



**The Partnership Effect:**  
Sharing the impact of Australia  
and Pacific partnerships

# Partnering for locally led development in the Cook Islands seabed sector

September 2025

*Photo: Mineral-rich fluids billowing from deep-sea hydrothermal vents on the ocean floor.*

**T**he Government of the Cook Islands is currently navigating the economic diversification opportunities, and challenges, presented by an emerging seabed minerals sector. It is also working to cultivate relevant national expertise to ensure long-term skills and self-reliance in the sector.

With the support of Australia through the Australia-Pacific Partnerships Platform (the Partnerships Platform),

the Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority (SBMA) has strengthened its technical foundations to focus on science-based, data-driven approaches and sound environmental safeguards.

Mobilised through the Partnerships Platform, John Parianos joined the SBMA as a Knowledge and Management Director from 2022 to 2025.



John  
Parianos

John is a marine geologist with more than 3 decades of experience in the resource sector, including 10 years in seabed minerals. His role focused on mentoring staff to support professional development and leadership, strengthening technical systems, and supporting SBMA to consolidate its knowledge base and enhance its credibility as a trusted regulator.

John's guidance helped the SBMA to operate with greater capability and assurance in a complex and evolving sector. The impact has been tangible. As confidence in the sector's technical foundations has grown within government and across agencies, SBMA staff



have embraced more knowledge and accountability, and sector oversight is undertaken through a proactive, science-based framework.

Through his technical guidance and mentoring, John supported staff such as Rima Browne and Tanga Morris to expand their skills and leadership in the sector.

Rima, who originally focused on geographic information system (GIS) mapping, broadened her expertise into marine research, environmental studies and license permit reviews, enabling the SBMA to conduct more in-depth internal assessments. She played a leadership role in the Women in Science Expedition in 2024 and received international recognition for her geomorphological map of the Cook Islands which won an

International Seabed Authority Secretary-General Award in 2023.

Rima attributes John's mentoring and technical support as contributing to this recognition.

*John encouraged me to be more involved and not restricted to my expertise. I've had the opportunity for exposure to the more technical side of seabed mining and marine resources, and the opportunity to engage in policy.*

**Rima Browne**

Senior Knowledge Management Officer

Similarly, Tanga, an environmental scientist, expanded her skills in report writing and policy work. With John's technical support, she gained greater confidence in engaging publicly on complex technical topics and in clearly communicating scientific insights to a wide range of audiences. Tanga now highlights the importance of having "the science behind it to prove it" when making statements and is a clear communicator, able to translate complex scientific concepts into clear messages for communities and policymakers.

As Knowledge and Management Director, John also worked closely with the SBMA team to document standard operating procedures, streamline workflows and build internal systems, strengthening SBMA's institutional capacity and ensuring its long-term sustainability.



Photo: Left to right: Tanga Morris (Knowledge Management Officer, SBMA), Ana Talanoa Baker (Country Lead – Cook Islands, Partnerships Platform), John Parianos (Knowledge Management Director, SBMA), Alex Herman (former SBMA Commissioner) and Rima Browne (Senior Knowledge Management Officer, SBMA).

These operational improvements supported SBMA to identify critical staffing needs and refine its organisational structure. The technical division expanded from 3 to 14 members, providing SBMA with greater resources to analyse data and conduct research. These changes, led by the SBMA, improved the Authority's capacity to produce crucial insights from historical data, including mineral resource estimates and habitat management strategies. They also reduced reliance on data from seabed mineral license holders, leading to more robust and independent regulatory oversight.

The collaboration between SBMA and John was underpinned by technical expertise, mutual trust and effective partnership. It demonstrated how targeted support can strengthen local institutions through a combination of mentoring and technical inputs, and empowering staff to take ownership and drive locally led development.

The Cook Islands is now working on the responsible development of its seabed minerals sector, drawing on its own research, data and strengthened institutional expertise.

Looking ahead, new environmental laws and guidelines, alongside a final Regional Environmental Management Plan scheduled to be finalised in 2025, will provide a robust, locally-driven framework for the sector.

This story reflects Australia's commitment to supporting locally led development and solutions as we work with Pacific partners as they progress their identified development priorities.



## EOIO 2 Enabling development services

The Australian Government's development cooperation programs and partner governments are supported with efficient, effective, inclusive and responsive enabling services.

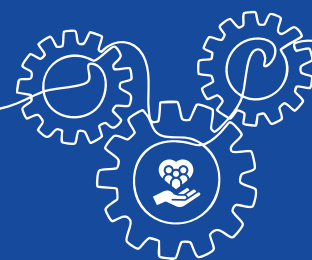


### IO 2.1

The Partnerships Platform, through its technical advisory activities, delivers timely, high-quality, strategic support to better meet shared policy priorities and national strategies.

### IO 2.2

Supported development programs, services and approaches are more inclusive of women, persons with disabilities and marginalised groups.



### IO 2.4

The Partnerships Platform harnesses partnerships and stakeholder relationships to promote coherent and effective development outcomes.



The Australia-Pacific Partnerships Platform supports Australia and partner Pacific countries as they continue working together to build a stable, prosperous and secure region. The Australia-Pacific Partnerships Platform provides Nauru, Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau and the Cook Islands with a suite of flexible, fit-for-purpose services that support development investments in governance, stability and resilience. The Australia-Pacific Partnerships Platform is supported by the Australian Government and managed by DT Global.