

# State of the Pacific — Slippery Slopes and Rough Rides in Regional Cooperative Endeavours in the Islands



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*This discussion paper results from a speech prepared for the keynote address at the 2016 State of the Pacific Conference, held at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, Australia, 13–15 September. In it Dr Aqorau discusses the state of regional cooperative affairs in the Pacific Islands, particularly with respect to fisheries, through his own observations, but not as he puts it ‘an academic sweep of our complex region. I want it to be rooted in the perceptions and experiences of an Islander!’*

## Introduction and Backdrop

An academic acquaintance who read my closing remarks to the 11th Meeting of the PNA (Parties to the Nauru Agreement) Ministers a few weeks ago said, ‘You must feel frustrated or at least amused by much of what is written by academics, who haven’t worked in any of the organisations’. I do not feel a sense of bemusement. Academic curiosity provides a healthy platform for the incubation of innovative ideas. Our issues provide fertile grounds for the exploration of transformative instruments that impact on our social and economic wellbeing, the pursuit of development alternatives that reduce aid dependency, the initiation of economic plans that build on the strengths of traditional rights and customary institutions, and the empowerment of people’s aspirations to take control of their resources and their own self determination. The ANU provides an ideal environment for fertilising and fostering such ideas. After all, the pursuit of regional cooperation is about ideas, the germination of ideas and the pollination of ideas suitable for the time and the circumstances; ideas that flow in slippery slides and rough rides.

I am from Solomon Islands, a country that has been the focus of some of the region’s highly acclaimed regional endeavours, namely ‘RAMSI’,<sup>1</sup> whose effects are of interest to the ANU. I was

trained at the University of Papua New Guinea, an institution whose establishment is closely intertwined with the ANU. A number of current parliamentarians and cabinet ministers in Papua New Guinea were in my cohort. Like many Papua New Guineans, I shared their hopes that my university colleagues would make a difference to their country, known as the ‘land of the unexpected’. As I told a classmate who now works in government, there is a great ‘opportunity’ to consolidate the economic foundations of Papua New Guinea. However, nation-building and governance, like regional cooperation, have their slippery slides and rough rides.

I have worked in, or travelled to, most Pacific Islands, except the territories of Tokelau, Pitcairn and Wallis and Futuna. I am lucky that I can view the evolution of our regional configuration through various lenses; as a government official in the Solomon Islands Government, listening to Nikenike Vurobaravu of Vanuatu, Bill Dihm of Papua New Guinea and the late Wilson Ifunaoa of Solomon Islands discuss the establishment of the Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG). I am privileged to have worked in two regional organisations, namely the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), and helped establish two other regional organisations, namely the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), which bears my signature on its founding document, and the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) Office.

As legal adviser to the PIFS, it was encouraging to listen to the Forum Foreign Ministers discuss Honourable Lawry Chan’s pleas for assistance in June 2003. The discussions on the formation of RAMSI by Forum Foreign Ministers were interesting.



Having lived in Honiara throughout the worst periods of the crisis, and having been involved in some of the disaster relief efforts as vice president of the Solomon Islands Red Cross Society, it was heartening to see the support from Forum Foreign Ministers for the Solomon Islands Government and people. As peoples of the Pacific, even though we are separated by the ocean, we are also enjoined by it, and in times of trouble, we come to each other's aid. That is our way of life. That is our conviction. If only we had done the same for Bougainville!

All this experience has exposed me to the intricacies of the relationships between Pacific Islands governments. It allowed me to view the fusion of the various cultural and ethnographic groups within the organisations and to see the influence Australia, New Zealand and other donors have on our regional cooperative efforts.

The extent of the influence and self-interest of donors cannot be underestimated. In a recent media statement, Dr Colin Tukuitonga, Director-General of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), said on financial problems his organisation was facing that

'I have some say [on project funds] but those stuff are determined elsewhere and they don't always align with the priorities we think are important. Herein lies the problem, you might want to implement something, you might think something is important, but sometimes I feel like I am just running to catch up, and it's really, really, challenging even for us at SPC, its difficult. So you can imagine what it's like for national offices who are expected to deliver on these things.'<sup>2</sup>

In June 1993 when we were preparing for the 1994 Barbados Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, one of our developed country members asked the meeting to endorse its position although we had not even seen it! I argued that we could not possibly endorse something we had not seen. There was a stalemate. To break the stalemate, an Island delegate actually pleaded with us to concede in the interest of compromise and accept a proposal we had not seen!

I have not forgotten, when I was FFA deputy director-general, what an aid official once told me in November 2009, when we had our annual bilateral consultations. I said we did not mind the monitoring and evaluation that we had to do on donor funds as they were necessary, but I lamented that it was diverting the organisation from its core functions. The aid official pointed her finger at me and said, 'I'll tell you what, you have no choice!' Two months later, I left the FFA to take the challenge of establishing the PNA Office, with no funds, no source of funds and certainly no donor support.

Six years later, the PNA has become one of the most innovative and effective regional organisations in the world, and I am proud of its many achievements. We have helped increase the direct revenues for the parties to our organisation from US\$60 million to US\$400 million through implementation of the PNA Vessel Day Scheme (which I will discuss further later). The secretariat is self-reliant, running on a business model, with no donor funding and we have paid dividends to our members for the past three years.

Institutions that create self-reliance are often destined to succeed. It has come as no surprise to me that the same donor, whose officer chastised me at the FFA, today claims credit for the increase in revenues from our hard work and coincidentally forgets that they invested heavily in attempts to block the establishment of the PNA Office, and undermine what has always been classified as a 'divisive grouping'. Of course, it wants to show to its taxpayers that its funds have been responsible for the huge increase in revenues in its investments in regional fisheries, and what better way to underline that than by riding on the success of our hard work. What is important to me is not what this particular donor claims, because it has its constituents that it must answer to, but what our own members understand and know. PNA member countries know that it is the legal instrument that they have invested in, implemented and owned that has transformed fisheries resulting in the increased revenues that they receive from their tuna resources.

My comments today comes fresh off the back of three important political gatherings that may help inform our discussions, viz, the Pacific Islands

Development Forum (PIDF) Leaders Summit in Honiara in July, the Pacific Islands Development Programme (PIDP) Leaders Conference and meeting with President Obama in Honolulu in August, and the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Summit in Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, last week.

I make my observations with one caveat and that is, the efficacy and effectiveness of regional cooperation depends on a combination of two important factors: first, the nature of the institutions and instruments that govern decision-making and, secondly, the relationships and interaction between peoples, individuals, delegations, and the friendships that they spawn.

I believe the latter is perhaps the most important quality in nurturing our regional collaboration. As Pacific Islanders, we cherish our friendships and relationships and place high value on these to help cushion the slides and rough rides on the issues that we have to confront. Yet within the forums there are members with more patronising self-serving views.

### The Slopes and Rough Rides of Political Collaboration

On my way to Brisbane on Nauru Airlines, I met my former boss and family friend at the PIFS, Sir Noel Levi, who was on the plane travelling back from Pohnpei with the chair, chief executive officer (CEO) and corporate service manager of Air Niugini. They were returning from Pohnpei to connect to Port Moresby from Honiara after the inaugural flight of Air Niugini from Port Moresby to the Federated States of Micronesia. Two things occurred to me from our coincidental meeting: the first was that the review of the forum that led to the development of the Pacific Plan was done when Sir Noel was the secretary-general of the PIFS. It was supposed to strengthen Pacific regional integration and cooperation and had four key pillars: [economic growth](#), [sustainable development](#), [good governance](#) and [security](#). When I searched 'what is the Pacific Plan?' on the internet, no less than 66,400,000 results came up! Such is the popularity of a plan that was designed to make things better for the Pacific Islanders. But did it succeed in making things better? In Sir Mekere Morauta's 2013

review of the Pacific Plan, he concluded that it had become a conduit for increasing donor influence rather than promoting self-determination, independence and development, but that is a discussion for another day.

The second thing that occurred to me on that flight was the investments that Island-owned airlines were making in serving their northern brothers and sisters; linking the southern region to the north, and beyond. At a time when United Airlines cut all cross-equator services to the Islands, and Radio Australia and Australia TV cut key sources of news and information, private investments by airlines were stepping in to fill a void, connecting our region and peoples.

Viewed through the lenses of those who have not worked and lived in the northern Pacific, Micronesia is just a group of dotted atolls scattered across the northern Pacific, not deserving of Radio Australia and Australia TV. I think that this underestimates the critical importance of this part of the Pacific. Like the changes that we are seeing in climatic conditions, I would argue that greatest change in the political dynamics of our regional cooperative architecture in the past 20 years has been the shift of the geopolitical powerbase from the South to the North.

Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia and Majuro in the Marshall Islands host perhaps the two most important regional organisations that have the biggest economic and political influence in the Islands. These are the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), whose membership includes the European Union (EU), Canada, China, United States, Philippines, Indonesia, Korea, Japan and Taiwan; and the PNA Office whose role and responsibilities include administering the largest and most complex fisheries cap and trade scheme in the world, namely the Purse Seine Vessel Day Scheme (VDS). The importance of these two organisations lies not just in their roles and functions, but in the level of interaction that takes place on a daily basis between the officials of these small island countries and the fishing companies. They are interacting each morning with company and government officials from China, the United States, Korea and the Philippines, collecting data,

and passing on valuable information about what is happening across a vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. The tuna sector is a multibillion-dollar industry with PNA waters alone supplying 50 per cent of the raw materials for global canned skipjack.

There are also two military bases located in the northern Pacific; in Guam and in Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The combination of the presence of the US military bases and the hundreds of fishing vessels from the major superpowers in the equatorial part of the region provides an interesting backdrop to the geopolitical landscape of our region, and has been one of the drivers of the shifts in the powerbase that has occurred in the past 20 years.

A major difference between the WCPFC and PNA and the other regional institutions is that their decisions are legally binding on their members, and this is why some complain that decisions that are made at regional level in the other agencies (such as the Pacific Islands Forum) are often not implemented at the national level. Gerald Zakios, a former foreign minister and attorney general of the Marshall Islands, once told me Forum Leaders cannot bind their governments and countries as they are only heads of their executive governments, and it is just a gathering of the heads of governments with no powers to make decisions that legally bind their governments; only their parliaments can do that because the forum is not, as he describes it, 'designed to do that!'

The nature of our political cooperative engagement continues to be in a state of flux, and the character of that engagement has changed over the past 47 years. This is inevitable given the mutation of time, changes in circumstances, and the development of strong national interests coalescing around different economic and trade interests. The early leaders of the forum were nation builders, visionaries who had the common interest and greater good of the region in mind. It could be argued that they governed their countries selflessly, and adopted the same selfless approach to their engagements at the regional political level putting their regional interest above their own. They were concerned about nation-building and inspiring support for holding their disparate communities and societies together. They brought those same values to the way they

engaged with each other at the regional level. They were, as some would describe, statesmen, who put their country's interest above their own, although as we have come to learn in the media recently perhaps some of them may not be as selfless as we had thought! Nonetheless, regional cooperative action coalesced around issues of self-determination and the assertion of rights.

It comes as no surprise therefore that the two most visionary and far-reaching decisions that our leaders made in the 1970s and early 1980s were to establish the South Pacific Forum Fisheries Agency and the Nauru Agreement; the latter driving our concerns over future sustainability and genuine participation in developing our resources. These initiatives continue to form an important cornerstone of the collaborative framework for the assertion of our sovereign rights and self-determination over our fisheries. The collaborative efforts of the PNA members continue to have far-reaching economic implications for thousands of Pacific Islanders every day who wake up each morning and go to work in offices, on boats, in canneries and as fishing observers. In some member states up to 90 per cent of their GDP is today fisheries based.

It could be said that we had more in common in the 1970s and early 1980s than we have now; that there were more political issues that brought us together than separated us. Consequently, it was easier to find commonality amongst the countries.

It was inevitable that the one-size-fits-all approach to regional cooperation would come under stress as countries' national interests became more intertwined with issues that were not generally shared across the region. The coups in Fiji and the frustration of what I describe as the 'Niue factor' consequently led to the emergence of other organisations built around issues that were of particular interest to the leaders. The Niue factor is how a small country with only 1200 people can hold the region to ransom if it does not agree with everyone and get its own way; in effect making regionalism hostage to the lowest common denominator. In a consensus-based decision-making regime such as the PIF, where every country must be kept happy to concede to a decision, not all the outcomes are necessarily

the best, and with interests so diverse — ranging from industrialised nations to truly small island states — there may be other factors influencing support such as aid. The same could also be said about the ‘donor factor’, where the major donor is also a member of the regional organisation and can influence the outcomes of a decision and reduce its effectiveness, and, more typically, breed dependency and maintain influence through the carrot of aid. I think the recent criticisms of the forum with respect to the strength of decisions on climate change have been influenced by this.

Thus, the emergence of different political groupings such as the Melanesia Spearhead Group, Polynesian Leaders Summit, Pacific Islands Development Programme and the Pacific Islands Development Forum simply reflect the new political dynamics of the region driven by frustration with the outdated regional structures driven by donor agendas. We have to accept the fact that we are now a complex region with individual countries having their own independence and national interests to pursue. The situation has changed from the early 1970s, when our countries were just emerging into self-governance, and our leaders were preoccupied with nation-building and constructing a sense of national and regional identity. Then they were concerned about establishing the basis for us to capture rights to the ocean’s resources and the development of arrangements to protect and enhance those rights. Now that we have achieved that, the focus of cooperative efforts has been on arrangements that reflect the national self-interest.

The MSG and PIDF could be said to have been established as a result of the Fiji coup in 2006. Both organisations have played an important role in fostering the interests of its constituents, and the PIDF provides a good model for the integration of civil society, the academic community and member governments. Both are Island driven, without the support of the region’s industrialised neighbours to the south. There are some risks, however, to the efficacy and effectiveness of these organisations, and limitations to what they can do. The biggest limitation of each respective secretariat lies in their financial outlay to support their work programs, and the risk that they could become dependent

on donors. Already, the MSG Secretariat has been operating on a deficit, largely as a result of absorbing too many programs that would appear to replicate the PIFS. They have programs that include trade, climate financing, forestry, traditional rights and knowledge, and policing. The result is that they need more funds to support their programs.

The PIDF provides a very good platform for Pacific leaders to engage on a whole range of issues. It is arguably a more inclusive process. It was able to demonstrate its effectiveness in 2015 when at the PIDF Leaders Summit the leaders were able to agree on strong language on climate change. Its ongoing efficacy will depend on how well its newly established secretariat is able to weave its way through the issues without trying to duplicate the same programs that other organisations provide. The effectiveness of the grouping more broadly will depend on two factors: a) the extent to which it can decouple itself from the influence that Prime Minister Bainimarama brings to bear on the organisation; and b) the extent to which other leaders view it as an ongoing vehicle for a Pacific Islands voice on issues that they cannot air at the forum due to its membership. It is instructive to note that there were only three heads of government at its recent summit in Honiara. However, the engagement of the academic community and the central role of civil society in the PIDF is an excellent model. There is no need to build secretariats with high overheads when you can draw on the intellectual and analytical resources of non-government organisations and academic institutions. Even if we do not agree with their analysis, there are at least economic efficiencies to be gained by exploring these different models, and more importantly, they are not necessarily inhibited by the limitations imposed by donors regarding issues surrounding the policy papers that should go to leaders.

The PIFS will continue to retain its central role as the secretariat of the Forum Leaders Summit, although it is struggling to find a niche in the current regional configuration in ways that make it an effective organisation. As SPEC (South Pacific Economic Corporation Bureau), its role and functions were well defined and clearly understood. Its narrow focus on trade and economic cooperation

helped spawn the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA) with Australia and New Zealand, an agreement that Roman Grynburg, in his recent outburst on PACER Plus,<sup>3</sup> argued should be maintained.

In my view, PIFS started to lose its focus when it became a conduit through which broader political issues related to 9/11 were assimilated into its role and functions, and tensions arose particularly amongst the island countries as to how they could pursue their economic and trade interests while trying to balance the new security interests that the secretariat was asked to facilitate. The Forum Secretariat and the forum itself started to lose focus and with it the perception that it was becoming an ineffective institution began to grow. Thus, the review of the forum that was conducted in 2004 was done with a view to making it more effective and more relevant to the needs of the Pacific Islands which led to the development of the Pacific Plan.

As I mentioned earlier, Sir Noel was the secretary general at the time that review was initiated. Some felt that perhaps the review was an indictment of Sir Noel's leadership and management of the organisation, but more broadly, in my personal view, the PIFS suffered from an innate inability to foster ideas and promote the free exchange of ideas between itself and its constituents, namely the member countries. I remember at the Auckland Forum in 2003, an overzealous and easily flustered senior colleague in the PIF Secretariat instructed us at our staff meeting that we should not laugh when country officials laugh! This lack of interaction and flexibility to engage with officials from member countries, in my personal view, impacted on the effectiveness of the organisation. Promotion of ideas were not as important as the size of the font, the space between the sentences, whether the 't's' were crossed and the 'i's' dotted, and whether memos were copied to relevant staff through a hierarchy which had things like 'UFS', which means 'up for first sight'. The PIFS was sinking in a bureaucratic maze, exacerbated in part by the sensitivities associated with the security issues, which it now also had to handle. The Pacific Plan was the product of this review.

I have argued that because the Forum Leaders Summit does not make legally binding decisions, Forum Members are not bound by the Communiqués. This obviously raises questions about its effectiveness. Nonetheless, the new Framework for Regionalism which now informs the work of the forum provides a more flexible and inclusive approach towards the discussions by political leaders of regional issues. I am not sure if the framework that we now have actually reflects what Sir Mekere Mourauta had in mind. When we met in Majuro on one of his consultation trips, when Marshall Islands was chair of the forum, he said what he wanted to see was political leaders being able to act as such and make decisions that only they, as political leaders, could make. As an example, he said that the decision for the Pacific Islands to have a centralised fishing licensing system could only be made by political leaders, as that impacted on the national sovereign powers of states to issue licences. I think he was looking at a structure of decision-making that was prescriptive but at the same time transformative in effect.

What is in no doubt, however, is that the operation of the new framework is revealing the values and concerns that are important to ordinary people. By far the greatest number of submissions that were received related to human rights, particularly relating to West Papua. I counted no less than 13 submissions on West Papua, which was the largest for a single subject matter, signifying the importance of the human dimensions of our relationships.

Fisheries has been the other subject of importance to the Forum Leaders Dialogue. Among the priority issues the leaders discussed in Pohnpei last week were increasing the economic returns of regional fisheries, responding to the effects of climate change and disaster risk management. Indeed, a page and half of the 47th Forum Leaders Communiqué was dedicated to fisheries underpinning the greater focus on economic growth (PIFS 2016). Other key issues identified for leaders to consider under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism include implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, upholding human rights in West Papua, reducing the burden of cervical cancer, coordinating regional information and com-

munications technology, trade integration and a framework to support the rights of persons with disabilities. One can argue that the new framework brings a more human face to the forum leaders' discussions, allowing them to discuss matters that directly impact on livelihoods and what are of common human value.

Thrown into this political quagmire are the donors and dialogue partners. These are countries that have an interest in the region, although the term 'interest' may be misleading. There are now 17 dialogue partners including Cuba and Indonesia. Forum meetings are almost like a circus with dialogue partners, donors and organisations falling over each other to set up meetings with the leaders. My observation has been that increasingly the Forum Leaders Summit has been less about the interaction amongst the leaders as it is about the meeting with donors, leaving very little time for dialogue and for leaders to get to know each other. In recent years, the confluence of interest between some NGOs and certain leaders has seen particular agenda items brought to the fore. We have seen the association between President Anote Tong and Conservation International (CI), and President Tommy Remengesau (Jnr) and the Pew Foundation resulting in the outcomes on oceans taking slightly stronger conservation stances, which in large measure reflect these relationships.

The Pacific Island countries continue to engage with each other, other external countries and international institutions — focusing on calculated decisions on what they view are best for them in a changing world. The situation is complex and tinged with various biases and realities. The forum was recently described as being the least economically influential grouping (Herr and Bergin 9/9/2016). This might be true when viewed in global geopolitical terms. However, the global influence of the Pacific Islands region cannot be underestimated in at least two respects. The first is in the global tuna market where 58 per cent of global tuna stocks are taken mostly in the waters of the Pacific Island countries, in particular the PNA countries. The second is the warm Pacific Ocean currents and waves influence global weather patterns, with quite severe economic consequences.

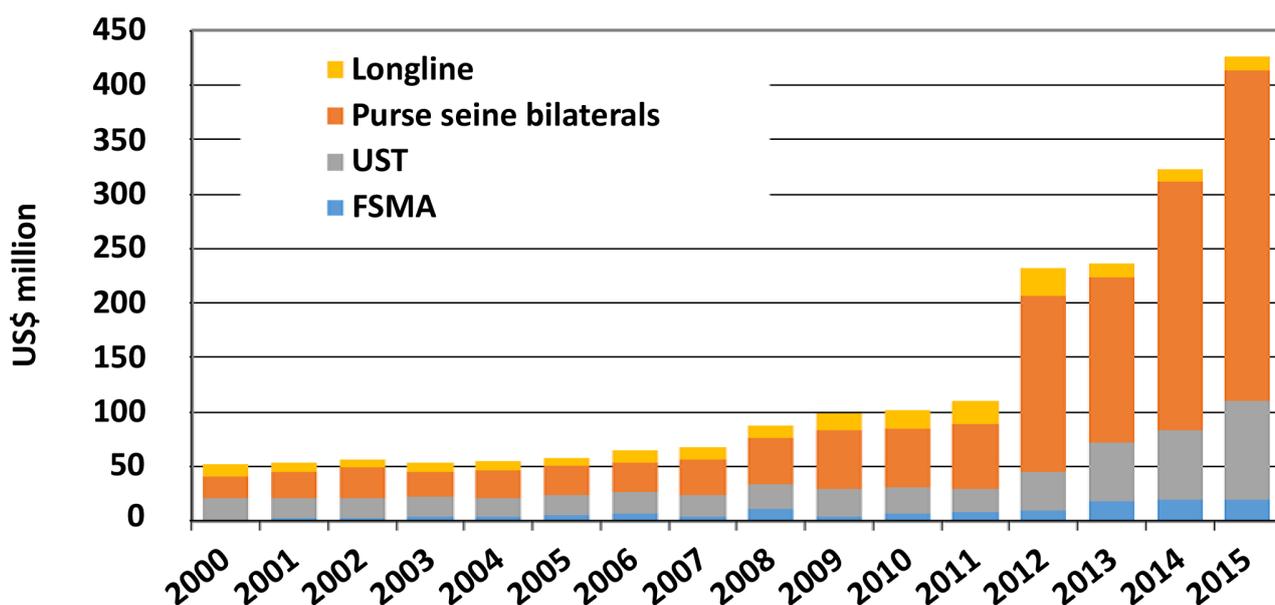
## Fishy Tales and Policy Coherence

Our regional fisheries cooperative engagements have far reaching implications for global tuna and the role that the Pacific Islands play in this fishery cannot be underestimated. The Pacific Islands' lucrative tuna resource is at the centre of a geopolitical tussle between the richest and most powerful states in the world and some of the smallest and least-developed countries. I have discussed these dynamics in a chapter, entitled 'Fisheries Diplomacy and International Relations: How Tuna is Shaping Regional Politics', in *The New Pacific Diplomacy* edited by Professors Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Aqorau 2015). So, I do not intend to labour in detail about these dynamics.

However, one of the most successful development stories in regional cooperative engagement has been the PNA who have managed to take control of their tuna fishery. It instituted a rights-based fisheries management instrument known as the Vessel Day Scheme, which set a limit on days in which vessels can fish, increasing scarcity and making access to fishing in PNA waters more valuable. In 2010, the parties established their own secretariat with instructions that it be self-funded, with no support from PNA members and donors. When the office was established, the value of a fishing day was around US\$1500–2500 a day. Today, it is worth an average of US\$10,000+ a day with traded days worth up to US\$16,000 a day. The total value of the access in 2010 was around US\$60 million. Today, it is estimated to be around US\$400 million (see Figure 1). The PNA have instituted innovative conservation and management measures, including imposing bans on Fish Aggregating Device (FAD) usage, area closures such as the prohibition on fishing in certain high seas pockets, prohibiting setting of nets on whale sharks, requiring observers on 100 per cent of all purse seiners, and pushing through the adoption of Limited Reference Points (LRPs) for all tuna stocks and Target Reference Points (TRPs) for skipjack tuna.

The PNA also managed to get the FAD free skipjack tuna fisheries certified under the global standard for ecolabels, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC); a first for a developing country

Figure 1: Value of access fees to FFA Economic Exclusion Zones



Note: UST — United States Treaty, FSMA — Federated States of Micronesia Arrangement

Source: FFA 2015.

fishery. Through its marketing and retailing platform *Pacifical*, the PNA have been able to respond to their leaders' demand for vertical integration and co-branding, and in doing so extracting a premium from retailers for *Pacifical* MSC canned tuna which are now found in the supermarkets in Europe and Australia and New Zealand.

At the PNA, we have been able to show what a group of small island developing states can do on their own without donor support. We did this because we valued rights and the importance of the legal instruments that underpin these rights.

This journey has not been easy though, with the PNA countries constantly having to fend off efforts by industrialised fishing nations to work against the Vessel Day Scheme and claw back the gains and control that PNA members now have over the fishery. We have seen the EU use the negotiations process of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) to try to dictate and control the way the Pacific Islands, and the PNA in particular, manage their tuna fisheries. We have also seen the United States use the Treaty on Fisheries to limit the application of the VDS and try to curtail the control of the PNA. It is ironic that these countries are also major donors to the region, and their

behaviour towards the PNA and the Pacific Islands show a lack of coherence between their stated development aid and fisheries policies. Surprisingly, New Zealand, which is a Forum Member, which may suggest support for Pacific development, has been constantly undermining the control and gains made by the PNA, in particular by pushing for the VDS to be replaced by a catch-based system. While the opposition of the United States and the EU are understandable because of the impact of the VDS on their fleets, Wellington's constant opposition to the PNA and the VDS defies any logic unless it is acting for other interests and we are a pawn in their games.

The PNA have proven through the VDS and their own initiative that they have an instrument that creates self-reliance and independence. Rather than opposing it, development partners should be supporting the PNA and promoting the VDS unless their true agenda is to perpetuate dependency. In this regard, it is heartening to see the Pacific Islands leaders at their meeting with President Obama calling on the United States to support the scheme. The fact that the statements received support from all the Pacific nations should stop any further attempts to undermine the VDS from within the region. But I doubt it!

The fisheries cooperative framework also continues to be in a state of flux, and suffers from slips and slides that the other cooperative endeavours experience. Looking to the future, the recent study by the World Bank, '[Pacific Possible](#)', probably provides the best analytical evaluation of the future. It predicts a reduced role for the FFA centred around monitoring, control and surveillance; with core fisheries management functions being managed by the PNA for the tropical tuna fisheries, and, if and when they can get their act together despite New Zealand's regional stewardship, the Tokelau Arrangement Parties will control the southern albacore fishery.

Having the FFA concentrate on MCS (Regional Monitoring, Control and Surveillance) serves Australia's broad strategy in using the FFA as its surveillance and security platform. Australia did not fully support the FFA when it was established by the Island leaders in the 1970s until it realised that it served as a useful regional platform for surveillance. Indeed, statements emanating from the 47th Forum Leaders Summit strongly suggests this to be the case. In his remarks, James Movick, Director-General of the FFA said:

'It's important for Australia in terms of the fact the regional surveillance system that we put in place for fisheries can also be used to do other border control issues within the region. That is ultimately our goal,' ...

'People smuggling, drug smuggling, a lot of those types of activities. It would be marginal cost to extend the platform to look at those activities,' ...

'We've got in place the Niue Treaty Subsidiary Agreement, which is a regulatory frame which will allow for easy cooperation between Pacific Island countries.

'With the regional surveillance system we have tools to not only survey fishing boats but all other maritime activity in the region. To include the other sectors is the logical way to move forward, the efficient way to move forward.' (quoted in Armbruster 10/9/2016)

This should not be seen as a threat, but a reflection of the shifting sands and the slips and rough rides in the pursuit of regional cooperative action.

### Conclusion

One of my first assignments when I joined the Solomon Islands civil service was to represent the Pacific Island countries to witness the deposit by the United States of its instrument of ratification to the Treaty on Fisheries with the Government of Papua New Guinea in June 1988. It is ironic that 22 years later when I became CEO of the PNA Office, I strongly advocated for the Treaty on Fisheries with the United States to be restricted and reshaped to so that it reflects the market-based fisheries regime that the PNA, in the meantime, had developed and was applying to all other fleets. One of the most remarkable developments in the past 20 years has been shift in the powerbase from the south to the northern equatorial regions of the Pacific. This shift has been associated with the geographic concentration of the resource but more broadly and importantly it has been driven by the power of the rights that are entrenched in the Vessel Day Scheme, underlining the importance of the design of the arrangements.

The key imperative for regional cooperation foreshadowed by the founders for the forum was economic self-reliance. They were all faced by the challenges and opportunities of being newly independent countries. It is clear from the two most important organisations that they established in the 1970s and 1980s, namely the FFA and PNA, that they had economic independence on their radar. Regional cooperation should be about creating self-reliance and reducing dependency on aid. It should be about the development of instruments that are rights-based, and putting the interests of resource owners above those of outsiders. For a long time, the Island countries were bystanders in the development of their resources, and were basically price takers, rather than price setters. The key lesson for development aid donors to the region is that the PNA have been able to demonstrate the value of economic instruments that empower right holders as evidenced by the increased returns from their tuna resources. Economic growth and stability is

important for the Island countries and instead of looking to work against and undermine the Vessel Day Scheme, development partners should support it. The same can also be said for support to the other resource sectors such as mining, forestry and deep seabed mining where donors should be supporting the development of rights-based instruments that empower the resource owners, not disenfranchise them.

The discussion has shown that there is a price to be paid for regional cooperation in that there are tradeoffs that often have to be made between the individual national interests and those of the region. However, it is argued that regional cooperation does not necessarily mean subjugating the broader national interest of a country. Even where national leaders are bent on promoting their national interest, the overriding impulse for cooperating should be to exercise their rights in ways that improve the wellbeing of their people.

The emphasis of regional cooperation and the relationships that have been developed through the various processes and mechanisms that exist in the region should be aimed at reducing aid dependency, not perpetuating dependency on others. We need more support to economic institutions that create self-reliance.

There has been a shift in the political dynamics in the region and while some of this change may be disconcerting to some organisations, because they might see a reduced role and funding for themselves, policymakers must be always be cognisant of these trends and be prepared to respond accordingly.

There are a number of personal observations that I wish to offer about the state of the Pacific as concluding thoughts. Regional cooperation provides an interesting backdrop to the study of the Pacific Islands, their perceptions and what they consider as valuable. However, the broad conclusion that I wish to draw is the disconnect that often comes about between what we do regionally and what we do not do nationally.

We have espoused the notion of good governance, transparency and accountable governments at the regional level, yet the quality of our governance, particularly in Melanesia, leaves a lot to be desired. There is something to be said about the quality of

leadership and governance within the region, and the efficacy of our regional engagement. We no longer have leaders who stand out; whom everyone in the region can regard as a statesperson because of their persona and because they defend the interests of the region.

We have been strong advocates of reducing greenhouse gases and addressing climate change, yet our carbon footprint is poor. We still drive in airconditioned SUVs, work in airconditioned offices and live in airconditioned homes. We deride those who contribute to greenhouse gases, yet we allow Asian logging companies to decimate our forests.

We promote the need for self-reliance and independence, yet we cannot wean ourselves off aid dependency and promote dependency at all levels by having discretionary funds for bureaucrats and elected representatives. In some cases, we have allowed donor countries to contribute to so-called constituency rural development funds to be administered by politicians!

We have fostered the ideals of inclusive governments and human rights, yet we shy away from ensuring that women are better represented in the highest decision-making body in parliament. The representation of women in parliament is not a gender issue but a social justice issue; ensuring that all members of society are fairly represented to make decisions about the social and economic wellbeing of everyone.

We talk about regional integration and labour mobility, yet we have barriers to travelling and working in our countries. The most liberal country that practises labour mobility is the Marshall Islands where they welcome Pacific Islanders from Fiji, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Federated States of Micronesia and Kiribati to work in line positions.

Our reaction and responses to what we say and do at the regional level also have slips and slides. The internet and social media have brought people closer. It is healthy our young people are today debating economic and political issues across the region, questioning their politicians, and posting updates on the alleged misdemeanours of our politicians. Social media is also reconnecting our people from our countries, recreating a Pacific identity. We all celebrated Fiji's gold medal win in the Rio

olympic games and shared their joy because, after all, as one people, we felt that their win was also ours in the Pacific Islands.

I am confident in our young people as sources of innovation and change. The future of the region belongs to them, and they are agitating for better governance from our leaders. But we cannot pretend to ignore the challenges that we face. There is a dire need for greater political stability in the largest geographic region of the Pacific — Melanesia. There is perhaps a need to review the forms and structure of systems of government to see which ones can deliver more stable politics and delivery of services. There is a need to provide opportunities for the large, growing youth population in the region, and address the debilitating impacts of health issues such as diabetes, alcohol and drugs abuse and increasing mental health issues. The challenges surrounding diabetes are reaching epidemic proportions in the region.

Our cooperative efforts must be geared towards empowering our peoples, communities and countries. We must put self-determination and economic independence into reality, and not pay lip service to such aspirations, while we just happily continue to pander to aid donors. The Pacific's journey, its slips, slides and rough rides, have given Islanders a wealth of experience, but what have we learnt from all of this? Are we better off economically and socially? Are we better served by our governments because of these arrangements? These are questions that we need to ask of our governments and leaders. These are questions that we need to ask if we are to evaluate the effectiveness and efficacy of our regional relationships.

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