

Transcript: Green growth, activism & Pacific regionalism – in conversation with Fe'iloakitau Kaho Tevi

Tess Okay, so maybe you could start by telling us a bit about yourself and your
Newton background, where you currently sit in the Pacific development space and how
Cain: you got here.

FT: I am married to Eleni and we have five children. Eleni has taken up a position at the Melanesian Spearhead Group. And so we have moved in since January and basically set up home here, although I shuttle both in and out of Suva and other places with work.

I had to leave a position in Suva at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, having done that since 2012 as the coordinator of the Green Growth Program. Basically, this program is about nurturing a coalition of leaders around the issue of growth and green growth around that, and sustainable development. This coalition brings together leaders who are influential in the next 3-5 years and who inherently feel concerned about the current growth trends.

Since then I've been working with the Vanuatu government, the Solomon Islands government in particular, on the issue of sustainable development and the issue of world heritage sites, and more focus on macro-policy development, looking at national development plans, looking at overall macro-policies like the Ocean Policy, political issues as well, and seeing how issues like the issue of West Papua shapes and reshapes the region and seeing how that features in and amongst the politics of the day.

Having said that, it's a transition. You think that you'd be a house husband and take care of the kids, and it's a very interesting place to be and a position to be in. There are lots of things up in the future, and it looks good. It feels good.

So in terms of professional development, I studied in Paris, did my undergraduate studies at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio in the U.S. I did my two Masters degrees at the University of Paris, France and also with the International Institute for Public Administration (IIAP). The IIAP focuses on building the capacities of French bureaucrats going overseas to the colonies, sort of like an École Nationale d'Administration for French international bureaucrats.

I am trained in diplomacy and international relations. I worked for the churches for a number of years, almost over a decade, both in Geneva, Switzerland and also here in the Pacific.

Prior to that, I was with the Pacific Concerns Resource Center, the secretariat to the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Movement. Very formative years, '96 to 2000.

Formative years in terms of shaping the mindset and shaping the perspectives on the region and how that flows out and carries on in the region. So that's my background. I am an Anglican, and so I also worked very closely with the church here in Vanuatu; I go to Seaside parish. That keeps my feet on the ground.

TNC: Well that's—I mean I think that's given us a really good introduction. I've learned a lot about you that I didn't already know, and I think you've raised a couple of things that we could discuss further.

FT: Sure.

TNC: I guess first of all, I know earlier this year you were at the Pacific Islands Development Forum in Suva. You were also in Port Moresby around the meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum. I know this is something that you and I have discussed previously, but I'd be keen to know, based on your observations most recently, what do you think of the relative strengths and weaknesses of those organisations within the region?

FT: Let's take PIF first and have a look at the PIDF later. In terms of the Forum, I think we're still seeing Dame Meg's input into the Pacific Islands Forum.

The recent reminder by the Pacific islands Forum to Papua New Guinea with regard to the undertaking on West Papua is an interesting one. I know for one that West Papua will determine the Forum's ability, or lack thereof, to continue to be the organisation that it is, or to develop into a new institution with clear mandates and clear use of their political clout.

TNC: So why is that? Because for a long time the Forum had nothing to say about West Papua, certainly not publicly. We know that it was being discussed in the sidelines, but what is it that you feel has changed that makes West Papua such an important issue?

FT: I think part and parcel of the response that is the most influential here is social media. I think that there is a step up in awareness on the issue of West Papua.

TNC: Yeah.

FT: And you asked the question before about the issues of development. One thing that I failed to also add—is my links with the Pacific Advocacy Network on Globalisation. I chair that organisation and it has also influenced the way I look at matters around the region.

So one of the many issues is the whole discussion on West Papua, and social media has had a lot of influence in bringing that issue to the table, not only of the governments, but also churches, NGOs, civil society organisations, women's groups, youth groups. It has placed West Papua almost at the core of any type of

entity that the Pacific will have to grapple with in the future. We can no longer ignore West Papua.

TNC: It's quite interesting from the Vanuatu perspective, because obviously previously Vanuatu was very much at the heart of that.

FT: Yes.

TNC: Giving voice for having the government in exile or however they want to describe themselves. And then I think I'd agree that within the last 18 months to 2 years, we've seen other countries step up, largely via civil society through social media communities.

So I was in Canberra a few years ago when somebody said, "Oh yeah, West Papua's a non-issue." And I was thinking, "Well, not in my country." And I think, you know, we've seen that voice spread and rise in other places, well even places where it was being kept very quiet like Fiji.

FT: I think that you have the opportunity here to begin to see how movements move, movements take shape in the region. Vanuatu's leadership has been instrumental in keeping the issue of West Papua on the agenda.

But it has had its limits, you know? We've always spoken about the need to leverage and to increase the profile of West Papua, but we haven't quite shifted, or taken the next step, in terms of, "Okay. What else? What else is there to do?" And so this is where Solomon Islands' initiative to create a position within the Prime Minister's office, specifically focused on West Papua.

It has given us the opportunity to begin to focus strategically on West Papua, to get everybody around the table to say, "Where do we take this issue from here over the next 5 years, the next 10 years? What are the key strategies that we can influence to ensure that West Papua remains an issue for the Forum.

And so this is what I'm saying. For the Forum itself, the issue will be a determining factor how they treat West Papua and how they are able to get the political support around the issue. And it won't go away. It's interesting to see how regional politics is playing out with regard to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and also West Papua in the recent case, or recently.

TNC: Yes. I agree that it's not going to go away. I also think there's still a long way to go.

FT: There is still a long way.

TNC: Significant strides have been made. Significant things have been achieved. But this is not a done deal. There's still an awful long way to go, and people are, I think no

matter where you stand on the issue, the fact is that there's going to be a lot of patience needed to get this across the line.

FT: And we will need to be strategic about it. We can no longer afford to just be emotional about it. Indonesia's not emotional about it. Indonesia is very strategic and objective about the issue, and so should we.

TNC: Yes.

FT: Getting back to the issue of Forum. So as I said, Dame Meg is doing awesome work. What we need to see the results that have been in the flow. She has been in there for about a year, so we'll now begin to see the results of her input, in terms of shifting an organisation which is bureaucratically cumbersome to something that is flexible enough.

So in terms of Forum, seeing how Australia and New Zealand will play out their pressure and their role in the new Forum that's in the making, that will also decide how Pacific island countries will take the Forum, and now that the option is there. You know?

Now there is an option, because before there was no option. And I would love to—I would love PIDF to take all the credit for COP 21, and all the focus of international countries on 1.5 that we managed to get there, and the coalition of the ambitious countries.

But I think PIDF had a critical role to play in harnessing the collective momentum of the countries, to stand together and say, "Yes, this is what we need." And not to be pulled apart. That was, I think for me, the month of September was an interesting month.

We had one meeting after the other, and people saying the same things and coming right through and holding their stance at the Forum, saying "This is what we want, and this is what you get." Despite all the pressures, despite all the cheque book diplomacy, everything was up to try and get the Pacific island countries to shift and take position. And kudos to them.

TNC: Yes.

FT: Kudos to all in the room for its actual initiative. So you see that coming through, and you see—and now I shift to the idea of you see a new momentum taking place. And I think that PIDF expresses that in a much more comprehensive way than the Pacific Islands Forum.

It is a momentum that is inclusive, an organisation that is inclusive, that brings the civil society and private sector onto the table and makes them sit around the table and decide together what are the issues and challenges that the region will be

facing, and how to address it together. And I think that's the way—for me, that will be one of the strengths that we can give to the Pacific Islands Development Forum.

TNC: I mean, I think, you know, it won't surprise you to learn that I remain somewhat skeptical about the future role of the PIDF. And I think the main reason that I do that, my question is about, there are significant Pacific players, PNG, Vanuatu, who have yet to really come on board with the whole PIDF model, or the PIDF approach. And one thing I feel is an issue, particularly with Vanuatu, is that Indonesia is in there supporting PIDF and putting money into it. Is there not like an inherent tension there?

FT: Yes, there is. And I think the—I think how it will play out as PIDF develops as an organisation. What we will hopefully see is Fiji stepping back from taking leadership in the PIDF and getting the PIDF to be a more regional organisation as it stands. The only reason, the main reason why it has become political is because Fiji has taken that step to do that, and to be political about it.

I think the idea is big enough to have both Indonesia and West Papua roaming around and then doing their thing around—and it's not created to be a political entity, although people may think that it is. I think—and this is again another one of the strengths, is that PIDF was created to be flexible enough, nimble enough, to respond to the sustainable development challenges of the region.

How we use it and what we use it for, as you know, there's a lot of political discussions, a lot of perceptions, a lot of things, and so we only have the opportunity to do this, but I don't think we should qualify, I don't think we should qualify PIDF and the future of PIDF based on what happened at the recent PIDF meeting in Fiji. In relation to Indonesia and the issue of West Papua.

TNC: Again, I think there's more to come.

FT: I'm sure.

TNC: On both sides of that story that we always talk about. Certainly I would agree that some of the changes we've seen in the way of the Pacific Islands Forum is engaging with civil society and with the private sector. It could be largely contributed to the PIDF stance on that, PIFS has looked at that and thought 'Oh well, we could do more of that as well.' And that, I think, is a good thing.

FT: I think one thing, Tess, is one of the big challenges with regards to PIDF is the challenge of falling into being a CROP agency. It's a big, slippery slope. And basically—because maybe that's all that we know how to deal with regional issues..

I mean that's how we deal with regional issues: using CROP approach, the CROP agency approach. It becomes cumbersome, and the real threat for PIDF is that PIDF falls into that state where it sees itself as a regional body.

TNC: Yeah.

FT: And then it starts to act like one, and then it starts to put fences and barriers, and that's not the character and identity that PIDF should be.

TNC: I think that's right. I'm not going to disagree with you. But I guess there's a fine line because you've got to have a certain amount of structure and governance lines and all that in order to be able to get stuff done.

Otherwise it's—if it's going to be more than just everyone gets together once a year and has a conversation, and it's all very free and easy that's fine. If you want to actually deliver something more tangible there needs to be a certain amount of structure in order for that to happen.

FT: Yeah. And PIDF is not—PIDF was not set up to do the CROP work.

TNC: Right.

FT: PIDF was not set up to do that. And this is where we need to be—we need to have clarity on what PIDF is. It's a space. Maintaining that space is a very difficult challenge. Everybody wants to cloud that space, Fiji included. Everybody wants to get that space, monopolise that space.

As long as we can keep that space as an opportunity for people to come and talk about issues or challenges, talk about opportunities, discuss deals, that will form the character of PIDF. It's not a CROP agency. It will not deliver on water tanks and RWASH programs. It's not geared towards that.

TNC: It's not a development agency.

FT: No. And we should keep it as such because once we move down the slope of projects; that's it. We've lost the essence of what PIDF should be looking like.

TNC: I think that's a really important point, and one that I don't think has necessarily been articulated completely explicitly up to now. So I think it's really important that that point is made and that message is maintained that that's what PIDF is for, and it's not to be doing other things.

FT: I think we desperately—it's an everyday challenge for PIDF. Good luck on the new DG because that space is a prime, let's call it real estate, prime location. We've placed it—

TNC: And it's a contested space.

FT: Yes.

TNC: And you know there are so many relationships to manage, and the internal relationships are possibly more problematic or more difficult to manage than some of the external relationships. As I said, there's a lot to do, and just managing that space is going to be tough.

I want to move on to discuss your work, or your thinking around green growth and sustainable development.

You said you've been working on it quite extensively. I was chatting with Ben Sims at the Global Green Growth Institute the other week, and he made the point to me that globally, green growth has yet to really be pinned down in terms of what it means as a concept. Different people conceptualise it in different ways.

So I guess I'd really like to start with that, is how do you conceptualise it and how do you see it—how does it apply in the Pacific? Because I know it exists as a concept elsewhere, but within the Pacific context, what does green growth mean?

FT: Yes. We've thought since 2011, we've thought about this issue of green growth, what it means, what it does not mean. What it does not mean solely is the Korean approach to defining green growth. It's not just technology.

TNC: Right.

FT: So I would say for the region, for the Pacific region, it's not just about a technological perspective on growth, on green growth. It's not just that as what Korea would claim, or would be pushing for. The Green Growth Institute, Global Green Growth Institute is also an interesting body.

It tries to grapple with the integrated framework on growth. It still has its challenges in terms of defining what green growth will mean, especially with regards to the new Sustainable Development Goals. How does green growth sit? Where it fits and what is GGGI's role in that new framework?

In the work that we've been doing over the last 3-4 years, in the Pacific, green growth has to do with lifestyles; green growth has to do with a sustainable approach to development. Green growth has to do with—the maturity of the countries to determine where and how they want to address development.

So there's a positive and strong corroboration that we in the Pacific have placed between green growth and sustainable development. It sticks. Maybe green growth, sustainable development and political maturity. So you keep on adding to, and then it becomes a ladder. No?

Or you begin to weave that mat. And so far that's how we look at this. That's how green growth can be defined. It's about sustainable development. It's about

looking at issues that are user-friendly. It's about looking at our environment and seeing how we can adapt our environment or adapt ourselves to the environment that is coming. It's about political maturity. It's about the ability of Pacific island countries to determine their own fate.

And so green growth cannot be solely restricted to an academic exercise of defining what it is and what it is not. Green growth is more than just that. It's a more holistic approach to realise that. We've gone about the region and we've gone about saying that in order to address green growth, in order to address the economic and environment challenges that we have, we need to change our lifestyles.

But change it to what? The question that's always come back to us is, "Okay of course. Change it, yes, good. But change it to what? Do you want us to go back to being grass roots, wearing grass skirts?" Of course I say no, but I would also add to that that the solution does not lie outside the region.

It's right inside the region. How will we configure ourselves? How we look at our lifestyles, our traditional households? To then begin to create this type of society that is—that lives within its means. That has a set of core values. That's green growth. And it's something that's in the making. It's not—and of course it will be defined in the region. People will come and will add to it and will continue to define it as we move along. But as of I think today, this is how we can define it.

TNC: So how—can you give me any examples of what sort of practical impact, a concept like green growth, which you've said is very much tied in with sustainable development. What's a practical example of how that can add to or change the way that Pacific island countries can do business?

FT: Good example is Tropical Cyclone. You were here. I was here.

TNC: I wasn't here actually. I was in Fiji. But I got back very soon after.

FT: I was here. We went through how this community of Vanuatu, the resilient community of Vanuatu, was able to go through the cyclone, sit back for a day, take a breather, and then the very next day start off again rebuilding. Not waiting for assistance to come in. It was the very next day, you would see people starting to pick up the pieces and move, and move on.

A lot has been written about the resilience ni-Vanuatu people, and we can look around the region and we can see examples and examples, time and time again, of the resilient nature of the Pacific Islanders.

Not having gone through AusAID courses and DFAT courses, and Red Cross workshops, etcetera, on resilience, but our very own understanding of how we live within our means and in our environment. And that has now, as a result of Cyclone

Pam, people have begun to look more closely at how resilience expresses itself in an indigenous local community.

Before, it was almost like a weakness, you know? You look at the thatching. You look at the houses. "Oh, that's not cyclone-proof." But guess what? When the cyclone goes through, what is the first house to come back up? It's the traditional house. So let's define resilience again. Is it to withstand the cyclone, or is it to recover quickly and then move on? Right? Working within the means. Working within our nature.

TNC: Is that growth or is that recovery?

FT: No, hold on. That's—that for me expresses a set of values that for me green growth encompasses. That's what we express as a set of values when we build that house. And that's part of I guess a sense of maturity that we are going through. The recognition that there is something that we can learn and that the future of the region, in terms of green growth, it's within us.

We need to find the tools to identify this and to identify those components of what we can achieve. So that's one example we can quote.

Examples of which time and time again, the resilient nature of these communities has expressed itself with or without help or foreign assistance. So we need to think about that. We need to think how that defines, how that defines growth for us.

TNC: And also how that creates a platform for what comes next.

FT: Exactly.

TNC: So it's not just—so it goes beyond simply recovery but those things, those strengths are continued into development of whatever type.

FT: Exactly.

TNC: It's environmentally appropriate and within our means. So I think that's what's been missing previously. That's often helpful for recovery, but then we stop doing that and we start doing something else. Maybe we need to work out how to continue that and grow it into something more.

FT: Yes. And there's been a lot of complaints about how Vanuatu managed the humanitarian aid partners and agencies. Kudos to them. To be able to tell them off and say, "Hey, this is how we do things in this country. We might be slow. We might be this, but that's just how it is."

“And so this is how we work. If you want to do something else, please go to another disaster. This is how we manage our disaster.” I think that sends a good signal, and I think we should be learning from that.

TNC: I mean I’ve observed what happened here from close in and then from further away. What it really brought home to me is all those issues about development that we talk about - when something like Cyclone Pam happens. There were no new issues. It’s all the same. It’s just writ really large.

It’s like know your context. Use your local knowledge. It’s all about the relationships, managing them. All of those things, they’re not new. It’s just that when something like that happens it just makes it really, really clear how important they are.

So I think there is an awful lot to learn, and a lot of really valuable skills that were learned in a short space of time, but we now need to be able to capitalise on and grow on it, and then bed into everyday business. So it’s not just something we just save up for special occasions.

FT: No.

TNC: This is the way we do things every day.

FT: Tess, look at how the communities got together. Look at how the communities go together without foreign assistance, how they got together and dealt with the issue without foreign assistance.

TNC: Look at how the private sector just got on and looked after their staff and looked after their clients.

FT: Exactly. That’s how we get to it. We need to integrate all those things into this bigger picture.

TNC: Yes.

FT: And try and begin to take those examples and those learnings and then weave it in, weave it in as we move along. I’ll come back to the initial question. It is about the growth and it’s a component, an example of how we do and how we can change things. And so it is a long road.

TNC: Oh yes. It’s a long road.

FT: Just like West Papua.

TNC: This is not a three-year project.

FT: No.

TNC: Okay, so when you told us about your background, so you have a very strong background in civil society coming from the church side of things and other NGOs. How would you assess the capacity of civil society in the region at the moment to influence the sorts of decision making we're talking about?

FT: Interesting question, Tess. I had a recent discussion about the word activism and how activism has changed over the last 15-20 years. Back in the days, when countries in the Pacific just reached and got their independence, activism was high. Political activism was there.

There was a lot of issues, a lot of concerns. Vanuatu being one of the countries that came out of that era, and Fiji in the 70s starting off that era. So we had that type of political activism that was right and that was there. But then we went through, it's like a lull, in the late 80s into the 90s, when activism was beginning to be institutionalised.

Then when we began to institutionalise activism we began to lose like the edge of—cutting edge. I guess it's a normal development of any movement that wants to begin to coordinate itself and bring up a secretariat, after a while becomes a bureaucracy. Then it turns into an institution. Then you lose the edge.

Then interestingly enough, I know it has come, activism has come back in a new way. Since 2008, 2009, since Copenhagen, where you see this activism, or this new type of activism coming through in the region. I'm not talking about international. I'm talking about just the region.

And so we see activism in a defined, redefined... and here again, I come back to the issue of West Papua. West Papua is redefining political activism in the region. Look at just what happened in Paris, at COP 21. You have the new activists.

You have the new environmental activists that are coming through, the young Solwarans, the Young Solwara movement, the Wan Solwara movement, the other groups that have— ... PICAN, Pacific Islands Climate Action Network. These are all young, new activists that are coming through.

They have gone through the USP channels and now they want to change the world. All good. But that's what we see is this sense of new—new sense of dynamism in civil society.

What the old horses, like a lot of us around the table, when we look at the new civil society movements, we often say it would have been good that they acknowledge their place and position within the broader strand of a movement and recognise those who have contributed in the past.

And also bring them along. It seems like our young activists are a little bit too keen on stamping their mark that they fail to see that there has been a history of

activism up to date. And so that's where I see activism and civil society, a big, blossoming of it coming through.

Also new cutting-edge trends like for example, a whole discussion around sustainable shipping and sustainable sea transport is coming back to the fore, and that's using traditional maritime skills to address what is a key regional environmental challenge. Pollution, maritime pollution.

So you have that type, and you have the Pacific Voyagers Society, one of which the canoe, one which is right here outside in front of the Waterfront. Those are the new expressions of civil society that's coming through. Creations of these types of movements, or organisations that are beginning to tackle bigger issues.

Of course there's a more—we just want to address sustainable shipping and traditional skills. But what they're also is addressing the issue of—we can replicate effects from maintaining navigational skills, traditional navigational skills, all the way up to advocating for bunker fuels – advocating for a decrease in bunker fuels. That's the link. Vanuatu being a flag state, has influence and critical decisions to make.

TNC: Isn't that where there's a weakness in these linkages, because from what I see, I don't see very good—I don't see civil society here in Vanuatu engaging with government either in dialogue or in activism to influence international policy. I don't see a lot of that. I see some token consultations, but I don't see articles in the paper from NGOs saying, "This is what we want" in terms of this specific policy.

And to go back to Cyclone Pam, one of the things that it highlighted, to me, is although there were some relationships between NGOs and some government departments, overall, NGOs, really have very weak links with government, even just in knowing who to pick up the phone and talk to about issues. And I think that possibly contributed to some of the apparent disconnect between government response and humanitarian response.

FT: And I think, Tess, I think we cannot point five of our fingers at civil society. I think there's a lot of responsibility also that governments have to take on in terms of how they deal with civil society. The civil service, there has to be a revisiting of what civil service means, and being a civil servant.

You are a servant of the government, and by government means the people. So you serve the people. It's not the other way around. The people don't come in on their knees to come and ask for service. They shouldn't. Citizens, rightfully, ask and request their assistance, and their service. Then I think there needs to be a give and take in this discussion.

TNC: Absolutely.

FT: Civil society, yes, we have a responsibility. But also governments, we have to change because we can no longer function and I come back to whole discussion of exclusivity. The government needs to recognize that civil society has a role to play.

TNC: Yes, I absolutely agree. Similarly, with the private sector. Civil society has to recognise that the private sector has a role to play...

FT: Right.

TNC: So I mean that's something that I spent quite a bit of time worrying about, thinking about, is we live in countries with small resource sets, it would be better if we just all worked together.

But there are opportunities to work together without compromising our ideals or becoming corrupt and messy. It can be done in a meaningful, positive way, and I think there are a lot of wasted opportunities because people just find—just can't find a way to sit down and talk to each other.

FT: I think the faster we—the faster governments give that space, step back and create that space for people to come in and work with them, the better our countries will be in the future. Vanuatu included.

TNC: I think there's a lot to that. Okay, so my last question is in relation to your home country of Tonga. How significant do you think is the recent election of 'Akilisi Pohiva for democracy in Tonga?

FT: Good question. I think in the longer run, in the medium to long term, I think there's a lot of benefit that can accrue from 'Akilisi and his time, and his government being in place. I think there's a lot of lessons that can be taken from the first year or so of 'Akilisi's government. A lot of questionable decisions.

I think there's been a lot of decisions with regards to positions, maybe not all of positions have been given as thank you gifts for support and I think we cannot abide it. It's blatant almost to the point of kicking you in the face.

TNC: Yes.

FT: In terms of the quality of the person, qualifications versus position. But within the bigger picture, I think there is a lot of lessons within that. There is more good than—there's more strengths than weaknesses that's coming out of this government. The fact that, you know, Tonga has taken a strong stance on the issue of West Papua is a token of that and you will see, you will see this government taking on regional issues in a much more stronger way than in the past. The first year has been about consolidating and shifting the country at the national level. I think you will see Tonga playing a more influential role in the region in the future.

Now that, you know, Tonga is now the chair of the PSIDS in New York, so that's another influential position. That's an issue about PIDF as well, the strength of having—being the connection between New York and the Pacific Small Island Developing States the PSIDS discussion and the definition of that vis-à-vis the region. And we've seen it happen. We've seen COP as a result, we've seen the UNGA as a result, and we've seen the PSIDS working in the background to get that type of platform. Yeah, so Tonga being the chair of that for the next couple of years will be an interesting time for Tonga and an interesting time for the region, from Tonga's perspective as well.

TNC: Something to look forward to.

FT: Yes, it is. Looking forward to it.

TNC: Fei thank you very much for your time and sharing your thinking with us.

FT: Oh, thank you.

TNC: I look forward to following up with you again soon.

FT: Thank you, Tess.