

Save the Children, ChildFund and Netsafe NZ establish new online safety collaboration with Meta support

Save the Children Australia, ChildFund Australia and Netsafe New Zealand have announced the establishment of a collaboration to address online safety in the Pacific with seed funding from Meta.

The three non-governmental organisations announced the partnership – which will be led by Save the Children Australia – at an event at Meta’s Sydney offices on Friday, with attendance by government, industry, and academic representatives.

Meta’s seed funding will enable these organisations to provide support services and safety education to victims of online abuse, in particular teenagers and youth, through a pilot initiative in Papua New Guinea that aims to provide reporting pathways in the future.

Additional funding partners are being sought to build on these activities to create a nation-wide pilot and scale the initiative across the Pacific over the next five years.

As access to the internet across the Pacific increases, thanks to the steady rollout of faster and more affordable cable systems, so too does the risk of encountering harmful online content and abuse – particularly for young people.

In PNG, for example, where Save the Children and ChildFund have longstanding child protection and development programs, women and children face some of the highest rates of violence in the world and this violence is now transcending to online platforms. There is a broader socio-cultural shift occurring amongst young people as a result of technological use, with children being more exposed to pornography and harmful content than ever before. The negative effects of all of this are affecting intergenerational relationships.

A widely recognised obstacle to addressing online abuse, in particular the spread of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), is the general unawareness of how and what to report and a dedicated place that can guide people to do so.

Responding to this gap, the collaboration will deliver a range of measures to strengthen online safety in PNG, including awareness-raising sessions in schools, empowering young people to act as peer safety ambassadors, and a media campaign to raise wider community awareness.

Additional funding would build on this work and create a dedicated national helpline function in PNG to receive reports about online safety concerns, including bullying, grooming, CSAM and other illegal content.

The helpline would provide free and confidential advice to people experiencing harmful online content, including working with digital platforms to remove content that violates their policies and prevent further negative impacts. It would also provide people with access and referrals to support services as appropriate.

This service would be established within the existing national domestic violence helpline, 1 Tok Kaunselin Helpim Lain, which is jointly operated by ChildFund PNG and the local not-for-profit Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee. It would be modelled on other successful NGO-based online safety helplines, such as Netsafe New Zealand, which would provide technical capacity building support for the PNG help line staff.

The partners hope to scale the initiative more widely into other Pacific Island countries where there is a need for similar services.

The new collaboration builds on the existing partnership between Save the Children Australia and Meta, which, alongside Save the Children Fiji, has delivered online safety awareness raising and educational initiatives in the Pacific Islands to help increase digital literacy and safety skills, with a focus on teenagers, youth and parents. The 'I Am Digital' campaign, which launched in February 2021, has now been run across seven Pacific Island nations – Fiji, Kiribati, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu.

Quote attributable to Mat Tinkler, Chief Executive Officer of Save the Children Australia:

“As children and young people increasingly use social media platforms in PNG and the Pacific, online safety is becoming ever more critical to help ensure their protection from online and real-world harms,” he said.

“Save the Children is very pleased to be a founding member of this collaboration, which will enhance and support our existing work with the PNG Government and Meta to support and empower young people as they access the internet across the region.

“We are seeking an additional \$1.5 million to pilot this initiative in PNG and welcome conversations with governments, corporates and not-for-profits who are interested in joining this partnership as we look to scale this across the Pacific.”

Save the Children Australia operates vital health, education and child protection services across the Pacific, reaching vulnerable children and their communities in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu.

Quote attributable to Amy Lamoin from ChildFund Australia:

“The digital landscape in PNG and the Pacific is changing rapidly and the development sector, the tech industry, government regulators and communities need to act now to mitigate the most acute risks for children,” she said.

“Through this new partnership, ChildFund Australia will bring together two priority areas of our programming to protect children in PNG - child online safety, and gender-based violence helplines. We will use our Swipe Safe frontline worker training to provide critical counselling support and referral for children who have experienced online sexual exploitation and other harms.”

Quote attributable to Brent Carey, Chief Executive Officer of Netsafe New Zealand:

“New Zealand has a long association with Pacific nations, like Papua New Guinea. With our lives moving online, it’s crucial to equip communities with local responses to online harm. Netsafe, through our Pacific Collaboration Programme funded by the New Zealand Government, supports Pacific countries in building online safety capabilities. This includes tailored online safety advice, cyber safety incident response, community engagement and ongoing research about online harms in the Pacific,” he said.

“We’re excited to expand our outreach efforts to Papua New Guinea by partnering with agencies such as Save the Children Australia, ChildFund Australia and local in-country partners together with Meta. Pilot programmes between NGOs and the private sector are one way of promoting positive change in the Pacific region.”

Quote attributable to Mia Garlick, Meta’s Regional Director of Policy for Australia, New Zealand, Pacific Islands, Japan and Korea:

“The rapidly expanding access to digital tools across the Pacific Islands has immense potential to be transformative across areas such as business growth, disaster response and simply enabling people to build new connections and stay in touch with loved ones across the globe. But it is also not without its risks, which is why Meta is proud of our investments in digital literacy initiatives across the region, and to be a founding supporter of this new collaboration,” she said.

“We look forward to working closely with Save the Children Australia, ChildFund Australia and Netsafe New Zealand in implementing the Papua New Guinea pilot project as an important next step towards empowering people in the Pacific Islands to have safe and positive experiences whenever they go online.”

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About Netsafe

Netsafe is an independent non-profit organisation with an unrelenting focus on online safety. We keep people of all ages safe online by providing free support, advice and education. Visit netsafe.org.nz for free resources and to report incidents of online harm.

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