

The Pacific Plan: vague purpose, shaky ownership, fractured implementation

The logo for the Pacific Plan Review 2013 is displayed in a dark blue rectangular box. The text "PACIFIC PLAN" is in white, and "REVIEW 2013" is in a light blue color.

by Tony Hughes

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The **Pacific Plan** was drawn up in 2005 at the behest of Forum Leaders. The Plan was first reviewed in 2009, and an expert team is now undertaking a further review involving region-wide consultations. There is a feeling in the region that the Plan has fallen short of expectations because of inappropriate form and content, and lack of interest among the Plan's many 'stakeholders'.

The Review Team has invited submissions, which are being posted on the web [here](#). The following is a shortened version of my submission.

To be taken seriously any plan needs a credible purpose, clear ownership and a workable means of implementation. The Pacific Plan has had problems in all three areas, which can be summarised as follows:

1. The expressed purpose was too broad for an operational plan, and attempts to give it focus were unsuccessful. The Plan was the Secretariat's response to a vision formulated by leaders at a regional meeting. In such settings Leaders are commonly attended and advised by officials who are strong on drafting communiques but lack experience of making and executing complex plans. The outcome can easily then be an expression of intent that is over-optimistic in respect of both the external environment, and the realities of national awareness and motivation. This seems to have happened with the Pacific Plan.

Experienced planners were then engaged to give the leaders' vision a practical form. They identified worthwhile regional initiatives for implementation, but in further deliberations Pacific regional organisations (see below) added to the Plan components from their own programs that effectively sank it. My experience suggests that for the PP concept to survive, the Plan should be reborn as a set of rules for identifying and implementing high-priority activities best done on a regional basis, rather than trying to be an operational plan with timing and budgets.

2. Ownership of the Plan was fragmented from the start, scarcely existing outside the Forum Secretariat, while at the country level interest in the Plan was very weak.

The region is often spoken of internationally as if it was a coherent group of like-minded island nations working together for a set of common goals, but the reality is very different. Like any other nation-states, the Pacific island states are driven by strong (sometimes arguably wrong-headed) perceptions of national interest; while the great physical distances between them and their varied histories of contact and colonisation by Europe, Asia and USA and subsequent emigration have oriented them much more strongly outwards to the Pacific Rim than towards their island neighbours (where these neighbours are close, the pre-colonial history was often one of periodic invasion and enslavement).

Melanesia (PNG, SI, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji) hugely outweighs the Polynesian and Micronesian islands in population, land area and mineral resources. As PNG looks to exert greater regional influence, and the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) flexes its muscles, this naturally triggers defensive reactions in Polynesia and Micronesia. The (re-)activation of subregional groupings highlights the differences that exist among the vastly scattered, very differently resource-endowed and ethnically distinct island countries.

It also underlines the peculiar position of Australia and New Zealand. They have been active members of the Forum from its start in 1971, and have provided most of the funding for regional collaboration. In recent years their role has been increasingly questioned (usually when they are not present) in part because of their naturally direct style of debating issues, and in part because they tend to assume that they know what's right for the region.

With this background, it is not surprising that Pacific-wide collaboration does not loom large in the domestic politics of island countries, and there is very limited political or official awareness of the Pacific Plan, let alone a sense of ownership or responsibility for its implementation.

3. The drafting and implementation of the Plan was bedevilled by the Pacific's array of semi-autonomous regional organisations, sometimes referred to as the Regional Institutional Framework (RIF), or the CROP (Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific) agencies. These are the result of institutional growth over the last fifty years with a notable burst of expansion during the 1970s, the decade when most Pacific island countries reached independence. The regional organisations have taken on the inward-looking and turf-protecting characteristics that afflict such institutions everywhere.

Over the years there have been several government-backed attempts to replace the main Pacific Regional Organisations (PROs) by a single comprehensive and all-round-competent regional institution—their combined size being quite manageable in organisational terms. So far these moves have been successfully resisted by the organisations themselves. My submission to the PP Review, referred to above, gives a summary of the reform proposals, of which the most recent was my review of PROs for the Forum Secretariat (itself a PRO) in 2005. That recommended the establishment of a Pacific Commission, with several categories of membership, and executive capacity to do all that the Pacific island countries (and Australia, New Zealand and other non-PIC participants) could reasonably wish for on a regional basis.

The need for this fundamental institutional reform is so clear that support for it simply will not go away, and it's eminently feasible. SPC's current absorption of SPREP and SOPAC suggests that it has quietly embarked on establishing the single regional organisation, while the Forum Secretariat just hopes it won't happen, and carries out another PP review.

This blog is a part of a series on the Pacific Plan Review. Other blogs in this series can be found [here](#).

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Link:

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