

# Change in the Pacific - a Forum Perspective

Edwin Smith Memorial Lecture

Presented by

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The vast Pacific Ocean has many dimensions and means different things to different people. There is the geographic aspect based on the simple fact it is the world's largest ocean, twice the size of the Atlantic. In its bounty, over thousands of years, it has sustained humanity and given forth a proud tradition of exploration and discovery, both in the gradual spread of Pacific peoples through its islands and in playing an important role in opening up the world as a conduit for global trade and economic development throughout the broader Asia-Pacific region.

Notwithstanding its name, the Pacific has not always enjoyed a peaceful existence. It has long been a stage for geopolitical rivalries from the voyages of the great European explorers until today when the influence of the major world powers stands astride the region. Indeed, in the last century, its waters and islands were an active theatre of global conflict. In that time Pacific cultures and traditions were plundered, and in the wake of that conflict and as a result of colonialism, Pacific communities experienced the horrors and long-term legacy of the testing of nuclear weapons.

As a region so vulnerable to unexpected events and pressures, the Pacific has always needed to be innovative, transforming and adapting its social, political and multilateral institutions in pursuit of common objectives. In recent years, long-standing governance and development aspirations have been compounded as new demands and diverse challenges have emerged. Transnational crime and terrorism, climate change, and dramatic shifts in global power relations have demanded us all to work better together for the good of all.

Nevertheless, in an increasingly interdependent world, where decisions taken one side of the world can have deep impacts on peoples remote from the centres of world power, Pacific countries have no other option but to fight as hard as possible to make their voice heard. In the face of global change and uncertainty, the pursuit of cooperation and partnership, through the Pacific Islands Forum but also through other regional and global bodies, remains an effective tool to serve common interests, maximising limited influence and promoting hard-won achievements.

Where the path to success or failure lies, however, is not necessarily whether others take our collective efforts seriously, but whether national governments facing a constantly changing domestic landscape, often influenced and complicated by global forces, actually implement the sound policies and best practices advocated through their own regional deliberations.

As a starting point, I will provide an overview of the critical issues facing the Pacific: the key political, economic, social and environmental challenges and touch on the work being pursued through the Pacific's own regional mechanisms. Indeed, rather than having to face their challenges individually as a matter of necessity, the Pacific islands already have a sophisticated and generally effective set of regional structures and agencies. The consolidation of regional policy in order to better address global demands, be they pressure for an effective regional counter-terrorism policy, the need to engage in international climate change deliberations or responses to agreed UN development goals were just some of the many tasks I faced in my previous policy role at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS).

### Regional security

My main task at the Forum was to address regional political governance and security issues. Prior to my arrival, in 2005, Pacific Forum Leaders adopted a vision for the future to guide Forum policies and approaches to all its key challenges. The overarching goal was to establish a region of peace, harmony, security and economic prosperity, so that its peoples could lead free and worthwhile lives. To give effect to this vision, Forum Leaders adopted the Pacific Plan to act as a roadmap for regional collaboration and cooperation. Security, a foundation stone for this vision, is one of the four pillars of the Pacific Plan and was recognised as an essential prerequisite for the other three pillars of good governance, economic growth and sustainable development.

Throughout the existence of the Pacific Forum since 1971, the region has seen largely harmonious relations between the States of the Pacific with very few border incidents and only a relatively small number of bilateral disputes. Most of these were quickly resolved through diplomatic dialogue and even today there seems little likelihood of a direct hostile military threat (what might be termed a 'traditional' security threat) from outside the region. Nevertheless, there are real and serious non-traditional threats with implications for regional stability, in the form of potential terrorist attacks, transnational crimes such as terrorism, trafficking in persons, arms or drugs and money-laundering and the impacts of climate change and pandemic disease. Within Pacific island countries, there are also potential, and unfortunately at times actual, drivers of instability resulting in internal tensions in the form of disputes over resources, ethnic and tribal rivalries, political discontent, poverty and social disparities.

### Forum principles

In responding to these threats, the Forum has adopted basic values and principles contained or reflected in the Leaders Vision of 2005 and a range of regional Declarations. These include:

- the Honiara Declaration of 1992 on law enforcement cooperation;
- the Aitutaki Declaration of 1997 on principles governing regional security in the region;
- the Forum Principles of Good Governance 1997, relating to the national budget process, and accounts of governments, state-owned enterprises and statutory corporations;

- the Biketawa Declaration of 2000 on principles for good governance and for responses to crises in the region;
- the Forum Principles of Good Leadership 2003, relating to key principles of good governance which are fundamental to good leadership; and
- principles embedded in the Forum Vision, like tolerance and respect for the cultural diversity of the region; and recognition of the region's responsibility for guardianship of the our ocean and its resources.

To highlight just one of these key mechanisms, the Biketawa Declaration introduced guiding principles and a regional process for responding to conflicts and crises in member countries which, while respecting the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, sends an unprecedented signal about Forum members' readiness for more regional involvement to help address internal security threats. The first regional action launched under the Biketawa Declaration was the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) which remains a unique Pacific initiative and success story, with the full cooperation and agreement of the Solomon Islands Government and founded on the active participation of all Forum Governments. Forum assistance to Nauru with the financial rescue plan under the PRAN programme (ended in 2009 at the request of Nauru), as well as the Leaders decision to suspend the participation of Fiji from Forum meetings were also taken under the auspices of the Biketawa Declaration.

#### Human rights

Peace, prosperity and justice cannot be fully realised without human rights. The interdependence between stable governance, human rights and economic growth is undeniable - political and civil rights cannot be advanced without respect for economic, social and cultural rights. In a recently formed partnership with the European Union, the Forum has now commenced work to assist Pacific Island countries ratify and report on core human rights treaties and covenants, including the Rome Statute for the ICC. This work better enables governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and ordinary citizens to regularly take stock of human rights observance in their country, measure progress against universal standards, both as a means of monitoring progress over time and to reflect on improvements needed. Consideration of the need for a regional human rights mechanism is also now on the Forum agenda.

The overall aim of such efforts is to defend human rights, promote democracy and good governance and pursue a common vision of a region respected for the quality of its governance and the full observance of democratic values. To this end, we must take into account and celebrate our diversity and allow our unique cultures and traditions to flourish for the benefit of current and future generations. Greater opportunities to partner with civil society and to allow marginalised people such as women, rural communities and ethnic minorities, to exercise their rights can only

## Economic Challenges

In addition to key security tasks before the Forum, global developments often conspire to create economic and development obstacles which are just as difficult and demanding. In response, the Forum occupies a central place in regional cooperation with its key responsibilities for the high-level political and policy making of the region, with its principal coordination function amongst the various regional organisations. It has a leading role in specific activities including pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the promotion of aid effectiveness strategies under the Cairns Compact and, the issue I will first address, the implementation of the region's own development agenda, the Pacific Plan.

## The Pacific Plan

The Pacific Plan, endorsed by Forum Leaders in 2005, is the master strategy to strengthen regional cooperation and integration, with aspiration to see the Pacific as a region of peace, harmony, security and economic prosperity, so that all of its people can lead free and worthwhile lives.

At their meeting in 2009, Forum Leaders endorsed a set of five key priorities as a way for implementing the Pacific Plan more effectively and as a response to new global changes and challenges presented by the global economic crisis and the on-going vulnerability of Pacific island countries to external shocks. Expressed broadly the five Pacific Plan priorities are:

- (i) fostering economic development for broad-based growth;
- (ii) improving livelihoods and well-being of Pacific peoples;
- (iii) addressing the impacts of climate change;
- (iv) achieving stronger national development through better governance; and
- (v) ensuring improved social, political and legal conditions for stability, safety and security .

Fundamentally, these are priorities premised on inherent vulnerabilities and framed around the need to build resilience and coping abilities among Pacific communities. The Pacific Plan is aligned with the work of regional organisations and implemented by all regional organisations which meet at least once a year under the permanent chairmanship of the Forum Secretary General.

To this end, the Pacific Plan provides a master strategy for the sustainable development of Pacific countries according to key priorities set at the highest political level by Forum Leaders, and as assisted and supported by the network of all CROP agencies. The engagement of Leaders and Forum member countries through their senior officials mean that the same key priorities are substantially reflected, if not entirely so, in national development strategies.

## Aid Effectiveness

In 2009, Leaders have also adopted a Compact on Strengthening Development Coordination in the Pacific, the Cairns Compact, which provides the machinery for effective implementation of development priorities. The Compact represents a new determination and commitment at the highest political level to lift the economic and development performance of the region. Its principal objective is to drive more effective coordination of all available development resources, from donor partners and from member countries as well, centred on the aim of achieving real progress against the MDGs. Towards this objective, it was agreed that the development and implementation of the Compact would be based on the following principles:

- broad-based, private sector-led growth as essential to achieving faster development progress;
- improved governance and service delivery;
- greater investment in infrastructure;
- country leadership, mutual accountability and mutual responsibility between Forum island countries and their development partners as fundamental to successful development outcomes;
- the need to draw on international best-practice as expressed in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action; and
- a revitalised commitment to the achievement of the MDGs in the Pacific.

## Millennium Development Goals

While tracking of progress against the MDGs has provided a new focus to monitor the region's developmental progress it has led to concerns about the region's performance against globally accepted standards. While good progress has been made in some areas, no Pacific island country is on track to achieve all the MDGs, and no MDG is on track to be achieved by all countries. Indeed, the Pacific region is second only to Sub-Saharan Africa in struggling to meet the MDGs.

At their meeting in 2010 Forum Leaders issued their Port Vila Declaration on Accelerating Progress on the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals noting the uneven results to date and committing to extra effort at accelerating progress, and calling on development partners to work with the region to identify and develop new activities and programmes for the years leading up to 2015. Further attention will be needed in responding to any new global agreement on human development objectives in the post-2015 period.

## Health Issues

Health issues remain a major concern throughout the region, requiring focused strategies to tackle HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and, alarmingly, the already high rate of deaths of Pacific peoples from non-communicable, so-called 'lifestyle' diseases. In addition, since 2009, the Pacific region has worked at Ministerial level to progress an effective rights-based programmes for Pacific Islanders with disabilities but much more work needs to be done to protect and advance their

interests given they have been one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups over many years.

### Security and Gender Equality

The maintenance of family-centred societies is also vital in mitigating against damaging social pressures and building community resilience. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has been acknowledged by Pacific leaders as a serious problem and a Forum Reference Group was created in 2010 to report to advance the goal of eradicating such violence in all member countries. Violence against women is far too pervasive in the region and is gradually being better acknowledged as a risk to human security and a potential destabilising factor for many Pacific communities. It is also part of systemic behaviours which prevent women participating fully in political and economic life and contribute to the Pacific performing badly on indicators of women's economic empowerment and political representation. Current efforts to create a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security must be encouraged and advanced if we are to be seen as a region responsibly and progressively addressing gender inequalities to build better communities for the future.

### Disasters, Climate Change and Oceans

The Pacific islands also face specific and unavoidable vulnerabilities in the face of an ever-changing global landscape. The special case for small island developing states was agreed in the Rio Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and was based on the high levels of economic and environmental vulnerability inherent in island countries as a result of their smallness, remoteness and susceptibility to natural disasters. This special case has been recognised internationally in the years since in a number of multilateral contexts. These are among the factors which combine to make the achievement of the MDGs particularly challenging in the Pacific and the global community must be mindful of this in assessing its performance and, most importantly, in determining development benchmarks for the future.

The extreme exposure of Pacific island countries to the dangers of climate change is extensively documented in the work of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the concerns of Pacific countries are well known. These impacts are already evident and there will be significant deterioration as they grow and are manifested. Climate change alone has been named by Forum Leaders as the great challenge of our time, for it threatens not only livelihoods, security and living standards, but also the very viability, if not long-term existence of some Pacific communities.

There are also other pressing environmental concerns for the region, including in the continuing loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification and the over-exploitation and depletion of marine resources. The reiteration by Forum Leaders in recent years of the critical importance of ensuring the sustainable development, management and conservation of the Pacific Ocean is a significant decision and this is being pursued through the Framework for a Pacific Oceanscape with the Secretary General of the Forum designated as the Oceans Commissioner for the region.

## Fisheries

I would also like to highlight a key issue for the Pacific which is no less economic as it is security-related. Fisheries is a major source of food and income for Pacific island countries and for many Pacific people is the main prospect for sustainable economic development. The maximisation of return from these resources and their sustainable conservation and management is therefore fundamental to the long-term socio-economic wellbeing and stability of the region, as is the protection of those resources.

Sustaining our fisheries resource is a huge responsibility for Pacific states, compounded as it is by limited technical and economic abilities and by the vastness of the Pacific. Fish, as one of the few readily abundant natural resources, is vital to the prospects for the region's sustainable economic development and future well-being, as a multi-billion dollar source of export revenue for many countries; as employment and livelihood opportunities for many Pacific islanders; and for food security, supplying in some communities up to 95% of their daily protein needs. With Pacific populations projected to grow sharply in the next 50 years, effective protective measures become fundamental to the sustainability of fisheries and, overall, to food security needs for the Pacific.

As it is, we know that an estimated 20% of the current reported catch from the Pacific comes from illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and that major international bodies are warning that overfishing is threatening some key commercial stocks. It is critical that Governments, of the Pacific and Governments worldwide continue to seek effective action through the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) and other effective management mechanisms such as the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Convention (WCPFC) to tighten controls over illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and to better control and manage foreign exploitation of what remains a finite Pacific resource.

As global fish stocks become depleted, more pressure will be placed upon the Pacific fisheries to supply even more than the current 54% of tuna it all ready supplies to the global market. Without proper management and enforcement to protect fish stocks, there is a distinct possibility of eventual resource depletion which would be absolutely catastrophic for island communities. Inevitably, it will be the communities which are not able to respond to the challenge and those most vulnerable to poverty, hunger and disease that will suffer, and possibly leading to increased social tension and potential conflict.

## Conclusion

As this review of many of the key challenges shows, the enormity and complexity of the tasks at hand remain daunting. Not one among Pacific countries can manage alone and there is inevitability and basic common sense to our need to work together. In international terms, the Forum region is still a relatively young one. The challenges we now face are occurring and being manifested within the lifespan of one Pacific generation. Undoubtedly, there will be failures and shortcomings as we try to manage these changes and challenges. Clearly, we need to improve and build our resilience and greatly enhance our capacities to cope. In doing so, Pacific countries must also be responsible and accountable, first and foremost to their own citizens while also mindful of international demands.

In particular, we need to accept that the expansion of the rule of law and the norms of international behaviour ingrained in multilateral instruments concerning human rights, the environment, peace and security and the rights of women and children has been the foundation of much of the political, social and economic progress achieved throughout the world, including in our own region. We must recognise that these are normative standards which make the world a far better place for us all. The Forum has been a clear voice championing these values but such values are being constantly contested in a region dealing with a myriad of conflicting and disparate interests. Ensuring we remain an effective voice in the global community in advancing international standards and norms for the greater benefit of all people is a key task if we are to continue to attract mutually beneficial development partnerships for the future.

Every year, our Pacific communities continue to be confronted by external forces and emerging challenges that directly threaten prospects for regional and human security, law and order, and peace and stability. A myriad of serious cross-border and trans-national crimes, compounded by devastating impacts of the global financial and economic crises, including climate change and natural disasters, add to complications and challenges for our region. But our history shows we are a region of resilience and one firmly committed to the Forum vision for a peaceful, secure and prosperous Pacific.

The end goal of Pacific regionalism must be one in which its citizens enjoy higher standards of health and education, long lives and expanded opportunity; where Pacific economic performance is continually improving, driven by environmentally sustainable service industries. It would be a future where dictatorships, inter-ethnic rivalries and violent conflicts are relegated to the past; where the Pacific is truly integrated in the wider Asia-Pacific region, and we are given a far more influential voice in world affairs, not least as the custodians of the world's largest ocean. Through the ongoing efforts of the Pacific Islands Forum, the ambitious vision put forward by past Leaders can be advanced and, in time, be brought even closer to reality.

In advancing regionalism in the Pacific, all nations must respond collectively to common challenges where collective responses serve to amplify our voice, bolster commitment and build our strength. The Forum belongs to all nations of the region. It should not be dominated by one country or one group of countries or serve the national interest of some over others. In so far as it represents our collective wisdom and better judgement in the face of problems and challenges, we must utilise it to the collective benefit of all the peoples of the Pacific region.

In a dynamic world, change is inevitable and should not be feared. As well as bringing uncertainty, change can also create new opportunities. Through cooperation encouraged by the Pacific Islands Forum, our region is provided with an important tool to manage that change and harvest its potential for the benefit of Pacific peoples. No one country can feasibly manage alone in today's world, where peace and security at the regional level are inextricably linked to peace and stability in each member country. This quest for greater influence and better resilience is no less the search for an antidote to the destabilising forces of global change.

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