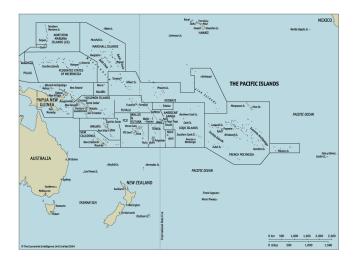# DEVPOLICYBLOG

What we've learned about development in the Pacific islands — a report by practitioners, and an opportunity for further interaction

By Tony Hughes
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The island countries of the South West Pacific (PICs for short) present a particularly sharp version of the issues, problems and opportunities that confront small developing countries everywhere. Here, the dispersion of the fourteen constitutionally independent nation-states and two dependencies of France across the ocean is more severe and their distances from trade routes and centres of global economic activity are greater than in other regions, while the islands themselves are more varied in size, configuration and resource endowments, and the linguistic and cultural identities and behavioural norms of their peoples are both more varied and more intact than in conventional groupings of small states elsewhere. Moreover—as most PIC governments know but have yet to reflect in their national or regional response strategies—the imminent prospect of an accelerated rise in sea levels looms darkly over all the PICs.

In the last seventy years powerful strategic, political and commercial forces—starting with the impact of World War II, decolonisation and the birth of international development assistance, continued by globalisation in its many forms and accentuated now by transformational advances in telecommunications—have brought the PICs onto the world stage and into increasingly close contact with Asia, USA and Europe. They are now variously engaged in a seemingly uncontrollable process of social and economic change, somewhat blithely labelled 'development'. They all receive substantial external assistance in cash or other forms, and several depend heavily on remittances from their emigrants to Pacific Rim countries. All have constitutions designed to produce forms of democratic government, but the pace of change is such that capture of the constitutional governance system by special-interest groups is a constant threat, and in several PICs is a reality.

Against that backdrop, in November 2012 a group of thirty men and women, PIC nationals and expatriates, each with long experience of planning, implementation and subsequent evaluation of PIC 'development', met in Suva to pool the ideas and insights into issues, performance and prospects of the PICs that they had acquired, tested, and accumulated . The three-day 'What Can We Learn?' (WCWL) symposium revolved around the presentation of commissioned papers and intensive 'closed door' debate. The scope and tenor of the discussions, with key areas of agreement and continuing issues, are described in this first volume of the WCWL report: *What we've learned about development in Pacific island countries*. A second volume, containing the commissioned papers and reports by participant rapporteurs, is being finalized, and will shortly be available.

This publication of the WCWL report opens the way for web-based interaction among practitioners and others interested in matters raised in the report and related issues, and forms the first part of the planned follow-up to the consultations in Suva a year ago. The second part will comprise engagement with individual PICs on specific topics identified in, or arising from, the WCWL Report. The aim will be to identify best-practice approaches to common issues from among participating PICs, and to make these available within in the Pacific and more widely.

Meanwhile the WCWL report is open for business with the aim of attracting critical examination and further discussion of any of its propositions, arguments and conclusions. Among the many issues addressed—but far from finally disposed of—in the report, are two topics that might usefully be explored early in any web-based interchange:

- Abundant aid and multiple donors create twin moral hazards for PICs and donors: (1) easy access to external assistance undermines the political resolve needed to build domestic capacity to sustain essential public goods and services; while (2) PIC governments can embark on poorly conceived or planned policies, safe in the knowledge that if things fall apart, the aid donors (for whatever reason) will always rally round to rescue a PIC in trouble ('We can't afford to have a failed state on our doorstep', PM John Howard, launching RAMSI). Can these risks to effective and sustainable PIC policy-making be overcome? Is it worth making the effort, given that on a global scale, permanent and comprehensive support for PICs (except PNG) is quite affordable?

- In the WCWL Survival Kit for practitioners, an attitude of 'positive scepticism' is recommended: ie, positive about the legitimate aims of governments, but cautious and asking serious questions about the ways and means proposed to achieve those

aims. Such scepticism, even in a generally positive brief, can appear to political leaders (urged on by lackeys) as disloyalty, resulting in the expert practitioner's removal or reduced access to decision-makers. Managing such problems in other parliamentary environments has been nicely parodied in 'Yes, Minister' and 'The Hollow Men'. How can the political and technical bases of policy-making best be amalgamated in PICs?

While the second part of the follow-up to WCWL is being planned, involving more detailed engagement with PICs and collaboration among them, web-based discussion of the issues above and others arising from or related to WCWL can continue to help focus and inform the content of such activities. Please leave your comments at the bottom of this post, or consider writing a post yourself: send an email to devpolicy if you are interested.

Tony Hughes is Project Coordinator of the What Can We Learn (WCWL) project, which is funded by a group of donors active in assisting PICs' development, including Australia, New Zealand, UNDP, ESCAP and ADB. For more background on WCWL, click here.

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