



ISLAND DREAMING: A fresh look at Pacific regionalism

Pacific regionalism timeline:

- » 1947 - SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION (SPC) ESTABLISHED (Australia, France, New Zealand, Netherlands, UK and USA)
- » 1966 - PACIFIC CONFERENCE OF CHURCHES ESTABLISHED
- » 1968 - UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC ESTABLISHED
- » 1971 - SOUTH PACIFIC FORUM FOUNDED (Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, New Zealand, Samoa and Tonga)
- » 1972 - SOUTH PACIFIC BUREAU FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION (SPEC) ESTABLISHED
- » 1975 - AFRICAN, CARIBBEAN AND PACIFIC GROUP OF STATES (ACP) ESTABLISHED
- » 1979 - PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM FISHERIES AGENCY ESTABLISHED
- » 1980 - SOUTH PACIFIC BOARD FOR EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT (SPBEA) ESTABLISHED
- » 1980 - PACIFIC ISLANDS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (PIDP) ESTABLISHED
- » 1981 - SOUTH PACIFIC REGIONAL TRADE AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION AGREEMENT (SPARTECA)
- » 1983 - 22 ISLAND COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES HAVE JOINED SPC
- » 1984 - SOUTH PACIFIC APPLIED GEOSCIENCE COMMISSION (SOPAC) ESTABLISHED
- » 1984 - FIRST MEETING OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS CONFERENCE OF LEADERS
- » 1985 - SOUTH PACIFIC NUCLEAR FREE ZONE TREATY
- » 1986 - MELANESIAN SPEARHEAD GROUP (MSG) FOUNDED

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This is a region of remarkable contrasts and of immense diversities: diversities of land forms and people; innumerable languages little known elsewhere; and of cultures and traditions, unique and distinct, one from the other. There is, in the natural order, much more to divide than there is to unite.¹

Given the tribal nature of the Pacific in general and Melanesia in particular, it is always a challenge to bring consensus to big ideas. Many of today's leaders were forged in the struggle to win independence, and have since remained focused on developing their own nation states. Building a sense of nationalism, let alone regionalism, has itself been a real challenge, especially given the entrenched *wontok*² system of loyalties and the relative infancy of the Pacific island states.

It is not surprising then, that despite many years of discussing Pacific regionalism, we seem to be getting no closer to a common understanding of what this means: where is the big picture on our Pacific future? Who can explain what the Pacific region will look like in 20, 50 or even 100 years from now? Are we moving towards a 'Pacific Union' with a single currency and open borders? Or will it ultimately be more beneficial for island states to stay focused on the nation building exercise and bilateral deals that enhance their own national sovereignty? And just what is the role of sub-regional groupings in Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia? Is it more realistic to consider federated sub-regional blocs (e.g. Federated States of Melanesia) rather than an over-arching Pacific Union? In the absence of a long-term vision, have we already seen the high-tide of regionalism, and the future now is ebbing back to national and sub-regional agendas?

The lack of debate or clarity on Pacific regionalism is creating confusion among the informed sections of the community, bewilderment among grass roots and despair among those Pacific peoples still colonised and unrepresented. This paper looks at the main areas where regional architecture is either established or now being built, as well as some of the ideas that could help shape a strong and viable community to best take advantage of the 'Pacific Century' we now live in.

History matters

Over the last forty years the world has been arranging itself into regional blocs. Witness the creation of the EU (European Union), NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), CARICOM (Caribbean Community Single Market and Economy), the Arab League, the African Union and closer to home, ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations). Since the 1990s there has been a renewed emphasis on regional integration in the belief that this is good for development and poverty reduction. There are now over 100 regional trade agreements that span continents and often involve cases of multiple membership (i.e. countries that are party to more than one agreement). The Pacific is among the last regions of the world to form itself into a functioning bloc to promote trade, investment, migration and security - the heart of any regional integration project.

1. Statement by Tuiloma Neroni Slade, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, at the opening of the 41st leaders meeting in Port Vila on 4 August 2010 - <http://www.forumsec.org.fj/pages.cfm/newsroom/speeches/2010-1/statement-by-sg-tuiloma-neroni-slade-at-opening-of-41st-pif.html>

Discussion
paper:

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poverty³, found that regionalism can contribute to improved livelihoods, but only if the process goes beyond trade and investment to include regional public goods (e.g. customs, education, peacekeeping operations, healthcare, agricultural research). The study concluded that regional trade agreements have generally boosted intra-regional trade (mainly due to tariff reductions), and that regional integration generally led to increased foreign direct investment. However, the authors caution that the benefits of increased trade and investment depend on complementary conditions being in place - such as an educated workforce. Further, as intra-regional trade in developing regions is usually small, so too are any benefits. We know this has been the case in the Pacific, where regional trade agreements have failed to boost intra-regional trade or make any significant contribution to the development of the islands⁴. We also know that globalisation places serious demands on the limited resources in small island developing states.

The language of 'development' has embraced regionalism as a tool to promote economic growth. Starting with a foundation based on trade may have been suitable in Europe, but for the Pacific, where trade will always be limited, is this the best framework for fostering a Pacific community? There is arguably a need to establish the social-political-cultural bedrock first.

Birth of the Pacific regional project

The architecture for Pacific regionalism dates back to the latter years of the Second World War and a resolve by Australia and New Zealand "to exercise a decisive influence upon the future of the South Pacific and to work together to secure this"⁵. In 1947 the colonial powers came together to establish the South Pacific Commission (see timeline on previous page) to "encourage and strengthen international cooperation in promoting the economic and social welfare of the peoples of the non-self-governing territories in the South Pacific"⁶. This early means of cooperation was later extended to the independent island states and dependent territories. Political and security matters have always been excluded from consideration by the SPC, which continues to focus on research, planning and technical assistance.

The first regional political grouping was the South Pacific Forum (now the Pacific Islands Forum). Its inception coincided with Fiji's independence, and was born out of increasing frustration of island leaders with the political shackles imposed by the SPC - especially on the issue of nuclear testing. Long heralded as the preeminent political institution in the Pacific, the Forum's legitimacy has stemmed from its annual meeting of government leaders. An agreement in 2005 sought to formalise the Forum (although this has yet to come into effect as it has not been ratified by all 16 members) and provided the 'mandate' to further regional cooperation. The *Pacific Plan*⁷ was endorsed as a 10 year framework to achieve this aim of closer integration.

3. Dirk Willem te Velde and The Overseas Development Institute, editors (2006) *Regional Integration and Poverty*. Ashgate Publishing Ltd, England

4. For further discussion see - PiPP (2008) *Beyond fish and coconuts: Trade agreements in the Pacific islands*, Pacific Institute of Public Policy Briefing Note 03 - pacificpolicy.org

5. McLintock, A.H. (ed) (1966) *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* - teara.govt.nz/en/1966/international-relations/5

6. *Canberra Agreement (1947)* - austrlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/1948/15.html

7. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2007) *The Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration* - forumsec.org.fj/pages.cfm/about-us/the-pacific-plan/

future of the Pacific. Instead, it recognises the need to "clarify Members' own understanding and appreciation of regionalism" and tiptoes its way through the contentious issue of national sovereignty ("regionalism under the Pacific Plan does not imply any limitation on national sovereignty"). The goals and objectives, while commendable, are so broad as to render them useless (e.g. "increased sustainable trade, reduced poverty, enhanced involvement of youth and improved education").

Where are we now?

The Pacific is not lacking in regional architecture - see Table 1 showing membership of the main intergovernmental institutions. In addition to the international, regional and sub-regional political groupings, there are 10 organisations delivering technical assistance, policy advice, training and research services, as well as a number of trade and economic agreements. These implementing agencies have led a number of significant programmes in regional cooperation - notably the management of fisheries (FFA and PNA) and marine resources and environmental protection (SPC and SOPAC/SPREP). Further, a number of private sector, faith based and civil society initiatives⁸ have contributed to the broader social and economic integration objectives. At a recent debate on regionalism hosted by the Pacific Institute of Public Policy⁹, students from the University of the South Pacific argued that the university itself has been one of the most successful examples of regional integration by facilitating cultural exchanges and fostering a Pacific fraternity.

Political cooperation has been less evident. Now half way into the 10 year *Pacific Plan*, we seem to have come no closer to defining our regional dream. Perhaps that is because the Pacific regional project has only really taken hold in the last decade. Part of this project includes "reform [of] the Forum and the regional institutional mechanism" - as stated in the introduction of the plan. Few question the need for reform, with a growing perception that the regional body suffers both a 'democratic deficit' and a confused existence. In the lead up to this year's annual leaders' meeting, the Forum faced what some are calling an 'existential crisis' - questioning its very relevance. It has been politically paralysed on the main challenges confronting the region: trade, climate change and the military takeover in Fiji. The Leaders' Communiqué¹⁰ this year was so bland that it was barely reported by the assembled international media. Again, civil society representatives were barred from participation. Without funding support and a place at the table for civil society, the Forum Secretariat remains disconnected from the broader Pacific community. While there has been muted criticism over the years, this year was different. Notwithstanding the validity of reasons, the non-attendance of leaders from four of the largest members sparked concern about downgrading the annual summit of government heads. Support for Fiji's hastily convened 'rival' Engaging Fiji¹¹ meeting further suggested dissatisfaction within the Forum membership.

8. E.g. Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation (PIPSO), Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) and Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO)

9. *The Pacific Debate: That regionalism has failed the Pacific*, held on 6 August 2010 at USP Emalus Campus in Port Vila

10. *Forty First Pacific Islands Forum Port Vila, Vanuatu 4-5 August 2010 Forum Communiqué* - forumsec.org.fj/pages.cfm/documents/forum-communications/

11. The meeting held at Natadola 22-23 July 2010 was attended by leaders of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu, and representatives of five other Pacific states

Pacific regionalism timeline:

[continued from first page]

- » 1988 - SPEC RENAMED FORUM SECRETARIAT
- » 1988 - SOUTH PACIFIC ORGANISATIONS COORDINATING COMMITTEE ESTABLISHED (SPOCC)
- » 1990 - ALLIANCE OF SMALL ISLAND STATES (AOSIS) ESTABLISHED
- » 1990 - SOUTH PACIFIC REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (SPREP) ESTABLISHED
- » 1991 - PACIFIC ISLANDS ASSOCIATION OF NGOS (PIANGO) ESTABLISHED
- » 1993 - MSG TRADE AGREEMENT
- » 1996 - PACIFIC ISLANDS CENTRE (PIC) ESTABLISHED
- » 1997 - FIRST PACIFIC ALLIANCE LEADERS' MEETING (PALM)
- » 1997 - SPC RENAMED SECRETARIAT OF THE PACIFIC COMMUNITY
- » 1997 - FIRST MICRONESIAN CHIEF EXECUTIVES' SUMMIT
- » 1999 - SPOCC RENAMED COUNCIL OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN THE PACIFIC (CROP)
- » 2000 - SOUTH PACIFIC FORUM RENAMED PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM
- » 2000 - AGREEMENT ESTABLISHING PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM SECRETARIAT
- » 2001 - PACIFIC AGREEMENT ON CLOSER ECONOMIC RELATIONS (PACER) SIGNED
- » 2001 - PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES TRADE AGREEMENT (PICTA)
- » 2004 - WESTERN & CENTRAL PACIFIC FISHERIES COMMISSION FOUNDED
- » 2005 - PACIFIC PLAN ADOPTED BY FORUM LEADERS
- » 2005 - AGREEMENT ESTABLISHING PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM (to date it has only been ratified by 5 members)
- » 2007 - AGREEMENT ESTABLISHING MELANESIAN SPEARHEAD GROUP
- » 2007 - PACER 'PLUS' TRIGGERED BY AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND
- » 2008 - MSG SECRETARIAT OPENED
- » 2010 - PARTIES TO THE NAURU AGREEMENT (PNA) OFFICE OPENED
- » 2010 - SOPAC MERGES WITH SPC
- » 2010 - OFFICE OF THE CHIEF TRADE ADVISOR (OCTA) ESTABLISHED
- » SOURCE: Individual agency web sites and Lal, B. and K. Fortune (2000) *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopedia*, University of Hawaii Press

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MOVING FORWARD

Great geopolitical forces are now at play, with the growing influence of Asian powers in the Pacific ending the status quo that has typified relations between the island countries and the traditional Pacific powers until now. In the new Great Game for the Pacific, regional architecture will be one of the main avenues through which the existing and new powers will seek to exercise their influence. Pacific leaders need to identify the best way to play the game to ensure peace and prosperity. Where the Pacific's traditional allies invested their political capital in a centralised, Suva-based Forum Secretariat, with all the countries acting as spokes on the wheel, Asian powers are supporting the sub-regionals instead. It was not just polite diplomacy that saw the emerging powers join Pacific leaders at the Engaging Fiji meeting. China has also invested heavily in establishing the MSG secretariat in Port Vila, and across the region. In the shifting political and economic landscape, Papua New Guinea arguably places more value on its ties with ASEAN than the Forum.

The Pacific integration project has been allowed to drift on the tide. So how do we steer it towards a practical realisation of regional goals? Firstly, we need to dispel the myth that strong sub-regional groupings are a threat to regionalism. With the rise of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) as an effective policy broker, an annual meeting of Micronesian leaders and talk of a common Polynesian passport, it is time to face the reality of three distinct regions within a region. In such a diverse and scattered region, it makes sense that the momentum for policy formulation is at the sub-regional level. If the Forum is to remain relevant, it will need to adapt its mandate and operations in light of this shift. Focussing on policy coordination and forging political linkages between sub-regional groupings would redefine the responsibility of the Forum Secretariat, which has been confused through increasing project implementation and advisory roles that overlap with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and other agencies.

Secondly, greater Pacific ownership and representation in the regional bodies may lead to the consideration of more island ideas at the negotiating table. In 2009, Pacific island members collectively contributed just 0.6 per cent of the Forum's budget, and to date just three island countries have ratified the 2005 agreement establishing the organisation. The triennial Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders is a more inclusive assembly, and if we are serious about regionalism (trade, investment, migration and security), it makes little sense not to include the non-self-governing territories. If the Forum exists to defend the interests of Pacific people, why does it remain silent on a number of ongoing struggles? This involves difficult political issues, but is something the Pacific family simply must face. There is often a disconnect between rhetoric and reality. At the opening of this year's Forum we heard an emotive speech¹ on the need to protect "the most vulnerable people in the region". Yet once again, the most vulnerable and oppressed people in the Pacific – the West Papuans (100,000 dead and counting from 40 years of Indonesian rule)¹² – were ignored. Likewise, delegates from Tahiti and Rapa Nui seeking support for self determination continued to have their quest for dialogue swept under the Forum tapa mat. In contrast, the World Bank was admitted as an official observer.

Finally, we need an inclusive debate on whether we even want to move towards a united Pacific - with a single currency, open borders and the free movement of capital, goods, services and people. For all the talk to date, arguably the most tangible element of regional integration - the movement of people - remains restricted, especially for Melanesians who, ironically, have easier access (e.g. visa on arrival) visiting many Asian countries than Australia¹³. The most recent addition to the regional project is PACER 'Plus'¹⁴ - an addition to the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations. There is a lot at stake in defining the 'Plus', which has to be about much more than trade for it to advance national or regional development efforts. Three years after being triggered, the perception is that PACER Plus is little more than a regional free trade deal. We remain on a journey without a destination until both the critics and proponents of PACER Plus come up with meaningful detail for consideration.

We have had decades of 'big man' politics - now we need to refine the big ideas, and have island leaders articulate their vision and timeline for our Pacific community.

12. Wing J. and P. King (2005) *Genocide in West Papua? The role of the Indonesian state apparatus and a current needs assessment of the Papuan people*. Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney and ELSHAM Jayapura, Papua – sydney.edu.au/arts/peace_conflict/docs/WestPapuaGenocideRpt05

13. For further discussion see Opeskin, B. and T. MacDermott (2010) *Enhancing opportunities for regional migration in the Pacific*, Pacific Institute of Public Policy, Suva, Fiji.