



# South Pacific Futures: Outcomes and Recommendations

Andrew Elek



THE FOUNDATION FOR  
DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

# Introduction

The Brisbane Dialogue on South Pacific futures provided the opportunity for wide-ranging discussions among a diverse group of people from the Pacific Islands and others interested in the future of these island nations. Initial exchanges on potential subjects for consideration led to a consensus to focus the dialogue on the second day around the topics of:

- governance
- education
- sustainable economic development
- conflict resolution.

There was considerable overlap in the problems and opportunities identified by groups discussing each of the topics. The dominant common thread was the need for greater awareness. All levels of the Pacific community need to be much better informed about their situation, the way they are governed, and opportunities to improve their lives. At the same time, advances in information technology are creating new, innovative options for gathering and disseminating relevant information to everyone in the Pacific, even those in relatively isolated locations.

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The discussions revealed remarkably wide differences among the many states in the Pacific as well as the need to understand each traditional culture in order to grapple with today's problems. Approaches to issues need to suit each culture in its physical environment. Nevertheless, there was broad agreement that all would benefit from sharing experiences. All can learn from the successes as well as the disappointments of others in the region confronting shared problems of development and interaction with the global society and economy. Once again, improving information technology provides new opportunities for effective communications among people grappling with similar issues in far-flung locations.

The following paragraphs do not attempt to summarise all of the matters raised in the various sessions of the Brisbane Dialogue. Many of the significant points are set out in the background papers prepared for the dialogue, which are themselves being revised to reflect the discussions which took place. What follows seeks to focus on those matters where a fairly clear consensus emerged, with particular emphasis on follow-up actions.

## Sustainable economic development

Sustainable economic development was seen as an essential ingredient for the future wellbeing of Pacific Island societies. The experience of many other economies has demonstrated that prudent fiscal management and well-managed markets are essential for sustained growth. That requires government policies which promote, rather than restrict, competition in the production and distribution of goods and services, including international competition.

The track record of developing economies in the Pacific and elsewhere during the past few decades has demonstrated that economies which are open to outside ideas, products and investment have outperformed, substantially, those economies whose

governments sought to isolate them from the rest of the world. This experience highlights the importance of globalisation and led, in the dialogue, to constructive discussion of engagement and integration with other economies — a theme discussed in more detail below.

The discussion of economic developments and prospects also led to a consensus that sustainable growth requires more than just good macro and micro-economic policies. Such policies are only likely to be pursued if there is a transparent and accountable system of government and justice, which places tight limits on corruption. For example, cronyism tends to lead to competition being restricted, and markets cannot operate well without respect for personal safety and the security of property. To a large extent, sustainable economic growth depends on good governance and effective means of conflict resolution.

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There was general agreement that sustainable growth also needed a well-informed society. Accurate gathering and dissemination of information about the workings of administrative and judicial systems is essential to maintain transparency, consistency and accountability. Access to information, including from international sources, is also needed if the owners of resources, such as tropical forests, are to maximise the benefits of such resources.

This led to considerable emphasis on the need to nurture effective and responsible media and the ability to access the wide range of information already available through the Internet.

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The discussion emphasised the currently heavy reliance of Pacific Island economies on earnings from natural resources and inflows of foreign assistance. Neither of these sources of income are expected to grow continuously. Therefore, long-term economic growth depends on raising the productivity of the people of the Pacific through human resource development which includes, but extends beyond, classroom education.

## Governance

Participants in the extensive discussion on governance agreed that it was desirable to continue to encourage debate on the type of government suited to the needs of the Pacific Islands; however, it would be most productive to look at ways of improving the effectiveness of the democratically elected governments which are in place.

It was noted that elections held every few years are not the whole answer to ensuring a system of government which is genuinely accountable and responsive to the needs of all members of society. To provide 'democracy between elections', it is essential that the workings of all arms of the government — legislative, executive and judicial —

operate in a consistent and transparent manner. That, in turn, requires constant and independent scrutiny

To promote accountability, it is also essential that the society be adequately informed about what they can expect from governments as well as what governments actually do. They also need to be able to make good use of such information and make their views known. These considerations apply to governance at all levels — local as well as national.

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Corporate governance was also considered important: business people should also be accountable and responsive to government regulations designed to protect community interests. Non-government organisations (NGOs), including Transparency International, are becoming increasingly active in the region, helping to raise awareness of important social issues, including gender and environmental concerns. NGOs are also being used increasingly in channelling international assistance to Pacific communities. These organisations must also be managed in a transparent and accountable manner.

## Community awareness and the media

Both printed and electronic media were considered vital for raising awareness of Pacific people about opportunities for self-advancement and about the ways in which governments and businesses are influencing their lives. Accurate and incisive reporting is essential to stem the growing problem of corruption in the region. However, the media in the Pacific Island nations are only just beginning to tackle the challenge of responsible investigative reporting.

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There is considerable scope to extend the training available to those in the media. It would also be useful to set up regional associations and regular meetings to help exchange expertise and experience. The Papua New Guinea Media Council is already setting some useful precedents, for example, by adopting a code of ethics. The Pacific Islands News Association is to meet in Papua New Guinea during 2001.

## Information technology

The rapid improvement in access to information through the Internet is providing ever greater and progressively lower cost access to information. Such information is becoming a valuable supplement to traditional media sources. Perhaps even more importantly, new information technology is interactive. It allows people to seek out information which they themselves consider to be relevant, provides means of instant worldwide communications and allows much greater opportunities for expressing views.

Access to the Internet provides significant new opportunities to improve productivity. This has led to fears of a new 'digital divide' among those reaping the benefits of the emerging 'e-economy' and those left out and left behind.

This concern has led to commitments to ensure that all communities have access to the Internet as soon as possible. In particular, the leaders of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) process have committed themselves to policies and actions to enable everyone in the Asia-Pacific region to have individual or community-based access to services by 2010. While not all Pacific Island nations are members of APEC, it should not be difficult to confirm that this commitment is intended to apply all Pacific Island communities.

Ongoing advances in technology, including telecommunications, can be expected to make it technically feasible to meet this commitment, even to communities which cannot expect access to cable networks for either power or communications in the foreseeable future. The potential enhancement of productivity and commercial opportunities should make it possible for the necessary investment in hardware and communications systems to be financed by private sector investment.

There is an additional, and considerable, challenge of making information from global, regional and national sources relevant to the 'grassroots'. A lot of thought and work will be needed to ensure that all communities, including those with very limited access to traditional classroom-based education, hence with very limited literacy or numeracy, can make effective use of access to the Internet. Without such preparation, a 'digital divide' can emerge even with convenient and low-cost access to information technology.

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Several relevant efforts are already under way to promote the productive use of new information and communications facilities, including by people with low incomes and low levels of literacy. Attention was drawn to collaboration between Tonga and an international information technology firm, CISCO. There is an urgent need to draw on such experience and make it applicable and accessible to Pacific Island communities.

## Human resource development

Renewed education and training efforts are needed in classrooms and other areas of human resource development. There was extensive discussion of the need to strike the best possible balance between education and literacy programs in vernacular as well as in English. Human resource development also needs to involve the whole community; this can be assisted by new developments in telecommunications and information technology. The Internet can certainly provide channels of communications among currently isolated teachers in rural communities.

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Considerable support was expressed for intra-regional conferences and other exchanges among educators, such as a Pacific Exchange Fellowship Scheme. Such exchanges could include those involved in training for the use of new information technology. A potential theme for such exchanges is to develop ways of educating and nurturing a 'Pacific child'. More systematic use could also be made of the experience of Pacific Island people working in other countries.

## Conflict resolution

More effort is needed towards conflict resolution in order to stem a growing trend towards violence. This will need to involve a better understanding of the sources of conflict (including access to and sharing of benefits from natural resources and changing gender relations in communities). A prevalent 'culture of silence' needs to be countered by encouraging community dialogue about potential sources of conflict. More training is needed in conflict resolution, especially among youth.

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It may be useful to use procedures such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in order to defuse and resolve emerging conflicts, for example, over land. There is also scope for exchange of experience in promoting greater integrity of law enforcement and for gun control (for example, through legislation and/or buy-back schemes). It would be desirable to set up an Internet inventory of relevant work and experience in these fields, possibly with assistance from international development agencies.

## Regional cooperation

Constructive engagement and partnership within the region and with close neighbours such as Australia and New Zealand will continue to be vital for regional peace and prosperity. Continuing efforts will be needed to raise mutual awareness, which is essential for mutual respect. Considerable emphasis is needed on better understanding between Australia and New Zealand societies and other Pacific communities.

Regional economic integration is already being promoted, for example, by the APEC process and by schemes for preferential access of Pacific Island products to both Australian and New Zealand markets. There is extensive intra-regional movement of workers, especially to New Zealand. A free trade area (FTA) to include all Pacific islands as well as Australia and New Zealand is under consideration.

Participants noted that thorough integration of economies required far more than the reduction of border barriers to trade in goods and services. As shown by experience elsewhere, including in Europe, it is also necessary to facilitate the movement of labour and capital as well as by promoting the mutual recognition and/or harmonisation of domestic economic regulations.

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It is, therefore, more productive to encourage a regional common market, rather than just a regional FTA. Given the characteristics and natural resource endowments of the region's economies, labour mobility within the region will be important for promoting economic integration and avoiding widening gaps in living standards. Enhanced labour mobility will have important social implications which need to be better understood.

## Recommendations

The issues set out above lead to several potential follow-ups. If a region-wide consensus is reached on specific ideas, there are good prospects for attracting the necessary financial support from official development agencies and/or NGOs.

At the outset, it will be important to gain a better understanding of what related work is already under way. A specific starting point might be to create an inventory of past and ongoing efforts to promote more effective conflict resolution and law enforcement. AusAID could be requested to support such an initiative.

The Foundation for Development Cooperation (FDC) itself plans to promote further work in two areas.

- Helping Pacific communities to prepare for the new 'e-economy'. This would draw on a combination of people with expertise in information technology, software development and community education to ensure effective and productive uses of the expected improvement in access to information and other services available on the Internet in the coming years.
- Investigating the potential issues, costs and benefit of promoting a genuinely integrated regional market, including Australia and New Zealand as well as Pacific Island economies, with particular emphasis on the issue of enhanced labour mobility.

Others are encouraged to follow up more of the ideas raised above. One means of doing so is to facilitate continuing communications among those involved in the 2000 Brisbane Dialogue. A list of e-mail addresses has already been circulated and a website will be set up to encourage interaction and information-sharing.

When follow-up work, by FDC and others, on some of the issues raised in the initial Dialogue is adequately advanced, it may be desirable to convene a further Brisbane Dialogue which can assess such progress as well as identify new issues for attention.