

Slowly goes the Forum leaders' agenda

by Tess Newton Cain

9 September 2024



Forum Leaders at the Vava'u retreat in the Kingdom of Tonga, 2024

Photo Credit: [Facebook/ForumSec](#)

Between [the earthquake](#) at the beginning and the [communiqué kerfuffle](#) at the end, the 53rd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting (PIFLM) ran smoothly enough and presented as a largely harmonious affair. It was one of the biggest, with over 1,000 delegates, activists, observers, and journalists travelling to Nuku'alofa from across the world. Of the 18 Forum member countries, all were present bar one: President Taneti Maamau of Kiribati was unable to attend as his country is in the midst of elections.

In [his opening address](#) to the meeting, Forum Secretary-General Baron Waqa stated “the time for talking is now over – we need to see action”. While these words were largely directed to Forum partners, they also provide a benchmark against which the outcomes of the PIFLM can be judged.

[As reported by Kalafi Moala](#), one of the most significant action points for the PIF was the establishment of the [Pacific Resilience Facility \(PRF\)](#). But attempts to persuade extra-regional partners to contribute to the capitalisation of this facility are meeting with mixed results. The European Union remains a non-starter – the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, said “we are exploring opportunities” to be able to contribute to the PRF and, according to a senior UK official, “the UK has committed technical assistance to the value of £1.3 million (US\$1.72 million) to setting up and structuring the PRF ... UK funding and budgetary processes prevent us from a direct pledge to the PRF until it is fully established, and financial formalities are finalised”.

There were several additions to the Forum's agenda at this meeting. The situation in [New Caledonia](#) was high profile and has been discussed extensively elsewhere. Perhaps less headline-grabbing was the addition of both health and education as standing agenda items, as proposed by the incoming chair, Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni of Tonga. [The communiqué's](#) only substantive action point in these areas was an agreement to “develop a comprehensive region-wide health workforce strategy that focuses on quality training and retention measures for consideration by Pacific Health Ministers” (s.16).

There is no denying the importance of these issues in the Pacific. However, loading them onto the leaders' agenda appears to go against the spirit of the Morauta review of 2013, which was to use this annual summit for issues that required collective political decision-making at the highest level. It should be recalled that in 2015, as part of the implementation of the [Framework for Pacific Regionalism \(FPR\)](#), the submission and filtering process for agenda items was such that a group of just five made the cut: climate change, fisheries, West Papua, ICT, and cervical cancer.

It is not surprising that the elements of the leaders' agenda have changed in the years since then. Cervical cancer has faded away. Many other items have made their way through a variety of officials' and ministerial processes to end up in front of the leaders. However, if Morauta's principles are to be preserved, there should be a renewed commitment to handing off issues – including those that are the pets of the chair – to better homes. They could be pursued through an appropriate ministerial meeting or as part of the work program of a more technical regional agency such as the Pacific Community.

The creeping flabbiness of the agenda, combined with the disruption caused by geopolitical competition, has led to important issues not being progressed in a timely manner. [Last year in Rarotonga](#), leaders requested that the Review of Regional Architecture be concluded for their consideration this year; this has not been achieved. Also last year, leaders considered the idea of a “Zone of Peace” as put forward by Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka of Fiji and tasked the Secretariat to further develop it for their consideration in 2024. Come this year's communiqué and the concept has advanced little. It is now termed the “Ocean of Peace”, and the Secretariat is requested to develop a draft concept for consideration ahead of the gathering next year in Solomon Islands.

As these deferrals and timeline extensions accumulate, the ability of the Pacific Islands Forum to maintain focus and achieve political outcomes is undermined. The case of West Papua provides a striking example. In this year's communiqué, it merits just one line in which the report of the special envoys (prime ministers James Marape of PNG and Rabuka of Fiji) was “noted”. At the closing press conference, the troika (comprising the leaders of Cook Islands, Tonga and Solomon Islands) said that they were “planning to make sure” a visit to West Papua by Forum special envoys took place before the next meeting. The details of how they are going to make that happen have not yet been disclosed.

This is a blog in an ongoing series of [Pacific Island Forum Leaders' Meeting analysis](#) by Tess Newton Cain.

Author/s:

Tess Newton Cain

Dr Tess Newton Cain is an Associate of the Development Policy Centre and an adjunct Associate Professor at the Griffith Asia Institute.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/slowly-goes-the-forum-leaders-agenda-20240909/>