

CONSTITUTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS



REALISING CONSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

New Zealand has special constitutional relationships with three countries in the Pacific: Tokelau, Niue, and the Cook Islands. New Zealand's support plays a vital role in the lives of the people who live there.

CONSTITUTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS	2008/09 FUNDING (\$)
Cook Islands	5,505,954
Niue	11,942,305
Tokelau	15,366,084
TOTAL	32,814,343

The Cook Islands has been self-governing in free association with New Zealand since 1965, and Niue has been self-governing in free association with New Zealand since 1974. Tokelau is New Zealand's last remaining dependent territory. In October 2003 Tokelau's General Fono voted to formally explore the

option of self-governance in free association with New Zealand. Subsequent referenda have not met the threshold needed to make that constitutional change.

Citizens of Niue, Tokelau, and the Cook Islands are also citizens of New Zealand, and New Zealand has a responsibility to support development in these countries. In Tokelau and Niue, New Zealand provides budgetary assistance backstopped by significant technical support to maintain core public services for the people in these small isolated Pacific island countries. In the Cook Islands a dedicated programme addresses economic and social challenges.

Q CASE STUDY

DISABILITY ACTION IN THE COOK ISLANDS

In developing countries health and education resources and services are often stretched, and support for people with disabilities is frequently sidelined. People with disabilities can become invisible members of society, shut out from the opportunities they are entitled to. The Disability Action Team (DAT) was set up to implement the national disability policy and improve the lives of people with disabilities in the Cook Islands. DAT does not exist to directly 'solve' every disability issue in the Cook Islands. Rather, it supports a wide range of activities that raise awareness, build capacity, and set up systems so that people with disabilities and their families, with support from a range of organisations, will be empowered and supported to continue overcoming challenges into the future. DAT first received NZAID funding in 2005, and since that time its activities have contributed to far greater integration and acceptance of people with disabilities.

DAT has been active in increasing the prominence of people with disabilities through the media, including radio talk back, television, and newsletters. Awareness campaigns have targeted specific issues, including accessibility, vocation, and human rights. The campaigns not only send positive messages to the general community; they also encourage people with disabilities and their families.

Government support is needed to build capacity within the health and education sectors. DAT encourages partnerships between the Ministries of Health and Education and disability NGOs to provide funding for initiatives. In 2009 this included helping to facilitate a partnership between Global Volunteers and the Ministry of Health for equipment maintenance and repair; and a full time physiotherapist being employed at Te Vaerua Rehabilitation Centre. The Ministry of Education has taken over from NZAID some funding for the Creative Centre and outer islands learning centres.

Reliable demographic information about disabilities is necessary to assist with resourcing and policy decisions. DAT has undertaken to comprehensively update survey of rates of disability in the Cook Islands. By mid-2009 the outer islands had been surveyed and surveying work was underway in Rarotonga, with the results of this survey being provided to the Ministry of Health.

DAT also works to build capacity of disability NGOs and community groups in the Cook Islands. In 2009 DAT facilitated visits from speech therapists, occupational therapists, and special needs teachers to run professional development training sessions around the Cook Islands. These same specialists have provided care to people with disabilities, particularly in the Outer Islands, which have higher rates of hardship and lack infrastructure. People with disabilities are also being given vocational opportunities through DAT. For example, members of the Deaf community are teaching sign language to teacher aides.

In a context where many people with disabilities will be cared for within their families and immediate communities, the training and support of non-professionals is also vital. In 2009 DAT has held autism/behaviour support workshops led by visiting specialists for parents and caregivers. DAT is also helping to set up self-help groups so caregivers have support systems and can have a collective voice to advocate for disabled rights.

There is no single, simple way to address the range of issues that people with disabilities face. With its mix of activities, DAT is setting up a sustainable, supportive system that will see people with disabilities in the Cook Islands continue to remove barriers, fulfil their potential, and be visible, as it is their right to be. 🌀

1 The ballot box being transported around Tokelau during a constitutional change referendum.