

Submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Consultation on the Pacific Islands Forum 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent

November 2020

Introduction

The Australian government, along with the governments of all members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), has committed to run domestic consultations into the PIF's *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

As the PIF's 2050 vision says:

In 2050, the Blue Pacific Continent is a region of peace; harmony; security, social inclusion; and increased prosperity so that all Pacific people are leading free, healthy and productive lives.

Our Blue Pacific identity reinforces the potential of our shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean and reaffirms the connections of Pacific peoples with their natural resources, environment, cultures and livelihoods.

We understand that this vision can only be achieved through regional collective action.

In this spirit, Peacifica and the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education have prepared a joint submission to the inquiry. Central to our submission is the fact that the climate crisis is the region's single greatest threat, and that Australia's intransigence on climate action in poses a significant threat to the realisation of the 2050 vision.

It is not the only pressing issue. Our submission also refers to gender inequality, opportunities for youth, health, global competition, economic factors and more, all of which are cut across by climate.

We also address the effects of COVID-19, which offers both risks and opportunities for the region.

Australia has a pivotal role as a member of the community of Pacific island nations. The 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy offers us a chance to contribute as a full partner in a prosperous Pacific future.

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1. What are the major challenges facing our region as we work together to achieve the vision for a Blue Pacific Continent by 2050?

2. How might these challenges impact on our region over the next 30 years to 2050?

The **climate crisis** is the single greatest challenge to realising the vision of a Blue Pacific continent. Its myriad facets - higher tides, sea level rise, more intense storm activity, drought and flood affect every facet of life in the Pacific and compound other challenges. Population growth pressures will be worsened by a reduction in useable land. Fisheries, agriculture and forests will be impacted. Movement within the region will be affected as sea level changes and higher tides will affect vulnerable infrastructure.

Health is likely to be affected in myriad ways due to climate change. The loss of productive land and sea, as well as reducing the availability of nutritious food, will force further reliance on imported food. The expense of fresh, high quality, nutritious food will further exacerbate the crisis of 'lifestyle diseases' like diabetes and obesity. Storm surges, king tides and sea level rise will impact the availability of **potable water**. Changed climate conditions may see the further incursion of tropical diseases like malaria into the region.

"I am worried about our future here in Kiribati. We have been dealing with higher tides and floods for years now. Not only are our homes, schools and hospitals destroyed but the sea water destroys our crops and fresh water supply. We do not have the resources to deal with these devastating impacts of climate change on our own. We need more help from others, especially Australia and New Zealand." – Teruabine Anna Nuariki, Gender and Youth Officer, Kiribati

The climate crisis' threat to the viability of the region's most vulnerable countries is an impending disaster not only for their citizens. If communities are forced to relocate, tensions with any 'host' communities, most of which are likely to be in the region, will be very likely. In a profound way, the loss of liveable territories will diminish the integrity of the Blue Pacific as a whole. Pacific island peoples are deeply connected to their home lands and seas, and their potential loss affects them deeply.

"Kiribati may not have until 2050. By then our country may be unliveable. What will become of us and where will we go?" – Vasiti Tebamare, National Coordinator Kiribati Health Retreat Association

Gender inequality across the region, which manifests as uneven political and economic representation, and in the crisis of gender based violence, is a risk to the realisation of a peaceful, healthy and productive region. Climate impacts, particularly in relation to food security and resilience to disaster, will disproportionately affect women, children and people with disabilities, who already enjoy less economic independence and freedom of movement.

"A majority of women in the villages are illiterate and live in their own world, unaware of what is happening with the government of the day." Community leader, Solomon Islands

Global competition between superpowers risks creating divisions within the Pacific community. However this risk may be more of a concern to Australia and New Zealand than to the majority of Pacific states. There is some evidence (eg in the [Pacific Perspectives on the World](#) report written by Peacifica for the Whitlam Institute) that Pacific people see increased international attention as an opportunity to achieve better outcomes for the region. Competition may still create the potential for tension, but presenting a united front as the Blue Pacific continent would be a valuable contribution to mitigating this risk.

“A Sea of Islands meeting the Belt and Road.” – Member of Parliament,
Solomon Islands

A mirror of this situation is also possible: **global interest could decline** as international actors turn inward in response to the climate crisis and a weakened global rules based order. Again, regional solidarity and collaboration will be important to assure that the Pacific is able to maintain its place in international affairs.

Economic well-being is a perennial challenge for the Pacific. The high costs associated with the region’s remoteness and scattered population are well known, and the effects of the climate crisis risk compounding them further as the combined effects of different climate events destroy agricultural livelihoods and damage natural resources. The underlying subsistence capability of the region will be compromised, both due to direct climate impacts and the effects of growing populations. Tourism may also be affected as infrastructure is damaged, seasonal cycles change and the region’s natural beauty is affected.

Energy security is another long term challenge for the Pacific, but is perhaps one to which the region is well placed to respond as it is blessed with an abundance of renewable energy sources, notably wind and solar. As a direct contributor to mitigating the climate crisis, achieving renewable energy security in the region is win/win. However **Australia’s outlier status** due to its continued dependence on producing, exporting and consuming coal and gas confounds the region’s chances of success.

Finally, an internal challenge is to assure **unity** among the PIF membership. While there are numerous fault lines in the membership, particularly in relation to sharing of political leadership, the distance between Australia and other members in the response to the climate crisis is the most pressing issue. Australia’s willingness to pursue its own agenda on climate action without regard to the unanimous and long-held position of the other Forum members suggests that Australia will not hesitate to act in its own interests, without regard for its neighbours. Australia’s willingness to take advantage of its status as the most powerful PIF member threatens the capacity of the Forum to achieve its strategic vision. It also suggests that Australia significantly undervalues the economic, social and cultural benefits that would derive from a more respectful and collaborative contribution to the Blue Pacific vision.

3. How might COVID-19 impact on our region's development trajectory to 2050?

COVID-19 may lead to a spectrum of both positive and negative long term outcomes for the Pacific islands. The most obvious negative impact is on the region's **economy**. This particularly affects the region's tourism-dependent countries and those that make heavy use of remittances from workers overseas, but other unforeseen trade and supply challenges may emerge.

However, longer term economic impact may be somewhat mitigated due to the region's perceived status as being largely COVID-free. Fiji is already positioning itself as a safe haven for very wealthy visitors. An opening to Australia, New Zealand and other potentially COVID-safe countries may lead to increased numbers of visitors, as other travel destinations remain unavailable.

Importantly, **many Pacific islands, especially the sovereign, independent members of the PIF, have been successful in preventing COVID from spreading.** Closed borders have proven effective and quarantine has worked. This has been achieved through cooperation between all PIF members including Australia and New Zealand, in particular in the operation of the humanitarian corridor. This demonstration of regional solidarity and coordination is a valuable modelling of what can be achieved through regional cooperation, and offers an important boost to the perception - both from outside and inside - of the region's capability. Opening up increases risk but the region has demonstrated that it is able to assess and manage the risk - as shown most recently in the identification of COVID in quarantined arrivals to Vanuatu and Fiji.

In the longer term, the region may experience fewer adverse effects from COVID-19 than many other parts of the world, assuming that Pacific states continue to stop the virus. The greatest risk lies with Papua New Guinea. As the region's largest Pacific island state, with a land border to Indonesia and a particularly challenging economic, governance and health services delivery environment, PNG's risk profile for COVID is very different. However despite the significant numbers of cases in July and August, the people of PNG appear to be succeeding in containing the spread.

A risk may lie with the less effective management of the crisis in the French and American **non-PIF Pacific** territories. Movement between them and PIF members (eg through airport transfer or cruise ships) could increase the risk of outbreaks. However with a couple of exceptions (Guam & French Polynesia) these territories have limited COVID cases to a single wave.

As the world looks to recovery, and to 'build back better' the comparatively good performance of the region through the acute phase of the crisis may position them for a relatively strong economic recovery. But health must remain the first priority of any recovery process, both as an end in itself and as being critical for building resilience. Australia and New Zealand have an important role to play in ensuring the effective distribution of any vaccine to the region. Their investment in a strong and healthy Blue Pacific is an investment in prosperity and security for all PIF members.

4. How can Pacific Islands Forum members work together to address these challenges, including through closer economic and security linkages that preserve national sovereignty?

All Forum members must **support and contribute to the Pacific islands' global leadership on climate change**. A united Blue Pacific will be better placed to lead global climate financing negotiations that prioritise the most vulnerable people, including Pacific islanders. Assuring **secure and predictable climate finance** is essential to mitigate the region's climate impacts, adapt to change and avert, minimise and address loss and damage.

Australia has demonstrated the weakest commitment to climate action and therefore needs to:

- Commit to zero net emissions by 2050 and developing a long term low greenhouse gas emissions strategy by 2020
- Phase out all subsidies to fossil fuels
- Cancel its leftover Kyoto Protocol credits
- Double its current Nationally Determined Contribution in line with the 2014 advice of the Independent Climate Change Authority
- Maximise the opportunities from COVID-19 recovery to boost renewable energy and low emissions transport
- Provide new, additional funds to finance climate mitigation and adaptation under the Paris agreement, including the Green Climate Fund.

"I really hope that the Pacific leaders like Australia will give us a place on this earth and listen to our story. What we are saying is what we experience and we live it. Our people live with it."
– Maria Tiimon Chi-Fang, Pacific Calling Partnership

A safe, prosperous Blue Pacific Region is one where all members are **free and able to move and work**. Labour mobility schemes are widely supported and there is scope to expand the number of workers and employment sectors. This needs further investment to protect workers. **Labour mobility is particularly valuable for Pacific youth**.

"Opportunities need to be presented to [youth]. The economic aspect, but the social aspect as well, in terms of quality education, health, ... and then a sense of national identity." – Community leader, Solomon Islands

Considering the likelihood of future climate migration, enhanced Pacific labour movement will build resilience and strengthen inter-country communal links that may facilitate later safe movements. All PIF members should implement the Nansen Initiative's *Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the context of Disasters and Climate Change*. Australia should also carefully consider and implement the recommendations of the [Kaldor Centre Policy Brief- Climate Change, Disasters and Mobility - A Roadmap for Australian Action](#).

Australia is essential to realising the Blue Pacific vision. **Investment in Australia to deepen understanding of historical and cultural links and teach Pacific languages** will build the capability of Australians to engage with the region.

“You can ‘understand’ the politics and the context, but it’s actually understanding the cultural context, the social context, even the faith-based context that is important. And in order to understand that, you need to give space and voice to Pacific people.” Community leader, Fiji

Gender equality is a priority - in political representation, in economic empowerment, in education, in freedom from violence and in access to justice. The climate crisis is impacting women more deeply. Empowered and resilient Pacific women are essential to the region’s fight against climate change, and the realisation of the Blue Pacific vision.