

Tess Newton Cain
Crawford School of Development Policy
Pacific Conversations
Elise Huffer
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Tess: Welcome to Pacific Conversations. My name is Tess Newton Cain. I'm a Research Associate with the Development Policy Centre. And this morning I'm very pleased to be able to have an opportunity to speak with Dr. Elise Huffer who is the Cultural Adviser for the Human Development Program at SPC. And she's joining me today from Suva. So good morning Elise. And thank you very much for joining us.

Elise: Bula vinaka, Tess. And thank you for having me on.

Tess: Okay. So maybe to start with for the benefit of our listeners, I'd like to invite you to give us an overview of yourself and your background. And what your experience to date has been with development in the Pacific.

Elise: Okay. Well, I've been with the Human Development Program of SPC for the past six years. And prior to that I looked after the Pacific Studies Programme at the University of the South Pacific, which entailed not only post grad teaching and research, but also the Institute of Pacific Studies Publications which is now the USP Press.

So which was really about providing an outlet for Pacific writers and thinkers of today. And so my interest in development has been quite strong over all these years. But particularly issues such as gender and culture and development. And rethinking development in the Pacific.

Tess: Okay. That's great. Thank you very much. And we have in common that we're both ex-members of staff at USP, which is fairly common as I move around the region and chat to people. So based on that background and obviously you're extremely well developed qualifications and experience and expertise, I wonder if we could move on to talk about a recent conference that you convened which was on cultural economics in the Pacific. So I have two questions for you, which I think are related.

One is whether you can tell me what your current thinking is about what is cultural economics and what is its significance in our region? And then the second question is what were the key messages that came out of that conference that was held recently in Suva?

Elise: Okay. Well, just to backtrack a bit, to understand sort of the background to holding a cultural economics conference. Obviously as adviser for culture, one of the things I'm tasked with is trying to help build up the culture sector in the region. And to be able to really profile what the culture sector is in the region.

But that's culture as a sector. And that's a very important aspect and within that entails cultural heritage, cultural industries and developing cultural policy. But there's the other dimension, which is culture, what's called the sort of anthropological meaning of culture, which is culture as a way of life.

And how culture permeates or is part of people's daily lives. And obviously when you're talking about development whether it's projects or activities or questions of well-being, culture is central to that. So in that one of the issues in the region has

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been the lack of attention to the contribution of culture to the economies of the countries -

And I don't mean just as cultural industries, but really culture seen much more widely. So the background to the conference was to try to look at what the discipline of cultural economics is. And so we had people like Professor David Throsby come over. And he's obviously very well known and respected for his work in that area.

But it was also to look at culture more widely and the relationship between culture and economies. So that's sort of the approach that we had. In terms of the key messages, I'm not sure we had a lot of messages that give us immediate answers.

But the main messages were that, well, we need to continue working in this area. The region has established and implemented or developed –and is in process of implementing the 'Regional Culture Strategy: Investing in Pacific cultures 2010/2020'.

And that was as part of the Pacific Plan. And was something developed with the assistance of the SPC but through a body called the Council of Pacific Arts and Culture. And one of the areas in that is to also look at how culture is taught.

And so, one of the outcomes – the more concrete outcome is to have a program of teaching, learning and research in cultural economics at USP. We're talking about concrete outcomes. I guess that would be one of them. Now that needs to sort of mapped out. How exactly that's going to happen.

But it was also one of the objectives of holding this conference was to be able to define for ourselves in the region what cultural economics is about and should be about. We had one paper originally and unfortunately she wasn't able to attend. But it was supposed to be around land in Vanuatu and the role of land and people's identity with respect to land and how that relates to economies.

So when we're talking about culture in the Pacific, it's very wide. And so – I guess some of the things that need to be decided in a longer term are what sort of areas we can really work on in cultural economics. And what are sort of in the 'too difficult' box and need to be really thought about some more.

Tess: I think it's a fascinating area and as you say it's one that doesn't – hasn't historically necessarily had a lot of discussion. And I think you've raised there are some really quite interesting issues that we'll be looking forward to seeing more about how they can be developed.

And I have a couple of more questions that can maybe sort of - I'm not looking for you necessarily to have any hard and fast answers but may give us an opportunity to think about what other areas there are to develop this thinking. The first is based on not only what came out of the recent conference but other work that you've been doing with colleagues. What do you think Pacific island governments can or should be doing to promote the development cultural economy at the national level?

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Elise: Well, I mean there's a whole range of areas. But I think the first thing is for us as a culture sector to make obvious to Pacific island governments the role that culture can play. And traditionally the culture sector has been weak in government policy areas.

So because culture is part of people's daily lives and it's not something that governments I think have felt comfortable as an area of going into with policy. So it's been difficult. But one of the things that certainly we've been working on from the culture sector is the development of National Cultural Policies which enables the ministries and departments of culture to table something at Cabinet with specific goals, outcomes that they would like to see and to start building up the capacity in the formal aspects of the arts and culture sector.

So that's one sort of dimension of it. The other dimension is work that's also been carried out that has some impact - that's having impact at the international level which is also about re-thinking GDP measures, rethinking well-being.

And we know that culture in the Pacific is very important in resilience of communities and in people's daily well being. But that's not something that's measured. It's not counted. So it tends to sort of drop off the radar when you're talking about policy, when you're talking about national budgets, when you're talking about projects or programs being carried out in countries.

So I guess it's a sort of two pronged approach. They're mutually supportive. But that's the work that needs to be done. I think the fact that there's a regional culture strategy means that departments of culture but also the sort of civil society sector in arts and culture have been really picking up in the past few years and carrying out a lot of work. So I think it will eventually have an impact. And I think now the Forum Leaders are aware of the importance of culture as a possible economic area to start looking at.

Tess: Okay. Thank you for that. I guess to move on to maybe something a little bit more - I'm trying to think what's the best word - maybe a little bit more concrete. But to what extent or what do you see are opportunities for activities within the cultural sector or with cultural economic activities to be linked to other economic activities?

For example tourism and as well as the opportunities, I also would like what you think are the risks that might be associated with that sort of linkage and how those risks can best be addressed?

Elise: Okay. Well, there's two levels in which we're looking at the relationship with tourism. One is the more regional level with the South Pacific Tourism Organisation is developing its strategy for the next few years. Culture is now fairly strongly engrained in that.

And so I guess it will really be in the implementation phase of that of how culture is really integrated into tourism. Certainly what we'd like to see is a sort of bottom up

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approach to it because currently the relationship between tourism and culture hasn't been well established.

And so, there's a lot of initiatives with standards, contractual relationships between producers and hotels or retailers and so forth. So through the work also that we're doing on cultural industries and that's much more precise and concrete looking at value chain development between culture and tourism. So that's for producers; arts producers and producers of crafts and so forth. But also looking at heritage tourism more closely and how to link those. And like you say it does need to be done very carefully. And we're interested in an ethical relationship.

So one in which producers and local communities don't have to transform necessarily their art and cultural expressions to suit a tourism industry but a tourism industry that's interested in what people are already producing and what skills and expressions that they have available.

But there's a lot of training that needs to be done. Whether you're talking about management of sites or regular production of crafts, performing, art standards and so forth. So we're working with the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat and with all the ministries and arts groups to start really looking at – not only contractual obligations on both sides but how to have an ethical approach to this area.

Tess: I think that's a really fascinating area because obviously it brings in to the whole sort of dimension as to what extent can commercialisation of culture assist with conservation and preservation. And what's the point at which it becomes a downside for the conservation and preservation of culture. So I think there's a really interesting dynamic there between those two aspects of cultural work.

Elise: I think that's right. And I think it needs to be thought about carefully. And that's why it requires sort of deliberate action on the part of both producers, communities as well as the tourism sector. Because what's happening now around the region is that there's a real lack of standards. For instance crafts that aren't even from the Pacific are being sold as though they were.

So there's a lot of work. And that is the work that we're doing, we're carrying out currently. One of the projects we're working on with the forum. And with Fiji, Samoa and Solomon Islands is specifically focused on the cultural industries. And that will be one of the areas that will be addressed.

Tess: Okay. Well, that leads me to my next question, which is also my final question, which is how if at all should development assistance be directed to supporting these cultural economic activities? And what do we currently know about the appetite among donors to provide that sort of support in this space?

Elise: Well, I mean of course we think development assistance should be directed to this area because it's missing out on a huge potential. People are producing on a daily basis but they're not accessing markets whether you're talking about local or national markets. And their work is not being valued.

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What we're trying to establish is that the work of our incredibly talented Pacific artists, even people in their daily lives, is valued. And so that's beginning to happen. I think it was up to the culture sector to show that work was being done. And now we've had the support for the past few years from the European Union, which has enabled us to do work on cultural policies and on doing all the sort of baseline work on cultural industries.

Now there's a Pacific heritage hub that's based at USP to work on all the world heritage and intangible heritage in the Pacific. So I think we've made good progress in the past few years. And that progress then attracts attention from donors.

So just to give an example, our other colleagues in SPC and the land resource division are contributing with a manual on bio-security and movement of handicrafts in the region. These are things that cost quite a lot and that are supported by donors. The other thing is that there's funding out there. But it needs to be accessed. And for that people need to be able to put in proposals. And one of the areas that we were lacking in I think in past years was that a lot of groups weren't registered. That's changing. We now have registered Arts Councils for example, Samoa now has a registered Arts Council which enables it to then approach donors, governments and so forth.

So we're getting there. It's a long process. It's not something that happens overnight. But I think we're getting there. There's a lot of really good initiatives taking place in the region. So we're making good progress. And I think increasingly governments will be paying attention. And donors will be paying attention to this area.

Tess: Yeah. I think it's a fascinating area. I think it's a very exciting area. So thank you very much for giving us an insight into what I know is a much bigger, more diverse and multi layered set of activities that you're involved in. So it's great to be able to get a glimpse of the vast array of work that your program is involved in.

And I'm certainly looking forward to reading and hearing more about developments in this space. Dr. Elise Huffer. Vinaka, thank you very much for your time.

Elise: Thank you very much Tess. It's great opportunity to be able to talk about this as well. Thank you.