

## **Transcript: Tourism, regionalism and Niue's quest for self-sustainability: an interview with Premier Toke Talagi**

**Cain:** My name is Tess Newton Cain. I'm a Research Associate at the Development Policy Centre. This morning, I am very pleased and honoured to be able to speak with Premier Toke Talagi from Niue. Good morning Premier Talagi, and welcome to Pacific Conversations.

**Talagi:** Good morning Tess. How are you?

**Cain:** I'm good, thank you. And I have to say, this is the first Pacific Conversations that we've had to take the International Date Line into account. So I feel like I'm engaging in time travel, because I know it's Wednesday where you are, and it's Thursday where I am.

**Talagi:** Yes, a lot of people find that strange. When they fly into Niue from New Zealand for example, they leave on a Saturday and have Friday again here.

**Cain:** It can be a bit disorienting.

**Talagi:** - realise you just go through these things.

**Cain:** Okay, so to begin with Premier, for those of us, and I include myself in this, who maybe don't know very much about your country, I would like to invite you to give us an introduction to Niue and its people.

**Talagi:** Well, we call ourselves, the island, the Rock of Polynesia. We're obviously Polynesian. We sit right between the Cook Islands, Samoa, Tonga, and so on. We're relatively large for an island state. There's 100 square miles and a lot of people don't appreciate the fact that we're bigger than the Cook Islands, for example, in total land mass combined.

Our political structure is that we have a constitutional arrangement with New Zealand and we have self-governing status and free association with New Zealand. They support us and provide assistance to us. But our main industry at the moment is tourism. We've built up tourism over the last six years. We have arrangements with Air New Zealand for two flights a week.

So the tourism industry is growing pretty rapidly, and I'm pleased about that because in the end it means we should be able to become self-sustaining in the long term. That's what we're banking on – our target if you wish – at the present time. Is that sufficient for your purposes, or would you like to know something else?

**Cain:** That leads me into my second question, which you've already referred to, which is about what you see – as we currently stand in 2014 – as the key opportunities and challenges for economic and social development in your country? You've already made reference to tourism. Perhaps you'd like to expand on that or there might be other issues that you want to discuss in that context?

**Talagi:** I think we've always had – the key elements of the problems we have had here, a lot of Niueans have gone to New Zealand. We are New Zealand citizens. A lot of them have

gone to Australia. Obviously, the opportunities are there for them. In the '50s, '60s, '70s, and up until recently, where we've managed to stabilise the population.

And one of the key elements, and the reason why tourism is so important to us, is because it provides the opportunity for people, particularly Niueans, hopefully to consider returning to Niue and seeking the opportunities that are available for them here. That has been a major challenge for us, but instead of worrying about it – in the sense that we've continued to talk about it – we've set our objective to use tourism as a means for growing the private sector, the businesses, increasing shipping and air services, so that people have confidence that when they come back here they've got a good opportunity to earn money.

There's a lot more people now starting businesses here. I think about two to three years ago there were about 100. The number of registered businesses has gone up to about 250, and probably over, at the moment. So clearly economic activity, particularly in relation to the tourism sector, is growing.

**Cain:** And obviously around the tourism, you see that there are opportunities for support services, local producers, to supply into the tourism market.

**Talagi:** Yeah, that's right. We're not focusing our attention on growing exports. In any case, we're too small. Ability to export is limited for that purpose. So in essence, what I've said to people here is that, if they come here, we have produce for them. Those are some of the collateral businesses that will arise as a consequence of what has been done.

For example, two hydroponic companies have set up here. They're doing extremely well. They're providing local vegies, lettuces and so on, for the domestic market as well as for the tourism market. There are huge opportunities in the cultural sector, which we haven't really made use of as I'd like to. But beyond that, there are obviously the services that we will find as tourists – the fishing, the diving – because those are the major attractions for people when they come here. Apart from the fact that we're very quiet. We're a 1,600 person base population. With 8,000 tourists coming through here, you're looking at a total population of 10,000. It's a great place for people to come visit, have a quiet holiday.

**Cain:** Okay. That's great. Thank you. And I wanted to move on to something that operates more in the regional space. So you recently expressed what appeared to me to be a degree of frustration with the Small Island States unit (SIS) with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS). So what I wanted to ask you is whether you see any role that Pacific regionalism can contribute to the development of Niue. And if so, what is it that Niue needs and wants from Pacific regionalism more generally?

**Talagi:** I think the question really is what is SIS doing as far as the Forum institution if you wish to help the small island states? We have set up the SIS specifically because we said that they deserve more specific and targeted support from donors and other countries who wish to contribute toward climate change, for example.

But over the last six years that I've been premier, and this is my third term, there appears to be no real pragmatic support provided for the small island states *per se*. There's a lot of talk. There's a lot of effort being put in. But nothing of any material size

that I can point to and say, “Yes that’s good for us because it’s helping the small island states.”

As far as regionalism is concerned, that’s a slightly different perspective. The Pacific Islands Forum, for example, and regionalism, are excellent concepts. But I think one of the things that we’ve got to be careful about is the fact that we’ve focused our attention so much on the concept rather than the practical application of what that actually means to the Pacific island countries and to the people that we serve.

At the present moment it appears to me that regionalism is a concept that many people talk about, but I’m not certain whether there is any practical implementation thinking in relation to what this regionalism can do, not just with small island states like Niue, but also some of the bigger island states that are part of the Forum.

**Cain:** Okay. So it’s an aspiration yet to be realised in concrete terms.

**Talagi:** That’s right. My belief at the present moment is that we spend too much time talking about many of these things. But we haven’t come up with any particular solutions that would help some of the small island states or some of the bigger island states. There’s a lot of funding at the moment that’s going into regional organisations. And most of the funding is going toward consultancies. And that’s not helping us at all.

I know a lot of people seem to think that we need consultants to tell them what we need. We know what we need. They need to listen to us more rather than hope that a consultant who spends a couple of days here will know everything about Niue. They can’t. Obviously.

So therefore they need to review their thinking and determine that in fact we will tell them what we need and they will either agree or not. And that’s fair enough. That’s their decision.

**Cain:** So you’d like to see it operating more –

**Talagi:** It’s all about – I’m talking about – I’m not talking about the regional organisations, *per se*. But I must say that I get frustrated with them as well.

**Cain:** [*laughter*]. Okay. Well I think I’m going to introduce what’s maybe another source of frustration. Recently you responded to announcements of new partnerships to assist with combating the effects of climate change in quite a particular and somewhat critical way. You made reference to the need to get more out of existing partnerships rather than get side tracked, if you like, in developing new partnerships. So can you give us some detail into what ‘getting more out of existing partnerships’ would look like in your view?

**Talagi:** I think at the moment we’re very happy with the partners we have. We have very strong partnership arrangements with New Zealand, the EU, China, Japan in many respects, Australia and so on. But when you attend these international and subregional meetings, nations, all we ever do is listen and talk about figures and what’s going to happen and how it’s going to happen.

And ten years down the track, and unfortunately I was in Mauritius ten years ago, and I thought, "This is getting ridiculous. We haven't moved at all. All we've done is agreed to the pledges. We've agreed that we must reduce the CO2 levels. And we haven't achieved any one of those things to be honest." I'm brutally frank about some of these things, because I think that somebody must stand up and say "Ain't working. I'm sorry. It's not working for us. And if it's working for you, then how can it be working for you when it's not helping us?"

**Cain:** And I guess one of the concerns I have, and obviously I hear sort of similar conversations here in Vanuatu, but also in countries like Niue, like you said, you have a small population. You have small numbers of resources. And your officials' time and energy is being caught up in these discussions and meetings and conferences and consultations. And maybe, at what point do you say, "Actually, we're better off spending our time over here doing this because this is actually going to have some impact"?

**Talagi:** I think you'll find that I've made a pledge to withdraw from the SIS. I think that's what we're going to carry through. The first thing is we're not certain as to how, what legal framework was the SIS established under in the first place. So we're not sure how anybody can withdraw or otherwise.

The second thing is in relation to what countries can do for the Pacific island countries at the moment. There are too many meetings, to be honest. There are just too many meetings. And although we're small, we can send people to these meetings. But if I were to attend every meeting that I was invited to, I'd spend no time at home at all. It's not worth the time. So we're being very selective for the moment about the meetings that we attend.

It's not anything you could do with the population, *per se*. It's to do with how effective we're seeing these meetings, are they going to be helpful to Niue? If they're not, then I don't see any point in continuing to go to them.

**Cain:** Yes, well, I know, I think that response makes a lot of sense to me. And I'm sure it will resonate with other small island states in the region. My last question is one that lots of people, I'm sure, ask. And I know you know this. Lots of people ask Pacific island leaders what it is that their countries need. I'd like to finish by asking you what's the one thing, or the two main things, that you feel the country of Niue has to offer to the region and the wider world?

**Talagi:** That's a hard question to answer, because it's a short conversation at this time, I'll not be able to answer all of that. What does anybody have to offer? What does a small unit have to offer? What does a family have to offer? A country?

We can offer whatever the world requires of us in terms of showing the world the way that we live at the present moment, which has always been based on our sustainability in terms of our conservation measures and so on. But as well as that, we're a microcosm of what actually happens in the much larger countries. And therefore people should look at what we're trying to do at the present moment, listen to us a bit more, not just us here in Niue, but also some of the other Pacific islands, and see whether they can assist us or not.

What we can offer the world therefore is an example of a country that is trying its best at this moment to become self-sustaining, and is determined to become self-sustaining, so that other people can see what we're doing and hopefully learn from that.

**Cain:** Okay, that's great. Thank you very much for sparing some time this morning to chat and for sharing. I certainly feel that I have a much better understanding of Niue and what you're doing there and hopefully our listeners will too. So thank you once again for joining us on Pacific Conversations.

**Talagi:** Thank you. Good bye Tess.

**Cain:** Thank you very much Premier.

***[end of transcript]***