

Transcript: Regionalism, sub-regionalism and women's empowerment: an interview with Dame Meg Taylor

Tess: My name is Tess Newton Cain. I'm a Research Associate at the Development Policy Centre. And this afternoon, here in Port Vila, it's a great honour and pleasure to be able to meet with Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

So Dame Meg, thank you very much for making some time and welcome to Pacific Conversations.

Meg: Thank you. Pleasure to be here. And delighted to be in Vanuatu.

Tess: Very good. There's been a lot happening in relation to Pacific regionalism in the last little while. You and I, I think, are both on record saying that 2015 is going to be a very important year for regionalism. And I'd like to know, based on where we are now, what you think are the key objectives for the regionalism project in the next five to ten years?

Meg: I'm going to have to ask you a question on that. Do you mean in terms of where PIF is involved, or the regional governments are involved?

Tess: I think the bigger, the whole of regionalism to start with, and then maybe we look more at those individual components.

Meg: I mean, the perspective that the Pacific Islands Forum has is that in 2012 in Majuro, the decision was made to adopt the Pacific Plan Framework that Sir Mekere Morauta from Papua New Guinea was asked to work on, where they had extensive consultation with people in the Pacific. About 700 or more people had been involved in the consultations plus the governments.

And what has emerged out of that is the framework and the key emphasis is about changing the paradigm of the way development is done in the region, where the leaders of the Pacific are the ones that make the decision as to what are the regional priorities. So, what are the specific high political and economic issues that the region should be focusing on? Not a list of 20 to 30, but a list of four to five, and no more.

The task that the Pacific Islands Forum has and the CROP agencies will have is to make sure we are implementing that. But right now, it's rolling out that process, and actually implementing a report that was done in the Pacific rather than shelving it and hoping that somebody will write another one.

Tess: So having identified those objectives – more leadership, more decisions made by leaders, focusing on objectives that really contribute to development in the region – what do you see as the most significant challenges to achieving those objectives? And how do you think they can be overcome?

Meg: Just to be clear on the process, it is not the Pacific Islands Forum that identifies this. Right now, as of tomorrow, the Troika, which is the government of Papua New Guinea – the incoming chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, the current chair – Palau, and the former – Republic of Marshall Islands, their representatives will meet with me in Suva, and we will short list a special subcommittee, which is a subcommittee of individuals that represent regions in the Pacific and small island states, the private sector, and civil society.

This was a suggestion that came out through the framework document. They will be the ones who will then process what suggestions have been made from people in the region. And through that process, they'll be able to identify what are the key issues that people keep raising and also what are the proposals that institutions or individuals have put forward.

So PIF is facilitating this, but it's not the organisation. This is about getting a greater participatory process of people in the region to do this.

Tess: And what do you think might be – what are the risks you see? What are the barriers that may inhibit that process?

Meg: I'd like to say that I don't want to predict any obstacles. My view is we've got to drive this now and really keep it to a timetable. PIF's role has to be to make sure that the briefs that are written for the leaders are very balanced, and of course giving them the facts, so that when they meet to make a decision they are very well informed and well briefed.

I think that grappling with these issues, that's going to be tougher than we all think. You don't just pluck a topic out of thin air. We've got to make sure that it's a regional issue, and not a regional issue for some and not for others: what is the thread that holds it all together? For instance, one of the issues that I think we talk about a lot in the region – and good things are happening through the University of South Pacific – is the ICT.

How do we communicate with each other? This is one issue that you could say is significant and is a regional issue of a very high political nature, because we need to be connected, etc.

Other issues will emerge through the process of submissions that are being made.

Tess: Okay, great, thank you. Now I'm going to recycle a question that I asked Colin Tukuitonga when he took over as Director General of SPC, and that is, when your term expires in six years' time –

Meg: No, three.

Tess: Three years' time, what would you like to have achieved, and how would you like the Forum Secretariat to look?

Meg: I've only been there two months, and I think the organisational structure has to be reviewed. But my main focus in terms of institutional outcome is to ensure that the Pacific Framework is truly implemented and accepted, not just by the leadership and the CROP agencies, but by the donor agencies. That when the leaders of the Pacific say "these are the four priorities for the issues in the region", that donor agencies get behind it. Not, as I see now, many donors or partners have their own agenda in the region.

It's really quite extraordinary that there's so much happening in the Pacific, but not always in line with what the Pacific leaders think is a priority for them. If in three years we have that really bedded down and the shift is changed so that the responsibility and the political leadership comes from the Pacific leaders, then I will have accomplished what I was asked to do by the leaders.

Tess: Okay. Just in terms of the Secretariat, you mentioned a review of organisational structure.

Meg: Well no, to make things happen and be much more responsive, I've got to look at the structure and how we're delivering. And I'm in the process of doing that now.

Tess: Okay. So how does that review or your consideration of that, how does that impact on the review that was undertaken in 2012 of the Forum Secretariat's functions?

Meg: I'm looking at an institution that I've inherited, end of 2014, now 2015. It's amazing how dynamics change in this region very quickly, and what we've been asked to do in terms of implementation is going to require skill sets that can deliver, be responsive to what the leaders want.

Also keeping the relationship with the donor agencies, the partners, etc., and making it a very effective and vibrant organisation. I think that, I know that, there are questions out there in the Pacific, and I'd be stupid not to acknowledge it.

There's a debate that the Pacific Islands Forum is becoming irrelevant, that it's not needed. I want to be able to assure the people of the Pacific, because when they were asked by Sir Mekere about regionalism they responded that they needed a regional organisation that represented their countries. And the Pacific Islands Forum is one that represents the independent states of the Pacific.

And that's a very precious mandate for me. And we've got to make sure that it is protected but also effective.

Tess: Okay, great, thank you. As we know, you are the first woman to hold the position of Secretary General. Based on your own experience, what you've seen of other people,

how do you think that professional Pacific island women can best be supported in order to take on leadership roles at the regional level?

Meg: I think we've got to be supported by our own gender and supported by men in our communities for the intelligence and the contribution that we can make as individuals.

The Pacific is wide in the sense of all the different roles that women play. The role of mother, wife, is still and will always be the most important in the sense of how we hold family together because of our social structures in the Pacific. And the roles that we play in ensuring that our communal responsibilities are adhered to.

And women are very strong in holding that fabric of society together. When we're moving into the professional and modern world, it's the opportunities that women are given. And I think- I've heard this from young women in PNG - that some of the areas that they feel they can't make progress is because many of us who are the older women are making sure that they don't have those opportunities.

And we don't ensure that they get those opportunities. I've not been working in the Pacific in the last several years. I've worked in the Office of the Compliance Advisor in Washington at the World Bank Group and I have lots of smart young women. And I made it my business to bring in young women that I could help mentor and guide.

I hope that I can be able to do something of that sort through my role in the Pacific and encourage others to take a mentoring role. But it's the opportunities. And I think it's the opportunities that women feel they can be comfortable in being able to do that work plus also play their role - I mean, not play their role, but carry out their functions - at home.

You hear a lot of the debate, "can you do both?" Well, traditionally our women have always worked in our societies. It's nothing new. It's just transposed into modern economies and how adaptable we as women can be.

I've been very, very fortunate that I've had tremendous support from my own family and my own men in my life, who were my friends at university, who were supportive of my growth in my professional life, and Papua New Guinean men that I studied with and grew up with.

Tess: Okay, great. So just to finish, to go back to the regional landscape. Looking at the regional and sub-regional landscape as it is currently, how would you evaluate what it is at the moment? And how do you see it evolving?

Meg: Well, I'm really impressed by what some of the sub-regional organisations are doing. And I've had a very good day of meeting here in Port Vila with the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the accomplishments. And there are some very impressive issues

that they've had to deal with, particularly around transport, in terms of aviation, trade, visa issues, and massive steps in terms of cooperation.

Which would be a fantastic opportunity if we could achieve that through the whole region. There's an emergence of the Polynesian leaders as well as in Micronesia. And an exchange of ideas with sub-regional organisations. I think that what we've got to be open to as a regional organisation is that there are some things that a sub-regional can do and do them well. There are other things and issues that a regional organisation has to have responsibility for and take leadership on. And we need to be able to exchange ideas and not be afraid of it. Because I think in the end it's about the service and delivery back to our own people in our own countries.

Tess: Okay, very recently, I think just in the last day or so, you've commented on the forthcoming summit or meeting in Sydney convened by the governments of Australia and Fiji with a view to looking at regional architecture. Do you have any further thoughts on that, or is it just a case of wait and see what transpires?

Meg: Well, that meeting emerged from a conversation between the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Australia and the Prime Minister of Fiji. The Pacific Islands Forum is not involved in the sense of organising this meeting. So it's not a PIF meeting.

With regards to discussing regional architecture, regional architecture has been discussed before. It's been discussed more recently I understand. And now again, there's a desire to discuss it. How that will be fashioned, I'm waiting to see how they want to discuss this.

What the outcomes will be: leadership in the Pacific has to really think these things through. What is it that they want? What is it that they want from institutions that already exist? And if it's not sufficient, then how should they be re-fashioned? Who should be members of that? What do the members, as it exists, bring? If there's concern about a member state not wanting to be actively involved because of the membership structure, then leadership has to tackle these issues.

These issues aren't going to go away. Leaders know that. And this is about being a regional political leader.

I see myself as just an instrument that has to then make sure, once the decisions are made, that the institution that I'm now given the charge to lead works, and works hard.

Tess: Okay. Thank you very much Dame Meg for your time and for sharing your thinking with us. And enjoy the rest of your time in Port Vila.

Meg: Thank you.

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