

Reclaiming Pacific Island Regionalism Does Neoliberalism Have to Reign?

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Introduction

The late Professor Epeli Hau'ofa, in a seminal essay published in 1993 titled *Our Sea of Islands*, wrote of the 'borderless world' inhabited by the people of Oceania prior to colonization and the subsequent contraction of this world into the finite entities of Pacific Island states and territories. Hau'ofa linked the confinement of Oceanic people to isolated 'tiny spaces', the restriction of their movement across their ocean world, and the conceptualisation of Pacific Island states as 'small' and 'resource-poor'. His celebration of Pacific people breaking out of these confines by moving and working abroad, while maintaining social relationships back home, processes which he said are missed when exclusively focusing on developments *within* Pacific island states, reflected a globalist viewpoint. Hau'ofa highlighted the 'interdependence' of Oceanic people living abroad and living at home, which he remarked, is 'the essence of the global system', and observed that Oceanic people are not dependent on anyone's largesse, rely more on their own efforts than that of anyone else, and do plan for and invest in the future as they have always done. The ordinary people of Oceania, as he saw them, are redefining their own world in accordance with their perceptions of their own interests, free from the regional institutions, external economic planners and legislative framers of Pacific Island states. The future of Oceania, in his view, lay in the hands of its own people, not with 'those who prescribe for us' and make us 'forever dependent and indebted, because they could see no way out' (1993:15).

Forty-four years earlier, a European observer, Albert Norman, commented on the formation of the first regional inter-governmental entity, the South Pacific Commission, in the June 1949 issue of the *Christian Science Monitor* from a surprisingly Oceanic perspective:

'Southern Oceania, that Pacific 'continent' which mainly is under water, is unique as a 'reclamation' project. Not an inch of soil will be reclaimed. The task is to reclaim something quite different, something which has been submerged by the chauvinist policies of Europe. And the major item of equipment on the project is the new sense of international moral responsibility which has launched the vast social enterprise... separating each 'island' group are the waters of the South Pacific which tend to create the impression that this society is broken up and hopelessly separated from its

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essential parts. This geographical illusion has been heightened by the occupying European nations, who, over the centuries, have 'claimed' for their own the visible peaks of the land. It was thus that the political and meaningless divisions of Europe became arbitrarily superimposed on Oceania. The first step in 'reclamation' has been to free the land of these bonds, to restore the essential regional viewpoint and unity, to overlook the dividing waters, to see the land and its people as united...it will be the task of the South Pacific Commission to ...promote the social reclamation of the world's seventh 'continent' and its people'².

While the colonial administrators behind the formation of the SPC saw themselves as doing a novel thing by attempting to forge a regional identity rather than 'tapping a pre-existing affinity' (Fry 1997), Norman recognized an earlier Oceanic history pre-dating but subsequently eroded by European colonization. The formation of the SPC provided opportunities for Pacific Islanders to travel and meet each other across colonial boundaries, something they had not had much opportunity to do over the previous 50 years for they had been 'confined by changing European economic practices and colonial control of movement and travel' including the internal labour trades that came with colonialism which restricted foreign labour recruiters, and reduced opportunities to join trading vessels and undertake long distance travel on whaling vessels (ibid).

The foregoing references provide an historical backdrop to the modern regionalist project that began with the creation of the SPC in 1949 by colonial administrators, came to fruition with the establishment from the 1970s onwards of a number of regional inter-governmental organizations by independent Pacific Island states,³ and is today being re-conceptualized by non-Islanders to fit with economic globalization, an externally-driven, neoliberal project. These references testify to the longstanding Oceanic 'world' of Pacific Islanders, to their early connectedness to the wider global world, albeit through European-initiated processes, and to their voluntary and autonomous integration in other geographical locations today, in pursuit of their economic interests. As such, they provide a useful starting point for questioning the state-centred (or inter-governmental)

² Norman is cited at length by Greg Fry in 'The South Pacific 'experiment': reflections on the origins of regional identity' in the *Journal of Pacific History*, September 1997, Vol 32, No 2, pp180, 23pp.

³ The heads of the following regional bodies comprise the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP): Forum Fisheries Agency, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Secretariat of the Pacific Community (Formerly SPC), Secretariat of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, South Pacific Applied Geosciences Commission, South Pacific Tourism Organisation, University of the South Pacific, Pacific Islands Development Programme, Fiji School of Medicine and South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment.

neoliberal regional integration project which is the subject of this critique.

Post-independence Pacific Regionalism and Political Solidarity

From the 1970s to the early 1990s, intergovernmental regionalism in the Pacific was about more than simply "the creation of regional capacity."² One of its hallmarks was its effectiveness in politically organizing Pacific Island states to collectively resist threats to Pacific Island interests or to increase returns from regional economic resources. Regionalism in this period was not the exclusive preserve of governments or states either. Regional solidarity among peoples' movements has had as long a history in the Pacific as intergovernmental regionalism, interconnecting movements for political independence or sovereignty with trade unions, women's rights movements, environmental groups and Pacific churches in support of struggles for freedom and justice. Regional solidarity was a key element in the movements against nuclear testing, nuclear bases, and the transshipment and/or dumping of nuclear wastes. Over the last three to four decades, NGOs and social movements in the region have exerted pressure on independent Pacific Island governments to support various struggles in defense of Pacific interests. As Fry (2004) has pointed out, they have also challenged governments and political elites arrogating to themselves the exclusive right to speak for the region.³ In sum, Pacific regionalism from the 1970s to the early 1990s has reflected political solidarity both among Pacific Islands states and among peoples of the Pacific organized in social movements, often with some convergence between states and NGOs occurring where external interests were evidently detrimental to Pacific Island ones. In recent years, however, regionalism has taken a new turn, driven by neoliberal rationalities that are deeply embedded in the promotion and planning of regional economic markets that primarily serve external interests. The re-conceptualization and re-creation of regionalism in a neoliberal frame has significant long-term implications for the livelihood options, development prospects, quality of life, and general well-being of Pacific Island people, not least women. "New Pacific Regionalism" aims to "deepen cooperation and integration among Pacific Island countries", specifically to facilitate the primary objective of opening up consumer, resource, investment, and labor markets in the Pacific to foreign suppliers of goods and services, under the banner of economic reform and good governance. Like the trade agreements with which they are linked, they are being negotiated and adopted by Pacific Island states at the regional level without prior public debate or reference to elected representatives of people in national parliaments. Moreover, despite the development rhetoric in which these new agreements are couched, and despite assertions about treasuring the diversity

of the Pacific and honoring its cultures, traditions, and beliefs, the new agreements being forged will more likely serve to undermine both traditional social and economic systems and values that have till now served to protect Pacific island people from more extreme forms of poverty and destitution. It will also be to the detriment of prospects for equitable and sustainable development in the region, from which Pacific women are being increasingly distanced.

The remainder of this paper reflects on the substitution of political regionalism by the new regionalism of market integration in the Pacific. It considers, from a gendered perspective, some of the implications of the new regionalism, and recent endeavors by people's organizations and movements to reclaim political regionalism in defense of Pacific Island peoples' long-term livelihood and cultural interests. It also reflects on the prospects offered by new regionalism for improving human rights and especially women's human rights or gender justice. In particular, it finds that gender inequality remains prevalent in the Pacific Islands. This is despite the ratification of CEDAW by a majority of Pacific Island states,⁵ and repeated commitments by governments to the Pacific Platform for Action for the Advancement of Women (1994), the adoption of gender policies by CROP (Council of Regional Organizations in the Pacific) agencies, and the growing effectiveness of regional gender units in the two leading regional intergovernmental institutions, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and the South Pacific Community (SPC). The inclusion of gender equality as one of fifteen strategic objectives of new regionalism's blueprint, The Pacific Plan, suggests that women have a stake in its implementation and Pacific feminists may engage with the Pacific Plan from this standpoint. Yet beyond perhaps broadening labor market access for trained nurses, and even this benefit has significant costs for labor-exporting countries, the new regionalism of market integration offers few prospects for improving the lives and standard of living of the majority of Pacific women.

The Pacific Plan and New Pacific Regionalism:

A Neoliberal Framework for Regional Market Integration

In April 2004, Pacific Island Forum leaders gathered in Auckland for a special

meeting to discuss the report of a review of the Forum by an Eminent Persons Group (EPG). Here, "a new vision" for the region was agreed upon-one that, in the words of Samoan Prime Minister Hon Tuilaepa Aiono Sailele Malielegaoi, emphasized "guaranteeing for our people free and worthwhile lives."⁶ To give effect to their vision they called for the development of a "Pacific Plan for Strengthening Pacific Cooperation and Integration." This plan would aim to promote economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security—the four priority areas agreed to by the Forum Island leaders. According to the Samoan Prime Minister, the plan that was subsequently developed was intended to

deepen cooperation and integration among Pacific Island countries and to establish where our people might gain the most through the pooling of resources of governance and the aligning of our policies. This endeavor might take us well beyond current levels of regional cooperation and into a new phase of regional integration- a *Pacific union of as yet unknown dimensions*. We want practical benefits for our people, and we want to retain the best of our traditions and cultures. But we also want initiatives which will transform our Pacific into a dynamic and progressive region capable of meeting the challenges of modernity and globalisation.⁷

In 2005, a joint Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Commonwealth Secretariat (CS) project on developing and implementing the Pacific Plan was tasked with providing a cost-benefit analysis of a new ("deeper") Pacific regionalism. The resulting report, entitled *Toward a New Pacific Regionalism*,⁸ provided Pacific Island states with a roadmap for moving beyond the existing regionalism (of inter-government meetings and regional endeavors in the provision of services) toward meeting what are stated as the region's "fundamental challenges," namely, "easing capacity constraints for governments *through increased provision of services*" and "creating economic opportunity for Pacific citizens *through increased market integration*."⁹ Some of the services identified as needed but hampered by capacity constraints were clearly services required for better implementation of reform commitments. Regional market integration was promoted,

through a broadened PACER (Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations), with investment, services, and labor mobility (something that the Forum Island countries, FICs, are most interested in) added to free trade in goods to bring tangible, quantifiable, economic benefits to the region's citizens. The report also proposed a binding legal instrument involving trade, aid, and governance commitments for the FICs, citing ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market) as examples of successful binding regional cooperation models.

We discuss the ADB/CS report in some detail as it provides insights into the political and economic thinking behind the new Pacific regionalism. Club Theory (drawn from economics and applied to military alliances, international organizations, and cross border infrastructure and services) was curiously drawn upon in the ADB/CS report to re-conceptualize sovereign states as "clubs." Since clubs are supposed to satisfy two "essential conditions" (to be "self-sustaining" and "provide a large enough pool of net benefits for each of its members")¹⁰ and it could be argued that several of the Forum Island states are not independently self-sustaining in economic terms, there is an implicit suggestion that microstates do not qualify for sovereignty. Helen Hughes had made similar arguments at length.¹¹ The summary analyses of existing regional initiatives in the report did not appear to draw on the Club Theory framework, however, and the lessons apparently learned from club theory appeared to be only marginally related to the facts of the cases cited. The language used in the report gave away the report's subtle neoliberal bias. The notion of "*essential sovereign functions*"¹² resonates with the first functions of states theorized in World Bank governance literature, but narrows state functions to just two: "formulating and enforcing appropriate national policies" and "providing essential services such as health, education and policing."¹³ The "*erosion of effective sovereignty*" (defined as the ability to carry out policies that governments have "chosen for themselves") rendered Forum Island states only "nominally sovereign," according to the report,¹⁴ their effectiveness and validity judged by how well they are able to implement (reform) policies.¹⁵

The reference to Pacific Island states as sovereign clubs ("created with the support, recognition and aid of the international community" even though they were "frequently sub-economic in size")¹⁶ takes no account of Pacific Island states' colonial history or the independence struggles from which they emerged.

The fourteen regional initiatives proposed in the report were considered likely to yield high benefits (with costs and benefits for each estimated in dollar value) under the four Pacific Plan challenge areas. They included:

- a regional economic and statistical technical assistance facility to strengthen and supplement the PFTAC (Pacific Financial Technical Assistance Centre);
- regional capacity to assist customs officials collect revenue;
- a regional ombudsman;
- a regional panel of auditors;
- increased (temporary) labor market access to Australia and NZ;
- a regional aviation safety office;
- a joint purchasing facility for petroleum products;
- enhanced transparency/harmonization of fisheries access arrangements;
- liberalization of telecommunications markets;
- a regional nurse training facility;
- a regional sports institute;
- a regional statistical office;
- a regional body to protect intellectual property;
- and
- a regional training facility to provide civilian police training for international peacekeeping as well as for national service.

Although the anticipated benefits from both the governance initiatives and labor mobility initiatives were expected to be shared by many, Pacific Island states were expected to have to overcome "considerable opposition" from the 'few losers' who were "well-organized, vocal and in a position to effectively oppose reforms."¹⁷

All the report's proposed regional initiatives are reflective of the managerial audit culture associated with the reconfiguration of state and regional authority as the contradictions of neoliberalism at the national level become apparent at the regional level. Most involve the technical tracking of money (customs duties

and taxes), communications, transport, and energy (aviation safety, petroleum, and telecommunications), mobile natural resources (fish), and trained people (workers, nurses, and sportspersons). Clearly missing are initiatives aimed at developing sustainable livelihoods. More importantly, these initiatives seem to ignore existing asymmetries among and within Pacific Island states— Pacific people do not all enjoy high levels of education, women as a group are still subordinated to men as a group, and life in urban centers is vastly different to village life where a majority of Pacific Islanders still live.

The report proposed that a legally binding agreement be negotiated among all Forum countries, establishing mutual obligations. That the negotiation will be between donor states within the Pacific Islands Forum (specifically Australia and New Zealand) and Pacific Island member states is quite clear from the proposal that all Forum *Island* governments make a commitment or binding agreement to good governance, in return for a renewable five to ten year aid and trade agreement. Three dimensions are highlighted to underscore the mutuality of obligations, which is what Australia and NZ will have to provide, to ensure a win-win outcome.

- *Aid commitments*: The report puts the case for continued aid to the Forum Island Countries. It says stability, continuity, and predictability are more important than the volume of aid *per se* but that additional resources for Pacific Plan initiatives, which should be met on an equal sharing basis by Australia and New Zealand, should supplement significant and guaranteed bilateral aid flows. It proposes that Australian and New Zealand aid to the region should reach 0.08 percent of their GDP, and that 25 percent of their total development budget should be allocated to Forum Island Countries.¹⁸

- *Trade commitments*: The report argues that trade should centre on a package of opportunities for "gainful employment for trained FIC nationals" through training and temporary movement arrangements through the

region. This contrasts with the present situation of restricted access for untrained Forum Island Country labor, and relatively open (and permanent) access for skilled Pacific Island labor to Australia and New Zealand, which works to the advantage of the latter. In short, a managed trade and development approach to migration, with added resources for training facilities is proposed. Specifically, this means opening up labor markets in Australia and New Zealand for Pacific Island citizens, and establishing largely export-oriented regional training facilities for nursing, sports and policing services to supply those markets. The proposed regional training facilities are to be aid (rather than private sector) funded, as in the Philippines. This is intended to ensure that the costs of educating and training this mobile labor will not be borne by the supplying country alone.

- *Governance commitments*: To ensure that governance standards become a vital part of domestic economic life, the report proposes that clear means of financing obligations and bound commitments be made by FICs when negotiating with development partners.

A simultaneous, two-track negotiating process was recommended, with a range of concrete interventions such as implementation of the "highest yielding initiatives."¹⁹ This first step was to "build confidence in the process and... emerging partnership";²⁰ the second track essentially the commencement of a process for negotiating a Pacific Plan or extended PACER agreement. In other words, the report called for the merger of a Pacific Plan with expanded PACER negotiations, the two 'plans' or agreements evidently being seen as having very similar objectives or intentions in respect to regional integration.

The report argued that without a multifaceted trade and development agreement, the PACER negotiations (on a goods only agreement) would be at risk of being unsuccessful, in that a goods only agreement would primarily benefit Australia and NZ, with FICs bearing adjustment costs. While this is true, the early push to open negotiations on an expanded PACER (now known as PACER Plus), and to include investment and services as well as labor mobility (the part that Forum Island governments are most interested in) into the discussion in the belief that this will bring them some early gains, is problematic. In particular, it focuses on anticipated benefits from gaining market access in Australia and NZ (especially increased labor market

access) without assessing or acknowledging the risks of opening up Forum Island states' goods, investment and services markets under rules of reciprocity. The claim is indeed made that the Forum Island countries' greatest benefit from trade liberalization will not come from liberalized agriculture or industry, but from "the liberalized movement of people and the liberalization of services."²¹ The report also proposed that Japan be included in a Pacific free trade agreement since after the EPA (Economic Partnership Agreement) and PACER come into force, Japan will be the only major donor whose exports to the region will be subject to residual tariffs.

The report called for more resources to be committed to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat for feasibility studies on the proposed regional initiatives and the negotiations in track two. The process of negotiating a substantial treaty arrangement was expected to create a "perception" of regional bodies as "open to capture" by "donor interests" or the "international bureaucracy that manages them."²² And, as a first step towards the eventual establishment of a 'Regional Senate', it was proposed that all Forum Island states have a representative based in Suva, to have a voice in the decision-making and oversight body based at the Forum Secretariat.²³

The report's arguments and proposals for regional initiatives are couched in a perspective sympathetic to Forum Island country interests. However, its single-minded focus on gains to be secured through strategic negotiation by Forum Island states with Australia and NZ under the rubric of the Pacific Plan and an expanded PACER did not examine the broader and longer term implications of region-wide market integration, specifically the implications of access to Forum Island country markets (for goods, services, and investment). It reflected a strategic approach of trying to secure some gains from a situation where everything is stacked against Forum Island states. As such, it proposed taking a huge gamble with major risks.

There is no doubt that the fleshed-out Pacific Plan adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum Meeting in Port Moresby in October 2005 is essentially a road map for further trade liberalization in the region, under PICTA (Pacific Islands Countries Trade Agreement), PACER (Plus) and the proposed EPA with the European Union. "Initiated, funded, promoted and broadly sculptured by the governments of NZ, Australia and Europe in particular"²⁴ this New Pacific Regionalism represents what Fry has referred to as "hegemonic regionalism."²⁵ What it overlooks and underestimates are tendencies toward what we might term

"counter-hegemonic regionalism," indications of which include the recent democratic disruptions seen in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu. These serve to lift the mat further on widespread practices of social violence that pervade the region. Most often directed toward women, social violence is the powder keg that cannot continue to be ignored if sustainable, democratic development and gender justice are to be realized.

Implications of the New Regionalism

Pacific regionalism specialist Greg Fry, in an analysis of three competing models of a redefined regional political community, raised questions about their "moral and political legitimacy" and political acceptability.²⁶ He suggested that the starting point for judging or assessing legitimacy is to ask the question, Who is Oceania for? And, as subsidiary questions, What does the community stand for as a set of values, practices and ideas? Who should be regarded as belonging to the community, and on what basis? Who can speak for it and determine its practice? Fry concluded, prematurely in our view, that in contrast to the Australian government proposal, and the Australian Senate Committee's proposal, the Pacific Eminent Persons Group proposal for a "more effective regionalism" had the most potential to gain the support of Pacific states, not least because it promised an "equal place at the table" and a more "inclusive community."²⁷ He acknowledged that it could be hijacked by Australia and redesigned to fit with the latter's "special responsibility to manage the region in the war of terror,"²⁸ but not that it may be harnessed to fit with and serve the broader agenda of economic and trade liberalization.

In a substantive critique of the Pacific Plan, its origins, content and goals, Elise Huffer,²⁹ reminds us that the Plan emerged from a review initiated by New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clarke. Huffer argues that it is "intimately tied to the redefining of the Pacific Islands Forum," a body which represents only heads of governments and states, does not "create space for wider discussion

of important regional matters by the citizens of Forum Island countries,"³⁰ and whose Secretariat is "distant from the peoples of the region, as well as hierarchical and technocratic."³¹ Huffer also recognizes the political implications of the Pacific Plan in setting

an agenda for new levels of regional integration whereby Pacific island countries will gradually relinquish sovereignty over certain areas of governance, economic policy and security. As such, it sets the framework for a new political and economic order, even though the latter may be introduced incrementally.³²

New Pacific Regionalism departs substantially from the autonomous, self-determining regionalism of earlier decades and is indeed an ideological cloak for the ongoing programme of liberalization that has been underway in the region since 1995, under the direction of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. While rallying the support of Pacific Island states behind the vision of a Pacific Plan, New Pacific Regionalism works in effect to politically disorganize Pacific Island states and to replace an autonomously determined regional agenda with an imposed one. It also serves to obscure the main agenda of economic and trade liberalization. Challenging this agenda requires a critical appraisal of regional policy developments from the vantage point of ordinary Pacific Island people. In particular it needs to include Pacific Island women, whose historical exclusion from regional decision-making has remained unchanged, despite the ratification of CEDAW by a majority of Forum Island countries and the adoption of gender policies by most CROP agencies in the last decade.

Jane Kelsey³³ has analyzed some of the impacts of economic restructuring and liberalization that are already being seen in the region. Increasing economic insecurity and new labor market openings have made hundreds of families in Fiji reliant on the export earnings (remittances) of skilled nurses and unemployed soldiers, who have been leaving Fiji in droves to take up better paying

jobs abroad. Remittance earnings are now a major source of national income in Fiji, constituting in 2006 almost 6.2 percent of GDP, according to the World Bank.³⁴ The high risks involved in undertaking contract work as armed security workers in the Middle East are offset by an attractive insurance policy, which makes the families of soldiers who die in service beneficiaries of handsome compensation payouts in U.S. dollars. The links between high risk, 'niche' labor markets for Fijian soldiers in the oil rich but war-torn regions of the Middle East and global economic/military/industrial interests on the one hand, and openings for southern providers of care work and neoliberal public policies in the North are evident. The social costs and insecurity associated with supplying labor to external markets under such artificially created conditions are significant, although they may tend to be discounted in the eager embracing of market openings and job opportunities abroad.

From research recently undertaken by one of the authors of this paper in Tonga, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, it is evident that liberalization is having unforeseen negative effects. The theoretical benefits of reduced import tariffs and wider consumer choices in food imports, for instance, will not likely improve health and well-being in Tonga, despite the intentions of accompanying health sector reforms. In Vanuatu, the benefits of investment liberalization in tourism are being reaped by noncitizens, and a major unforeseen effect of the successful marketing of beachfront land by multinational real estate companies to foreign investors is the effective dispossession of custom landowners.³⁵ In PNG, negotiations on the Pacific EPA with the EU inspired an ambitious but environmentally destructive mega industrial fisheries plan for the Madang Lagoon, which other Pacific island states are being invited to invest in, in the face of mounting popular opposition from local resource owners.

The rear guard action position being adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat seems to be primarily focused on adjustment costs. Rather than defending Pacific self-determination, the position being taken appears to be "if you compensate for adjustment costs, we will happily commit to policy changes." Social impacts such as job losses are accepted as "adjustment costs," the dehumanizing and disembodied language of economics providing a convenient euphemism.

However, it is recognized that such adjustment costs carry "increased risk of further alienating public opinion and elite opinion against increased integration."³⁶

The Challenge from Social Movements and NGOs

It was from regional NGOs that the strongest criticism of New Pacific Regionalism, and specifically the Pacific Plan, came. In a statement issued in 2005, and signed by leading regional NGOs, the Plan was attacked for its 'empty' pronouncements about "treasur[ing] the diversity of the Pacific and seek[ing] a future in which its cultures, traditions, and religious beliefs are valued, honoured, and developed."³⁷ The NGO statement stopped short of linking the Plan to the main agenda of structural adjustment and liberalization. In July 2006, however, a gathering of NGOs in Nadi, organized by Oxfam NZ, raised concerns about the proposed Economic Partnership Agreement between Pacific ACP (African Caribbean and Pacific) states and the EU, and considered the findings of research undertaken in the region on the social impacts of liberalization. Participants at the meeting demanded that social impact studies be carried out before commencing negotiations on an EPA and any other trade agreement, particularly PACER. Attended by several women's NGOs, and the Fiji Nurses Association, which has been monitoring impacts on Fiji's public health system of the hemorrhage of experienced nurses from Fiji through avenues created by Australasian (labor) recruitment agencies, a communiqué issued at the end of the meeting sent a clear message to Pacific political leaders:

As civil society groups meeting in Nadi, Fiji, we believe that trade agreements must have just and equitable development at their heart. Genuine sustainable development—including economic, social, cultural, gender and environmental dimensions—must be the central pillar of these agreements. We are concerned that the proposed EPA in its current form will not fulfill these development objectives. To address this, there must be a stronger partnership between government and civil society in the Pacific, to ensure that all aspects of the EPA and possible alternatives are explored, to achieve the best outcomes for the peoples of the Pacific, both at national and regional levels.³⁸

The coming together of Pacific NGOs for the first time to

directly discuss trade liberalization and trade agreements, and their commitment to continuing to keep up the pressure on their governments to ensure that certain non-negotiable areas are not traded away, namely, ownership and use of customary land, cultural heritage, key public services, food security, and farmers' livelihoods, reflected a long overdue reclaiming of political regionalism by Pacific NGOs.³⁹ Mindful of the fact that the EU had signed three bilateral fisheries agreements (with Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and FSM), thereby undermining the region's only real leverage in the negotiations, the conference press statement highlighted the need for solidarity among Pacific Island states in conducting these negotiations. Furthermore, it flagged the dangers posed by particular provisions that could find their way into the agreement. Included in the statement was the claim that:

The Pacific is being short-changed. The European Union has promised to support development in the Pacific, but so far, these promises have not been fulfilled. . . . Pacific governments need to have solidarity when they negotiate for the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union. . . . Particular provisions in the negotiations which could cause dangers to Pacific societies include the local impacts of foreign fisheries, unregulated tourism, lack of control over foreign companies, lack of government's right to regulate in the public interest, threats to public services such as water supplies, and pressures for alienation and foreign control of land.⁴⁰

The Conference press statement also expressed concern about Australia and New Zealand making unfair demands on Pacific countries seeking accession to the WTO during bilaterals.

Engendering the Pacific Plan

The NGO critique did not fall on deaf ears. The evolution of the Pacific Plan since 2005 (in keeping with its projection as a "living document") has seen its inclusion of fifteen strategic objectives, aimed at addressing a broad range of issues and concerns, among them gender inequality. Strategic objective eight aims to improve gender equality by

mainstreaming . . . gender issues throughout the other

initiatives where appropriate, . . . the ratification and implementation of rights-based international and regional conventions and agreements and associated support for meeting, reporting and other requirements. . . . including the drafting, harmonisation and promotion of awareness of rights-based domestic legislation within the Pacific covering CEDAW on gender [and other stipulated international conventions].⁴¹

A number of other specific initiatives to support gender equality are identified in the Plan for immediate implementation, among them a focus on domestic, gender, and sexual violence in the police training initiative; incorporating gender impacts in cost-benefit analyses of regional activities; and strengthening statistical information systems in relation to sex disaggregated data provision. Meanwhile another initiative, aimed at increasing women's representation in national parliaments, is under implementation. Research has been jointly commissioned by the Forum Secretariat and UNIFEM on barriers to women entering national parliaments and a regional workshop has been held on strategies to raise women's parliamentary representation in line with commitments made by Forum Island countries. Attention to this issue is long overdue. In March 2005, the international feminist advocacy group, Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) named six Pacific countries among the twelve states it dubbed the Dirty Dozen for not having a single woman member of parliament. The election of Lepolo Taunisila to the Tongan parliament later that year reduced the number of Pacific states identified for that dubious distinction to five.⁴²

The engendering of the Pacific Plan, which we have revealed as a framework for deepening neoliberal reform and trade liberalization in the region, begs explanation. As explained in a Pacific Plan document, the issue of gender equality "has been recognized by Pacific Island leaders at the highest level," and the EPG report is cited for concluding that "Pacific institutions and processes need to be more gender sensitive and better acknowledge and encourage the participation of women in decision-making at all levels, as

well as work toward the reduction and elimination of domestic violence, and the improvement of women's literacy and health." ⁴³ The commitment to gender equality in the region is more than rhetorical. Gender policies have been adopted by all CROP agencies demonstrating one of the benefits of regional policymaking and monitoring of policy implementation. It is evidently intended that the Pacific Plan will include supporting countries in meeting their international commitments, for example, under CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁴⁴ For at least a decade, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat has had a full-time (albeit aid-funded) gender advisor on its staff.

The ready inclusion of gender equality within a broader regional economic agenda that, in our view, will adversely affect the interests of a majority of Pacific Island women is rather ironic. As much as we might acclaim regional organizations for their gender policies and welcome the advantage this gives us to secure advances for women, we should recognize its limitations. It represents a narrow political perspective and legal-technocratic approach to advancing gender equality, one that is unlikely to achieve what feminists have come to call "gender justice." Moreover, it proposes to deliver gender equality in the context of deepening economic inequality at global, regional, and national levels as a result of neoliberal economic policies and free market trade policies. This disjuncture between an avowed commitment to gender equality on the one hand, and on the other, a disregard for the reality of growing economic inequality reflects the difference between feminist and multilateral state agendas. Therefore, while international feminist organizations call for both economic justice and gender justice, states and multilateral institutions prefer to treat poverty and gender inequality as discrete problems that can be 'fixed' without reference to their structural causes.

A recent strategic response by human rights organizations to the Pacific Plan effectively encourages the narrow approach of regional

organizations. A seventy-page paper entitled *Ratification of International Human Rights Treaties: Added Value for the Pacific Region*, produced in November 2006 by the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT)⁴⁵ as part of a collaborative effort between the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat and the Regional Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR), seeks to give direction to Pacific Island leaders and the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat on how they could give effect to the Pacific Plan's stated wish to elevate human rights as a core concern. While commending the Pacific Plan's attention to "addressing democracy and human rights, rather than predominantly focusing on economic growth,"⁴⁶ the paper's own focus was somewhat narrow in its primary concern with advancing civil and political rights, and its relative inattention to economic rights, or economic security and rights. Among the rights that go unmentioned are the rights to a livelihood, employment, access to land for cultivation, and fair and just wages. While it is not generally surprising that such economic rights were sidelined, as they remain contentious and are indeed often challenged by proponents of the free market, it would have been appropriate to discuss economic rights in the context of economic security, which is discussed. Instead, the paper defined economic security in a way that fits comfortably with the neoliberal framework and the present macroeconomic policy environment in the region, that is, economic security concerns "access to resources, finance, and markets necessary to sustain acceptable levels of welfare and State power."⁴⁷ No mention is made of a fairer or more equitable distribution of resources or national wealth and income, nor of the importance of social safety nets for vulnerable groups of people in society.

The theoretically greater access to resources, finance, and markets that are the promise of market liberalization is unlikely to reduce liberalization's negative social impacts in terms of increased income disparities and economic insecurity. While discussing issues covered by the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), implicit reference is

made to the right to development. In particular, there is explicit mention of the rights to education, health, work, and adequate standard of living, including food, clothing, and housing, and references to the poverty affecting 25 percent of the region's population and the poor conditions of many Pacific Islanders (measured by the percentage of the population with access to safe drinking water, and access to quality education). An obscure statement on the "opportunity for external and internal speculation on policies, which is always important to have in any Government"⁴⁸ does not appear to reflect any concern with developing self-determination, which would have been meaningful to state. Embracing the opportunity presented by the Pacific Plan for advancing Pacific Island states' human rights commitments, is a valid strategy for advocacy, nonetheless it legitimates the main agenda of the Pacific Plan. There is an urgent need to examine the Plan's main agenda in terms of its likely gender impacts, and especially to consider what the wider and longer-term implications of economic and trade liberalization may be for Pacific Island women.

Conclusion

The antecedents of regional solidarity in the Pacific provide a critical perspective from which to understand contemporary calls for regional solidarity. In the early postcolonial period, the shared concerns of the leaders of newly independent Pacific countries were expressed as resistance to colonial interventions. NGOs and churches engaged in resisting continued colonial interventions in the region also developed distinctive regional identities. In this early period, the successful negotiation of nonreciprocal trading arrangements with former colonial powers was considered just dues for decades of economic appropriation from the colonies, even though the terms of reference were ultimately fraught with contradictions for the small independent countries, dependant as they are always likely to be on the political and economic goodwill of larger metropolitan states.

In macrolevel political negotiations, regional solidarity has always been vital to securing the interests of Pacific Island states. Inherent in this process, dominated by male negotiators, is the disembodied practice of homogenizing the Pacific, with the imagined beneficiary of Pacific regional solidarity being, implicitly, male. Thus far, challenges to new regionalism have ignored gender concerns, dovetailing well with the disembodied rationalities of neoliberalism. Women's NGOs and feminist organizations in the Pacific have not yet taken issue with New Pacific Regionalism by examining its promises from a critical gender perspective. One of the

promises of independence, from which political regionalism (which Pacific Island women within NGOs helped forge) sprang, was political and economic self-determination, which is at serious risk of being lost because of creeping new regionalism. On the other hand, for Pacific women of the twenty-first century, the promise of commitments signed onto by Pacific Island governments in Beijing and Cairo, and of CEDAW ratification, is women's full enjoyment of citizenship and human rights. Fulfillment of this promise demands both transformation of the gendered micropolitics of power that operate throughout the Pacific, and retention of traditional systems and practices which help sustain social cohesion, equity, and access.

The challenge is to reclaim Pacific regionalism from the clutches of neoliberalism and invest it with the project of building societies in the Pacific that are socially and environmentally sustainable as well as gender and economically just. It goes without saying that Pacific Island men and women would certainly benefit from a more equitable global economy, and from expanded opportunities to participate in it, with all of the legal supports and human rights protections that might be expected under an effective system of global governance centered less on economic integration and more on the goals of human development and social wellbeing.

Notes

1. This paper was first presented to a panel on "Feminist Movements in the Pacific Region" at the IAFFE Conference, Sydney University, July 7-9, 2006.
2. Richard Herr, "Pacific Island Regionalism: How Firm the Foundation for Future Cooperation?" in *Pacific Futures*, ed. Michael Powles (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2006), 184.
3. Greg Fry, "Whose Oceania? Contending Visions of Community in Pacific Region-Building," Working Paper 2004/3 (Canberra: ANU, 2004), 11.
4. Hon Tuilaepa Aiono Sailele Malielegaoi, "The Future of Regionalism in the Pacific," *Annual Pacific Lecture (2005) of the Pacific Cooperation Foundation by the Prime Minister of Samoa and the (then) Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum* (March 2005), 3.
5. By 2005, all but four Pacific Island Forum states (Kiribati, Nauru, Solomon Islands, and Tonga) had become signatories to, or had ratified CEDAW. Fourteen years earlier, several Pacific leaders at the 1991 South Pacific Forum, in discussions of the "Report of a Seminar on CEDAW" held in Rarotonga in May that year, decried the imposition of western values (following a similar charge made at the seminar itself), asserted biblical teachings on the position of women, and claimed that there was no

discrimination against women in their countries. See Jean Zorn, "Women, Custom & International Law in the Pacific," Occasional Paper No. 5, City University of New York, http://www.vanuatu.usp.ac.fj/journal_splaw/pal-dcosta-12.docpublications/Publications/Occasional_Papers.htm, 1999 (accessed February 20, 2008).

6. Malielegaoi, "The Future of Regionalism in the Pacific," 3.

7. Ibid; emphasis mine.

8. Roman Grynberg, *Towards a New Pacific Regionalism* (Manilla: ADB, 2005), <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/Pacific-Regionalism/vol2/vol2.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2008).

9. Ibid., xix; emphasis original.

10. Ibid., xv.

11. See her article, "The Pacific is Viable," *Issues Analysis* 53, Centre for Independent Studies (December 2004): 2.

12. Grynberg, *Towards a New Pacific Regionalism*, 33; emphasis added.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid; emphasis added.

15. Wesley-Smith notes the vastly different international environment today compared with that which facilitated the emergence of sovereign Pacific Island states, and the linking of sovereignty, for the first time, to performance-based criteria. See Terence Wesley-Smith, "There Goes the Neighborhood: The Politics of Failed States and Regional Intervention in the Pacific," in *Redefining the Pacific? Regionalism, Past, Present and Future*, ed. Jenny Bryant-Tokalau and Ian Frazer (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 121.

16. Grynberg, *Towards a New Pacific Regionalism*, 42.

17. Ibid., 148.

18. Ibid., 152.

19. Ibid., xxiv.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 153.

22. Ibid., xxvi.

23. Ibid., 164.

24. Ron Crocombe, "Regionalism Above and Below the Forum: The Geographical/Culture Region, Asia Pacific and Others" in *Pacific Futures*, ed. Michael Powles (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2006), 195.

25. Fry, "Whose Oceania?" 11.

26. Ibid., 5.

27. Ibid., 18.

28. Ibid.

29. Elise Huffer, "The Pacific Plan: A Political and Cultural Critique," in *Redefining the Pacific?*, ed. Bryant-Tokalau and Frazer, 160. See also Aroha Mead, *The Broader Pacific Plan, Tidying-up the Region: Commentary Prepared on the South Pacific Forum's Pacific Plan* (Wellington, Civil society groups throughout the Pacific region, 2005), for another critique.

30. Ibid., 159.
31. Huffer also records the interesting fact that the EPG, whose membership included Sir Julius Chan (Chair, PNG), Dr. Langi Kavaliku (Tonga), Bob Cotton (Australia), Teburoro Tito (Kiribati), and Maiava Iulai Toma (Samoa) as part of the review team, a reflection group, assistants who were all senior civil servants from NZ, and a support group whose members all came from the NZ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (and Trade). See Huffer, "The Pacific Plan," 158.
32. Huffer, "The Pacific Plan," 158.
33. Jane Kelsey, "Taking Nurses and Soldiers to Market—Trade Liberalization and Gendered Neo-colonialism in the Pacific," (paper presented to the 15th Annual Conference on Feminist Economics, Sydney, July 7–9, 2006).
34. Manjula Luthria, et al., *At Home and Away: Expanding Job Opportunities for Pacific Islanders through Labour Mobility* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006).
35. Claire Slatter, *The Con/Dominion of Vanuatu? Paying the Price of Investment and Land Liberalisation: A Case Study of Vanuatu's Tourism Industry* (Auckland: Oxfam New Zealand, 2006).
36. Grynberg, *Towards a New Pacific Regionalism*, 74.
37. Its signatories were: Council of Pacific Education (COPE), Disabled Peoples International (DPI), Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC), Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women, Foundation of the People's of the South Pacific International (FSPI), Greenpeace-Pacific, South Pacific Oceanic Council of Trade Unions (SPOCTU), Pacific Concerns Resource Centre (PCRC), Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), Pacific Foundation for the Advancement of Women (PACFAW), Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association (PINA), Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organizations (PIANGO), World Council of Churches (WCC)-Pacific, and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). All except FWCC are regional NGOs.
38. "Communique: Pacific Civil Society Meeting on Trade Negotiations, Nadi, Fiji, June 13–16, 2006," <http://www.pacificplan.org> (accessed February 20, 2008).
39. See Claire Slatter, "Treading Water in Rapids? Non-Governmental Organisations and Resistance to Neoliberalism in Pacific Island States," in *Globalisation and Governance in the Pacific Islands*, Australian National University E-Press (Canberra, December 2006), http://epress.anu.edu.au/ssgm/global_gov/mobile_devices/ch02.html (accessed February 20, 2008), for a fuller discussion of Pacific NGOs and resistance to neoliberalism in the Pacific Islands.
40. Ibid.
41. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), *The Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional*

- Cooperation and Integration*, October 18, 2006,
<http://www.pacificplan.org/tiki-page.php?pageName=Pacific+Plan+Documents> (accessed February 20, 2008).
42. *Pacific Beat*, University of the South Pacific 6, no. 1, February 27, 2006.
43. AusAid, "Gender and the Pacific Plan," in *The Pacific Plan: The Way Forward*,
http://www.pacificplan.org/tiki-download_file.php?fileId+158 (accessed February 20, 2008).
44. Ibid.
45. OHCHR, *Discussion paper—Ratification of International Human Rights Treaties: Added Value for the Pacific Region*, November 28, 2006, initial draft by P. Imrana Jalal, Human Rights Advisor, Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT/UNDP) for the OHCHR Regional Office for the Pacific, Suva.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.