

JSCFADT inquiry into Australia activating greater trade and investment with Pacific island countries

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The Whitlam Institute, together with peacebuilding NGO Peacifica and a group of Pacific and Australia-based researchers,¹ suggests that Australia's important role in activating greater trade and investment with Pacific island states and people can be strengthened if Australia allows Pacific perspectives and modes of engagement to inform its own approach to relationships with the region. Appreciation of culture and diversity, mutual respect, reciprocity and trust are the things that Pacific islanders value most in relationships.

In late 2019, the Whitlam Institute engaged Peacifica to conduct research into *Pacific Perspectives on the World: Listening to Australia's Island Neighbours in order to build strong, respectful and sustainable relationships*.² The research was motivated by a sense that, despite Australia's Pacific Step-up, Australian engagement and investment across the region was not hitting the mark, particularly in the context of the rise in global interest in the region. The research was conducted in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

The Institute, Peacifica and the research team are concerned that the Step-up, while welcome and well-intentioned, has been conceived as an Australian-led initiative rather than as a joint Australia-Pacific one; and that Australia's engagement in the region pays insufficient attention to the perspectives of Pacific islander citizens and governments. The *Pacific Perspectives* research helps to fill this gap by hearing from a cross-section of Pacific islanders, including representatives of the private sector, about their perspectives on the world and their place in it. It recommends ways that Australia can best contribute to their future, and to its own improved foreign policy outcomes in the region. The research findings are directly relevant to this inquiry.

This research is distinctive in that it brings out the participants' views on the issues of most importance to them. It captures what they wanted to talk about, not what the research team wanted to ask. Its findings are rich and occasionally challenging to an Australian reader. It was clear from the research that most Pacific islander people see that Australia is a close ally of the Pacific island states, but that they are also deeply frustrated about the way that Australia – and Australians – conduct themselves in the region. As one interviewee said: *"It's a fact – there is a big country right next door, in the neighbourhood, the big brother. It's just that sometimes in the family the big brother's got his own agendas [that are] not in the interests of the other siblings."*

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² The *Pacific Perspectives on the World* research report was published in February 2020 and launched at the Australasian Aid Conference. It identified several key messages drawn from conversations with 150 Pacific islander people and made recommendations across a number of areas of Australian policy. The report is attached and is available at the Whitlam Institute website through [this link](#).

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The key messages of the research report speak directly to the terms of reference not only of this inquiry, but also to the other Pacific inquiries being conducted by the JSCFADT and to the consultation into Australia's international development program. These key messages represent the most commonly and most strongly raised points by the participants in the research across the three countries. The [full report](#), which is attached, offers more detail on these points and the report's recommendations:

- 1. *Quality relationships matter more than quantities of aid, trade or other engagement.***
Australia does not need to prove itself by giving or doing the most – the country is already recognised as being intrinsic and essential to the region and Pacific island states. It is this underlying positive disposition that drives the occasionally very strong critiques of Australia by its Pacific neighbours. They want relationships that put the concerns of Pacific peoples on a par with those of Australia, that reach beyond the narrow bands of government and civil society, that prioritise local ownership and that recognise our shared histories and identities.
- 2. *Values, norms & ways of doing things matter a great deal to Pacific islanders.*** Pacific island people routinely hold in their minds, consciousness and actions a recognition and a celebration of their cultural diversity alongside a sense of commonality of interest, respect, trust, reciprocity and an understanding of culture. Interacting in sympathy with this 'Pacific Mode' of working together – in all its complexities and commonalities - is essential.
- 3. *Australia is one of many potential relationships for Pacific islanders.*** The domestic concerns of Pacific islanders are connected more than ever before to global issues, notably but not exclusively through the climate crisis. Many Pacific islanders are also mindful of the region's geostrategic significance. Pacific islanders are thus acting with more urgency and confidence in working with international partners, chiefly other Pacific states, Australia, New Zealand and China. In this environment Australia's natural advantages are confounded by our inability to engage with the 'Pacific Mode'. Pacific island states can and will turn to other partners if their interests and world-view are not acknowledged by Australia.

Since the launch of the *Pacific Perspectives* report, it has been evident that these messages are well understood by various Australian companies working in the region, as their representatives have observed that these points resonate strongly with their own experience. This is encouraging, and a number of the recommendations of the report can build on this foundation to expand this understanding to achieve better trade outcomes for Pacific islander enterprises. Particular emphasis needs to be given to encourage the success of women-run businesses, and of 'traditional' female sectors. Some of our recommendations include:

Shift gears on the Step-up: The research participants see Australian engagement with the region, including the Pacific Step-up, predominantly as unilateral initiatives of Australia. They comprise things that are done **for** or **to** the Pacific, not **with** it. Pacific people are looking for reassurance that Australia shares their concerns and is working alongside them, as an equal partner, to address shared challenges. As a start we recommend that the Australian government:

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- Convene a regional Partnership Summit, at which diverse participants from civil society, private sector, government, community and churches from across the region can explore themes of most significance to Pacific peoples. For the Australian contingent, strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and participation is essential, to address the lack of visibility of Indigenous people and perspectives in Australia's international face.
- Deepen relationships beyond the capitals, both in the Pacific states and in Australia. A multiplicity of civil society, sporting, commercial, religious and cultural links are ready to be developed, in some cases building on existing initiatives.
- Improve government, private sector and NGO partnerships by encouraging Australian government agencies, businesses and INGOs to better recognise existing local capacity and support the development of new capacity where requested.

Invest in Australia's Pacific Literacy: Pacific islanders know more about Australia than we do about them. We are in effect stepping up without knowing where we are going. This can be addressed by:

- Promoting knowledge of the Pacific, including its languages, in Australian schools and universities and through mainstream media.
- Developing a 'Pacific Capable' strategy to prepare Australia and Australians to live, work, and socialise with Pacific island people in their own country and in the countries of the region.
- Working with Pacific diaspora communities to build the capacity of government departments and agencies, contractors and INGOs that work in the region.

Level the playing field when it comes to access: Travel to Australia, and doing business here, are perennial headaches for Pacific people. These concerns were raised repeatedly and by participants of all backgrounds. Action in this area would be a potent symbol of Australia's good faith towards the region. We recommend that Australia:

- Make it easier for all Pacific people to travel to and work in Australia through increased access to short-term visas, student and professional exchange programs that reach beyond the scope of the current labour mobility programs.
- Prioritise products from the Pacific for regulatory and administrative processes (e.g. biosecurity approval) to get them into Australian markets.
- Hold a regular Pacific Expo in Australia to showcase both primary and value-added products and foster business to business ties.

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