however according to stakeholders' data, there's approximately 318 qualified Tongan seafarers. About 600 seafarers registered with different maritime agencies, however, more than 300 were confirmed through agencies data as unemployed"⁸.

The FISUI further declared that "according to data from domestic shipping companies and dock workers in Nuku'alofa, Eua, Ha'apai, and Vava'u, there are a total of 350 seafarers permanently employed. This figure includes those working in the government maritime sectors, whale watching, and fishing companies. Based on

⁷ Questionnaire response by FISUI, July 2024.

⁸ Consolidated questionnaire responses from Tongan stakeholders, July 2024.

the information available, only 50 to 60 per cent of the total seafarers in Tonga are employed in the shipping industry, while around 40 per cent are unemployed or underemployed”.⁹

The Tuvalu Maritime Training Institute claimed that only six Tuvaluan seafarers – presumably recent graduates – are currently employed on board foreign vessels on international voyages, and that from the Institute’s inception in 1979 to now there were 1,964 qualified seafarers.

Table 1 also includes the number of vessels of 300 gross tonnage or greater in each country’s respective national fleet, which shows the potential for employing national seafarers on national vessels for each country. The study countries – especially those with largest national fleet figures, such as Tuvalu and Vanuatu – may consider establishing employment incentives (or obligations) for national flagged vessels to employ a certain percentage of national seafarers.

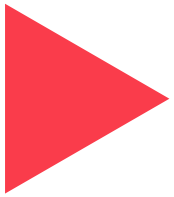
Such measures have been implemented by other countries. For example, the French law requires shipowners that have registered their vessels under the French International Register (RIF) to have a mandatory minimum of 25 per cent of crew being nationals of a Member State of the European Union, a State party to the Agreement on the European Economic Area, or Switzerland, or of a State party to any international agreement with equivalent provisions regarding residence and work rights (or 35 per cent depending on specific circumstances)¹⁰ which gives the composition.

9 Questionnaire response by FISUI, July 2024.

10 Article L.5612-3 of the French Transport Code. The special circumstance that require the percentage to be 35 per cent (based on the crew list) is related to vessels that have benefited from tax aid for their acquisition (tax GIEs, abolished in 2012–13).



Maritime Training Center - Kiribati © ILO



4

Ratification status in PLCs of major ILO instruments related to seafarers

The ILO has adopted more than 70 instruments, including 41 Conventions and their related Recommendations, to safeguard seafarers' rights. The ILO's international maritime labour standards establish the minimum conditions for "decent work" and address almost all aspects of work, including minimum requirements for work on a ship (such as minimum age, medical fitness and training), provisions on conditions of employment, wages, leave, repatriation, accommodation, recreational facilities, food and catering, occupational safety and health protection, welfare and social security protection. In addition, they address issues such as pensions and an internationally recognized document for seafarers – a seafarers' identity document, or SID – to assist in border control.

The **Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, as amended (MLC, 2006)**, consolidates and revises 68 previous maritime instruments, including 36 Conventions and one Protocol.¹¹ By consolidating several instruments, the MLC, 2006, sets out, in a single instrument, the right to decent conditions of work in almost every aspect of seafarers' working and living conditions. It establishes minimum standards for decent work for seafarers and is a source for enabling laws and policies that focus on the seafaring context.

To date, Tonga and Vanuatu have not yet ratified the MLC, 2006, which is a significant shortcoming, particularly for Vanuatu given the size of its fleet. Tuvalu, Kiribati and Fiji have ratified the MLC, 2006. However, their transposition of the Convention into national legal order and implementation vary depending on the country.

The **Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention (Revised), 2003, as amended (No. 185)**, revises the previous ILO Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention, 1958 (No. 108). Convention No. 185 establishes a more rigorous identity regime for seafarers with the aim of developing effective security from terrorism and ensuring that the world's seafarers will be given the freedom of movement necessary for their well-being and for their professional activities.

Fiji, Tonga and Tuvalu have not yet ratified Convention No. 185.¹²

Although **Kiribati**¹³ has ratified Convention No. 185, as of 2021 there appeared to be no specific laws or regulations for the issuance of SIDs, although the Kiribati Maritime Act 2017 required seafarers to obtain a discharge book,

11 These instruments, listed in Article X of the MLC, 2006, include all the previous maritime Conventions adopted since 1920, except those addressing seafarers' identity documents (Conventions Nos 108 and 185), as well as the Seafarers' Pension Convention, 1946 (No. 71), and the (outdated) Minimum Age (Trimmers and Stokers) Convention, 1921 (No. 15), which was abrogated by decision of the International Labour Conference in 2017. The ILO maritime Conventions dealing with fishing and with dockworkers are also not affected by the MLC, 2006 (ILO, n.d.),

12 Fiji has, however, ratified Convention No. 108.

13 Kiribati has ratified 11 ILO Conventions, including eight of the ten fundamental Conventions.

which is an eye-readable document (normal paper document with personal data) issued by the Marine Division, Ministry of Information and Communication, Transport and Tourism Development.¹⁴

The **Seafarers' Pensions Convention, 1946 (No. 71)**, has received to date only 13 ratifications worldwide. None of the five countries included in this study has ratified it. Similarly, the **ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188)**, has received only 21 ratifications in total. None of the five study countries has ratified it.

Although fisheries are not the primary focus of this research, this topic will be briefly addressed throughout the study, as the fishing industry in the Pacific holds significant potential for creating local job opportunities due to its abundant resources. It also presents a possible career transition for merchant seafarers. Additionally, according to local policies in some countries, seafarers could be employed as observers on foreign fishing vessels operating within their national EEZs. It is also recommended that PICs consider making the issuance of fishing licenses to foreign vessels operating in their national EEZ conditional on the employment of a certain number or percentage of national seafarers.

The Pacific Island seafarers' working and living conditions and welfare will depend, inter alia, on whether the State in which the ship on which they work is registered – that is, the flag State – has ratified major relevant maritime Conventions and adopted appropriate implementing legislation and policies, as well as whether these laws and policies are being correctly implemented by shipowners on board their vessels.

Although the MLC, 2006, places on flag States most of the responsibilities with regard to the working and living conditions of seafarers, the State of nationality of seafarers (or the State in which they are ordinarily resident) also holds certain responsibilities under the MLC, 2006, such as social security and welfare, consular and legal support, and repatriation assistance. Therefore, the Pacific Island seafarers' further protection will also depend on whether their State of nationality has adhered to the appropriate international Conventions providing for further guarantees – particularly in case of failure of the flag State and/or the shipowner to abide by their obligations – as well as foreseeing other social protection measures while the seafarers are in their home countries.

It is important that countries adhere to the main ILO instruments aimed at protecting seafarers' working conditions, welfare and ensure the proper implementation of these instruments in the national legal order. The latter can be achieved through specific ILO assistance in amending their national legislation, as well as ILO consultations concerning the appropriate mechanisms needed for implementation to be put in place. Issuance of SIDs, as per the requirements of the Convention 185, will also contribute to increasing the competitiveness of PIC seafarers in the labour market.

► **Table 2. Ratification of MLC, 2006, and Convention No. 185 by the study countries**

Country	Ratified MLC, 2006	Ratified Convention No. 185
Fiji	YES	NO
Kiribati	YES	YES
Tonga	NO	NO
Tuvalu	YES	NO
Vanuatu	NO	YES

¹⁴ Although Kiribati submitted its second report to ILO on the MLC, 2006, the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) was not totally satisfied with its implementation, and it has urged the Government to adopt without delay the necessary measures to bring all relevant legislation in full compliance with the MLC, 2006, and notably to ensure in practice that seafarers on board Kiribati-flagged ships are not requested to continue working beyond the default 11 months maximum period of service on board. The CEACR also expressed concern over the minimum age of work and the national determination of the definition of "seafarer". See CEACR, Direct Request – MLC, 2006 – Kiribati, adopted 2023.

► 5

Current and changing dynamics relating to seafaring in selected Pacific Island Countries

5.1. Fiji

5.1.1. Demographic, geographic and economic profile

Fiji consists of an archipelago of more than 330 islands – of which about 110 are permanently inhabited – and more than 500 islets, amounting to a total land area of about 18,300 square kilometres. In Fiji, the area of the ocean is 70 times larger than the land territory, with an EEZ of approximately 1.29 million square kilometres. The capital, Suva, is on the south-east coast of the largest island, Viti Levu. The current population of Fiji is 941,567.

Fiji has a market economy based primarily on tourism and agriculture, the latter including a substantial subsistence sector,¹⁵ the commercial sector is heavily based on garment manufacturing and on sugarcane.¹⁶

Fiji has a significant maritime industry, including boat building (especially fishing boats and pleasure crafts), shipping, fishing and tourism sectors. Fishing has become increasingly important to the economy; in the early twenty-first century, fish products accounted for nearly one tenth of export revenue. Tourism is Fiji's leading economic activity. Fiji is strategically located for air travelers from Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America and Japan and is a major destination for tourist cruises.¹⁷

The country's seafaring workforce plays a crucial role in supporting its economy and maritime trade.

15 Subsistence farmers earn supplementary cash income from cultivating copra, cocoa, kava, taro, pineapples, cassava, or bananas, or from fishing.

16 Sugar was Fiji's largest export, accounting for more than half of all exports. Since large-scale systematic planting of pine forests began in the 1960s, a timber industry has developed for domestic use and export.

17 Tourism is based on the attractions of duty-free shopping and colourful handicraft markets, as well as the usual draws of tropical islands. Many hotels are located on small offshore islands or secluded beaches and offer accommodations in houses of local design and materials rather than in urban-style multi-story buildings.

5.1.2. COVID-19 impact

The 2020 economic contraction due to the COVID-19 pandemic was the largest in Fiji's modern history. The loss of tourism revenue had negative spillover effects affecting Fiji's overall economy. The socio-economic and environmental impacts of the pandemic on Fiji's ocean economy included job losses and the migration of Fijians back to their villages (OECD 2022).

Fiji's GDP fell during the pandemic, mainly due to the closure of tourism-related activities. The travel restrictions and border closings due to COVID-19 almost completely shut down Fiji's tourism sector. However, remittances displayed remarkable resilience – unlike in other SIDS – and actually increased during the pandemic. Fiji was also hit by three tropical cyclones during the pandemic, which added to the COVID-19 induced downturn and resulted in further challenges (OECD 2022).

5.1.3. ILO Conventions

Fiji has been an ILO member since 1974 and, as of the date of this study, is a party to 39 ILO Conventions and one Protocol. Among the five PICs examined, Fiji has ratified the highest number of ILO Conventions, reflecting its commitment to international labour standards.

As noted above, Fiji is a party to the MLC, 2006. It has also ratified the Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention, 1958 (No. 108), but has not yet acceded to Convention No. 185, which requires the use of biometric data as a reliable means of seafarer identification.¹⁸

Seafarers' identity documents Conventions

The Government of Fiji has previously expressed an intention to ratify Convention No. 185, and has requested the ILO's technical assistance in that regard.¹⁹ The Government of Fiji has also informed the ILO that the Ministry of Employment, in consultation with the tripartite partners and the relevant stakeholders, in particular the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji, were discussing how to apply the provisions of Convention No. 185 to commercial maritime fishing.

Regulatory compliance. The ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) recalled in this regard the Resolution adopted by the third meeting of the Special Tripartite Committee of the Maritime Labour Convention, wherein it expressed concern about the difficulties seafarers continue to have in accessing shore leave and transiting in certain ports and terminals around the world.²⁰

It appears that at the time of the ILO CEACR addressed its comments to Fiji (that is, in 2020), there were no relevant provisions in Fiji's national legislation implementing Articles 5 and 6 of Convention No. 108 regarding the rights to readmission and entry into a territory for which Convention No. 108 was in force. Pending the possible ratification of Convention No. 185, the CEACR requested the Government to take the necessary measures to give effect to Articles 5 and 6 of Convention No. 108.

18 The main difference between Conventions Nos 185 and 108 is the use of biometric data as a reliable means of identification. The successful application of Convention No. 185 has two main requirements:

1. the application of the necessary biometric technology; and
2. the establishment of an appropriate infrastructure to control, manufacture and secure the production process of identifiers.

19 CEACR, Direct Request – Convention No. 185 – Fiji, adopted 2020

20 CEACR, Direct Request – Convention No. 185 – Fiji, adopted 2020.

Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, as amended (MLC, 2006)

In its most recent comments addressed to Fiji regarding the implementation of the MLC, 2006, the CEACR in 2020 highlighted several issues of non-compliance. The non-compliances notably related to national provisions addressing the minimum age of seafarers, consultation with shipowners' and seafarers' organizations, seafarers' medical certificates, notice for the termination of seafarers' employment agreements, hours of work and hours of rest (exceptions), social security, and a number of other important areas.²¹ It is to be noted, however, that at the time of submission of its second report concerning compliance with the MLC, 2006, which has been analysed by ILO, the Government indicated that it was in the process of preparing draft legislation implementing the Convention.

Although Fiji has not yet formally accepted the 2014 amendments to the MLC, 2006, the country's draft MLC Regulations 2017 introduced requirements to implement the 2014 amendments, which align with the requirements of the MLC, 2006, on this issue. A study commissioned by ILO (2021) points out that while these provisions are already incorporated in the draft MLC Regulations 2017, in practice the implementation of the Regulations' financial security provisions may be more challenging, as there are no insurance schemes in place in Fiji yet. Further consultations are needed to discuss the form that the financial security system might take – for example, insurance, a national fund or Protection and Indemnity Club – and it is recommended that the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport consult further with key stakeholders on how to implement such provisions and whether a trust fund could be considered as a viable option.

The ILO has provided technical assistance to the Government regarding the draft legislation prepared and its compliance with the MLC, 2006.

It is recommended to review the applicable national legislation to ensure its full compliance with the MLC, 2006, taking into account the comments raised by the CEACR. It is also recommended to assess steps undertaken by Fiji to ratify Convention No. 185, as well as the national legislative and institutional framework put in place for its implementation. In the meantime, national legislation implementing Articles 5 and 6 of Convention No. 108 has to be adopted.

5.1.4. Maritime profile

Maritime fleet

International Maritime Organization (IMO) Global Integrated Shipping Information System (GISIS) shows 60 Fijian-flagged vessels equal to or greater than 300 gross tonnages (GT).

Fiji is a party to the Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control in the Asia-Pacific Region (hereafter, the "Tokyo MOU"), an inter-governmental cooperative organization engaged in regional efforts to ensure maritime safety, security and environmental protection through port state control inspections and cooperation among member countries. Regarding its fleet performance, Fiji is currently not listed on any of the lists – Black, Grey or White – of the Tokyo MOU²².

Ports

A total of eight Fijian ports are declared in IMO GISIS, with the two main ports being Suva and Lautoka. The Port of Suva is Fiji's largest and busiest container and general cargo port, providing the maritime gateway to the country's capital.

²¹ CEACR, Direct Request – MLC, 2006 – Fiji, adopted 2020.

²² The "White, Grey and Black lists" present the full spectrum, from quality flags (White List) to flags with a poor performance that are considered high or very high risk (Black List). It is based on the total number of inspections and detentions over a three-year rolling period for flags with at least 30 inspections in the period.

Fiji's waters – as with the general waters of other Pacific countries – are used as a transit zone for drug trafficking; human smuggling; illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing; and other crimes that Fiji recognizes as being challenging to mitigate, notably due to the lack of sufficient patrol fleet resources. Other main challenges include communication with remote islands.

5.1.5. Current dynamics relating to seafaring in Fiji

Fiji's strategic location, well-developed infrastructure and established maritime administration make it a hub for maritime activities and cooperation in the Pacific. It hosts various regional meetings, conferences and training programmes related to seafarer training, maritime safety and maritime security.

Additionally, Fiji is home to regional organizations and institutions, such as the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency and the Pacific Community, which facilitate collaboration among PICs on maritime issues, including seafarer training and development.

In 2023, Fiji's Pacific Centre for Maritime Studies (PCMS) trained a total of 159 students, including 67 cadets and upgrading students in Marine Engineering and 92 cadets and upgrading students in Nautical Science.²³

The PCMS and the Government provide assistance in securing the job prospects and employment of Fiji seafarers through Memoranda of Understanding with Government Shipping and Foreign Ships (Cadet Recruitment Drives). This approach may be considered as good practice and should be examined to determine if it can serve as a model for other countries to consider and adopt.

The main foreign maritime companies currently employing Fiji seafarers are China Navigation (Swire Shipping), the Neptune Pacific Line and Pacific International Lines. Regarding the local employment, seafarers liaise directly with local shipping companies in Fiji.²⁴

It is essential to address the factors contributing to the unemployment of qualified Fijian seafarers. Key challenges identified by the PCMS include poor wages on local vessels, inadequate welfare conditions on local vessels, competition with cheaper foreign labour, an insufficient regulatory enforcement and a limited number of shipping companies creating a tight job market.²⁵ A thorough examination of these issues is recommended to develop effective solutions.

Although Fijian seafarers may seem to be in a better position compared to those from the other study countries thanks to Fiji's strategic location and its advanced maritime training system in the Pacific region, they still face similar challenges in seafarer employment as their neighbours – particularly with respect to local job opportunities.

5.1.6. Maritime education and training

According to the ILO (2019), Fiji has the most advanced education and skills training systems in the Pacific region.²⁶ As a result, Fijians have been able to secure employment in several PICs across a variety of occupations and industries. Simultaneously, Fiji attracts a considerable number of migrants from other PICs. Some individuals come to Fiji to pursue studies at the regional University of the South Pacific, while others find employment with the numerous regional and international organizations headquartered in the country.

Pacific Centre for Maritime Studies

The Pacific Centre for Maritime Studies (PCMS), previously the Fiji Maritime Academy, was established in 1970 by the Government of Fiji to increase the number of qualified mariners and seafarers in Fiji and the Pacific region.

²³ Questionnaire response by PCMS, June 2024.

²⁴ Questionnaire response by PCMS, June 2024.

²⁵ Questionnaire response by PCMS, June 2024.

²⁶ If one excludes Australia and New Zealand.

The PCMS is considered one of the most advanced training institutions in the five study countries, particularly in terms of the range of diplomas offered. It offers courses that enable high school graduates a pathway to obtain certification to work as navigation or engineering officers on local and international ships.

The PCMS provides maritime training to the seafarers of Fiji as well as to nationals from across the South Pacific region. In their responses to the questionnaire for this research, the PCMS said that country in the region sending the most nationals to study at the Centre is Papua New Guinea, but that the Centre also enrolls students from Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Nauru, Marshal Islands and Vanuatu. Nationals from South Pacific countries choose to enroll in the PCMS because their home countries lack the facilities and programmes necessary for training at the highest Officer levels. Additionally, the PCMS in Fiji is a more affordable option compared to maritime training schools in Australia and New Zealand, making it a preferred choice. Regional students are sponsored by their respective governments. The PCMS explains that this is why the institution changed its name from Fiji Maritime Academy to Pacific Centre for Maritime Studies, as it serves the entire region, not just Fijians.²⁷

Programmes offered at the PCMS are approved by the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF). The Diploma and Certificate level programmes offered are accredited by Fiji National University and are registered at the Fiji Higher Education Commission.

The PCMS has been conducting courses in compliance with Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers Convention, 1978, as amended, which is a necessary requirement to ensure the international employability of its graduates. The programmes have been designed using IMO Model Courses as guiding tools for curriculum development, which is the best practice in the area. All operational and management level Certificates of Competency are issued by the MSAF (PCMS, n.d.).

Students graduating from the PCMS are awarded a Diploma in Nautical Science or a Diploma in Marine Engineering. These qualifications set them on the professional journey to becoming a Deck Officer or Engineer, starting at the Class 3 Watchkeeper level. For those with international sea time on vessels over 3,000GT for Deck Officers and engines over 300KW for Engineers, there is an opportunity to advance to the Class I management level in their respective fields (PCMS, n.d.). In 2007, the PCMS also introduced a Fisheries Programme into its curriculum. Currently the PCMS provides two specialized courses in fisheries – Deck Hand Fishing and the Offshore Skipper Programme – which are 1–2-month courses.²⁸

Although the highest maritime qualification currently on offer at the PCMS is the Class 3/Watchkeeper level for Masters and Engineers,²⁹ approval has been recently given by the Fiji National University Senate and the MSAF to offer a Master Class 2 and 1 courses from 2025, and a submission is underway to offer Engineer Class 2 and 1 courses from 2026.³⁰ This indicates that the PCMS is already anticipating future increased demand for highly skilled seafarers in the shipping industry and has proactively taken concrete measures to address it.

These proposed courses will be especially valuable, as the PCMS also offers training to seafarers from other Pacific nations, many of which are facing challenges in integrating these types of training into the curricula of their training institutions. As an example, the Tuvalu Maritime Training Institute, which currently deliver only diplomas for ratings, said that the current numbers of students enrolled “do not support such an investment”.³¹

In terms of potential enhancements for the PCMS, a 2019 study highlights that maritime education in Fiji is falling behind the Australian Maritime College (AMC), as the latter offers a variety of e-learning and blended learning programmes:

²⁷ Questionnaire response by PCMS, June 2024.

²⁸ Questionnaire response by PCMS, June 2024.

²⁹ Questionnaire response by PCMS, June 2024, as confirmed during the validation workshop in September 2024. See also ADB (2007) and PCMS (n.d.).

³⁰ Questionnaire response by PCMS, June 2024.

³¹ Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

The efficiency level at AMC is high since the college is more into blended learning to reach out to the seafarers and at the same time ensures that they have hands on experience. AMC has been using eLearning tools and techniques to deliver required knowledge to the learners while they still use traditional face to face mode to ensure competency is maintained at all levels. The respondents strongly agree that the teaching and learning method (concept of eLearning) and other technological resources used at AMC are highly efficient and because of the efficiency level, most Fijian seafarers opt to complete their further studies at AMC (Taslim 2019).

The PCMS replied in this respect that it currently uses online/blended modes of learning for those units that do not require practical sessions, and that main programme units are also offered via a blended mode of learning.³² It is therefore recommended to investigate whether the gap identified in the 2019 study has since been filled in regard to e-learning and blended courses, or whether there are further improvements that can be made in this space. This line of questioning may specifically be done in the light of the 2023 approval by the Tonga Ministry of the Basic Safety Refresher and Maritime Security online trainings of the Northeast Maritime Institute (NMI), a US-based training institution.³³ These online programmes are specifically designed for Tongan seafarers to receive a Certificate of Training through NMI's comprehensive maritime learning management system, Northeast Maritime Online (NEMO),³⁴ and could serve as a useful point of comparison with PCMS' online offerings.

In response to the questionnaire queries about additional courses or subjects that could enhance the curriculum, the PCMS identified the following courses:

- Modern and sustainable sailing, including the use of biofuel for ships operations;
- Autonomous ships operations;
- Ratification of relevant maritime regulations; and
- E-learning.³⁵

The PCMS considers that it has potential to develop onshore and offshore courses/programmes, which would be complementary to the current curriculum, such as:

- Port management;
- Shipping management and logistics;
- Maritime environment management;
- Yacht licensing;
- Maritime law and economics; and
- Maritime energy management.³⁶

The ILO (2021) has also previously recommended to include the implementation of the MLC, 2006, in maritime training courses for seafarers at the PCMS.

³² Questionnaire response by PCMS, June 2024.

³³ The Northeast Maritime Institute (NMI) began in 1981 as a New England branch of the Tidewater School of Navigation based in Norfolk, Virginia. It became the first training institution in the United States to provide training under the STCW 1978. In 2014, NMI began delivering many courses online, reaching mariners across the globe. Northeast Maritime Online (NEMO) has emerged as a transformative model for maritime education and training. It has a catalogue of more than 40 online courses available for purchase.

³⁴ For more information, see section 5.3.6 below.

³⁵ Questionnaire response by PCMS, June 2024.

³⁶ Questionnaire response by PCMS, June 2024.

The PCMS website is well-structured and student friendly. It is suggested that the four other study countries use this as a model when creating websites for their maritime education institutions. A website is a useful tool serving as a platform for sharing updates, resources and contact details, while also improving the visibility and accessibility of the school.

5.1.7. Recommendations

Recommendations below are addressed across the five key axes: (i) regulatory compliance; (ii) capacity-building and maritime education; (iii) seafarers' employment and welfare; (iv) partnerships and employment incentives; and (v) gender equality. In some instances, these recommendations are directed towards potential paths for future research, while others offer more concrete steps for advancing the employment opportunities and well-being of Fijian seafarers.

1. Regulatory compliance

- Considering the previous studies conducted and assistance provided, it is recommended to assess the current level of compliance of the national legislation of Fiji with the requirements of the MLC, 2006, including in relation to financial security in case of abandonment of seafarers and the shipowner's liability to assure compensation for the death or long-term disability of seafarers.
- It is advised to assess current challenges and progress achieved in relation to implementing Articles 5 and 6 of Convention No. 108.
- It is recommended to address existing challenges and progress in relation to ratification of Convention No. 185, as well as to assess the national legislative and institutional framework in place for its implementation.

2. Capacity-building and maritime education

- It is recommended to examine the PCMS' best practices in relation to maintaining STCW certification, delivering blended/remote courses, curriculum development, and the Centre's website. Sharing these practices with other PICs could be beneficial. Additionally, it is important to map the existing challenges in these areas to come up with recommendations for improvement.
- It is recommended to assess the challenges of the ongoing and future introduction of new certifications (Class 1 and 2 for Masters and Engineers) at PCMS, as well as the impact and opportunities this would create for other countries in the region.
- Potential partnerships and synergies between Pacific training institutions should be explored to leverage the resources and expertise available at the PCMS, particularly in the light of the upcoming opening of new certification courses at the PCMS (as explained above).
- It is recommended to explore potential adjustments to the curriculum of the PCMS to align with emerging trends in maritime shipping.
- It is advised to include the implementation of the MLC, 2006, in the PCMS's maritime training courses.

3. Seafarers' employment and welfare

- It is advised to evaluate the lessons learned from the crew change crisis and examine how the associated challenges have been addressed to enhance seafarer welfare and improve employment opportunities.
- It is recommended to explore the main challenges faced by Fijian seafarers in securing employment, and to identify measures that could be implemented to improve their job prospects.
- It is recommended to address challenges of employment in the local maritime sector.

4. Partnerships and employment incentives

- It is recommended to explore the feasibility of partnerships with foreign shipping companies (commercial, cruise and fishing) for the employment of national seafarers and graduates from the PCMS.
- It is advised to explore potential incentives/partnerships with foreign shipping companies granted permits to fish in Fiji's EEZ.
- It is recommended to consider incentives for ships under national flag to employ national seafarers.

5. Gender equality

- Over the long term, it is recommended to address the lack of equal educational opportunities for girls from an early age, particularly in subjects that would support maritime careers. This imbalance limits the pool of qualified female candidates for seafaring roles. Gender equality initiatives aimed at addressing disparities in education and employment opportunities, starting from the general education system, can help break traditional gender roles.
- Some efforts are undertaken to support the inclusion of Fijian women in seafaring (Pratiwi and Marzaman 2024). These can be studied as potential best practices for the region, but the efforts must be sustained to ensure equal access to education and employment opportunities for female seafarers.
- Over the medium term, supporting women to attain leadership and instructor roles at maritime training institutions will provide role models and help shift perceptions about women's capabilities in seafaring.
- In the short term, it is advised to envisage incentives for ships under Fijian flag to employ women seafarers, particularly on cruise vessels, in nautical and non-nautical (for example, hospitality) positions.

5.2. Kiribati

5.2.1. Demographic, geographic and economic profile

Kiribati is largely composed of infertile, low-lying atolls and coral islands (Mangubhai et al. 2019), but it is an archipelago nation with vast maritime resources and a strong cultural connection to the sea.

Its extensive EEZ covers three, non-contiguous traditional geographic subregions: Banaba (Melanesian-Micronesian area), the Gilbert Islands (Micronesia) and the Line and Phoenix Islands (Polynesia). The nation's total land area is relatively small compared to its expansive maritime domain.

Exclusive economic zone

Kiribati boasts one of the largest EEZs in the world, covering approximately 3.5 million square kilometres of ocean territory, with important tuna stocks. This vast marine area holds significant potential for fisheries, marine biodiversity and other maritime resources.

Kiribati's main source of revenue comes from the issuing of licenses to fishing fleets from Japan, the Republic of Korea, Taiwan (China) and the United States to fish in the country's EEZ. Another source of revenue is remittances sent by seafarers working on foreign merchant vessels and by the workers in the phosphate mines in Nauru.

Kiribati is a member of the Pacific Community, the Commonwealth of Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States, and became a member of the United Nations in 1999.

The country has the lowest GDP out of any sovereign state in Oceania and is considered one of the least developed countries in the world (it is in the 30th position from the bottom, being preceded by Solomon Islands, Togo, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea) (Ventura 2024). Thus, it is highly dependent on international aid for its economy.

Climate change vulnerability

Kiribati faces significant challenges from climate change, including rising sea levels, coastal erosion and extreme weather events. These threats endanger coastal infrastructure, livelihoods and maritime resources, posing risks to the nation's maritime domain. Addressing climate change has been a central part of its international policy as a member of the Alliance of Small Island States.

Maritime safety and security

Ensuring maritime safety and security is essential for Kiribati, given its vast maritime territory and reliance on marine resources. The Government collaborates with international partners to enhance maritime surveillance, search and rescue capabilities, and maritime law enforcement.

Fisheries

Fisheries are a crucial component of Kiribati's economy and livelihoods, providing employment, food security and revenue through fishing licenses to foreign vessels. Tuna fisheries play a significant role in the country's economy.

According to the World Bank (2020, para. 10): "Kiribati has the most productive EEZ in the WCPO in terms of fisheries. Of the fishing nations in the Pacific, Kiribati has the highest volume of catch, contributing 28.4 percent to the regional total in 2016. And, since introduction of the vessel day scheme (VDS), Kiribati has enjoyed a significant increase in revenue from fishing licenses and transshipment fees."

A 2006 IMF report pointed out the country's very limited fishing capacity at that time,³⁷ with revenue therefore coming mainly from fishing license fees paid by foreigners, including from Republic of Korea and Taiwan (China).³⁸ The report noted that over the medium term, there may be scope for Kiribati to develop its own capacity based around private commercial fishing businesses because the value of fish caught could generate substantial profits. More than 1,000 Kiribati citizens worked in 2006 aboard foreign fishing boats and thus have substantial experience in the industry. The IMF said that the Government could seek to attract investment in onshore processing, including by foreign enterprises with market access (Feyzioğlu 2006).

As of 2024, IMO GISIS data shows that Kiribati has increased its fishing capacity since. According to IMO GISIS, the Kiribati fishing fleet is composed up to date of 22 units, including 14 fishing vessels built in or after 2018 and one built in 2014, which means that since the 2006 IMF report, Kiribati has more than doubled the size of its national fishing fleet. The national fishing fleet therefore represents an important sector for employment of national i-Kiribati seafarers.

Tourism

According to the aforementioned 2006 IMF report, tourism has been constrained by the country's remoteness, poor flight services and the lack of knowledge about Kiribati in the major markets of Japan and the United States (Feyzioğlu 2006). There remains great potential, however, for specialty tourism, such as birding, diving and sport fishing.³⁹

Overall, Kiribati's profile reflects its dependence on marine resources, its vulnerability to climate change impacts and its efforts to promote sustainable development and maritime governance in the face of these challenges.

5.2.2. COVID-19 impact

Kiribati's economy was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government of Kiribati took measures to prevent the spread of the virus within its borders. These measures included travel restrictions, quarantine protocols and public health campaigns to promote hygiene and social distancing.

A crew-change crisis left groups of seamen from Kiribati stranded, with more than 600 i-Kiribati seafarers being trapped for nearly two years due to the pandemic (ICS 2022). For Kiribati's seafarers, the effect of this crew change crisis was amplified by the logistics of traveling to and from the remote Pacific Island nation, and the fact that the country was free of COVID cases (Human Rights at Sea 2021).

When the few available transit routes to the island were cut off in 2020 as the country's border closures came into effect, many i-Kiribati seafarers became stranded internationally, predominantly in Australia, Fiji, Germany, Indonesia and the Republic of Korea. While shipping companies employing i-Kiribati seafarers had thus far supported the nation's maritime workforce, the cost and apparent risk of employing them given their challenging circumstances proved unsustainable during the pandemic (Human Rights at Sea 2021). For instance, Danish shipping company Maersk, one of the main employers of Kiribati's seafarers, had attempted to negotiate

37 According to the IMF report, in 2006 in Kiribati there was a small fleet for deep-sea tuna fishing and private households largely engaged in subsistence fishing. The fluctuations in the fish catch reflected, not only the weather conditions, but also the condition of the fishing fleet. Poor maintenance lead to breakdowns of the fishing vessels. These problems were compounded by the continual financial difficulties facing the state-owned fishing company, which hampered the timely maintenance and repair of vessels, and by the limited access to export markets in the absence of storage facilities and regular commercial air transport links (Feyzioğlu 2006).

38 Fees are negotiated under bilateral agreements with all countries except the United States. In general, the license fees are around 5 per cent of the value of the catch, but are sometimes negotiated together with grant aid and may thus be lower. The multilateral agreement with the United States covers the fishing waters of Kiribati and 15 other nations. Most of the fees are paid at the end of the year based on where the fish were actually caught (Feyzioğlu 2006).

39 In fact, bird-watchers began to visit Christmas Island in the early 1990s, when reliable weekly service was established to and from Honolulu, three hours' flight away, but the air connections did not prove profitable for the national airline. As a signal to the private sector to take the lead in developing the tourist trade, the government offered for sale the main hotel on Christmas Island and later the hotel in South Tarawa, but as of 2006 these hotels have not been privatized (Feyzioğlu 2006).

potential passage home with the Kiribati Government with support from the ILO and IMO,⁴⁰ but ultimately made an official decision to freeze the enlistment of i-Kiribati nationals.⁴¹

According to Human Rights at Sea (2021), if the shipping companies withdraw from their longstanding partnership with Kiribati, its seafarers will face real challenges as to be employed as seamen again. This prediction appears to have been borne out, based on (unofficial) post-pandemic employment numbers. In 2021, more than 500 seafarers residing in Kiribati were declared as unemployed.⁴² According to information provided by the Kiribati Trade Union Congress (KTUC) in June 2024, there were 920 seafarers active Kiribati Overseas Seafarers Union (KIOSU) members in 2020 and all active KIOSU members were currently unemployed.⁴³

Thus, while negotiating (new) partnerships with private companies, such as Maersk, the Kiribati Government needs to provide reliable guarantees and suitable protocols to ensure its full cooperation in repatriation of seafarers in similar situations and whenever there may be such need. According to the KTUC, “a new partnership has been formed with the IHB shipping company based in Bulgaria, which will initially hire around 60 Kiribati Seafarers with STCW qualifications as part of a pilot program”.⁴⁴ Thus, it is expected that unemployment among i-Kiribati seafarers will decrease if this scheme works well.

5.2.3. ILO Conventions

Kiribati became an ILO member in 2000 and has ratified 11 ILO Conventions, including eight of the ten fundamental Conventions.

Kiribati has ratified two technical ILO Conventions: the MLC, 2006, and Convention No. 185.

Regulatory compliance

Although Kiribati has submitted two reports on its compliance with the MLC, 2006, the ILO CEACR was not totally satisfied with the Government’s implementation of the Convention, and urged the Government to adopt without delay the necessary measures to bring all relevant legislation in full compliance with the MLC, 2006. Notably, this included ensuring in practice that seafarers on board Kiribati-flagged ships are not requested to continue working beyond the default 11-month maximum period of service on board. The CEACR was also concerned by the minimum age of work and the national determination of the definition of “seafarer”.⁴⁵

Regarding Convention No. 185, as of 2020, there appeared to be no specific laws or regulations concerning the issuance of SIDs, although the Kiribati Maritime Act 2017 requires seafarers to obtain a discharge book,

40 Speaking to Human Rights at Sea in 2021, Maersk reported that the Government’s reluctance to permit full repatriation had resulted in a company decision to transfer crewmembers from Australia to Fiji to complete the final leg of the journey via chartered vessel. Though geographically closer to Kiribati, Fiji effectively became a holding area for 165 i-Kiribati seafarers who were unable to complete their journey home earlier in the pandemic due to Kiribati’s strict border closures. The crewmembers stranded in Fiji were no longer receiving basic living wages. Given the circumstances at that time in Fiji, the possibility of relocation fostered apprehension among the seafarers in Brisbane, who continued to receive their basic wages while in Australia. “The Government in Tarawa [the capital of Kiribati] have repeatedly refused our suggestions, including covering all costs, to repatriate the seafarers stranded in Brisbane directly from Australia to Kiribati by plane,” Maersk said at the time (Human Rights at Sea 2021).

41 Maersk’s comment in Human Rights at Sea (2021): “Sadly, and to our disappointment, our efforts with local government and authorities have not produced a successful outcome. As a result, and in order to safeguard our colleagues from a potential tightening of either national, regional or global travel restrictions, we had to make the decision to repatriate all our seafarers from Kiribati and freeze the enlistment of Kiribati nationals. As consequence, we are no longer participating in the partnership between Kiribati, New Zealand and South Pacific Marine Services.”

42 “Has COVID-19 ended seafaring for Kiribati?”, December 2021, <https://devpolicy.org/has-covid-19-ended-seafaring-for-kiribati-20211222/>

43 Questionnaire response by the KTUC, June 2024.

44 Questionnaire response by the KTUC, June 2024. The KTUC also stated that the main foreign maritime companies employing i-Kiribati seafarers at present are “Alpha Pacific Navigation Ltd - Swire Shipping Company, the IHB Shipping Company-Bulgaria, Australian Fishing Enterprises-Australia, Sealord Company -NZ and the KiwiRail-NZ”.

45 CEACR, Direct Request – MLC, 2006 – Kiribati, adopted 2023.

which is an eye-readable document (normal paper document with personal data) issued by the Marine Division of the Ministry of Information, Communication and Transport. In a direct request adopted in 2020, the CEACR requested the Government to adopt the necessary measures to issue SIDs to its seafarers in conformity with the requirements of Convention No. 185,⁴⁶ which will, inter alia, improve national seafarers' competitiveness in the labour market as well as enhance their freedom of movement, which is necessary for both their well-being and their professional activities.

Social partners

The Kiribati Trade Union of Congress (KTUC) represents the main trade unions in Kiribati, with ten affiliated trade unions. The Kiribati Major Employers Organization and the Kiribati Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) are the two major employers' organizations.

5.2.4. Maritime profile

IMO GISIS shows 96 results for ships under Kiribati flag, with 78 vessels if at least 300GT, including 71 of at least 500GT.

Kiribati's fleet is on Grey List of the Tokyo MOU (2020–22), which indicates that Kiribati flagged vessels have an average compliance record with international maritime standards. This reflects an intermediate performance level, leading to a moderate frequency of inspections and potential operational and reputational impacts. For seafarers on board ships flagged by Grey List countries, the main impacts include more frequent and thorough inspections, potential operational delays, increased workload and a need for high compliance standards. These factors can influence their daily work, safety, career prospects and overall welfare. Improving compliance can help a country move to the White List, while deteriorating performance can result in being placed on the Black List.

Reputational impact

Working on ships flagged by a grey-listed country might affect the perceived reputation of the seafarers among employers and in the maritime industry as a whole. Seafarers may face challenges if they seek employment with shipping companies that prefer vessels/seafarers from white-listed countries due to their higher compliance records.

Welfare issues

If a ship is detained due to deficiencies, seafarers might experience disruptions to their routine, which can impact their welfare. Long detention can lead to extended periods away from home and family, potentially causing stress and fatigue.

Kiribati is not a party to the regional Tokyo MOU on port State control. Thus, Kiribati does not participate in coordinated inspection efforts with other countries in the region.

International and domestic maritime transport

Inter-island transportation in Kiribati heavily relies on maritime transportation, with boats and ships serving as the primary mode of travel between the islands. The Government operates inter-island vessels to facilitate transportation and connect remote communities.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ CEACR, Direct Request – Convention No. 185 – Kiribati, adopted 2020.

⁴⁷ In July 2020, it was announced that Kiribati was to receive a \$US12 million grant to help improve the safety and resilience of inter-island transport in the western Gilbert Group. This Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Bank project intended to fund navigation aids and infrastructure on outer islands, including jetties, boat ramps and shelters, following the 2018 sinking of the MV Butiraoi as it travelled from the Gilbert Group to Tarawa, killing 81 people. An investigation identified a litany of failures, including overloading, a damaged ferry, a lack of safety equipment, and an inadequate response (RNZ 2020).

The Kiribati National Shipping Line (KNSL) is the only government-owned shipping company, and it previously provided all shipping services in Kiribati prior to the entry of the private sector (Kiribati, MICTTD 2020, 12). Nowadays, domestic sea transport is largely dominated by private companies, though their presence is only prominent in lucrative sectors. Thus, the KNSL focuses on providing shipping services to those routes not considered to be lucrative by private sector shipping services. Connectivity and accessibility to the outer islands from the capital (South Tarawa) is challenging due to inadequate infrastructure (wharves, ramps, piers and ports) and boat channels and passages. There is a need to improve connectivity and accessibility of shipping services to facilitate international and inter-island trade (Kiribati, Government of Kiribati 2017).

The Kiribati Port Authority (KPA) operates the country's two main ports of entry: Betio port in Tarawa island and the other in Kiritimati island. The primary functions of the KPA are to facilitate the safe passage of cargo and people from overseas vessels through the port and to facilitate border control and statutory processing. Some major projects for the KPA are the Betio port expansion and the Bairiki wharf rehabilitation, which will need major funding that the Government and development partners may assist with.

National maritime administration

Marine Division of the Ministry of Information, Communications and Transport. The Marine Division is the regulatory body responsible for ensuring that IMO conventions signed by the Government are complied with. The Marine Division is also responsible for setting the standards for Kiribati seafarers and fishers through training schemes offered at the Marine Training Centre (MTC). It ensures the training output in compliance with the IMO Conventions, such as the STCW Convention 1978 (as amended) and the STCW-F 1995.⁴⁸ It continues to work closely with the MTC and other key national stakeholders to ensure compliance and to foresee the needs for training development to improve the position of i-Kiribati seafarers in the global maritime market.

The **Ministry of Employment and Human Resources (MEHR)**, through its Labour Division, is responsible for maximizing employment opportunities locally and abroad. It administers i-Kiribati participation in existing labour mobility schemes, including Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme and New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and Sealord fisheries labour mobility initiative.

Through its Employment Unit, the Labour Division works collaboratively with the MTC and the Kiribati Institute of Technology in finding employment for its graduates. Through its Work Relations Unit, the Labour Division also manages the operations and compliance of registered recruitment agencies that find employment for the bulk of MTC graduates (New Zealand, MFAT 2014). Table 2 provides an overview of some of these agencies.

⁴⁸ The work of the Marine Division involves the following: approval of maritime institutes to carry out trainings and certifications; approval of pre-sea training schemes, courses and syllabuses; and approval of training personnel and training simulators (Kiribati, MICT, n.d.).

► **Table 2. Overview of Kiribati recruitment agencies engaged in placing seafarers**

Recruitment agencies	
South Pacific Marine Service (SPMS)	South Pacific Marine Service (SPMS) is a Kiribati-based employment agency owned by a group of six German shipping companies that employ male MTC graduates as deck and engineering ratings and stewards on their vessels. ¹⁵ The relationship between SPMS and MTC is a long one, dating back to 1966 when a Hamburg Sued vessel visited Kiribati to drop off a sick seaman. ¹⁶ This was the start of a relationship that will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2017. In 2013-2014 approximately 700 I-Kiribati seafarers and stewards were employed by SPMS companies. ¹⁷ Prior to the global financial crisis, SPMS companies employed about 1060 I-Kiribati. Over the years SPMS has supported MTC through the funding of MTC staff positions, and providing equipment and resources.
Shipping Agency of Kiribati (SAOK)	The Shipping Agency of Kiribati (SAOK) is a recruitment agent for the Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) which used to employ between 200-300 seafarers and hospitality workers before it moved out of the central Pacific region. While the company no longer employs hospitality workers, about 50 I-Kiribati engineers and two assistant pursers continue to be employed by NCL.
Kiribati Fishing Services (KFS)	This is the largest of the fishing recruitment companies, recruiting FTC graduates for the Japanese Fisheries Association (for pole and line, purse seine and long line vessels).
Kiribati Employment Marine Services, Central Pacific Maritime Agency, Dojin	These are other fishing recruitment agencies seeking FTC graduates to work on Japanese and Korean vessels.

Source: New Zealand, MFAT 2014, 16–17.

The MEHR also coordinates labour mobility initiatives through its National Labour Mobility Working Group and is establishing a national centralized labour market database in collaboration with relevant stakeholders to keep records of jobseekers as part of supporting its marketing initiatives.

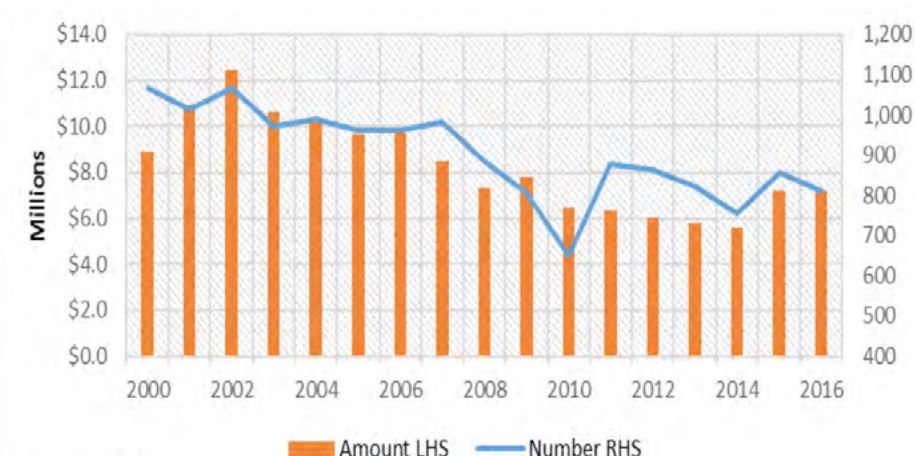
The Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resource Development is the agency responsible for fisheries policy and management. It led the development of the first Kiribati National Fisheries Policy 2013–2025, which set out five strategic objectives for fisheries development.

The Ministry of Women, Youth and Social Affairs was set up in October 2013, and is currently working on a Gender Equity Strategy.

5.2.5. Current dynamics relating to seafaring in Kiribati

Historically many i-Kiribati have been employed throughout the region as seafarers, with their remittances contributing substantially to household incomes. The number of seafarers employed overseas, however, has declined, even before the COVID pandemic, contributing to a fall in remittances. In 2002, nearly 1,100 i-Kiribati seafarers' remitted US\$12.5 million, but by 2016 the number of i-Kiribati seafarers had fallen to roughly 850, who remitted a total of US\$7.2 million (see figure 2 below).

► **Figure 1. Number of i-Kiribati seafarers working abroad and their total remittances (US\$), 2000–2016**



Source: Kiribati, Government of Kiribati 2016.

The employment situation for i-Kiribati seafarers became significantly more dire during the pandemic. Due to repatriation issues, Maersk, one of the main employers of Kiribati's seafarers, froze the enlistment of i-Kiribati nationals in 2021.⁴⁹ The crew-change crisis, which left groups of seafarers from Kiribati and other Pacific countries stranded abroad, may have also had a deterrent effect. The uncertainty and hardships the seafarers faced may have undermined the perceived stability and attractiveness of the maritime profession among younger generations.

Nevertheless, new avenues for employment have recently been secured for i-Kiribati seafarers. On 20 May 2024, a collective bargaining agreement between IHB Shipping and the Kiribati Islands Overseas Seamen's Union (KIOSU) was registered with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and entered into force to employ i-Kiribati seafarers on board IHB Shipping-managed vessels. The first group of i-Kiribati seafarers joined the *MV Antheia* (a Malta flagged vessel) on 5 June 2024 in Cadiz, Spain, and was followed by another group, which set foot on the *MV Diamond Sky* (Malta flagged vessel) in Callao, Peru, on 15 June 2024. This was announced by the company as "a promising start to a beneficial and successful collaboration. IHB Shipping intends to recruit more competent, experienced and motivated seafarers of this nationality for various positions on all managed ships" (IHB Shipping 2024).

Along the same lines, the KTUC noted that a new partnership had been formed with IHB Shipping that "will initially hire around 60 Kiribati Seafarers with STCW qualifications as part of a pilot program".⁵¹

49 Maersk's comment in Human Rights at Sea (2021): "Sadly, and to our disappointment, our efforts with local government and authorities have not produced a successful outcome. As a result, and in order to safeguard our colleagues from a potential tightening of either national, regional or global travel restrictions, we had to make the decision to repatriate all our seafarers from Kiribati and freeze the enlistment of Kiribati nationals. As consequence, we are no longer participating in the partnership between Kiribati, New Zealand and South Pacific Marine Services."

51 Questionnaire response by the KTUC, June 2024. The KTUC also stated that the main maritime foreign companies employing i-Kiribati seafarers at present are: "Alpha Pacific Navigation Ltd - Swire Shipping Company, the IHB Shipping Company-Bulgaria, Australian Fishing Enterprises-Australia, Sealord Company -NZ and the KiwiRail-NZ".

Efforts to address gender underrepresentation in seafaring in Kiribati have benefited from support by the New Zealand Aid Programme, which previously advocated for the establishment of scholarships for women to train at the New Zealand Maritime School (New Zealand, MFAT 2014). This initiative sought to empower women in Kiribati to become officers on vessels not crewed by Kiribati men to avoid some indiscipline issues reported in the past.⁵²

As regards to the potential of employing nationals on board ships under Kiribati flag, it appears currently to be no obligation in national legislation or policy to employ a certain number of i-Kiribati seafarers on commercial ships registered under the Kiribati flag. The same principle applies to i-Kiribati Second Registry office in Singapore.⁵³

As regards to the employment of i-Kiribati seafarers on foreign fishing vessels that are granted license to fish in Kiribati's EEZ, the KTUC noted that there is an approved Fisheries Policy governing the manning of crew for commercial fisheries ships operating within Kiribati waters.⁵⁴ It therefore appears to be important to access this Policy when conducting further research on this topic.

For Kiribati, research has shown that one person's wages are enough to support large extended families. While migrant numbers and remittances have declined, seafaring remains Kiribati's one of the primary labour mobility opportunities, with well-developed training and recruitment arrangements existing in the past (ILO 2019). Consequently, reviving the demand for i-Kiribati seafarers can be considered as a key priority for Kiribati.

As can be seen from the analysis above, it appears to be challenging to get a complete up-to-date picture of the current seafaring dynamics in Kiribati without detailed input from all the national authorities. Thus, it is important to gather further up-to-date information for the period 2022 to present to better understand the current seafaring dynamics in Kiribati and notably to understand how and to what extent the country managed to overcome the COVID-19 issues that affected its long-term partnerships with shipping companies (which can be also identified as a best practice example for other countries in the region). This assessment is expected to be carried out during the following stage of this project.

5.2.6. Maritime education and training

The Marine Training Centre (MTC) is a training school for seafarers and fishermen, founded in 1967 in Betio, Tarawa. Mainly funded by Germany (Hamburg Süd), the European Union, New Zealand and Japan, the MTC is approved to conduct training by the Marine Division of the Ministry of Information, Communication and Transport.

Over the 50-year period since its creation, the MTC has provided training to more than 6,300 persons, 4,520 (72 per cent) of whom have graduated. Although this includes just 78 women.

In 2006, the New Zealand Aid Programme contracted the New Zealand Maritime School to provide institution support and services to the MTC.⁵⁵ Specifically, the project objectives were to improve the MTC's management and strategic planning capacity, staff skills, and the quality, depth and breadth of training services, as well as to increase the participation of women. Among the conclusions of this programme were a need to provide additional support for English language skill development, the need to implement follow-up actions on gender issues, and the need to convene a task force to address discipline issues among Kiribati seafarers (New Zealand, MFAT 2010).

⁵² While previous downturns in the global economy were seen as being a factor in the pre-pandemic decline in the employment of i-Kiribati seafarers, the 2010 Kiribati Diagnostic Trade Integration Study specified that there were also reports of misbehaviour and indiscipline (Kiribati, Government of Kiribati 2010). The New Zealand Aid Programme also previously expressed concerns about the conduct of MTC graduates aboard international ships and the safety of women on board, offering a recommendation to the Government of Kiribati to convene a task force to address discipline issues of Kiribati seafarers (New Zealand, MFAT 2010).

⁵³ Questionnaire response by the KTUC, June 2024.

⁵⁴ Questionnaire response by the KTUC, June 2024.

⁵⁵ The aim of this project was to improve the ability of the MTC, as a maritime training institution, to better contribute to the economic and social well-being and human resource development of Kiribati.

Given that the documented recommendations of the New Zealand Aid Programme in relation to the MTC are now roughly 15 years old, it would be important to evaluate any action that may have been taken on these recommendations, as well as any other support recently provided to the MTC and its outcomes, and if necessary, to renew the engagement of relevant development programme to further enhance the capacity of the MTC. Unfortunately, the MTC did not provide a response to the questionnaire for this study, and it has not been possible to collect up-to-date data regarding the courses provided by the Centre and any challenges it has been facing. It is thus recommended to gather the relevant information as part of the following stage of research.

The improvement of English skills could be addressed through a partnership with the Kiribati Institute of Technology (KIT), which offers awards and short courses for trade and non-trade certificates, and notably it appears to play an important role through its Employment Support Services in providing English, fitness, pre-departure and other trainings in response to employers' demands (Kiribati, Government of Kiribati 2020).

It is also recommended to develop a website for the MTC, as it currently does not seem to have one, although it does have a Facebook page. A website would serve as a platform for disseminating updates, resources and contact details, as well as enhancing visibility and accessibility.

It is important that marine training institutions be responsive to anticipated changes in the industry's human resource needs. The current state of the international maritime workforce with an over-supply of ratings and shortage of officers is well known. Consequently, it appears important for the MTC to provide opportunities to upskill seafarers and to offer officer trainings, at least up to Level 3, and in the long term to Levels 2 and 1.

Further, the increase in autonomous shipping may possibly reduce global demand for seafarers by between 30,000 and 50,000, while at the same time increasing the need for highly skilled remote operators on shore, pilots of a new kind and riding gangs to keep high-tech ships operational (Nautilus International 2018). Therefore, it is recommended during the following stage of research to investigate the measures to be taken to prepare the MTC to timely take on board the necessary courses for these future jobs, as well as to upskill them in relation to the digitalization of shipping.

Employment opportunities for women

Structural change is required in Kiribati if women are to have opportunities for safe employment in sea-based roles. Such change is needed to address the traditional power imbalance between i-Kiribati men and women through women gaining positions of authority and influence as officers and subsequently as instructors at the MTC. In the short term, women may instead take on catering/hospitality course to work on cruise ships. Since 2010 the MTC has offered a ten-month hospitality/catering course that is open to male and female students.

The New Zealand Aid Programme previously issued recommendations to set up scholarships for women (with the required educational levels) to train at the New Zealand Maritime School to become officers on vessels not crewed by i-Kiribati men (New Zealand, MFAT 2014).

5.2.7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for Kiribati across the five axes. In some instances, these recommendations are directed towards potential paths for future research, while others offer more concrete steps for advancing the employment opportunities and well-being of i-Kiribati seafarers – however, future research could serve to examine the feasibility of these latter recommendations in the near term.

1. Regulatory compliance

- **SIDs:** Challenges and mitigation measures related to issuing SIDs to national seafarers in accordance with the requirements of Convention No. 185 have to be addressed. This would enhance the competitiveness of i-Kiribati seafarers in the labour market and improve their freedom of movement, which is essential for both their well-being and their professional activities.
- **MLC, 2006:** All relevant legislation should be fully aligned with the MLC, 2006, ensuring in practice that seafarers on Kiribati-flagged ships are not required to work beyond the standard maximum service period of 11 months, that the minimum working age for seafarers is respected, and that the national definition of “seafarer” is appropriately determined.⁵⁶
- **Flag State obligations:** Kiribati should fully implement its obligations as a flag State to ensure compliance with international standards on vessels under its flag, with the aim of being removed from the Tokyo MOU Grey List.

2. Capacity-building and maritime education

- **Strengthening seafarers’ training:** It is advised to collect more comprehensive data on training courses, recognition of qualifications, student enrollment and the challenges currently faced by the Marine Training Centre (MTC). This will help ensure that seafarers are adequately prepared to meet both current and future industry demands.
- **Promote certification and recognition:** It is paramount to ensure that Kiribati seafarers continue receiving internationally recognized certifications and qualifications, which will enhance their employability and opportunities for career advancement in the global maritime industry.
- It is advised to consider including appropriate training in the MTC curriculum to adapt to future shipping (digitalization, automatization, remote pilots) as well as a seafarers’ rights awareness course grounded in the MLC, 2006.
- **Soft skills development:** Several earlier studies reported cases of Kiribati seafarers’ misbehaviour and indiscipline aboard international ships, pointing this out as one of the potential reasons for the decline of the employment of Kiribati seafarers. In the past, New Zealand recommended to the Government of Kiribati that it convene a task force to address discipline issues of Kiribati seafarers. It is thus recommended that this issue be addressed appropriately, which may include introducing relevant courses (soft skills training) as part of seafarer training.
- **Web resources of the MTC:** It is recommended to develop a website for the MTC. Although it has a Facebook page, a website would serve as a comprehensive platform for disseminating updates, resources and contact details, as well as enhancing visibility and accessibility.
- The Government is encouraged to consider implementing recommendations and strategies formulated in the Kiribati Development Plan 2020–2023 to further match national training programmes to local and overseas demand, notably:
 - i. Training more officers than ordinary seaman, because our seafaring workers are facing strict competition for the same types of jobs from other countries;

⁵⁶ As per CEACR, Direct Request – Kiribati – MLC, 2006, adopted 2023.

- ii. Raising enrolments in the Certificates in English and Hospitality offered through KIT, because in all overseas jobs one of the main skills required is English proficiency;
- iii. Increasing intakes at MTC and KIT in caregiving and other identified needs;
- iv. Raising the qualification level at KIT for the Trade and Non-Trade Certificate III and above and offering nursing programmes at KNS at an advanced diploma level; and ...
- v. Increasing enrolments in hospitality courses at KIT over the next four years, with tourism identified as a potential area for economic diversification (Kiribati, Government of Kiribati 2020. 34).

3. Seafarers' employment and welfare

- Lessons learned from the crew change crisis of the COVID pandemic have to be analysed and the associated challenges to enhancing seafarer welfare and improving employment opportunities need to be examined.
- **Guarantees in cases of repatriation:** It is recommended to consider reliable guarantees to be provided and suitable protocols established to ensure cooperation in the repatriation of i-Kiribati seafarers in crisis situations similar to COVID-19 in order to regain the confidence of employment partners, including foreign shipping companies.⁵⁷
- In general, the challenges related to employment in the local maritime sector need to be assessed and addressed accordingly.

4. Partnerships and employment incentives

- Restoring or establishing new partnerships with international shipping companies should be considered. As noted above, a new partnership has been formed with the IHB shipping company based in Bulgaria, which will initially hire around 60 Kiribati seafarers as part of a pilot program, according to the KTUC.⁵⁸ The existence of such an employment agreement with a European company may be considered a potential example of good practice – particularly in the current context, wherein some European employers suspended the recruitment of Pacific seafarers in 2021 (Kiribati) due to ongoing challenges with repatriation. Should the relevant authorities be willing to share the agreement, it could be examined more closely to assess its value as a model for other countries.
- **Fishing:** The Government may consider in future granting fishing licenses for its EEZ on the condition that the licensed foreign vessels employ a certain number or percentage of i-Kiribati seafarers. In this respect, the KTUC said that there is an approved Fisheries Policy governing the manning of crew for commercial fisheries ships operating within Kiribati waters, but it was not viewed for this study. It is therefore important to access this Policy for analysis at the next stage of the research.
- **Secure job positions on vessels under Kiribati flag:** To secure job positions for nationals on board vessels under Kiribati flag, the Government may consider putting in place an obligation or various incentives for vessels under the national flag to employ a certain percentage of i-Kiribati seafarers (for example, similar to French second registry RIF – see section 3.5 above) or to increase employment opportunities through crewing arrangements with shipping companies.

57 Human Rights at Sea and Mission to Seafarers Brisbane have together outlined several recommendations to help facilitate the repatriation of i-Kiribati seafarers and to secure their futures in the international maritime industry, as follows :

- Australia and New Zealand should become instrumental in establishing suitable systems and protocols in conjunction with the Kiribati Government to manage the safe repatriation of i-Kiribati seafarers.
- A pandemic/crisis-safe travel bubble between the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand should be considered as an alternative to otherwise challenging international crew change systems (Human Rights at Sea 2021).

58 Questionnaire response by the KTUC, June 2024

- **Diversify employment opportunities:** Given the decline in unemployment rates, efforts should be made to diversify employment opportunities beyond seafaring. This could include investing in vocational training programmes and promoting entrepreneurship to create alternative sources of income for unemployed youth and women.
- **Tourism:** Tourism is another sector to be considered for the development, as there is strong potential for specialty tourism, such as birding, diving and sport fishing. Seafarers changing their professional track can be employed in such activities.

5. Gender equality

- Over the long term, it is recommended to address the lack of equal educational opportunities for girls from an early age, particularly in subjects that would support maritime careers. This imbalance limits the pool of qualified female candidates for seafaring roles. Gender equality initiatives aimed at addressing disparities in education and employment opportunities, starting from the general education system, can help break traditional gender roles.
- Over the medium term, supporting women to attain leadership and instructor roles at maritime training institutions will provide role models and help shift perceptions about women's capabilities in seafaring.
- In the short term, it is advised to envisage incentives for ships under Kiribati flag – particularly cruise vessels – to employ women seafarers, in nautical and non-nautical (such as, hospitality) positions.
- It should be noted that some reports recommend assigning women officers to vessels that are not crewed by i-Kiribati men.
- Recent efforts to support the inclusion of Fijian women in seafaring (Pratiwi and Marzaman 2024) can serve as a potential example of broader initiatives promoting female participation in the sector.

5.3. Tonga

5.3.1. Demographic, geographic and economic profile

Tonga comprises an archipelago of some 170 islands that extends north–south in two parallel chains for roughly 800 km. The eastern islands are low and formed of coral limestone; those in the west are mountainous and of volcanic origin.

Tonga faces many of the challenges typical among SIDS including geographical isolation, limited human and financial resources, and high costs of doing business and providing basic services. The economy has a narrow base and is dependent on inflows of remittances and external assistance, while the country is highly vulnerable to external shocks (ADB 2024).

The country has a developing free-market economy based mainly on agriculture. Chief products include fish, coconuts, sweet potatoes and bananas. Timber production, livestock raising and fishing also contribute to Tonga's economy.

Remittances from Tongans working overseas – especially in New Zealand, the United States and Australia –and tourism have both contributed significantly to the growth of the Tongan economy.

Fisheries

The major commercial fisheries activities in Tonga are: tuna longlining; deepwater droplining for snapper and grouper; harvesting of seaweed; harvesting of corals, invertebrates and fish for the ornamental aquarium trade; and the charter of vessels for whale watching, game fishing and scuba diving. Tonga is the leading producer of deep-slope bottom fish in the Pacific Islands region (FAO, n.d.-a).

Tuna and snapper fishing fleets operate out of the Nuku'alofa harbor, and the city is Tonga's main market for fishery products.

A minimum two national observers must be employed on board foreign fishing vessels granted license to fish in the EEZ of Tonga.⁵⁹ Most fishing vessels with such a license appear to be owned by Chinese companies with a mix of Chinese and Indonesian crew. There does not seem to be a requirement to employ Tongan fishermen in the crew of such vessels. This represents a significant missed opportunity for Tongan fishermen in terms of job prospects.⁶⁰

Tongan authorities also report a decrease in the number of vessels operating in its EEZ, which has reduced employment opportunities for national observers, leading them to seek alternative employment.⁶¹

Recreational fishing

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (n.d.), although subsistence fishing may have a large social component and be enjoyed by the participants, there is little recreational fishing as a leisure activity for villagers. There are fishing clubs in Tongatapu and Vava'u. Most members of the clubs are expatriate residents of Tonga. Commercial game fishing (mostly open-ocean trolling) is a popular tourist activity, especially in Vava'u where several commercial sport fishing vessels are registered. There appears to be no active management of the recreational subsector, with one exception: the Fisheries Management Act states, "No fishing vessel shall be used for reward or hire for sport fishing in the fisheries waters without a commercial sport fishing vessel license issued by the Secretary" (section 30(1)).

59 "For foreign vessels usually two (2) local observers as a minimum according to the current crew policy of the Ministry of Fisheries", as per the consolidated questionnaire responses from Tongan stakeholders, July 2024.

60 Questionnaire response by FISUI, July 2024.

61 Consolidated questionnaire responses from Tongan stakeholders, July 2024.

5.3.2. COVID-19 impact

According to Asia Development Bank, among Tonga's main challenges are sustaining economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and creating jobs for its youth. Tonga's relatively limited business environment restricts the ability of the ADB⁶² and other development partners to source local contractors and consultants to implement development activities (ADB 2024).⁶³

Tonga has been working to recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, with several initiatives aimed at revitalizing the economy and addressing ongoing social issues. Key efforts include hosting significant regional meetings like the 53rd Pacific Islands Forum in August 2024 to boost international cooperation and regional development.

5.3.3. ILO Conventions

Tonga has not ratified any of the ILO Conventions relevant to seafarers.⁶⁴ This appears to be a major shortcoming for a country with important maritime and seafaring culture.

The Friendly Island Seafarer's Union Incorporated (FISUI) stated in its questionnaire response that in 2016 it had submitted a proposal of concern for the ratification of MLC, 2006, to the Ministry of Trade and Economic Development. Currently, the MLC, 2006, is still under review by the Tonga National Tripartite Consultation Committee.⁶⁵

Ratifying the MLC, 2006, would signify Tonga's dedication to promoting the rights and welfare of seafarers and would offer a responsible image of the country within the international maritime community. By ratifying the MLC, 2006, Tonga would contribute to improving the welfare and well-being of its national seafarers and seafarers working on ships under its flag.

In their consolidated questionnaire response, Tongan authorities explained that there has been no discussion regarding potential ratification of Convention No. 185, but that there is an active interest in the ratification of the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188).⁶⁶

5.3.4. Maritime profile

Tonga relies on maritime transportation for local and regional trade, fishing and tourism.

Nuku'alofa and Neiafu are ports used for external shipping. Nuku'alofa is the capital and chief port of Tonga on the northern shore of Tongatapu Island. Its deep-draft harbor is protected by reefs.

Tonga heavily relies on the import of essential commodities like fuel and food, with over 98 per cent of these imports arriving via sea routes. The Queen Salote International Wharf at Nuku'alofa Port plays a pivotal role in Tonga's economic landscape, overseeing the handling of more than 95 per cent of the nation's total containerized volume. Co-financed by the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific, the ADB and the Tonga Government, the ongoing Nuku'alofa Port Upgrade Project aims at the rehabilitation, renewal and expensing of the existing infrastructure of the Nuku'alofa Port, as well as improving its management and operations practices (APIBC 2023).

62 The ADB is providing technical assistance to build the capacity of the government in improving gender outcomes, private sector development, international arbitration, climate and disaster resilience, social protection, water and energy supply, domestic transport networks, and public sector management (ADB 2024).

63 In 2023, Tonga received a US\$20-million additional grant cofinancing from the Government of Australia for the Nuku'alofa Port Upgrade Project and a US\$3-million grant cofinancing from the Japan Fund for Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific for the Integrated Aged Care Project. A summary of projects with cofinancing from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2023 is available at: <https://www.adb.org/where-we-work/tonga/cofinancing>.

64 Indeed, Tonga has ratified only one ILO instrument – the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182).

65 Questionnaire response by FISUI, July 2024.

66 Consolidated questionnaire responses from Tongan stakeholders, July 2024.

Maritime fleet

The IMO GISIS shows 96 entries for all types of ships under Tonga flag, including 70 ships of at least 300 GT.

Tonga is not a party to Tokyo MOU; however, it holds observer status.

The maritime industry in Tonga can be viewed as consisting of two major components. These are, first, the international shipping sector, bringing in the country's imports and taking away exports, and second, the domestic shipping sector, which provides the internal inter-island transport system (FISUI 2016).

Domestic shipping

Although domestic shipping could be seen as a first source of employment for Pacific seafarers, allowing them to work close to home, the Tongan domestic shipping sector, like in some other countries in the region, is prone to poor working conditions, insecurity and low wages, which make it less attractive to national seafarers.

In a 2016 strategy proposal, FISUI condemned, among others, the substandard condition of Tonga's domestic fleet and poor operational aspects.⁶⁷ The trade union proposed several measures to improve the current situation in domestic seafaring, including: restructuring Tongan maritime administration, upgrading domestic ports and facilities (infrastructure), and upgrading the country's Maritime Training Institute.⁶⁸

Tongan stakeholders

The **Ministry of Trade and Economic Development** is the lead government agency in Tonga with responsibility for labour and employment issues.

The **Marine and Ports Division of the Ministry of Infrastructure** is the national agency responsible for overseeing the strategic development of the Tongan maritime and shipping industry⁶⁹.

Ports Authority Tonga is a public entity that manages and maintains the operations and assets of the ports, encouraging the development of commercially viable and efficient ports in Tonga (Tonga, Ports Authority, n.d.).

Employers are primarily represented by the Tonga Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Workers' organizations include the Tonga Public Service Association and Friendly Islands Seafarer's Union Incorporated (FISUI). **FISUI** was registered with the Tongan Government in January 2006 and became affiliated with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) in April 2011. Although FISUI is considered a non-governmental organization, its work directly or indirectly assists the people of Tonga and the Tongan economy.

FISUI's objectives include promoting and protecting the interests and welfare of Tongan seafarers by providing training compliant with international standards. FISUI also aims to create programmes that run ILO Convention classes for Tongan seafarers, which may require hiring maritime instructors from the United States, New Zealand and Australia to assist. Additionally, FISUI intends to apply for scholarships for Tongan officers to study in Fiji, New Zealand, Australia or the United States, including through the East-West Centre in Hawaii. They also seek employment opportunities for Tongan seafarers with international shipping lines.

67 In 2016 the FISUI denounced the neglect of the domestic maritime infrastructure sector, which consists of transport from individual islands and villages to the main centres, where they can catch the larger ferries to Nuku'alofa. It highlighted that in "the last two years [2014–16] Tonga has had its worst maritime disasters in history, where 77 fatalities resulted". The FISUI highlighted the poor working conditions of the domestic seafarers, which it said were being paid less than \$80.00 per fortnight, without safety working clothes and leave. According to the FISUI, the minimum working conditions foreseen in the Shipping Act were not being enforced by the administration: "No shipping articles or work contracts are being used in most of the domestic fleet, as specified in the Shipping Act" (FISUI 2016).

68 The FISUI proposed in 2016 a "Strategy for a Successful 5-Year Plan" with an implementation plan and financial breakdown. In the Strategy the FISUI concludes that a better maritime infrastructure coverage of the Tongan islands, with a safe, regular, affordable, efficient and effective maritime transport infrastructure system, would also contribute to providing more employment opportunities for Tongan nationals, while assisting the development of the tourism industry, and promoting the internal trading and export of agricultural, fishing and other cultural and traditional commodities (FISUI 2016).

69 For the list of shipping companies and agents see: <http://moi.gov.to/divisions/marine-ports>.

FISUI would like to introduce maritime training to secondary schools in Tonga and the outer islands to increase the number of Tongan seafarers in the overseas labour market. With the help of the ITF, they plan to start a welfare system for Tongan seafarers.

5.3.5. Current dynamics relating to seafaring in Tonga

The ILO underlines in recent Tonga fact sheet that temporary labour migration – generally into the maritime, seafaring and fisheries sector – has played a longstanding role in addressing the lack of employment opportunities in Tonga. In 2020, there were 74,550 Tongans abroad, and personal remittances accounted for 38.3 per cent of GDP – the highest share of GDP among the PICs (ILO 2024b).

However, Tongan seafarers are currently facing difficulties in finding employment due to the global maritime industry's downturn during and after the pandemic. The decline in international shipping activities and stringent health regulations have significantly affected job opportunities for seafarers, who are crucial to the Tongan economy. Efforts to mitigate this include exploring alternative employment opportunities and advocating for better international cooperation to safeguard the livelihoods of seafarers.

In this respect, FISUI in their questionnaire response pointed to the following as the main reasons behind the unemployment of Tonga seafarers:

- a) maritime school lost its spot on the IMO whitelist in 2009 due to deficiencies found during auditing;
- b) competitive wage rates offered by employers in other industrial areas, especially in terms of labor mobility schemes;
- c) the number of employees in the maritime industry in Tonga being higher than the available jobs;
- d) the Tongan seafarer's market is not well recognized worldwide.⁷⁰

Indeed, in the past, Tongan seafarers had experienced difficulties in job prospects linked to the 2010 closure of the Tonga Maritime Polytechnical Institute (TMPI) for non-compliance with the STCW 1995. Many Tongan seafarers on both international and local shipping fleets lost their jobs because their certification was no longer re-validated or renewed by the TMPI. They then had to resort to maritime institutions in Fiji and New Zealand to renew and revalidate their certification, which was quite expensive (Tonga, PMO 2019).

5.3.6. Maritime education and training

The Tonga Maritime Polytechnical Institute (TMPI) was established in 1985 through a German aid programme and offered maritime and shore-based courses. In 2010, the TMPI was closed due to its noncompliance with the STCW 1995 requirements following an audit of the institution conducted by the IMO. The major deficiencies that the audit discovered included:

- not following the STCW Quality Manual;
- non-compliance of the facilities, such as the lack of an assimilator and the lack of fire-fighting equipment for training; and
- shortage of local qualified lecturers to conduct and run the training courses (Tonga, PMO 2019).

In 2019, the ownership, operation and management of the TMPI was transferred from the Ministry of Education and Training (MET) to the Friends Islands Shipping Agency (FISA) (Tonga, PMO 2019). This was motivated by challenges met by the Ministry to maintain the Institute at the level required by the STCW 1995, which was necessary to ensure international recognition of the Institute.

⁷⁰ Questionnaire response by FISUI, July 2024.

Speaking at the time, Prime Minister Samuela 'Akilisi Pohiva said:

[The] Cabinet's decision was difficult but necessary. Our local interisland shipping fleets are suffering because of the lack of qualified seamen. Our local fishing fleets are being forced to recruit crew and fishermen from Indonesia. We are unable to provide certified Tongan crew under agreement for shipping fleets in Europe and other parts of the world because TMPI had been shut down. Cabinet decided that the only way we can revive TMPI is to transfer it from MET to FISA (Tonga, PMO 2019).

The following seven programmes are currently offered by TMPI:

- General Practice Rating;
- Able Seafarer Deck and Engine;
- Master Class 4;
- Master Class 5;
- Master Class 6;
- Dangerous Cargo;
- Basic Safety of Life at Sea.

According to FISUI, 35 deck and engine officers of class 5 graduated from the TMPI in 2023, and there were 25 new recruitments to the TMPI for the General Practice Rating course for the same year. In 2024, the TMPI graduated 30 on deck and engine officers (Class 4). Ten General Purpose Rating students enrolled in 2024.⁷¹

FISUI identifies the lack of access to the highest maritime qualifications – Master Class 3 to 1 – as one of the major challenges reported by Tongan seafarers in their search for the employment: “Seafarers often face challenges when looking for a job due to limitations on their Certificates of Competency. For those aspiring to become foreign-going officers, they can only obtain the required certification from institutions in New Zealand and Australia within our region, but most cannot afford it.”⁷²

The Tonga Ministry of Infrastructure's Marine and Ports Division's approved in 2023 the Northeast Maritime Institute's (NMI's)⁷³ online Basic Safety Refresher and Maritime Security training, which is required under the STCW Convention (NMI, n.d.). This approval indicates that there is no appropriate in-house capacity to provide such training.

The approved programme⁷⁴ is specifically designed for Tongan seafarers to learn through the NMI's online system, NEMO. Once the online component is completed, a practical assessment portion is undertaken at the TMPI with the assistance of NMI-trained instructors and assessors. Completion of the NEMO training and the practical assessment allows a Tonga credentialed seafarers to renew their STCW Certificate of Proficiency through the Government of Tonga.

FISUI considers it essential to “improv[e] the standards of training for seafarers and other relevant courses in the maritime school” as one of the essential factors for the development and sustainability of the maritime sector in Tonga. It considers:

71 The FISUI specified that this certification will allow them to work as officers on Tongan-flagged domestic vessels, and if they wish to work on foreign-going vessel they will be treated as Able Bodied or Engine-rated seafarers.

72 Questionnaire response by FISUI, July 2024.

73 For more detailed information about the United States-based NMI, see section 5.1.6 above.

74 There are two specific Tonga training packages: “Package A for Ordinary Seafarers, Deck Ratings, and Engine Ratings” and “Package B for Able Seafarer Deck, Able Seafarer Engine, Watchkeeper Deck and Watchkeeper Engine”.

The current focus of the maritime school on specific areas of the industry, based on the qualifications and preferences of current instructors, does not align with the demands of the market. It would be beneficial to offer courses in fishing, logistics, supply chain training, freight forwarding and ship brokerage, and dock worker training to enhance the industry in Tonga. This will also contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals across the industry.⁷⁵

Improving training and certification standards are imperative to ensure competitiveness of Tonga seafarers in the global market. Addressing these issues is critical for the recovery and future resilience of Tonga's seafaring community and are recommended to be addressed during the follow-up field study.

5.3.7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for Tonga across the five axes. In some instances, these recommendations are directed towards potential paths for future research, while others offer more concrete steps for advancing the employment opportunities and well-being of Tongan seafarers.

1. Regulatory compliance

- It is recommended to address challenges related to ratification of the MLC, 2006, Convention No. 185 and Convention No. 188, as well as to consider putting in place legislative and institutional frameworks for their implementation. By ratifying the MLC, 2006, Tonga would contribute to improving the welfare and well-being of seafarers working on ships under its flag.
- Challenges and mitigation measures to ensure regulatory compliance in the domestic shipping should be considered as a topic for research.

2. Maritime education and training

- It is recommended to ensure that training and certification standards – including curriculum, facilities and equipment – meet the requirements of STCW 1978 and in particular its amendments. Regular compliance monitoring should be conducted to ensure alignment with IMO requirements and to prevent the risk of the school's closure, as experienced in the past.
- It is advised to consider introducing courses that take on board new and future trends in the maritime sector, such as automatization, zero emissions and remote vehicle operation.
- The relevance and potential benefits of offering advanced Certification of Competency courses (such as Master Class Levels 3 to 1) to access broader market opportunities should be explored, at least in the long term, and potential donors should be identified. FISUI considers the lack of access to the highest maritime qualifications as one of the major challenges reported by Tongan seafarers in their search for the employment.
- It is recommended for the Tonga maritime training institution to consider the inclusion of Basic Safety Refresher and Maritime Security training in its curriculum as per the STCW Convention 1978, as amended. Currently this is being delivered by the US-based NMI.
- It is recommended to explore the possibility of introducing courses proposed by Tonga authorities – such as in fishing, logistics, supply chain management, freight forwarding, ship brokerage and dock worker training⁷⁶ – to broaden the training programmes and to encompass additional sectors within the maritime industry, or as career transition path for the former seafarers.
- The introduction of remote/blended courses should be considered, when relevant.

⁷⁵ Questionnaire response by FISUI, July 2024.

⁷⁶ Consolidated questionnaire responses from Tongan stakeholders, July 2024.

- A clear decision should be made between introducing new courses (over the short, medium and long-terms) as suggested above and/or, as alternative, establishing potential synergies and partnerships with other institutions – particularly for courses not currently offered in Tonga.
- For greater visibility and, consequently, increased credibility, it is recommended to develop a website for the Tonga maritime training institution. A well-structured and regularly updated website would also:
 - Facilitate communication with international partners, recruiters, and alumni;
 - Provide up-to-date information on training programmes, certifications and admission procedures;
 - Promote transparency and institutional professionalism;
 - Attract potential students, including from neighbouring countries;
 - Support applications for international funding and technical assistance by showcasing the institution's achievements and needs;
 - Offer a platform for publishing news, events and job placement opportunities for graduates;
 - Contribute to regional and global recognition of Tongan maritime training, strengthening its presence within the wider maritime education and training community.

3. Seafarer employment and welfare

- **International shipping.** It is advised to evaluate the lessons learned from the crew change crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and to examine how the associated challenges have been addressed to enhance seafarer welfare and improve employment opportunities.
- **Domestic shipping.** Challenges of employment in the local maritime sector need to be addressed accordingly. In this context, it is recommended to follow up on the 2016 FISUI strategy proposal (regarding inter alia restructuring Tongan maritime administration, upgrading domestic ports and facilities, and upgrading the country's maritime training institution) by assessing the Government's response and any implementation progress, as well as by engaging with national stakeholders to identify further steps and potential support for improving domestic seafaring conditions.
- **Advocacy for seafarers.** It is recommended to promote awareness of the work carried out by the seafarers' trade union FISUI and its support to seafarers.

4. Securing jobs for national seafarers in commercial shipping

- Partnerships with foreign shipping companies (commercial, cruise, fishing, offshore) for the employment of national seafarers and graduates from the TMPI should be explored, incorporating best practices from other countries.
- It is recommended to consider incentives/partnerships with foreign shipping companies granted permits to fish in Tonga's EEZ. According to available information, a minimum of two national observers must be employed on board foreign fishing vessels granted license to fish in the EEZ of Tonga.⁷⁷ There does not seem to be a requirement to employ Tonga fishermen in the crew of such vessels, which represents a significant missed opportunity for Tonga in terms of promoting the job prospects of Tongan seafarers.⁷⁸
- Incentives for ships under national flag to employ national seafarers shall be explored.

⁷⁷ Consolidated questionnaire responses from Tongan stakeholders, July 2024.

⁷⁸ Questionnaire response by FISUI, July 2024.

5. Gender equality

- Over the long term, it is recommended to address the lack of equal educational opportunities for girls from an early age, particularly in subjects that would support maritime careers. This imbalance limits the pool of qualified female candidates for seafaring roles. Gender equality initiatives aimed at addressing disparities in education and employment opportunities, starting from the general education system, can help break traditional gender roles.
- Over the medium term, supporting women to attain leadership and instructor roles at maritime training institutions will provide role models and help shift perceptions about women's capabilities in seafaring.
- In the short term, it is advised to envisage incentives for ships under Tongan flag – particularly cruise vessels – to employ women seafarers, in nautical and non-nautical (such as, hospitality) positions.
- **Scholarship programmes and international support:** Programmes like New Zealand's scholarship initiative proposed for i-Kiribati women to train for officer roles⁷⁹ can be expanded to other PICs, including Tonga. Such international support can significantly increase women's access to training and higher positions in seafaring. The country may also consider examining initiatives undertaken in other countries of the region, such as efforts to support the inclusion of Fijian women in seafaring (Pratiwi and Marzaman 2024).

⁷⁹ For this and other gender review and strengthening proposals see New Zealand, MFAT, *Evaluation of New Zealand support for the Marine Training Centre, Kiribati*, 2014.

5.4. Tuvalu

5.4.1. Demographic, geographic and economic profile

Tuvalu is the fourth-smallest country in the world, with its population of around 11,000 spreads across nine islands that rise less than five meters above sea level, underscoring its extraordinary challenges from climate change. Tuvalu has an EEZ of roughly 900,000 square kilometres, and even by Pacific Island standards, it is considered to be quite isolated (FAO, n.d.-b).

Tuvalu is a member of Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and one of the three least-developed countries in the Pacific (Tuvalu, MOFT, Department of Trade 2021).

Tuvalu's primary economic activities are fishing⁸⁰ and subsistence farming, with income from foreign fishing licenses allowing access to its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) being a major source of government revenue⁸¹. The country's income is primarily derived from fishing licenses⁸², development assistance, licensing of internet domain names, and remittances from seafarers and labour migrants.

The per capita income in Tuvalu is significantly higher than in many other PICs – at US\$5,433 – largely due to offshore income, including maritime employment and remittances from seafarers and workers overseas. Tuvalu is classified as an upper middle-income country by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (ILO 2024c).

The public sector is the largest employer in Tuvalu, employing almost two thirds (66 per cent) of paid workers (Tuvalu, Government of Tuvalu 2022). The working-age population is estimated at 6,400, with a labour force participation rate of 24.9 per cent. The labour force participation rate is higher for men (29.6 per cent) than women, with only around one fifth of working-age women in the labour force (20 per cent). Employment is concentrated in the services sector (53 per cent), with 18.2 per cent in industry and 9.1 per cent in agriculture. Around a quarter (24.3 per cent) of employed persons are in the informal economy. The unemployment rate is 7.9 per cent, rising to 18.6 per cent for youth. Nearly three quarters (71.1 per cent) of youth are not in employment, education or training (NEET) (ILO 2024c).

5.4.2. COVID-19 impact

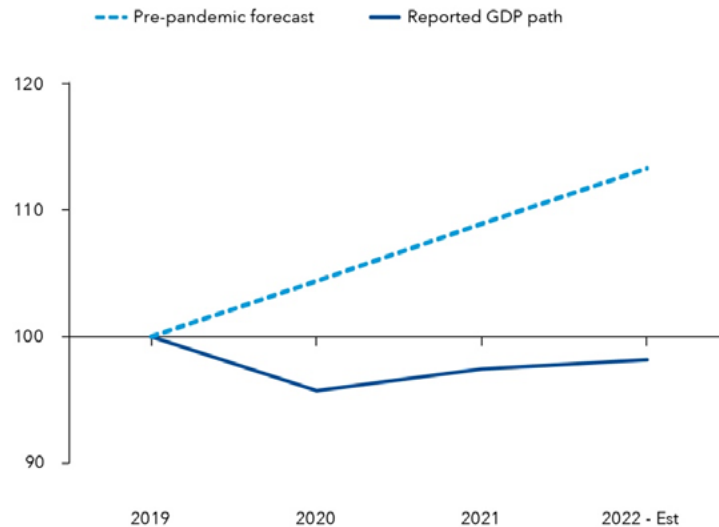
The containment measures swiftly implemented by the Tuvaluan authorities at the onset of the pandemic helped keep Tuvalu COVID-free, but they took a toll on economic activity, impacting construction and tourism-related activities (IMF 2021). According to an IMF article from July 2023, economic activity remained below pre-pandemic levels, much-needed climate adaptation projects had been delayed, fiscal pressures had risen and outbound migration was clouding Tuvalu's growth potential (Cerdeiro, Merga and Redl 2023).

80 There are two major categories of fisheries in the country: (1) the small-scale subsistence and commercial fisheries of the lagoons, reefs, slopes, and nearby ocean areas; and (2) the industrial¹ tuna fisheries that occur in the offshore areas of the Tuvalu fishery waters. Tuna fishing supports substantial purse seine and longline fisheries (FAO, n.d.-b).

81 Access fees have formed an important part of Government revenue for many years, but with the advent of the Purse Seine Vessel Day Scheme (VDS) in 2010, these have risen sharply and now account for more than half of Government revenues. Other benefits from the oceanic fishery include employment – mainly of fisheries observers at present – and economic activity around transshipment in Funafuti lagoon. The Government, through the National Fishing Corporation of Tuvalu (NAFICOT) is also a partner in several joint venture fishing operations (FAO, n.d.-b).

82 Among the Tuvalu Fisheries Department priorities mentioned in the Department's Corporate Plan 2020–2022 are the following:

- developing employment in the fishing sector;
- supporting sustainable development of small-scale fisheries for livelihoods, food security and healthier diets through training, FAD deployment, safety at sea initiatives and building a larger class of vessel for offshore fishing;
- development of staff capacity and systems to ensure that training and staff management meet the requirements for the work;
- promoting education on fisheries issues including materials for schools and recording traditional knowledge (Tuvalu, MOFT, Fisheries Department 2020a).

► **Figure 2. Impact of the COVID pandemic on GDP in Tuvalu, 2019–22 (2019 = 100 per cent)**

Source: Cerdeiro, Merga and Redl 2023⁸³.

Kiribati and Tuvalu were among the first countries to strictly close their borders when the WHO declared the pandemic and they have remained free from COVID-19. But the price has been that most of their own nationals stranded overseas could not get home, including students and sailors. The resulting crew-change crisis left groups of seamen from Kiribati and Tuvalu stranded abroad. The uncertainty and hardships faced by these stranded crews may have created a deterrent effect, casting doubt on the stability and appeal of the profession among younger Tuvaluans.

5.4.3. ILO Conventions

Tuvalu has ratified two ILO Conventions: the MLC, 2006, and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182).

Tuvalu is not a party to Convention No. 185. Countries not party to Convention No. 185 may face challenges in operational inefficiencies, competitive disadvantages and increased costs in the near future. Moreover, seafarers from these countries may encounter more difficulties in international travel and employment opportunities. As the ITF explains: “ILO 185 has two key aims: to uphold security and allow the deserved and necessary passage of seafarers on shore leave and in transit” (ITF 2015).

Tuvalu is also not a party to the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188), which aims to ensure decent conditions of work regarding minimum requirements for work on board; conditions of service; accommodation and food; occupational safety and health protection; medical care and social security. It is also a valuable tool in eliminating forced labour and child labour in the fishing sector.

Tuvalu’s social partners include the Tuvalu Seafarers Union representing workers and the Tuvalu National Private Sector Organization representing employers.

83 “Tuvalu Needs to Build Resilience Amid Threat from Rising Seas”, by Diego A. Cerdeiro, Roman D. Merga and Chris Redl, July 26, 2023, IMF, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2023/07/26/cf-tuvalu-needs-to-build-resilience-amid-threat-from-rising-seas>

MLC, 2006

Upon submission of its first report, the CEACR addressed a direct request to the Government in 2023 where it brought to its attention areas in which national legal framework that Tuvalu needs to improve to be in compliance with the MLC, 2006. This including a recommendation to take necessary measures to ensure full conformity with requirements related to the types of work that are likely to jeopardize the health and safety of seafarers under 18 years. The CEACR also requested the Government take necessary measures to fix a maximum number of hours of work for seafarers.⁸⁴ Addressing the issues raised by the CEACR would allow to achieve better working conditions for seafarers on vessels under Tuvalu flag.

5.4.4. Maritime profile

The effectiveness and efficiency of maritime transport are integral to the economic development of Tuvalu. The nation is served by an international container shipping service and bulk fuel delivery through the main port in Funafuti.

Domestic transshipment

Domestic transshipment to the islands is provided by government-owned ships, which are the only means of transport between the islands. The government fleet includes two passenger-cargo ships operated by the Ministry of Transport, Energy and Tourism, a fisheries research vessel, a vessel used for a variety of development tasks and a patrol boat. The passenger-cargo ships travel from Funafuti to the outer islands and to Fiji, so each island only has access to these ships once every two to three weeks. In addition to regular services, these ships are occasionally used for medical evacuations. They also carry students between Funafuti, Vaitupu and Fiji, where secondary or higher-level education is available. These ships therefore not only provide lifeline support to the Tuvaluan people, but also play a vital role in keeping communities connected (Australia, AIFFP 2023).

Maritime fleet

According to data provided to IMO GISIS, Tuvalu has an important fleet. The database shows 519 results for all types of ships under Tuvalu flag, with 481 vessels being at least 300GT, including 447 of at least 500GT.

Tuvalu has an open registry, which offers competitive pricing in comparison to other international registries. The Tuvalu national fleet is managed by a Singapore-based agency that oversees the operational and administrative aspects of vessels registered under the Tuvalu flag. This also promotes Tuvalu as an attractive registry for international shipping companies due to its tax and regulatory benefits.

There are a range of advantages and benefits that owners of Tuvalu flagged vessels enjoy, which include special discounted fees for, for example, a fleet of three or more vessels registered within a period of 12 months and vessels that have an excellent port state control record. There is no restriction on the nationality of officers or crew. And the website of the Tuvalu Ship Registry specifies that Tuvalu is a party to the STCW Convention with a reputable maritime training school providing well trained and hardworking seamen to shipowners worldwide. While there is no obligation to employ national seafarers, this statement suggests a potential opportunity for employing nationals.

To provide more chances for national seafarers to be employed on board these vessels under national flag, it is recommended to consider special discounted fees for their employment, which might increase in proportion to the number of Tuvaluan seafarers employed. There is also the more stringent possibility of requiring vessels to employ a certain percentage of nationals when registering under Tuvalu flag (for example, similar to French second registry RIF – see section 3.5 above). Such a measures on its own might allow for the employment all or almost all qualified Tuvaluan seafarers. Considering the latest available numbers of qualified non-employed

84 CEACR, Direct Request – MLC, 2006 – Tuvalu, adopted 2023.

Tuvaluan seafarers (1 958) and current number (519) of registered vessels in the IMO GISIS (all types and tonnage), there would only need to be around three or four Tuvaluan seafarers to be employed by each vessel under Tuvalu flag to achieve full employment.

Regional MOU

Tuvalu is not a party to Tokyo MOU, which means that it does not participate in this regional cooperative effort to improve maritime safety, security and environmental protection⁸⁵.

Its fleet is on the White List of the Tokyo MOU (Tokyo MOU Secretariat 2023), which is a good indicator as to the prima facie compliance of Tuvalu with its obligations as a flag State within the area of this regional agreement. However, it is to be noted that the ITF did register a case of severe non-compliance by a shipowner under Tuvalu flag in 2018.⁸⁶

5.4.5. Current dynamics relating to seafaring in Tuvalu

UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) statistics indicate that personal remittances from Tuvaluans abroad have steadily declined over the last two decades as a share of GDP. In 2005, the remittances from Tuvaluans abroad (including both seafarers and non-seafarers) were equivalent to 22.75 per cent of GDP, but this fell to 12.49 per cent in 2010, 7.28 per cent in 2015 and 4.07 per cent in 2022 (UNCTAD, n.d.). Some of this reduction is likely due to an overall decline in the number of Tuvaluan seafarers working on international ships, driven in part by: increased competition from seafarers from other countries of origin and the high prices for the flights of Tuvalu seafarers to their place of work (ILO 2010).

The 1991 Census enumerated 272 Tuvaluan seamen working overseas. The Tuvalu Overseas Seamen's Union (TOSU) estimated that the number of seafarers working on vessels in August 2002 was 417 (Boland and Doller 2007). In 2011 the ADB estimated that, at any one time, about 15 percent of the adult male population works abroad as seafarers and that there were 800 TMTI graduates registered for employment as seafarers. The ADB identified that the number of Tuvaluans employed as seafarers has decreased steadily from about 340 in 2001 to only 205 in 2010; so that of a total pool of 800 qualified seafarers, including those on leave, almost 450 were unemployed (ADB 2011).

A questionnaire was submitted to TOSU and to the TMTI to gather up to date information regarding numbers of Tuvaluan qualified seafarers and unemployment percentage, as well as the main challenges deployed by the seafarers to find a job. The answer received from TMTI indicates that the Institute had trained 1,964 qualified seafarers "from inception in 1979 to now".⁸⁷ To the question regarding the numbers of Tuvaluan seafarers currently employed, the TMTI claimed that there were only six Tuvaluan seafarers – presumably recent graduates – employed in 2023 and the same number of six remained employed in 2024 on board foreign vessels on international voyages, with "the latest figures got from the agent in April 2024"⁸⁸. These six seafarers are employed by Evergreen and Swire.

Employment opportunities have been shifting with demand for seafarers disappearing, though this has been partly offset by increased opportunities related to temporary labour schemes offered by regional partners (World Bank 2020), such as Australia's PALM scheme and New Zealand's RSE scheme⁸⁹. Previously there had also been a scheme for Tuvaluan seafarers to be employed on German vessels, but this scheme is no longer in effect. In the

⁸⁵ It should be noted, however, that owing to its isolation and the very low number of foreign vessels calling at its ports, the country's contribution would likely be minimal, which may explain why it allocates its limited resources to other priorities.

⁸⁶ According to the ITF (2018), several seafarers onboard the MV Amira Laura, a Tuvalu registered cargo ship, were severely underpaid, required to work 16 hour days and fed cold food and bread once a day.

⁸⁷ Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

⁸⁸ Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

⁸⁹ In the 2022–23 period, 234 Tuvaluans joined the RSE scheme.

answer to the research questionnaire, the TMTI said that currently there are no specific employment schemes with foreign shipping companies/countries for Tuvaluan seafarers. However, the recent hiring of Tuvaluan seafarers by Swire and Evergreen demonstrates that promising avenues of employment for Tuvaluan seafarers remain, albeit with the caveat that the recruitment through the recruitment agency used by Evergreen was recently suspended “because the Manning Agency’s SRPS (Seafarer Recruitment and Placement Service provider) certificate had expired without renewal”⁹⁰, and this certificate is the mandatory under the MLC, 2006. “We are currently looking for a qualified crew Manning agency, and will only be able to re-start employing Tuvaluan seafarers once it is confirmed that the agency can employ Tuvaluan seafarers and also holds a valid SRPS”⁹¹.

In general, as to the employment opportunities of the seafarers, the TMTI also stated that “the competition from the overseas work schemes is high as they are paid better”, which may make education at the TMTI less attractive. However, at the same time it highlights that the chances of finding a job in the temporary labour mobility schemes are higher for those who have graduated from the Institute.⁹²

Seafaring opportunities in fisheries

The Tuvalu Fisheries Department (TFD) has previously stated that it considers the employment of crew on fishing vessels as representing a significant opportunity for Tuvaluans, as jobs in merchant shipping have been on the decrease, taking into consideration, however, that fishing vessels can be a dangerous and low-paid working environment (Tuvalu, MOFT, Fisheries Department 2020b).

In 2020, there were incentives in place for foreign flag purse seiners to hire Tuvaluans as well as pilot schemes in Australia and New Zealand, and it appears important to learn more about these initiatives to consider how they can be expanded in the future. The TFD also stated in 2020 that there was a new policy and regulation to lay down the conditions for employment to ensure that crew are paid a reasonable wage and are properly cared for by their employers (Tuvalu, MOFT, Fisheries Department 2020b). It appears important to access these documents for further analysis.

The Tuvalu Fisheries Department has earlier indicated that one of its primary objectives is to nurture opportunities for Tuvaluan fishing crew and to ensure that all Tuvalu-flagged fishing vessels employ Tuvalu crew members. It sees prospects for Tuvalu crew members being placed on foreign vessels as well (Tuvalu, MOFT, Fisheries Department 2023).

However, there appears currently to be no obligation to employ a certain number of Tuvaluan seafarers for commercial ships registered under Tuvalu flag. Similarly, there is no obligation to employ a certain number of Tuvaluan seafarers on foreign fishing vessels that are granted a licence to fish in Tuvalu’s EEZ.⁹³

Challenges in relation to job prospects for Tuvaluan seafarers

According to the TMTI, the major challenges faced by Tuvaluan seafarers in relation to job prospects are linked to the fact that “opportunities are limited to experienced seafarers only”, “the training is not up to par with standards” and issues around the “recognition of training on the maritime field”.⁹⁴

90 Answer received by email from Seaman Section I, Seaman Department, Ship Division, Evergreen Marine Corp. (Taiwan) Ltd.

91 Ibid.

92 Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

93 Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

94 Questionnaire responses by TMTI, May 2024.

5.4.6. Maritime education and training

The Tuvalu Maritime Training Institute (TMTI) is a state-owned enterprise that provides training to marine cadets each year in order that they have the skills necessary for employment as seafarers or in merchant shipping. Cadets complete a Maritime Certificate for Seafarers. Training at TMTI is offered only up to a basic level of maritime qualifications. In its questionnaire responses, TMTI stated that it runs only STCW courses and ratings, with pre-sea training lasting for 12 months. The institute said that it does not offer more advanced “upskilling to officers training, [because] the [enrolment] numbers do not support such an investment”.⁹⁵

TMTI also provides specialized courses in fisheries, which it runs “in cohorts for some 6 weeks”. Transport management and logistics, business, (maritime) tourism or other courses related to maritime transport and fisheries do not appear to be available in Tuvalu.⁹⁶

As seen in table 3 below, enrolment at TMTI was on the rise at the time that the pandemic hit in 2020, but has declined substantially since that time, with 2024 enrolments sitting at less than a third of what was seen in 2020.

► **Table 3. Enrolment numbers for TMTI by sex, 2018–24**

Year	Male	Female	Total
2018	20	–	20
2019	20	–	20
2020	36	–	36
2021	26	–	26
2022	15	–	15
2023	10	–	10
2024	11	–	11

Source: Tuvalu, MEYS, Education Department 2022, 17; Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

According to the ILO’s Decent Work Country Programme: Tuvalu (2010–2012), TMTI only enrolls male cadets (ILO 2009), and this practice appears to have persisted based on the enrolment numbers in table 3 above, which show no female cadets over the previous seven years. In their responses to the questionnaire for this study, the TMTI offered the following explanation: “Female trainees were a likely possibility in previous years, but the problem is that women never attended the examinations and therefore never enrolled. With the availability on the work schemes in New Zealand and Australia, it aggravates the problem of females’ attendance for maritime training.”⁹⁷

TMTI agrees that it would be beneficial for Tuvaluan seafarers if the Institute’s curriculum took on board new trends in the shipping industry (such as digitalization and automatization, remote monitoring and control, unmanned vessels’ operation), but that they could only consider doing so “at the ratings level”.⁹⁸

Upon graduation, seafarers apply for overseas placement through shipping agents. Employment durations are variable (ILO 2009). The Alpha Pacific Navigation Limited (APNL) is no longer operating, thus, according to the information provided by TMTI in 2024, “now all recruitment are carried out by the Labour Department of the Government, which provides assistance in job finding for Tuvaluan seafarers”.⁹⁹ The Labour Department

⁹⁵ Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

⁹⁶ Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

⁹⁷ Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

⁹⁸ Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

⁹⁹ Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

appears to resort to a recruitment agency, and the Evergreen Marine Corp. noted that the recruitment agency they had been using to recruit Tuvaluans was recently suspended because its SRPS certificate had expired without renewal.¹⁰⁰

Despite its importance, TMTI has long experienced financial difficulties due to the irregular flow of government funds, and was at times has been seriously underfunded. In 2002, the ADB approved an assistance package to upgrade TMTI.¹⁰¹ Construction work at TMTI began in 2006, and it was expected that the Institute would be able to increase its annual student intake to 90 or possibly 120 students after the renovation and expansion work was completed (ILO 2009). This goal does not appear to have been achieved, as the enrolment numbers in figure 3 above demonstrate.

Post-secondary technical training is offered through the Tuvalu Atoll Science and Technology Training Institute (TASTTI), and there is scope for TMTI and TASTTI to collaborate on training delivery in order to diversify course offerings. The TMTI agrees that new synergies or complementary courses could be developed in cooperation with TASTTI, but that these potential areas for cooperation are “yet to be identified”.¹⁰²

Current challenges for the TMTI. TMTI noted in its questionnaire response that the training they offer needs to be improved to be in full compliance with the STCW 1978 and its amendments (and in particular with the amendments of 1995). The Institute explained that it needs to “fix the system improvement notices from the audits”. TOSU informed that the main reasons behind unemployment of qualified Tuvaluan seafarers at present is the fact that “Tuvalu is no longer under the AMSA list, TMTI school infrastructure are fall behind serviceable and behind 3 executive audits”.¹⁰⁴ The TMTI explains further that:

*the current training facilities and equipment are not fully sufficient to meet all the STCW'95 and its amendments requirements, particularly for higher levels of maritime certification. ... In addition to updating curriculum, facilities and assessments, TMTI should work closely with the Marine Department as the key regulatory body to ensure that training programs comply with STCW 1978 and its amendments. The Marine Department can provide critical support in areas such as curriculum review, instructor qualifications, facility standards, assessment procedures and regulatory compliance. Their expertise and oversight will be instrumental in helping TMTI enhance its training programs and meet international maritime standards, ultimately improving the quality of education and employability of its graduates.*¹⁰⁵

Thus, the improvement of its training system to IMO standards and its recognition appears to be a major concern for the TMTI and an important area for providing assistance to Tuvalu, and therefore should be considered during the next phase of the research.

100 Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

101 In 2002, the ADB approved an assistance package to upgrade the TMTI. The redevelopment of the TMTI was considered necessary to meet the competition provided by the growing supply of qualified seafarers graduating from an increasing number of maritime schools around the world and to meet the tightening of accreditation standards of the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The project financed by the ADB involved a jetty extension and installation of specialized safety-at-sea training equipment, installation of a firefighting facility, expansion of the water catchment and storage capacity, construction of new staff housing, the rehabilitation and extension of trainee quarters and training facilities (ADB 2011).

102 Questionnaire responses by TMTI, May 2024.

103 Questionnaire responses by TMTI, May 2024.

104 Questionnaire response by TOSU, January 2025.

105 Response to questionnaire no. 2 by TMTI, January 2025.

5.4.7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for Tuvalu across the five axes. In some instances, these recommendations are directed towards potential paths for future research, while others offer more concrete steps for advancing the employment opportunities and well-being of Tuvaluan seafarers – however, future research could serve to examine the feasibility of these latter recommendations in the near term.

1. Regulatory compliance

- It is recommended to assist with the transposition of the MLC, 2006, into national legislation and its implementation. This will help improve working conditions for both Tuvaluan and foreign seafarers on vessels flying the Tuvalu flag engaged in international voyages.
- It is advised to consider the challenges related to the ratification of ILO Convention No. 185 and to explore ways to overcome these obstacles.
- It is recommended to address the challenges associated with the ratification of the ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188), and to consider potential solutions to facilitate this process.

2. Capacity-building and education

- Ensuring compliance with STCW 1978 amendments and international recognition of the training and certification is paramount for the employability of national seafarers. Therefore, to ensure that TMTI maintains STCW compliance, it is recommended that it regularly updates its curriculum to reflect the latest STCW amendments, secures and maintains accreditation from national maritime authorities, and ensures that instructors are properly qualified. Facilities and equipment should be kept up-to-date, and a quality assurance system should be implemented for ongoing evaluation. Accurate training records must be maintained, and the Institute should be prepared for regular audits. Additionally, engaging with industry stakeholders will help TMTI to stay informed about regulatory changes. The TMTI has highlighted that its main challenge is “to fix our system improvement notices from the audits for STCW 95 compliance”. It also notes the need to “improve the training in accordance with STCW 95 and amendments”, as the “training is not up to par with standards”. It is therefore advised to provide assistance to TMTI in these areas, taking into account that the Institute has already experienced compliance challenges in the past.
- It is advised to consider the introduction of courses that take on board new and future trends, such as technological progress on board ships, digitalization and automatization, remote monitoring and control and unmanned vessels’ operation. The TMTI agrees that introducing such materials into training would be beneficial for the Tuvaluan seafarers, but that they would only be able to do so “at the ratings level”.¹⁰⁶
- Given the limited appeal of the domestic shipping sector and its low employment capacity, it is crucial to ensure that TMTI offers courses and certification for international ratings, enabling seafarers to work on international vessels.
- As the demand for officers is expected to increase in the future, while the need for ratings decreases due to technological advancements, it is advised to assess the feasibility and opportunity of introducing training programmes for Masters and Engineers over the long term. To this end, potential donors should be identified, such as, for example, the ADB. The TMTI explained that at present the current numbers of cadets do not support an investment for upskilling seafarers to officer ranks, although the ADB in 2011 was of the opinion that with minor adjustments the TMTI could be upgraded to provide junior officer courses, and that this would ultimately cost less than supporting Tuvaluan seafarers to study abroad.
- In this respect, it is advised to gather information regarding the construction work to upgrade TMTI that was financed by the ADB and started in 2006. As the post-upgrade enrolment target of 90–120 cadets per year have not been met, it is recommended to assess the challenges faced and determine whether the school’s expansion has been carried out.

¹⁰⁶ Questionnaire response by TMTI, May 2024.

- In the short term, establishing a stable agreement for officers' training and securing relevant funding for seafarers could be explored with maritime training institutions in Fiji, New Zealand or Australia. In general, it is advised to consider educational and training synergies with other training institutions.
- It is advised that TMTI collaborate with the Tuvalu Atoll Science and Technology Training Institute (TASTTI) to diversify its offerings, especially in relation to career transition programmes for seafarers looking to change or reorient their careers. The TMTI agrees on the need for such collaboration, though it notes that the specific areas for cooperation have yet to be identified.
- It is suggested that courses in transport management and logistics, business, maritime tourism, and other fields related to maritime transport and fisheries be explored for future development, as these are currently not available in Tuvalu. The TMTI acknowledges the potential for growth in these areas.
- It is recommended to include a sensibilization course on seafarers' rights as articulated in the MLC, 2006.
- It is recommended to develop a website for TMTI. A website would serve as a platform for disseminating updates, resources and contact details, as well as enhancing visibility and accessibility.

3. Working conditions and welfare

- **International shipping.** It is advised to evaluate the lessons learned from the pandemic-era crew change crisis and to examine how the associated challenges have been addressed to enhance seafarer welfare and improve employment opportunities.
- **Domestic shipping.** Challenges of employment in the local maritime sector need to be addressed accordingly, such as improving wages and safety on government-run ships and ships in domestic shipping and enhancing regulatory inspections and oversight.

4. Partnerships and employment incentives

- Partnerships with foreign shipping companies (commercial, cruise, fishing, offshore) for the employment of national seafarers and TMTI graduates should be explored, incorporating best practices from other countries.
- It is recommended to consider incentives/partnerships with foreign shipping companies granted permits to fish in Tuvalu's EEZ as well as incentives for ships under national flag (second register), as there seems to be no requirement for either type of vessel to employ a specific number of Tuvaluan seafarers.¹⁰⁷ These appear to be lost opportunities to provide employment for national seafarers. Incentives could potentially scale based on the number of Tuvaluan seafarers employed.
- The SRPS certification issue with the recruitment agency being used by Evergreen to recruit Tuvaluan seafarers needs to be resolved or an alternative agency found so that the company is once again in a position to recruit Tuvaluans.

5. Gender equality

- Over the long term, it is recommended to address the lack of equal educational opportunities for girls from an early age, particularly in subjects that would support maritime careers. This imbalance limits the pool of qualified female candidates for seafaring roles. Gender equality initiatives aimed at addressing disparities in education and employment opportunities, starting from the general education system, can help break traditional gender roles.
- Over the medium term, supporting women to attain leadership and instructor roles at maritime training institutions will provide role models and help shift perceptions about women's capabilities in seafaring.

¹⁰⁷ The TFD considers employment of crew on fishing vessels as a significant opportunity for Tuvaluans, as jobs in merchant shipping have been decreasing recently (Tuvalu, MOFT, Fisheries Department 2020b).

► **The future of seafarers:**

Emerging challenges, opportunities and achieving decent work for seafarers in selected Pacific Island countries

- In the short term, it is advised to envisage incentives for ships under Tuvaluan flag – particularly cruise vessels – to employ women seafarers, in nautical and non-nautical (such as, hospitality) positions.
- **Scholarship programmes and international support:** Programmes like New Zealand's scholarship initiative proposed for i-Kiribati women to train for officer roles can be expanded to other PICs, including Tuvalu. Such international support can significantly increase women's access to training and higher positions in seafaring.

5.5. Vanuatu

5.5.1. Demographic, geographic and economic profile

Vanuatu is composed of over 80 islands, and its capital of Port Vila is the main commercial centre and home to the country's main port. Vanuatu is strategically located in the South Pacific Ocean, making it a central point for maritime transportation and connectivity between the Pacific Islands. Its position facilitates trade, travel and cooperation among neighboring countries and regions.

Vanuatu's status as a country with an open ship register and as a labour-supplying nation for seafarers plays a significant role in supporting its economy, creating employment opportunities and contributing to the global maritime industry's growth and development.

The economy is based primarily on subsistence or small-scale agriculture, which provides a living for 65 per cent of the population. Fishing, offshore financial services and tourism are other mainstays of the economy (Vanuatu, Government of Vanuatu, n.d.).

Vanuatu is a member of various regional organizations and initiatives, such as the Pacific Islands Forum, the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the Pacific Islands Development Forum. These platforms provide opportunities for Vanuatu to engage in regional cooperation and dialogue on maritime issues, including transportation, fisheries management and environmental protection.

5.5.2. COVID-19 impact

Ni-Vanuatu seafarers, like their global counterparts, suffered from the consequences of COVID-19. Notably, they were exposed to heightened health risks and limited medical facilities onboard ships, and delays in receiving medical attention exacerbated these risks.

In 2020, about 50 ni-Vanuatu seafarers were stranded in foreign ports, including Manila and Hong Kong (China). Repatriation efforts took months, with the first group returning home in mid-2020 after extensive negotiations and logistical arrangements. The Vanuatu Government, in cooperation with international organizations, arranged several repatriation flights for stranded seafarers. However, these were limited and often delayed, resulting in prolonged periods away from home.

The pandemic also prompted the temporary closure of the Vanuatu Maritime College (VMC), disrupting the training schedules of many seafarers, delaying their career progression. Online training solutions were implemented, but were not accessible to all due to internet connectivity issues.

The expiration of certifications without the possibility of renewal during the pandemic was a major concern. The Vanuatu maritime administration provided extensions on certifications to mitigate this issue,¹⁰⁸ and issued Fleet Safety Letters to extend seafarers' period of service on board.¹⁰⁹

The Vanuatu Government launched a relief programme in partnership with the ITF to provide direct financial support to affected seafarers. This programme was critical in sustaining many families during the peak of the pandemic (ITFST 2020).

108 "Any seafarer on a Vanuatu flagged vessel that has been granted an extension either specifically or automatically under the previous Fleet Safety Letters 031420.GEN; 063020.GEN or 093020.GEN issued on 30 September-2020 and the vessel's owner/manager/agent cannot relieve and repatriate any affected seafarer due to any travel restrictions caused by the pandemic it is hereby automatically extended up to and including 31 December 2021", Vanuatu Maritime Services Limited, [Coronavirus and Seafarers Employment Agreement \(SEA\)](#), Fleet Safety Letter 063021.GEN.

109 "This Fleet Safety Letter is issued to reiterate the points stated in the Fleet Safety Letters 031420.GEN issued on 14 March 2020, 063020.GEN issued on 30 June 2020, 093020.GEN issued on 30 September 2020 and 123120.GEN issued on 31 December 2020 extending the seafarer's period of service on board due to the Coronavirus Pandemic with all benefits established Under Standards A2.4 (Entitlement to Leave) and A2.5.1. (Repatriation) of the Maritime Labour Convention 2006. (MLC)", Vanuatu Maritime Services Limited, [Coronavirus and Seafarers Employment Agreement \(SEA\)](#), Fleet Safety Letter 063021.GEN.

The instability in the maritime industry due to the pandemic has led some ni-Vanuatu seafarers to consider alternative careers, with a growing interest in shifting to land-based jobs.

5.5.3. ILO Conventions

Vanuatu became an ILO member in 2004 and has ratified nine ILO Conventions, including eight of the ten fundamental Conventions.

Vanuatu is a party to Convention No. 185, for which it has not yet submitted its first report.

In a 2023 direct request to Vanuatu, the ILO CEACR recalled that Convention No. 185 aims at aligning the technical requirements of the Convention with the latest standards adopted by the International Civil Aviation Organization with respect to the technology for seafarers' identity documents (SIDs) provided for in the Convention.¹¹⁰ The CEACR requested the Government to provide detailed information on such measures, including a copy of the applicable national provisions and a specimen of a SID compliant with Convention No. 185.¹¹¹

Vanuatu has not yet ratified the MLC, 2006, which is a major shortcoming for a country with such an important fleet. Ratification of the MLC, 2006, would signify Vanuatu's dedication to promoting the rights and welfare of seafarers, strengthen its maritime governance framework and foster a positive and responsible image within the international maritime community. In their response to the questionnaire for this study, the Vanuatu Maritime Safety Authority (VMSA) indicated that there were plans to ratify the MLC, 2006, but there is need of more "awareness and knowledge of the related obligations under the MLC. In addition, the current priorities seem to have shifted with Ministry currently focusing more on roads and civil aviation developments".¹¹²

Like other study countries, Vanuatu is not a party to ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188).

The ILO and Vanuatu collaborate on crucial areas such as labour law reform, national employment policy, enhancing jobseekers' access to decent work and social protection, as well as strengthening the capacity of tripartite partners for improved social dialogue. The social partners in Vanuatu include the Vanuatu Seafarers Union (VSU), the Vanuatu Trade Unions Combined (VTUC) and the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI).

5.5.4. Maritime profile

Vanuatu operates one of the world's largest open ship registries¹¹³ with an important fleet number; however, a substantial share of the fleet is quite old. IMO GISIS shows 543 Vanuatu flag vessels of at least 300GT, with 233 of these having been built before 1990.

The Vanuatu international ship registry is open to owners of any nationality. Vanuatu Maritime Services Limited (VMSL) is a privately held Vanuatu company operating under contract with the Vanuatu Government as the maritime administrator. VMSL operates the central registry office and handles all the details of vessel registration, mortgage recordation, seafarer documentation and all matters relating to safety and proper vessel inspection. VMSL's goal is to provide quality service at a low cost. The VMSL claims to utilize the services and expertise of IACS classification societies and respected surveyors (VMSL, n.d.).

¹¹⁰ In particular, they intend to change the biometric template in SIDs from a fingerprint template in a two-dimensional barcode to a facial image stored in a contactless chip as required by International Civil Aviation Organisation Document 9303.

¹¹¹ CEACR, Direct Request – Convention No. 185 – Vanuatu, adopted 2023.

¹¹² Questionnaire response by the VMSA, September 2024.

¹¹³ VMSL, [Employment of Ni-Vanuatu Seafarers on Vanuatu Flagged Vessels](#), 05080.GEN, 12 April 2005..

Vanuatu is on the Tokyo MOU White List with a total of 79 inspections and zero detentions of vessels under Vanuatu flag from 2020 to 2022 (Tokyo MOU Secretariat 2023),¹¹⁴ which may have been a good indicator as to the *prima facie* compliance of Vanuatu with its obligations as a flag State, at least for the vessels navigating in the region covered by this MOU. However, the ITF in 2019 placed Vanuatu on its Flags of Convenience List, together with 42 other countries. Vanuatu remains on the ITF list as of August 2024 (ITF, n.d.). The ITF classifying Vanuatu as a flag of convenience country suggests a potential lack of enforcement and low regulatory standards aboard vessels registered under its flag.

5.5.5. Current dynamics relating to seafaring in Vanuatu

In their response to the questionnaire for this study, the Vanuatu Maritime Safety Agency (VMSA) said that there are around 3,000 qualified ni-Vanuatu seafarers, of which around 1,000 are currently unemployed.¹¹⁵ The majority of employed ni-Vanuatu seafarers work on vessels registered in Vanuatu, with 80 per cent serving on Vanuatu-flagged vessels and 20 per cent on foreign-flagged vessels.¹¹⁶ The main foreign maritime companies currently employing ni-Vanuatu seafarers are P&O Cruise, Royal Caribbean Cruise and Swift Company.

According to the VMSA, one of the major challenges ni-Vanuatu seafarers face in finding employment is the lack of a dedicated office to coordinate job opportunities for ni-Vanuatu seafarers in both the domestic and international labour markets: “At the moment, ship owners and agents do direct recruitment of seafarers. For cruise ships and fishing vessels, there are specific agents [that] deal with the recruiting of seafarers on these vessels e.g. South Sea Services (domestic and cruise liners), private agent for fishing vessel.” The VMSA also noted that currently neither the Vanuatu Maritime College, the Government, nor any other institution or agency offers support for job placement or employment opportunities for ni-Vanuatu seafarers on international commercial vessels.¹¹⁷

The VMSA further identified several key factors contributing to the unemployment of ni-Vanuatu seafarers:

- a. The local maritime industry in Vanuatu is relatively small, resulting in fewer job opportunities compared to the international sector. This is particularly limiting for those seeking stable and long-term employment.
- b. Local maritime jobs often offer lower wages compared to international positions. This wage disparity can be a significant drawback for seafarers who rely on their earnings to support their families.
- c. A lack of incentives offered by ship owners.
- d. Unregulated wages and entitlements for seafarers.
- e. Smaller, locally operated vessels might not always meet the same safety and working condition standards as larger, internationally regulated ships.
- f. Absence of clear career development pathways for seafarers. Many local maritime jobs are seasonal or temporary, leading to periods of unemployment. This instability makes it difficult for seafarers to maintain consistent income and long-term planning.
- g. Expiration of seafarers’ certifications.
- h. A significant number of seafarers seek better opportunities outside the maritime industry.

¹¹⁴ Ports state inspections carried out by authorities for 2022, as per Tokyo MOU Secretariat 2023:

- Number of individual ships inspected – 1
- Number of individual ships visited – 35
- Number of inspections of Vanuatu vessels: 22, number of inspections with deficiencies – 11, number of deficiencies – 23, number of detentions – 0.

¹¹⁵ Questionnaire responses by the VMSA, September 2024.

¹¹⁶ Questionnaire response by the VMSA, September 2024.

¹¹⁷ Questionnaire response by the VMSA, September 2024.

The reasons identified by the VMSA align with trends observed in other studied countries: the domestic fleet and maritime sector are seen as non-attractive, offering limited opportunities for seafarers.

Career progression

There are limited opportunities for career advancement and professional development in Vanuatu's local maritime sector. This can be frustrating for seafarers who wish to progress in their careers and obtain advanced certifications.

Other employment schemes and higher-paying jobs abroad may appear more attractive to seafarers than working on board. Additionally, many seafarers may have let their certifications expire, further limiting their employment opportunities.

Additionally, there is a lack of clear career pathways for seafarers seeking career reconversion after international employment. The absence of partnerships or incentives from key stakeholders further exacerbates these challenges.

With regard to employment partnerships, the VMSA did note in their questionnaire response that "there is an MOU in discussion and ready to sign between VMSA and Scholarship Office to train and upskill Vanuatu seafarers. In addition, discussion is ongoing with Fiji and Marshall Islands Maritime Authority to established direct training and work opportunities for Vanuatu seafarers in international shipping."¹¹⁸ It is recommended to evaluate these initiatives for their potential adaptation in other countries within the region.

5.5.6. Maritime education and training

Our analysis of maritime education and training in Vanuatu is based on data from available open sources (which are very limited concerning the Vanuatu Maritime College (VMC), as the College does not have a dedicated website) and questionnaire responses provided by the VMSA. Since no response to our questionnaire was received from the VMC so far, it is recommended to validate the below findings with the VMC and the VMSA in the next phase of the study.

The VMC was established in 1998 to provide maritime and fishing training. Most of the training is international in focus, with English as the main language of instruction, although Bislama is used for rural fishing courses. It has ten full-time lecturers and one part-time lecturer and can accommodate a maximum of 72 candidates. The College accepts overseas candidates.

According to the VMSA,¹¹⁹ the highest level of officer studies provided by the Vanuatu Maritime College are:

- 500 GT – Class 4 near coastal voyage;
- 500 KW – Class 4 near coastal voyage.

The College also provides short and ratings courses.

The limitation of officers' certification to Class 4 means that officers trained at the VMC are unable to serve on vessels engaged in international voyages, which presents a long-term disadvantage, as future trends in shipping indicate a growing demand for officers coupled with a decline in ratings due to increased automation and digitalization.

The VMSA points out the main shortcoming of the VMC being the absence of "proper training facilities and educational at the Maritime College".¹²⁰ As this brief response to the questionnaire does not provide sufficient clarity on the specific shortcomings of the VMC from the perspective of the VMSA, further investigation is needed to accurately identify the issues and to suggest improvements for the VMC.

¹¹⁸ Questionnaire response by the VMSA, September 2024.

¹¹⁹ Questionnaire response by the VMSA, September 2024.

¹²⁰ Questionnaire response by the VMSA, September 2024.

In response to our question: “Does Vanuatu Maritime College offer online courses as part of the STCW training, and if so, what are they? Additionally, does the college provide blended learning (a combination of in-person and online courses, defined as computer-based education that allows seafarers to learn anywhere, at any time)?”, the VMSA replied negatively. Therefore, it is recommended to explore ways to support the VMC in this area as well.

In addition, the VMSA suggested that the following courses should be included in the VMC curriculum to address new trends in the shipping industry:

- National and international maritime laws;
- IT training;
- Digitalization and automation;
- Marine protection and greenhouse gas issues;
- Simulation training for masters;
- International ratings to enable seafarer to work on international vessels; and
- Increased capacity so as to train Masters and Engineers to Classes 3 to 1.

These recommendations indicate the need for VMC to expand its curriculum to better align with the evolving demands of the maritime sector.

As the VMC did not respond to our questionnaire, we were unable to gather clarifications/confirmations on these issues or obtain data on the number of seafarers trained annually at the college at this stage of the study.

The absence of a website for the VMC is a notable disadvantage, as it limits the organization's ability to share information and engage with its audience effectively. A website would serve as a platform for disseminating updates, resources and contact details, as well as enhancing visibility and accessibility. Therefore, developing a website is recommended, and the Pacific Centre for Maritime Studies in Fiji offers a good example of how a well-designed site in the Pacific can support a maritime training school.

5.5.7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for Vanuatu across the five axes. In some instances, these recommendations are directed towards potential paths for future research, while others offer more concrete steps for advancing the employment opportunities and well-being of ni-Vanuatu seafarers – however, future research could serve to examine the feasibility of these latter recommendations in the near term.

1. Regulatory compliance

- The failure to ratify the MLC, 2006, represents a significant shortcoming for a country with such a substantial fleet. It is recommended to address the challenges associated with ratifying the MLC, 2006, and particularly to raise awareness of its importance at the ministerial level and to provide support for incorporating its requirements into national legislation. Ratifying the MLC, 2006, would foster a positive and responsible image of Vanuatu's fleet within the international maritime community. By ratifying the MLC, 2006, Vanuatu would also contribute to improving the welfare and well-being of seafarers employed on the Vanuatu flagged vessels.
- It is recommended to address the challenges related to the implementation of Convention No. 185, and to provide assistance accordingly.
- Vanuatu is encouraged to fully implement its obligations as a flag State to ensure compliance with international standards on vessels under its flag, with the aim of being removed from the ITF Flags of Convenience List.

- Challenges and mitigation measures to ensure regulatory compliance and enhance the attractiveness the domestic shipping sector are to be considered.

2. Capacity-building and education

- Ensuring compliance with STCW 1978 and its amendments and securing/maintaining international recognition of the training and certification institutions is paramount for the employability of national seafarers. Therefore, to ensure that the VMC maintains STCW compliance, it is recommended that it: regularly updates its curriculum to reflect the latest STCW amendments; secures and maintains accreditation from national maritime authorities; and ensures that instructors are properly qualified. Facilities and equipment should be kept up to date, and a quality assurance system should be implemented for ongoing evaluation. Accurate training records must be maintained, and the College should be prepared for regular audits. Additionally, engaging with industry stakeholders will help stay informed about regulatory changes. It is advisable to check with the VMC to determine if it needs assistance in any of these areas, as the VMSA in this study pointed to the absence of “proper training facilities and educational at the Maritime College”¹²¹.
- It is advised to consider the introduction of courses taking on board new and future trends, such as IT training; digitalization and automation; marine protection and greenhouse gas issues; and simulation training for masters.
- Given the limited appeal of the domestic shipping sector and its low employment capacity, as well as an increased demand for officers in international shipping, it is crucial to ensure that ni-Vanuatu gain access to courses enabling them to work on international vessels at an officer rank.
- It is recommended to assess the feasibility of introducing training programmes for Masters and Engineers to Classes 3 to 1, at least in the long term, and potential donors should be identified to facilitate this. In the short term, the establishment of a stable agreement for ni-Vanuatu to train with maritime training institutions in Fiji, New Zealand or Australia could also be explored. There will also be a need to explore funding options to support ni-Vanuatu seafarers’ access to such overseas training.
- **Career pathways and training:** Develop clear career progression pathways supported by short-term training programmes that allow seafarers to transition into other maritime professions, such as logistics, port management, maritime business and ship operations. This would provide greater flexibility and career options for seafarers looking to diversify their skills and enhance their employability.
- Implement programmes to assist unemployed seafarers in renewing expired certifications and updating their skills to meet current standards.
- The introduction of remote/blended courses by the VMC should be considered, where relevant.
- It is advisable to implement career transition schemes for seafarers that include short-term training in related maritime fields, such as logistics, maritime law and business. This would enhance visibility for seafarers and provide potential pathways for career reorientation.
- Potential synergies and partnerships with other training institutions, both national and in the region, should be considered.
- It is recommended to develop a website for the Vanuatu Maritime College. A website would serve as a platform for disseminating updates, resources and contact details, as well as enhancing visibility and accessibility.

121 Questionnaire response by the VMSA, September 2024.

3. Working conditions and welfare

- **International shipping.** It is advised to evaluate the lessons learned from the pandemic-era crew change crisis and to examine how the associated challenges have been addressed to enhance seafarer welfare and improve employment opportunities.
- **Domestic shipping.** Challenges of employment in the local maritime sector need to be addressed accordingly, such as to improve wages on government-run ships and safety in general on ships engaged in domestic shipping.

4. Partnerships and employment incentives

- Partnerships with foreign shipping companies (commercial, cruise, fishing, offshore) for the employment of national seafarers and graduates from the VMC should be explored, incorporating best practices from other countries.
- It is recommended to consider incentives/partnerships with foreign shipping companies granted permits to fish in Vanuatu EEZ and incentives for ships under national flag (second register), as there seems to be no requirement to employ a specific number of ni-Vanuatu seafarers on commercial ships registered under the Vanuatu flag, nor is there a mandate to hire ni-Vanuatu seafarers on foreign fishing vessels licensed to operate within Vanuatu's EEZ. These appear to be lost opportunities for national seafarers' employment.

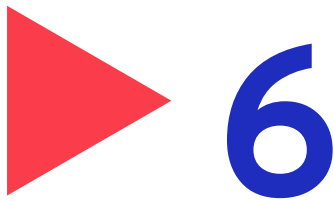
5. Gender equality

- Over the long term, it is recommended to address the lack of equal educational opportunities for girls from an early age, particularly in subjects that would support maritime careers. This imbalance limits the pool of qualified female candidates for seafaring roles. Gender equality initiatives aimed at addressing disparities in education and employment opportunities, starting from the general education system, can help break traditional gender roles.
- Over the medium term, supporting women to attain leadership and instructor roles at maritime training institutions will provide role models and help shift perceptions about women's capabilities in seafaring.
- In the short term, it is advised to envisage incentives for ships under Vanuatu flag – particularly cruise vessels – to employ women seafarers, in nautical and non-nautical (such as, hospitality) positions.
- **Scholarship programmes and international support:** Programmes like New Zealand's scholarship initiative proposed for i-Kiribati women to train for officer roles can be expanded to other PICs, including Vanuatu. Such international support can significantly increase women's access to training and higher positions in seafaring.



Inspection of a ship for ship safety, and decent working and living conditions for seafarers

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Conclusion and recommendations

The study identified common trends across the selected countries concerning seafarers' working conditions and employment prospects. The successful participation of Pacific Islanders in the maritime sector depends on several factors, which were explored across five key areas. These areas form the basis of the proposed subsequent research, focusing on:

- **Regulatory compliance:** The degree to which PICs align with international Conventions ensuring seafarers' rights and safety, such as the MLC, 2006.
- **Capacity-building and education:** The quality of maritime training institutions that provide seafarers with the necessary qualifications and skills to meet international standards.
- **Working conditions and welfare:** The overall safety, well-being and career progression of seafarers, including the operational conditions on both domestic and international vessels.
- **Partnerships and employment incentives:** The critical role of partnerships between Pacific Island nations and the shipping industry, as well as the creation of employment incentives on national flagged vessels and foreign vessels licenced to fish in PICs' EEZs. Collaborations with shipping companies, especially in the aftermath of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, and leveraging national resources and licensing to create opportunities in both the commercial shipping and fisheries sectors as essential means of securing the long-term employment prospects of national seafarers.
- **Gender equality:** Exploring access to seafaring roles for women and understanding the barriers to their participation in a traditionally male-dominated industry, while considering the specific cultural and social contexts of the countries studied.

Regulatory compliance

Regulatory compliance remains a significant challenge in the studied countries, especially in their respective domestic shipping sectors.

Challenges:

- **Inconsistent ratification:** Not all PICs in the study have ratified essential international instruments addressing seafarers' rights and welfare, such as the MLC, 2006, and ILO Convention No. 185. None of the five countries is party to the ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188).

► The future of seafarers:

Emerging challenges, opportunities and achieving decent work for seafarers in selected Pacific Island countries

- **Implementation gaps:** Even among countries that have ratified these Conventions, there are gaps in the full integration of their requirements into national legislation and gaps in the establishment of mechanisms for proper implementation.
- **Financial and human constraints:** Filling in ratification and implementation gaps requires sufficient human and financial resources and knowledge, which can be a particular challenge to secure in SIDs.

Opportunities:

- **Targeted assistance:** Providing targeted assistance to help these countries ratify and implement ILO maritime Conventions can improve seafarers' working conditions and welfare.
- **Regulatory improvement:** Enhancing national legislation to comply with international standards will offer better protection and rights for seafarers, creating a more stable and attractive maritime industry.
- **Green maritime transition:** The transition to green maritime technology, supported by initiatives such as the IMO's Baseline Training Framework for Seafarers in Decarbonization (WMU 2024), creates an opportunity for seafarers to adapt to operating ships using zero and near-zero emission fuels.

Human and financial resources to assist the countries in these tasks are to be explored among regional and international institutions donors.

It is important that countries adhere to the main ILO instruments aimed at protecting seafarers' working conditions and welfare – including the MLC, 2006, and Convention No. 185 – as well as ensure the proper implementation of these instruments into the national legal order, which can be achieved through specific assistance, inter alia, from the ILO in amending their national legislation and consultations as to the appropriate mechanisms necessary for implementation to be put in place in PICs. Issuance of seafarers' identity documents, as per the requirements of Convention No. 185, will also contribute to increasing the competitiveness of PIC seafarers in the labour market.

Capacity-building and education

The quality of the maritime training plays a pivotal role in ensuring the employability of seafarers in the global market. All five of the PICs studied have maritime training institutions with varying numbers of students trained, varying levels of certificates issued and varying challenges to face.

Challenges:

- **Compliance issues:** Compliance with STCW requirements and international recognition of any certification provided are crucial for the employability of all seafarers.¹²² Some countries – notably Tuvalu and Tonga – face difficulties in maintaining compliance with international standards, including STCW 1978 as amended, which affects the employability of their seafarer graduates. The countries experiencing challenges in maintaining the necessary compliance require specific assistance in this regard.
- **Varying education levels:** The level of maritime education varies among the study countries. It appears that Fiji is offering the highest education level among the studied countries as per STCW. Based on the questionnaire responses for this study, other countries may lack the resources or infrastructure to

¹²² Parties to the STCW 1978, as amended, are required to provide detailed information to IMO concerning administrative measures taken to ensure compliance with the Convention, education and training courses, certification procedures and other factors relevant to implementation. The IMO produces a list (the so called "white list") of "confirmed Parties" in compliance with the STCW Convention. Criteria for compliance includes having appropriate seafarer licensing systems, oversight of training centres, strong processes for certificate revalidation and flag state control. Seafarers with a Certificate of Competency (COC) from a non-white listed nation could be denied a Certificate of Equivalency (COE) and rejected for work aboard white list-flagged ships. Seafarer's training and sea time aboard non-white listed vessels could be rejected for a CoC from a white list country. For more information see: <https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/HumanElement/Pages/STCW-Conv-LINK.aspx>.

provide the training at a higher level than they currently do (Tonga) or they may not have the necessary enrolments each year to justify such an investment (Tuvalu). Research indicates increased demand for higher-skilled seafarers (that is, Officers) (Andrews 2023); therefore, the upskilling of a country's seafarers should be an objective, at least over the long term.

The stakeholders agree that upskilling seafarers, providing higher-level Certifications of Competency, offering remote/blended courses, and incorporating new shipping industry trends (such as decarbonization, digitalization, automation, remote monitoring and control) into the curricula of training institutions would help in creating a skilled workforce that is marketable and aligned with the current and future demands of the shipping sector.

Several countries point out that the certifications provided by their national maritime institutions do not allow the seafarer graduates to sail at Officer rank in international waters worldwide, imposing restrictions based on vessel size and operational area, which therefore considerably limits their employability in the international market. It is therefore encouraging that approval has been recently given for Fiji's PCMS to offer Master Class 2 and 1 course from 2025 and submission is underway to offer Engineer Class 2 and 1 courses from 2026. To date, to obtain these certificates in the region, one has had to study in Australia or New Zealand, which is not affordable for many candidates.

- **Financial and human constraints:** Maintaining compliance in maritime schools and introducing new courses or certification levels require significant human and financial investment, which may be unsustainable for the five countries under review. For instance, Tuvalu officials have indicated that investing in higher levels of certification for seafarers is not justified given the currently low enrolment numbers in maritime schools.

Opportunities:

- **Advanced training institutions:** Fiji's PCMS sets a benchmark for advanced maritime education among the five study countries, presenting opportunities for regional collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- **Potential for improvement:** With targeted assistance, training institutions in Tuvalu and Tonga could enhance their compliance with international standards, increasing the employability of their graduates.
- **Incorporating future trends:** As the maritime sector evolves towards greater environmental sustainability and digitalization, there is a need for advanced training programmes. These programmes should incorporate automation, artificial intelligence (AI), data analysis, digital navigation, environmental compliance, safety and cybersecurity awareness to prepare seafarers for roles as remote operators, new types of pilots and maintaining high-tech vessels. This approach, which takes a long-term perspective, will address the forecasted shortage of skilled professionals and enhance the competitiveness of PIC seafarers.

Financial and human constraints linked to these opportunities shall be addressed by applying for support from the relevant international and regional organizations or private donors.

Working conditions and welfare

Improving working conditions and welfare for seafarers in PICs is crucial for ensuring their long-term participation and success in the global maritime industry. Many seafarers from the region face significant challenges, such as poor safety standards, limited career progression and inadequate access to healthcare and social protection.

These conditions not only jeopardize their well-being but also undermine their employability and job satisfaction, contributing to high turnover rates and skill shortages. Addressing these issues through enhanced regulatory enforcement, better training and improved onboard conditions is essential for creating a stable and resilient workforce.

Employment in the domestic maritime sector

Employment in the domestic maritime sector across the studied Pacific countries presents several significant challenges for seafarers.

Challenges:

- **Poor working conditions:** Smaller, locally operated vessels do not appear to always meet the required safety and operational standards, posing risks to seafarers. For example, Tonga's FISUI highlighted substandard conditions in the domestic fleet, with poor safety culture leading to recent maritime disasters.
- **Limited career progression:** There are fewer opportunities for career advancement and professional development in the local maritime sector, with many positions being seasonal or temporary, leading to inconsistent income and difficulties in long-term planning. Lower wages in domestic maritime jobs, as opposed to more lucrative international positions, create financial strain for seafarers and their families.
- **Regulatory challenges:** Furthermore, maintaining regulatory compliance can be challenging, as local vessels may not require the same level of certification as international ships, complicating the process of keeping qualifications up to date.

These challenges collectively impact the employment landscape in the domestic maritime industry for the studied Pacific countries.

Opportunities:

- **Improving conditions:** Addressing the challenges of poor working conditions, limited opportunities and low wages in the domestic maritime sector can create more stable and attractive employment options.
- **Career development:** Establishing clear pathways for career progression and professional development within the local maritime industry will contribute to its attractiveness and reduce turnover, leading to a more skilled and productive workforce.

Partnerships and employment incentives

Partnerships with the shipping industry

Challenges:

- **Disruption of partnerships:** The crew change crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic undermined many established partnerships with shipping companies, affecting job placements for seafarers (for example, in the case of Kiribati).
- **Uncertainty over recovery:** It remains unclear whether old partnerships have been restored, or new ones established, nor is it clear what measures have been put in place to safeguard against similar crises in the future.

Opportunities:

- **Rebuilding partnerships:** There is an opportunity to rebuild and possibly strengthen partnerships with shipping companies, leveraging lessons learned during the pandemic to ensure more resilient arrangements.
- **Exploring new partnerships:** Follow-up field research can provide a chance to identify and establish new partnerships that can offer stable employment opportunities for seafarers.

Securing jobs for nationals

Opportunities:

- **National fleet employment:** There is scope to investigate possible employment incentives for ships under national flags to secure jobs for national seafarers.
- **Policy development:** Policies and incentives that require or encourage the employment of national seafarers on national flagged vessels as well as on foreign-flagged vessels operating in national EEZs can be developed to promote the employment of national seafarers.

Securing positions on nationally flagged vessels, as well as on foreign-flagged vessels granted fishing licenses within the national EEZ, can be a viable strategy to improve the employability of national seafarers. This is particularly relevant for countries with significant national fleets, such as Tuvalu and Vanuatu, as well as for those with extensive EEZs and abundant marine resources.

The scope of this study does not specifically cover seafarers on fishing vessels, although this issue has been partially touched on in this study. It is highly recommended to conduct a focused study on this topic to explore the emerging challenges and opportunities and to ensure decent work for PIC seafarers on fishing vessels. This is particularly important given the significance of the fishing sector in the Pacific region.

Gender equality

Challenges:

- **Cultural barriers and social contexts:** In many PICs, traditional gender roles place women in lower hierarchical positions within communities. This cultural context deters women from pursuing non-traditional roles, such as seafaring. The male-dominated culture aboard vessels often leads to discrimination, harassment and a hostile work environment for women, further discouraging female participation in the maritime sector.
- **Educational gaps:** There may be a lack of equal educational opportunities for girls starting from an early age, particularly in subjects that would support maritime careers. This imbalance limits the pool of qualified female candidates for seafaring roles.
- **Lack of female representation:** Few women occupy leadership or officer roles in the maritime sector, creating a lack of role models and mentors for younger women aspiring to enter the industry.

Opportunities:

- **Policy reform and education initiatives:** Gender equality initiatives aimed at addressing disparities in education and employment opportunities, starting from the general education system, can help break traditional gender roles.
- **Scholarship programmes and international support:** Programmes like New Zealand's scholarship initiative proposed for i-Kiribati women to train for officer roles can be expanded to other PICs. Such international support can significantly increase women's access to training and higher positions in seafaring.
- **Creating a safe work environment:** Implementing strict measures to address harassment and discrimination on ships, and ensuring gender-sensitive workplace policies, can create safer environments that encourage women to pursue careers in the maritime industry.
- **Role models and leadership development:** Supporting women to attain leadership and instructor roles at maritime training institutions will provide role models and help shift perceptions about women's capabilities in seafaring.

By addressing these challenges and leveraging these opportunities, gender equality in the maritime sector can be improved in the Pacific region.

The five areas outlined above offer a comprehensive framework for examining the challenges and opportunities facing Pacific Island seafarers, with a focus on their welfare, professional growth and integration into global maritime industries. By addressing these factors, subsequent research can develop actionable, targeted recommendations to strengthen the maritime employment across PICs.

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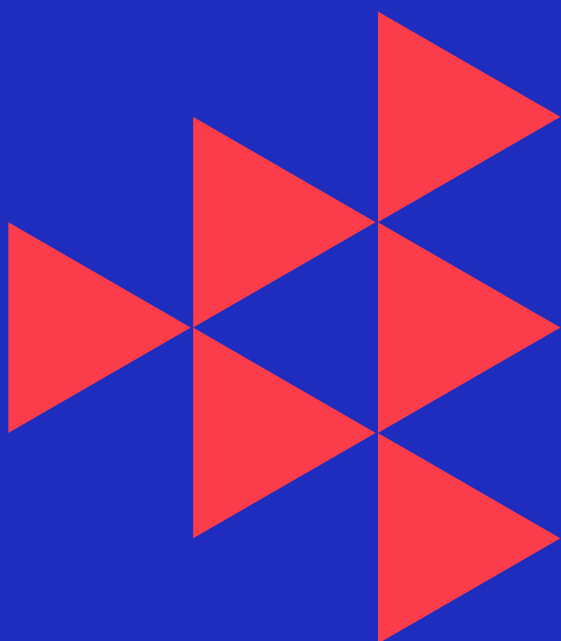
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