

A well-designed and properly administered research permit scheme can have multiple benefits for Pacific island countries. It can facilitate the prevention of misappropriation of traditional knowledge and genetic resources, help to ensure research builds on what has been done before rather than endlessly reinventing the wheel, direct research findings to those with practical use for them, avoid conflict and tensions in field sites, and ideally create better synergies between the research needs of the country and the objectives and focus of the researcher. Unfortunately, maladministration and lack of transparency of these schemes in the past, and in some cases at present, discourages genuine researchers from compliance and does not prevent unscrupulous researchers from slipping under the radar, thus undermining the potential value of research permits. These factors underlie the desire by a number of governments in the region to improve their research permit schemes. Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Cook Islands, for example, are all currently reviewing their schemes. This *In Brief* sets out some of the issues that arise in designing and implementing a research permit scheme, discusses the various options, and gives examples of best practice from the region. It is based on preliminary research conducted in Vanuatu and Cook Islands in 2013 and 2014.

National or Sectoral Scheme?

It is possible to have either a single national research permit system, as is currently the case in Samoa, Solomon Islands and Cook Islands, or multiple permit schemes administered under different government departments, as is the case in Fiji and Vanuatu. In general, national schemes are easier to monitor and enforce, and less confusing and bureaucratic for researchers (especially those doing multidisciplinary research). Department-specific research schemes, however, have the potential advantage of involving the department concerned more directly in the research being conducted; although this is also possible to achieve in a national scheme through incorporation of representatives of a wide range of government departments on the research committee.

Who Should It Apply To?

Most existing research permit schemes apply only to foreign researchers, and even then may not apply to

those with a pre-existing connection with the country, such as those living there, consultants working for aid donors, or those affiliated with in-country international non-government organisations. This limits the extent to which permit schemes are able to control the type of research done, facilitate understandings of the types of research being conducted, and make research findings more broadly available. In contrast, the Cook Islands' research permit scheme applies to *all* researchers in the country without exception. An administrator of the scheme explained that applying such a broad approach allows the government to assist all researchers in making sure they are not doubling up on research that has already been done.

Mandatory Research Protocols?

An important issue is whether the scheme should require researchers to comply with research protocols concerning matters such as prior informed consent and respecting cultural protocols. Vanuatu has an [abbreviated set of protocols](#) (and an [earlier version](#)) and is currently in the process of updating its protocols, but few other countries have such a scheme. A similar educative effect could be achieved by mandating that, wherever possible, researchers work with local counterparts, such as the Vanuatu fieldworkers at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. This option also has the advantage of building up local research capacity. In Vanuatu's case this was the aim of a research colloquium in 2006, which showcased collaborative research projects (Taylor and Thieberger 2011), and a follow-up is planned for 2016. The ratification of the *Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from Their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity* by a number of countries in the region may provide a useful impetus to develop such protocols. The Nagoya Protocol is intended to provide a legal framework for the effective implementation of one of the three objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity: the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the utilisation of genetic resources.

Enforcement

Monitoring and enforcement is currently the weakest link in most research permit schemes in the region. There are two aspects to monitoring: the first is

making sure that researchers use the research permit system; the second is ensuring that they comply with the conditions of the scheme. In regard to the first, the most viable approach given prevailing capacity constraints is a combination of:

- awareness-raising throughout government departments and the wider community about the need for researchers to have permits
- the cultivation of a habit by government employees and the general public to ask researchers for their research permits before participating in research activities (as currently occurs in Cook Islands)
- reporting those researchers who do not have permits to the relevant authority
- incorporating questions to do with research permits on both incoming and departing immigration forms.

In regard to the second aspect of monitoring, the options are requiring the payment of a bond that is repaid upon the lodging of research findings with the host government (currently the case in Tonga and under consideration in Solomon Islands), withholding future research permission to the researcher or his/her organisation, or contacting foreign researchers' ethics committees directly to complain. While requiring large bonds is the least resource-intensive for the host country, it may discourage poorly funded researchers and may not be a deterrent to well-funded researchers.

What To Do with Research Findings?

Most countries make it a requirement for researchers to lodge a number of hard and soft copies of their research findings with the host country. However, these are often filed away and not actively used. One way to overcome this is to create a database into which all research reports and findings are required to be lodged under a [creative commons licence](#) as a condition of the research permit approval (with exceptions available for cases of confidentiality or cultural sensitivity). This would facilitate broader awareness of the research that has been conducted. For example, Fiji launched a [health research portal](#) in 2014 which among other things provides access to completed research findings and reports. Such a knowledge resource is also likely to attract the attention of future researchers and promote awareness about the research permit scheme. Cook Islands is the only country to my knowledge currently planning such a database. The cost of creating and maintaining such a database can be mitigated by the use of technology such as wikis where a wide range of users

can upload documents rather than depending upon an administrator.

Mechanisms for Matching Country Research Needs with Researchers

A possible extension of a database of research findings could be a facility whereby government departments, non-government organisations and the general public post information about areas of research that need to be conducted in order to inform certain policies or promote certain goals. Such information could be used by researchers and organisations interested in designing research projects that have relevance for their host country. This could assist in changing the current dynamic whereby research projects are often generated by outside agendas and objectives. It may also help facilitate the development of collaborative research projects with local partners, helping to transform research subjects into part of the investigative process. Such collaborations between those with technical/outside knowledge and those with local/inside knowledge are increasingly recognised as leading to productive and innovative research outcomes (see, e.g. Leach et al. 2012).

Conclusion

The benefits of research permit schemes for the Pacific island region are likely to substantially outweigh their costs, especially as they may avoid the need for more expensive regulatory options to control biopiracy and misappropriation of traditional knowledge. The 'research permit scheme plus' options set out in the last two paragraphs offer particular advantages for countries such as Papua New Guinea,¹ currently seeking to gain better control over the research conducted in and about it.

Author Notes

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Endnote

- 1 Papua New Guinea is currently developing a national research agenda.

References

- Leach, M., J. Rockström, P. Raskin, I. Scoones, A.C. Stirling, A. Smith, J. Thompson, E. Millstone, A. Ely, E. Arond, C. Folke and P. Olsson 2012. Transforming Innovation for Sustainability. *Ecology and Society* 17(2):11. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-04933-170211>>, viewed 3/12/2014.
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