

Another Pacific plan, really?

by Stephen Howes and Sadhana Sen

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2019 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting, Tuvalu

Photo Credit: ABC News/Melissa Clarke

The Pacific Plan was suggested by an Eminent Persons Group in 2003 to provide “an overarching strategy for the region”. It was agreed via the Auckland Declaration at a 2004 special Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) meeting and adopted a year later by PIF leaders. Its aim of “peace, harmony, security and economic prosperity” for all of the Pacific people was to be pursued by initiatives grouped under four pillars: economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security.

The Pacific Plan failed to live up to its expectations. Almost a decade later, the findings of the [Pacific Plan Review](#) were presented to leaders at the 2013 Majuro Forum. As highlighted by this [2013 Devpolicy blog](#), the review, led by former PNG PM Sir Mekere Morauta, was politely scathing. The review said that the region needed regionalism more than ever, but that the Pacific Plan had gone about it the wrong way: it was too technocratic and lacked political support. This led to the May 2014 Special Forum Leaders Retreat and the new [Framework for Pacific Regionalism](#).

The new [Framework](#) aimed to streamline the regional agenda and ensure leaders had “high level, political conversations on the Pacific’s regional priorities”. Accordingly, it set up a new process for the identification of priorities and their endorsement by leaders.

In line with this new approach, prior to the 2015 Leaders meeting, the Forum Secretariat issued a public call for submissions for proposed regional initiatives. 68 were received. Proposed initiatives were then assessed by a specialist sub-committee on regionalism and five were put forward to leaders. These were: increased economic returns from fisheries and maritime surveillance; climate change and disaster risk management; information and communication technology; West Papua; and cervical cancer. All were considered by leaders, [some more enthusiastically than others](#).

Another three initiatives were endorsed in 2016, relating to: persons with disabilities; oceans; and regional mobility and harmonisation of business practices. In 2016, discussion of these eight initiatives consumed paragraphs 4 to 27 of a 46-paragraph communiqué, so the Framework was definitely front and centre.

So far, so good, but thereafter the Framework for Pacific Regionalism quickly lost momentum. By 2017, the “Blue Pacific” narrative was gaining traction, there was no further mention of any specific Framework initiatives, and only three of its original eight initiatives were discussed (fisheries, West Papua and climate change). In 2018 and 2019, the Framework hardly rated a mention in the leaders’ communiqué.

The 2019 leaders meeting also agreed to a new “2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent”, which would include both “a long-term vision” and “a carefully considered regionalism strategy” (paragraph 5 of the 2019 communiqué).

The 2050 Strategy was meant to be ready for consideration by leaders last year, but there was no Forum leaders meeting in 2020. When the 2050 Strategy will be ready is uncertain, but the more fundamental question is why it is needed. The harsh reality is that neither the Pacific Plan nor the Framework for Pacific Regionalism had traction. Both were adopted with great fanfare and then quickly lost momentum. Why will the 2050 Strategy be any different?

Plans are only useful if they drive real change. Is a new plan or “carefully considered regionalism strategy” really needed now, given that previous efforts have delivered so little? A greater focus on learning the lessons of the past, and on meaningful implementation, would be more likely to improve the lives of people across the Pacific.

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