

## The Pacific: Transition & Uncertainty

### What are the challenges?

Pacific Island people are experiencing rapid change as they negotiate both traditional and modern life. For many, this contributes to uncertainty and the break down of social norms and creates unrealised expectations. Growing numbers of people are not being sustained by traditional subsistence livelihoods, but new income opportunities are too few, especially for the young. Basic services are often inaccessible or of low quality, and government institutions unstable or ineffective. Civil society has limited opportunity to demand greater accountability. Many women and children experience violence, abuse and increasing poverty. Regional integration and the pressures of global trade offer both opportunity and risk; and climate change is a growing threat.

A synthesis of custom and modernity is emerging, but policy makers, donors and civil society all have different views on the direction it may take and the role of development assistance.

These challenges are common to many societies undergoing rapid modernisation, but they are often cited in the Pacific as evidence that the region is in crisis. This view is poorly received in the Pacific. It universalises problems that exist in specific contexts and ignores the long history and continued relevance of indigenous governance. The damage to the region's reputation further disadvantages Pacific nations' political and economic engagement.

#### 1. Poverty of opportunity

Subsistence living continues to be achievable for most Pacific people. But with limited participation in the formal economy many have difficulty accessing requirements like new clothes, balanced diets and school fees. Poor literacy and communications inhibit the transfer of people, goods, knowledge and information in many parts of the Pacific, limiting opportunities for trade and employment and hampering people's ability to enhance their livelihoods. In urban areas there are few labour-intensive industries to absorb the growing numbers of young, unskilled people. The impact of this issue is not universal: those with better connections to the wider world are able to take more advantage of the opportunities available to them.

#### 2. Violence against children and women

Violence and other abuse of children and women is a problem in many Pacific communities, especially in Melanesia. Domestic abuse is widespread. In Papua New Guinea (PNG) police abuse of children in custody is a particular problem. Girls and young women are especially vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. In PNG reports are increasing of the murder of women following accusations of sorcery.

Such abuse is not accepted in Pacific cultures, however some traditional protections are being undermined by the interaction of customary and modern life. Both traditional and formal systems of justice are poorly equipped to address the problem.



#### 3. Governance

Governance in the Pacific is commonly portrayed in Australia as being in crisis. The worst failures of governance have been taken as evidence of imminent widespread collapse. It is true that governance in some Pacific countries is fragile and unstable. Formal democratic systems are in many cases poorly aligned with pre-existing traditional governance systems. Insufficient numbers of well-educated and skilled people are available to run governments at all levels, resulting in failures of service delivery and accountability. Entrenched corruption undermines political and government processes; and practices that may be rational in some traditional contexts (eg nepotism) are incompatible with ethical practice in government.

Tonga, the Solomon Islands and Fiji all experienced extreme political turmoil in 2006, the latter cases leading to changes of government. Nevertheless, a quieter 2007 underlined the continued stability of the majority of Pacific countries.

#### 4. Climate change

Pacific island nations are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of man made climate change, including rising sea levels and temperatures and increasingly frequent extreme weather. The world's first evacuation of low-lying islands primarily due to climate change is now underway in PNG's Carteret Islands. More such evacuations are expected as storms and higher tides inundate low-lying land. Changes in climate are also likely to affect the Pacific's natural assets including coral reefs and fish stock, jeopardising the region's biodiversity and fishing and tourism industries.

Australia's recent ratification of the Kyoto Protocol was a welcome statement of the country's commitment to respond to climate change. It now needs to be followed up with concrete action, including discussing climate change-induced migration.

#### 5. Regional integration

The *Pacific Plan* of the Pacific Islands Forum promotes Pacific regionalism through the integration of selected services across Pacific countries, where this will result in development gains for the region as a whole. There is potential for more efficient service delivery through centralised management and resource distribution. Increased intra regional trade is another potential benefit. Some benefit is likely however a regional approach may have limited impact on national government capacity to serve the needs of remote communities. Non-PIF members, many with disadvantaged indigenous populations would miss out on any benefits of closer regional integration.

#### 6. Trade

The nations of the Pacific are extremely vulnerable to unequal trade arrangements and currently face two urgent trade issues. The first is the conditions being placed on some Pacific countries in their bids for accession to the World Trade Organisation. For example Tonga is being asked by member countries to lower its tariff barriers to 20%, lower than almost every other WTO member. Loss of tariff revenue will severely compromise the country's ability to fund basic services.

The second issue is the negotiation of reduced barriers with the European Union (EPA) and Australia and New Zealand (PACER). The recent commitment by the Australian government that PACER will prioritise development outcomes is welcome, however these new arrangements will exacerbate this unequal relationship unless the Pacific island nations are equipped to better represent their own interests.

## What is 'the Pacific'?

'The Pacific' is a 'continent of islands' home to 0.5 percent of the world's population, spread across more than thirty countries, territories and colonies. It is home to four distinct indigenous groups, Melanesia in the south-west, Micronesia in the north and Polynesia to the east. Indigenous Australians form the fourth group.

The main political grouping in the region is the **Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)**, which comprises the fourteen independent Pacific nations and the New Zealand-aligned territories Niue and Cook Islands. The PIF works toward the integration and growth of its members.

Regional civil society groups often have members from the French, Indonesian and United States' colonies and territories. Decolonisation and indigenous rights are therefore a priority of Pacific civil society, as are environment, trade and human rights.

www.politicalresources.net

## World Vision in the Pacific

World Vision has worked in the Pacific since the 1970s. Today it focuses on Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, addressing HIV & AIDS, maternal and child health, microfinance, livelihood development, food security, literacy and humanitarian relief, in both rural and urban settings. It also advocates on issues affecting the wider Pacific. Funding comes from private donations and government grants.

**Children:** Several programs in Port Moresby target poor and vulnerable children, including children of sex workers. These programs use a human rights approach to promote health, education nutrition and self-esteem. A World Vision report, *Strongim Pikinini* (see p.4) describes the prevalence of violence against children in all three countries.

**Livelihoods:** The *Givhan long Laef* project in Sanma province, Vanuatu is assisting local women to earn greater cash incomes from their agricultural activities and in developing stronger links to the province. Trade shows will promote local expertise to the wider market. In PNG's Madang Province World Vision, ACIAR (Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research) and the National Agricultural Research Institute are collaborating to trial a range of sweet potato varieties.

**HIV & AIDS:** HIV & AIDS prevention is central to World Vision's programs in all three countries, and will increase over time. A planned program in Madang will target communities living close to several large-scale commercial ventures.

The PACER negotiations need to be supported by an inclusive negotiation process that prioritises the development needs of the region's most vulnerable people.

Properly negotiated, evidence based agreements could bring considerable benefits to Pacific people. Unfair arrangements could overwhelm Pacific markets.

### 7. Societies in transition

All Pacific people are experiencing rapid change as they adapt their traditional lifestyles to the demands of the modern world. This creates tension between the collective and the individual, subsistence and the market, holism and segmentation, traditional politics and Westminster democracy; and restorative and retributive justice. Many people are thus uncertain about what is 'right' in both traditional and modern contexts, and of the boundaries between them. Crime, drug abuse, violence, corruption, unrealised expectations and poverty are some of the effects of this uncertainty. Other effects are less direct: imports of cheap, high fat foods have contributed to

extremely high levels of obesity and diabetes, especially in Polynesian societies.

The transition impacts most profoundly on the status of land in Pacific societies, in which communal land ownership is the norm. Such systems offer communities long term economic, social and spiritual security, which is threatened by modern phenomena like plantation agriculture, mining and urbanisation. It is generally accepted that communal title must continue to underpin land ownership in the Pacific, however events like the effective disenfranchisement of coastal landowners in Vanuatu demonstrate that a guarantee of communal title is only the first step.

## World Vision Recommends

World Vision recommends that the Australian Government and other national and multilateral organisations active in the Pacific implement the following changes and enhancements to their policies, programs and Pacific relations.

### 1. Adopt an approach to Pacific issues that recognises and builds on the strengths and capacities of the region and its people.

Analysis of the Pacific is dominated by deficit language. A changed approach will contribute significantly to effective, relevant programming and to improved relations between Australia and the region.

### 2. Improve consultation with Pacific civil society and governments to better incorporate Pacific perspectives and solutions in planning and implementation of development programs.

Pacific island citizens are unconvinced that the Australian Government is committed to genuine partnership with the region. Creative initiatives that build on Pacific methods of consultation would be welcomed.

### 3. Facilitate access to economic opportunities for the rural and urban poor through provision of communications and transport infrastructure and quality, relevant education.

These, together with other programs designed around the Millennium Development Goals, will further build the capacity of people to overcome poverty.

### 4. Facilitate Pacific-led research on the likely impacts of EPA, PACER and WTO membership on Pacific people, and build the capacity of Pacific island negotiators to reach fair trade agreements.

Pacific countries want to participate effectively in the global market but the balance of economic power and capacity is far from equal. These new arrangements will exacerbate this unequal relationship unless the Pacific island nations are equipped to better represent their own interests. This is an immediate priority given the currency of these negotiations.

5. Invest significantly in improved understanding of traditional governance, social and other systems, and facilitate a Pacific-led process of developing 'new custom', encompassing traditional and modern values.  
Much more research, in partnership with Pacific researchers, needs to be done to understand the Pacific context and approaches to development that will be most appropriate and effective for Pacific island peoples.
6. Shift the priority of governance programs to a better balance between institutionally targeted programs and community focussed demand-led governance initiatives.  
Macro-economic and bureaucratic reforms are likely to be ineffective unless supported by an informed citizenry that are engaged with their democratic and civic rights and responsibilities. Donors need to increase support to programs that build local civil society and support the education of actively engaged communities.
7. Australia must take concrete steps to reduce climate change and promote disaster preparedness.  
Investigation into and open discussion of the risks and likelihood of catastrophic climate change and the displacement of Pacific populations and bold action to reduce Australia's carbon emissions are the first steps in such action.
8. Support the full range of human rights for all Pacific people and ensure their inclusion in regional initiatives.  
Violations of the rights of indigenous Pacific people have been documented across the region, in both territories and sovereign countries. Their political, economic and cultural rights should be recognised and defended.
9. Support Pacific landowners' efforts to derive sustainable livelihoods from their land, including meaningful long-term protection of their ownership.  
As with trade the imbalance of knowledge may lead to unfair outcomes for Pacific landowners. The nominal protection of customary title may not stop the creation of exploitative leasehold agreements. Education and protection of landowners' rights is vital.

## Further Information

### Recent WV Publications and Papers on the Pacific

*Strongim Pikinini: Strongim laef b'long famili: enabling children to reach their full potential* (2005)

*Gutpela Tingting na Sindaun: Papua New Guinean perspectives on a good life* (2006)

*How are the Neighbours? The Millennium Development Goals and Our Region* (2006)

*How is the Neighbours' Health? The Millennium Development health Goals and our region* (2007)

*Getting the Basics Right: Water and Sanitation in South East Asia and the Pacific* (2007)

*Economic initiatives for the poor in context: growth from the grassroots* (Development Bulletin No. 72, March 2007, ANU)

*Improving Well-being and Achieving the Millennium Development Goals in Papua New Guinea* (2007, forthcoming)

### Other key resources on Pacific Development

*Nadi Statement of the Regional Civil Society Forum Meeting* (2006, [www.piango.org](http://www.piango.org))

*The Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration* (Pacific Islands Forum, 2005, [www.forumsec.org](http://www.forumsec.org))

*Pacific 2020: challenges and Opportunities for Growth* (AusAID, 2006, [www.ausaid.gov.au](http://www.ausaid.gov.au))

*South Pacific Futures: Oceania Toward 2050* (Anthony van Fossen, 2005, [www.fdc.org.au](http://www.fdc.org.au))

For information on Pacific trade, refer to [www.oxfam.org.nz](http://www.oxfam.org.nz)

For information on violence against children, see World Vision's *Strongim Pikinini* above and [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)

For information on climate change, refer to [www.wwf.org.au](http://www.wwf.org.au)

### About World Vision

World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organisation working to create lasting change in the lives of children, families and communities living in poverty. In Australia, World Vision is the country's largest charitable group. With the support of more than 400,000 Australians, World Vision helps over 12.4 million people every year. The organisation implements humanitarian relief, long-term community development projects and advocacy that addresses the causes of poverty and helps people move towards self-sufficiency.

To discuss World Vision Australia's position on the Pacific, please contact [policy@worldvison.com.au](mailto:policy@worldvison.com.au)