

How Australia can partner more effectively with France in the Pacific

by Hugh Piper and Anna Gibert

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Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief may offer lessons to inform coordination

Photo Credit: France Diplomatie/Facebook

As geopolitics brings increasing engagement by external actors with the Pacific, there is a need to coordinate more effectively – including Australia and France. At the same time, better coordination must be done in a consultative and respectful manner in partnership with Pacific nations, particularly in light of [Australia's commitment to a “new era”](#) with the region.

In a new [report by the Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy and Defence Dialogue](#) (AP4D), we identify how Australia can work with France to contribute to addressing some of the Pacific's challenges. To help inform our conclusions, we conducted discussions with Pacific Islanders in Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga who have experience working with Australia and France.

[Development coordination is crucial](#) for maximising the impact of scarce resources and ensuring that the often-limited bandwidth of Pacific governments is not overwhelmed – and that local sovereignty and perspectives are prioritised. Playing to the strengths of different actors, drawing on collective expertise, and avoiding duplicating or undermining respective efforts are also crucial. Donor coordination forums and conferences, greater visibility and mapping of respective contributions, alignment on diligence and compliance requirements, and dedicated resources for coordination are all [ideas to explore](#).

Australia and France can work together to improve coordination, alongside other actors including the US, New Zealand, Japan, European institutions, and multilateral development banks. While yet to demonstrate its practical value fully, the [Partners in the Blue Pacific](#) initiative promises to perform such a function – though [France and the EU are only observers](#), and it has received a [mixed reception in the Pacific](#). Australia should ensure that the grouping remains open to, and engaged with, France as much as possible. The first substantial [focus area for Partners in the Blue Pacific](#) is illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and it is important for France to

remain engaged, given its substantial exclusive economic zones in the Pacific and capacity to contribute to maritime domain awareness.

At the same time, consultations in the Pacific also noted the risk for Australia in working too closely with France and EU institutions, as this may lead to a reduction in the responsiveness for which Australia is highly valued. Engaging with, and accessing funding from, the EU is widely seen to be onerous, highly bureaucratic and operationally decontextualised.

Australia must also confront in frank terms the risks of working with France in the Pacific. It needs to grapple with the complexity of relationships with New Caledonia and French Polynesia and how they engage in forums such as the Pacific Islands Forum on essentially the same terms as sovereign nations, even though key policy domains including foreign relations remain under Paris's purview. Australia needs to be cognisant of how perspectives can diverge between overseas and metropolitan France and sensitively navigate this complexity.

In parts of the region, people express resentment and distrust driven by France's nuclear testing, [colonial history](#), and [ongoing sovereignty](#) over parts of the Pacific. Developments in recent years around New Caledonia's status, especially the [2021 independence referendum](#), have added to this. Pacific voices saw France's approach in the Pacific as more top-down, with less engagement with local needs and preferences when compared to [Australia's agenda](#), which is increasingly focused on localisation and sustainability. A widely held perception of lower French cultural and linguistic competency in the Pacific further hinders this.

Moreover, the wider context of the Australian government's push towards a [First Nations foreign policy](#), and its willingness to speak openly about the [legacy of colonialism](#) in the Indo-Pacific, must be considered in the context of engaging France in the Pacific. There is a [reputational risk for Australia](#) were it to be conspicuously inactive on indigenous issues with respect to the French territories while engaging with such issues elsewhere. While it is clear that the [Australian government intends to remain neutral](#) on the future status of French territories, it must be cognisant of, and proactive in, managing these risks while at the same time maintaining a close relationship with metropolitan France.

One way of doing this is to continue to foster positive people-to-people links with Indigenous people in French Pacific territories. This would build on [existing work in New Caledonia](#), for instance, to establish cultural and artistic links with First Nations Australians and to [share indigenous knowledge](#) on land management. [Expanding the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme](#) to New Caledonians and offering scholarships, similar to Australia Awards, to people in New Caledonia and French

Polynesia could also help boost links with Australia.

Such initiatives are a low-risk way of engaging Indigenous people in French territories without undermining Australia's neutrality on questions of sovereignty and independence. They would also demonstrate Australia actively boosting the status of Indigenous people in French territories and delivering on its First Nations foreign policy approach.

Pacific voices told us that humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) is the most advanced area of Australia-France coordination (through the tripartite [FRANZ Arrangement](#)), demonstrated by recent [responses to natural disasters in Vanuatu, Tonga](#), and Fiji. Such responses, however, could be improved with deeper local political economy analysis and consultation with local people and structures. Australia and France should also seek to derive lessons from HADR to inform coordination in other sectors.

Consultations identified that France had the most consistent and visible development cooperation presence (outside its own territories) in Vanuatu. However, in both Vanuatu and across the region more broadly, it was seen that there is significant scope for Australia and France to coordinate more effectively. Greater dialogue, information sharing, planning and consultation with local leaders and systems should be prioritised in-country to increase aggregated investment effectiveness. A clear commitment to coordination by Australia and France would also mitigate “donor overcrowding” and help manage the workload of Pacific bureaucracies. Indeed, it would be to Australia and France's credit to lead increased coordination as “responsible donors”. Pacific voices across the region identified several areas where joint work between Australia and France could be beneficial, including support for local media and civil society, advancing gender equality, sports development, education (especially in Vanuatu given its bilingual school system), and infrastructure (especially attracting EU finance).

Australia should generally support a greater French development contribution throughout the Pacific. Naturally, any joint work or coordination should be driven by the policy settings of Pacific nations and developed in consultation with the Pacific leaders. In doing so, the [language and ethos of the Blue Pacific Continent](#) should be employed.

The [French development agency, AFD](#), is likely to increase its contribution in the Pacific, focused on infrastructure, environment, oceans and climate resilience. There are, however, almost no established patterns of coordination between Australia and France in the Pacific on development.

There are substantial barriers to joint work on development projects by Australia and France, given unfamiliar bureaucracies, different languages, different ways of working, and different approaches to financing. Feasible bilateral cooperation is most likely to be in the form of discrete contributions, such as co-financing by one donor on a project predominately managed by the other. Australia could consider increasing its contribution to the French-run **Kiwa Initiative**, and France could build on its **current volunteer investment** into the Australian-funded Vanuatu Skills Partnership. There could also be scope for France to direct its development finance through the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific.

Bilateral coordination mechanisms and regular dialogue between Australian and French officials should be established as soon as possible, including by **finalising a letter of intent** between DFAT and AFD. Effective communication between Canberra and Paris, as well as in-country between Australian and French diplomatic posts and with Pacific governments, will be important to operationalise this intent meaningfully. More broadly, Australia should encourage France to direct its development contributions in the Pacific through NGOs, civil society organisations, multilateral institutions, and proven Australian-funded initiatives that support local leadership and have local legitimacy, in line with its First Nations foreign policy approach and localisation agenda.

Disclosures:

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Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/how-australia-can-partner-more-effectively-with-france-in-the-pacific-20230712/>