

Recently, some of us who live in the Pacific or spend much of our time thinking about issues affecting the region came together at the ANU in Canberra. Over four days, 25–28 June 2013, the inaugural State of the Pacific conference (hosted by the State, Society & Governance in Melanesia program) and the reinvigorated Pacific and PNG Updates (hosted by the Development Policy Centre<sup>1</sup>) provided some great opportunities for participants from numerous disciplines to identify shared interests, collaborate and, in some instances, highlight intractable points of difference.

Across the two events, there was a stimulating mix of academic analysis, practice-oriented observations, emerging research and social commentary. Here, I summarise some of what was discussed with reference to some cross-cutting themes.

## Regionalism & Sub-regionalism

The issue of regionalism was discussed in numerous contexts, whether by reference to the way our region is (or should be) viewed from Australia,<sup>2</sup> the ongoing review of the Pacific Plan or more specific issues of regionalism, such as the lessons learned from experiences with regional pooling of services.<sup>3</sup> Closely connected with issues of regionalism were numerous discussions about the present and future importance of sub-regional groupings. Unsurprisingly, the most prevalent topic of discussion in this space was the rise and rise of the Melanesian Spearhead Group,<sup>4</sup> no doubt enhanced by the very active presence of its Director General, Peter Forau. Arriving direct from the 19th summit in New Caledonia, the delegation's participation was noticeable and very well received, demonstrating what some of us have known for a while<sup>5</sup> — the conversations that take place in Port Vila and elsewhere in Melanesia are not necessarily the same as those that take place in Suva or Canberra. It is doubtful that issues pertaining to West Papua

would have received any attention at all, were it not for the input from those who had been in Noumea the week before.

Fiji was described as 'the elephant in the room' (by the economists she was described as 'the sleeping giant') — there was a range of opinions expressed about what exactly might happen in 2014 and what ramifications that might have regionally. The next step in the 'process' is the release of the revised constitution, which will set the framework for whatever happens next. Only then will civil society groups be able to judge what is required to really create a 'democratic space in an undemocratic context'.<sup>6</sup>

## Democracy, Politics and Leadership

There were many conversations, both formal and informal, about the politics of the region and how political developments were affecting the overall development of the countries within it. There were opportunities to discuss:

- how different electoral systems can act to promote democratic government or how they may be modified through the lens of prevalent cultural norms
- the extent to which political 'stability' should be promoted over basic constitutional tenets such as the separation of powers
- the significance of resources such as land and minerals in influencing political trajectories, and much more.

Issues of politics, power and representation are crucial to a meaningful understanding of Pacific island societies and they are central to ongoing development across the region. Gatherings of this sort provide an opportunity for people to listen to one another and deepen their knowledge of structures, institutions and influences so that their work (of whatever kind) is better supported by a sophisticated and nuanced contextual understanding.

## Gender

Another theme that ran through both conferences was the significance of gender in the region. Several sessions were devoted specifically to gender-focussed topics. Some of the most compelling presentations were in these sessions, and included:

- a commentary on how disparate civil society groups in Fiji have come together to engage with the ever-changing political processes of that country
- lessons learned about the economic empowerment of women through programs designed to support private sector development
- how service providers were coming together to better support victims of gender-based violence in Papua New Guinea.

A number of references were made to the 'Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development'<sup>7</sup> program funded by AusAID, which aims to provide support in all of the areas that were discussed during the two conferences.

## Why Are These Events Important?

The 'Pacific Perspectives' week was a great opportunity to think broadly about issues of importance for our region and to examine some issues in more detail both formally and informally.

The next two or three years are going to be very significant for the Pacific island region and for those countries who are seeking to establish, maintain or reposition diplomatic, political and strategic relationships: we will see elections in Fiji (hopefully), the ending of the 10-year autonomous governing period in Bougainville and the next milestone in the Noumea Accord. Each of these is significant at national and regional levels. Policy-makers of all types need to be making best use of opportunities to connect with thinkers, practitioners and communicators to develop and maintain knowledge bases that draw on as wide a range of sources as possible.

It was very encouraging to see SSGM and the Development Policy Centre work together to create an environment in which a greater number and range of people could participate than might have been the case if the events had been held separately and we look forward to more collaboration of this type in the future.

## Author Notes

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## Endnotes

1. Development Policy Centre, the Australian National University: <<https://devpolicy.crawford.anu.edu.au/>>
2. Bucks and Boats Best for the Pacific. ANU College of Asia & the Pacific Blog post 25/6/2013. <<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/news-events/all-stories/bucks-and-boats-best-pacific#.UdSpXz78-Fc>>.
3. Dornan, M., T. Newton Cain and S. Howes. Pooling in the Pacific: Has it Worked? Devpolicy Blog post 25/6/2013. <<http://devpolicy.org/pooling-pacific-20130625/>>.
4. Melanesian Spearhead Group Secretariat. <<http://www.msgsec.info/>>.
5. Newton Cain, T. Mid-year at the Melanesian Spearhead Group. Devpolicy Blog post 20/6/2013. <<http://devpolicy.org/mid-year-at-the-melanesian-spearhead-group-20130620-2/>>.
6. Newton Cain, T. and T. Chetty. Tara Chetty: Fiji Democracy and Women's Rights. Devpolicy Blog post 6/8/2013. <<http://devpolicy.org/in-conversation-with-tara-chetty-20130806/>>; Fiji's president, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, gave his assent to the revised constitution on 9 September 2013.
7. Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development initiative. <<http://www.pacificwomen.org/>>.

