

# Transforming the Regional Architecture: New Players and Challenges for the Pacific Islands

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## I S S U E S

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**S U M M A R Y** Growing debates over the mandate and capacity of regional institutions in the Pacific highlight the complex and cluttered agenda facing island leaders. The Pacific Islands Forum, with a new secretary general and Framework on Pacific Regionalism, is working to forge collective positions among its 16 members. But fundamental policy differences over climate change, trade, and decolonization reinforce the sentiment among islanders that Australia and New Zealand should play a less dominant role within the Forum. The current question of Fiji's reintegration into the Forum overshadows deeper structural changes across the region: Island nations are increasingly looking to nontraditional development partners and using mechanisms outside the Forum. Meanwhile, looming decisions on climate and self-determination seem destined to alienate powerful friends. Pacific islanders want to set the agenda within their own institutions, and are finding it increasingly difficult to paper over contested visions for the future.

Governments and citizens across the Pacific islands are debating whether the existing network of regional intergovernmental organizations is capable of addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

With an increasingly complex global agenda, the institutions that make up the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific face significant problems.<sup>1</sup> There is widespread contention over leadership and governance; the inability of current trade, aid, and economic policies to address poverty; increasing assertiveness by citizens who want to contribute to regional policy; and the transformative impact of climate change on vulnerable economies and environments.

Much of the debate focuses on the Pacific Islands Forum, the political institution that links Australia, New Zealand, and 14 independent island nations. Even though they are the key donors for the Forum, Australia and (to a lesser extent) New Zealand have a growing number of policy interests that diverge from those of their island neighbors, making it difficult to forge a regional consensus. Island states are increasingly looking to “nontraditional” development partners and using mechanisms outside the Forum. Many innovative policies are being promoted through the Pacific Small Island Developing States group or subregional organizations such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Polynesian Leaders Group and Micronesian Chief Executives’ meetings.

Adding significantly to this mix of tension and debate are changing regional dynamics, the role of new development partners, and Fiji’s status within the Pacific Islands Forum. The focus on Fiji’s regional role overshadows more fundamental policy differences between island states and the two largest Forum members, Australia and New Zealand—differences that will continue to drive the transformation of regional institutions.

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### Challenges for Regional Institutions

Much of the regionalism debate has focused on the issue of leadership, especially within the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. The mandate and functioning of the secretariat has been sharply critiqued in reviews of its 2005 Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration. After widespread consultation, a team led by former PNG Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta produced a frank critique of the regional architecture in 2013, describing the region as “at the crossroads.”<sup>2</sup>

Morauta was especially critical of the Pacific Plan, stating: “It is very difficult to see how the Pacific Plan or the processes surrounding it are—now—driving regional integration with the scope, pace and scale intended in its original framing. Confidence in the Pacific Plan and some of the institutions around it has fallen to the point where some observers question their survival.”<sup>3</sup>

The ascension in 2014 of Papua New Guinea’s Dame Meg Taylor to the position of Forum secretary general has generated new momentum, as has the replacement of the Pacific Plan by a new Framework on Pacific Regionalism.<sup>4</sup> For Taylor, “regionalism had lost its politics under the Pacific Plan,” while the new Framework provides “a process for identifying the region’s public policy priorities.”<sup>5</sup>

Taylor argues that the regional context is rapidly being transformed: “There is unprecedented interest by a wide range of external actors in our region—some new, some old, and all combined to present a crowded and complex geopolitical landscape. In addition, our regional architecture is more complex and varied than it once was. Part of this complexity arises from the way in which the regional architecture is governed and financed.”<sup>6</sup>

Most Forum Island Countries depend on Official Development Assistance. They have been buffeted by the recent restructuring of aid programs from long-term donors like Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (which have all merged independent development agencies into their foreign affairs departments). Debates over aid effectiveness have refocused attention on remittances, climate financing, innovative funding sources such as currency transfer levies, and the possibility of obtaining grants or loans from “nontraditional” development partners.

This mood for reform is underpinned by concern that regional frameworks are dominated by donors and technocrats, rather than national governments. This is a significant contrast to past decades, when island leaders drove collective diplomacy on self-determination, nuclear testing, fisheries, the law of the sea, and the creation of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, often in the face of opposition by great and powerful friends.

Debate over the mandate and capacity of members of the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific comes at a time when they must carry regional perspectives into international debates. Island nations are working to carry their own policies into global summits over climate change, the post-2008 crisis

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in neoliberal economics, and the adoption of new targets to replace the Millennium Development Goals.

Many of these global debates take place within institutions where island states are not members (such as the G-20). For this reason, Pacific island countries have sought alternative alliances to advance their agendas, for example with the Alliance of Small Island States or the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States, as well as expanded trade and political ties with emerging Asian economies.

The strengthening of the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) caucus at the United Nations, and its formal integration into the Asia group within the UN system, has created an important platform (Australia and New Zealand are members of the Western European and Others group, rather than the dynamic Asia-PSIDS group). Fiji's successful application to join the Non-Aligned Movement in 2011 and appointment as chair of the G-77 plus China group during 2013 (an unprecedented status for an island nation) highlights this international assertiveness.

In response to these changes, US diplomats have argued for greater engagement by Washington in the islands region in order to strengthen regional institutions and enhance relationships with key allies like Australia and New Zealand.<sup>7</sup> They seek a regional architecture flexible enough to respond to the material and non-material flows—of money, information, weapons, goods, drugs, and people—that are transforming the region.

The policies of the ANZUS allies, however, are often part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Gestures like the Pacific-American Climate Fund are a derisory response to the United States' historic responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions. Fundamental differences over climate change, trade, and decolonization will continue to drive debate about transforming the regional architecture and reinforce the growing sentiment that Australia and New Zealand should play a different role within the Forum.

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**Bringing Fiji Inside the Tent**

Since Fiji's September 2014 elections, most Forum leaders have abandoned their public condemnation of Rear Admiral Voreqe Bainimarama, who took power in a 2006 coup. But the desire to bring Fiji's newly elected prime minister back into the Forum reflects the belief that it is better to have disagreement inside of the tent than outside of it.

As Greg Fry of the University of the South Pacific (USP) has noted in a recent study of Pacific

regionalism: "Canberra sees Fiji as the hub of the Pacific islands region and regards as crucial Fiji's return to full membership in the Pacific Islands Forum rather than remaining outside the Forum tent fostering an alternative regional institutional architecture."<sup>8</sup>

Despite renewed engagement at official and ministerial levels, Bainimarama suggested in May 2015 that Fiji would only fully rejoin the Forum if Australia and New Zealand were to leave the organization: "I will not participate in any Forum leaders meeting until the issue of the undue influence of Australia and New Zealand and our divergence of views is addressed."<sup>9</sup> In response, the prime ministers of Papua New Guinea and Samoa publicly endorsed ongoing membership for the Forum's two largest members.

Former Fiji Foreign Minister Kaliopate Tavola has argued for a more nuanced transformation of the Forum. Tavola suggests that Australia and New Zealand should not be excluded, but their role within the Forum be transformed, reflecting their status as developed nations with divergent policy priorities. A new regional agreement with the two countries would complement an islands-only Forum, maintaining the bonds created by geography and history.<sup>10</sup>

This transformation will not occur quickly, but is likely to develop over time. Fiji's jousting with Australia and Papua New Guinea over regional leadership will continue, whether or not Prime Minister Bainimarama rejoins the annual Forum leaders retreat. As USP's Fry argues: "The commitment to an independent Pacific regionalism run by Pacific islanders is now a basic tenet of Fiji's foreign policy, which the newly elected Bainimarama government is clearly not prepared to compromise."<sup>11</sup>

Fiji's suspension from Forum activities between 2009 and 2014 certainly accelerated this trend. The Bainimarama government has refocused policy on South-South cooperation, establishing diplomatic relations with developing countries such as South Africa, Brazil, and the United Arab Emirates, and strengthening ties with China, Iran, and India.

The current attention given to Fiji's assertive regional leadership needs some qualification. Despite human rights abuses by post-coup regimes, Fiji has always been a "good international citizen," active in regional organizations, the Commonwealth and the United Nations. Founding Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was a crucial player in the creation of the Pacific Islands Forum and the African, Caribbean, and Pacific grouping (ACP), while Fiji officials played a vital role during negotiations for the first Lomé Convention and the UN Convention

*Developing a regional response to climate change is a core security issue for island states*

on the Law of the Sea. The first secretary general of the International Seabed Authority was Fiji's Satya Nandan. Fijian troops have joined UN peacekeeping operations across the globe.

Moreover, Fiji is not the only proponent of a new "island-centered" regionalism. Roch Wamytan, a leader of the Kanak independence movement in New Caledonia, says: "You see this across the region, especially with the Melanesians but also with the Polynesians and Micronesians. All of us want a certain autonomy and to cease constantly being under the influence of the colonial powers—or even the larger nations like Australia and New Zealand. We want to have a space where we can talk amongst ourselves without each time having to refer to the big countries, each of which has their own interests."<sup>12</sup>

Many other Pacific leaders have played a role in asserting alternative island agendas: advocacy by low-lying atoll nations on global climate policy, the transformation of regional fisheries policy through the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, or the successful UN General Assembly resolution in May 2013, initiated by the Pacific Small Island Developing States, to reinscribe French Polynesia on the UN list of non-self-governing territories.

Current debates about Fiji overshadow more significant structural changes in the political ecology of the region. Sandra Tarte of the University of the South Pacific argues that a series of intersecting changes "constitute a deeper transformation, not just of the regional architecture, but of the regional order itself."<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the Forum, all regional institutions are in flux, with competing pressures on their mandates and structures. These tensions will be exacerbated in the future, as fundamental policy differences with allies like Australia, New Zealand, France, and the United States come into conflict with their dominant role in regional financing and security.

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### **Climate Change**

Developing a regional response to climate change is a core security issue for island states. Prime Minister Bainimarama has highlighted this issue as at the heart of tensions between Australia and island neighbors: "As we see it, Australia and New Zealand have been put to the test on climate change and been found wanting. It should be no surprise that we have formed the view that at the very least, their position as full members of our island nation Forum needs to be questioned, reexamined and redefined. They

simply do not represent our interests as we face this critical matter of survival."<sup>14</sup>

He is not alone in this critique. At the 2014 UN Climate Summit, Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Tony de Brum stated: "Probably one of the most frustrating events of the past year for Pacific islanders is Australia's strange behavior when it comes to climate change. . . . Australia is a member of the Pacific Islands Forum and Australia is a Pacific island, a big island, but a Pacific island. It must recognize that it has a responsibility."<sup>15</sup>

In the past, Forum communiqués have found suitable language to paper over these differences. Pacific leaders have often compromised their support for Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) climate policies in order to placate Australian and New Zealand prime ministers. Today, this compromise is becoming harder, as Canberra works with other industrialized nations to systematically challenge positions advanced by AOSIS during climate negotiations (Canberra has opposed plans to limit subsidies to the coal industry and actively lobbies against AOSIS policy on loss and damage).<sup>16</sup>

Pacific governments are under increasing pressure from their own citizens to respond—from the Pacific Climate Warriors who have blockaded Australian coal ports, to the call for action by Marshallese poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner at the 2014 UN Climate Summit (which Australian Prime Minister Abbott refused to attend).<sup>17</sup> Even an outspoken climate advocate like President Anote Tong of Kiribati has been criticized by young i-Kiribati for the gap between rhetoric and action.<sup>18</sup>

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### **Tensions Over Neoliberalism**

This failure of OECD nations to recognize the "special and differential" status of vulnerable island states is repeated in regional trade policy.

From the early 1990s, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States have advocated a neoliberal ideology of trade liberalization to promote economic growth in the islands. Advocacy for the "Washington Consensus" has supported the corporatization and privatization of state-owned enterprises, cuts in public sector employment, the introduction of value-added taxes, and policies to promote greater foreign investment in key industries.

Despite significant investment of time and resources in regional trade negotiations, the development of a comprehensive regional Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the European Union and Pacific members of the ACP has foundered, even

though negotiations were supposed to be completed in 2007. For the PACER-Plus trade agreement with Australia and New Zealand, widespread criticism of the Forum Secretariat's role in negotiations led to the creation of the Office of the Chief Trade Advisor in Vanuatu. Recent Australian concessions on labor market access have now led to significant progress on the legal text of the treaty.

Regional trade expert Ambassador Kaliopate Tavola has noted the disparity of economic power in these trade negotiations: "ANZ are developed countries, members of the OECD that are well-resourced and affluent; they are fully integrated into the global economy.... They are signatories to the WTO and as such are determined, similar to the other big global traders, to push for free trade and the Washington Consensus. They are generally opposed to preferential trade on which the FICs still pivot their economic development strategies."<sup>19</sup>

Even though countries like Samoa have made extensive efforts to open their economies and improve financial management, the promised increase in foreign direct investment has not followed. Pacific trade negotiators argue that many barriers to growth lie in developed countries. For example, FICs face non-tariff trade barriers such as quarantine regulations or bans on niche exports such as kava and Australia has only slowly increased access for island labor.

Because of this, island governments are looking to new Asian markets and advancing a range of subregional initiatives on trade and labor mobility, including a third phase of the Melanesian Spearhead Group Trade Agreement and the 2014 signing of a Micronesia Trade and Economic Treaty.

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### Investigating Alternatives

"Sustainable development" is a regional buzzword, but in practice it's difficult to implement methods of development appropriate for vulnerable, small island nations.

Many Pacific officials and academics are critiquing neoliberal nostrums of economic growth. There is growing interest in new paradigms suitable for small island developing states such as "green growth," the blue (ocean) economy, and the traditional (village-centered) economy. Around the region, officials are developing alternative indicators for well-being, launching land reform to maintain communal ownership but mobilize resources for development, integrating indigenous

and Western modes of science, and climate-proofing existing aid programs.

Australia remains the largest provider of Official Development Assistance in the southwest Pacific, and France and the United States maintain their strategic influence through massive transfers to their colonial territories and the US Compact states in Micronesia. But the terrain is changing with the presence of new donors from Asia and the Middle East, who make small but significant interventions through grants, soft loans, or technical assistance. Meanwhile, hundreds of islanders are being trained as medical officers in Cuba; government officials are travelling to China, Korea, or Indonesia to investigate the role of state-owned enterprises and capital controls in the economy; provincial and national governments in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and New Caledonia are developing joint ventures with transnational corporations from China and Korea.

The significance of these new players, however, should not be exaggerated. Pacific island countries continue to welcome aid from Western allies, the World Bank, and Asian Development Bank. And Australia and New Zealand have also welcomed regional involvement by new donors and sought to coordinate aid standards through trilateral development projects such as a China-New Zealand-Cook Islands water supply program, a Papua New Guinea-China-Australia project on malaria control, or New Zealand cooperation with Cuba and island nations on certification of doctors.

US diplomats and scholars often survey the rise of new players through the prism of defense and security, trying to refocus Washington's attention on Beijing's strategic engagement with the Pacific islands. US Defense Department analyst Tamara Renee Shie suggests that "should the United States continue to remain passive in the face of a growing Chinese presence, China may not only woo the South Pacific, but possibly win it."<sup>20</sup>

Other analysts have been more measured in their analysis of China's strategic influence, including Jian Yang who argues that "China's policy towards the South Pacific is not mainly driven by its security strategy."<sup>21</sup> To counter perceptions of Chinese expansionism, they highlight domestic constraints, such as energy and environmental management, proletarian labor discontent, and unresolved national questions in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

In the future, however, contact with nontraditional players will be used to leverage better deals with Western partners. The US\$50 billion Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiated by

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China provides options for countries that have relied on the Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility, funded by the ADB, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the European Union. Washington's lobbying to stop Australia, Japan, and Indonesia from participating in the founding meeting of the AIIB further isolates traditional donors in a region desperate for new infrastructure.<sup>22</sup>

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### **Engaging with Business and Civil Society**

Beyond regional intergovernmental organizations, there are also Pacific-wide church, community, and business networks, including the Pacific Conference of Churches, the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations, and the Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation.

Agencies and donors associated with the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP) have long talked about the importance of engaging with civil society, but most NGOs are tired of token consultations designed to ratify existing agendas. A challenge for regional organizations is to develop sustained, well-resourced, and ongoing engagement with a diverse array of community and business organizations across the region.

With the Forum Secretariat still struggling to cope with this diversity, new fora for cooperation are being established, including the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). Founded in 2013, PIDF grew out of Fiji's "Engaging with the Pacific" meetings, which were designed to breach the isolation of the post-coup Bainimarama regime. The PIDF meets a regional need by involving governments, businesses, and NGOs on an equal footing.

Sandra Tarte has noted: "The format of the PIDF conference combined an unconventional mix of diplomatic protocol and creative informality. This owed much to the makeup of the participants: from state leaders and politicians to academics, business leaders, diplomats and civil society representatives."<sup>23</sup>

The Forum Secretariat was the only key CROP agency not represented at the PIDF inaugural summit. However, Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Taylor has now met with PIDF officials, noting that "everybody's got a role to play as long as it's constructive."<sup>24</sup> The PIDF may well evolve into a venue for a range of organizations to promote culturally appropriate, sustainable development that meets the interests of island communities.

### **Regional Boundaries and Self-determination**

The regional architecture will continue to be stressed by debates over self-determination and political independence, one of the central pillars of Forum activity in the first two decades after its founding in 1971.

Six Pacific territories remain on the UN list of non-self-governing territories: New Caledonia and French Polynesia (under French administration), Tokelau (New Zealand), Pitcairn (United Kingdom), Guam and American Samoa (United States). Across the region there are also "second order" self-determination struggles in post-colonial states such as Bougainville (Papua New Guinea), Rapanui (Chile), and West Papua (Indonesia).

There are many economic, demographic, and strategic barriers to decolonization. The ethnic diversity and small size of some territories is a constraint, and many people welcome immigration rights and the financial benefits of territorial status. Beyond this, Paris and Washington have long ignored UN criticism of their colonial policies, prioritizing strategic military deployments in Guam and New Caledonia or control of territorial Exclusive Economic Zones at a time when seabed mining is the new economic frontier.

The Pacific Islands Forum has developed new policies on engagement with the territories. Following the end of French nuclear testing, New Caledonia (1999) and French Polynesia (2004) gained Forum observer status, then both upgraded to "associate membership" in 2006. Tokelau upgraded its 2005 observer status to associate membership in 2014. Other nations remain as Forum observers, including Timor-Leste (2002), Wallis and Futuna (2006) and the US dependencies of Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the North Marianas (2011).

Despite this regional engagement, Australia's strategic partnerships with France and the United States have limited the Forum's capacity to develop a concrete program to advance decolonization. For this reason, island leaders have increasingly used other mechanisms to take diplomatic initiatives. Two recent examples are the work of Pacific Small Island Developing States ambassadors for the reinscription of French Polynesia at the UN General Assembly and the decision of the June 2015 Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) summit to grant observer status to the United Liberation Movement of West Papua, alongside Indonesia as an associate member.<sup>25</sup>

The issue of self-determination will soon be forced back onto the regional agenda, where it was central in the 1970s and 1980s. Under the 1998 Noumea Accord, New Caledonia is scheduled to hold a

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referendum on self-determination by late 2018. Following elections in May 2015 for the Autonomous Bougainville Government, there is a five-year window for a referendum to determine a new political status.

Indonesia's increased engagement in the MSG will create ongoing political tensions in regional networks, especially as people across Melanesia use social media to highlight Indonesian human rights abuses. (Papua New Guinea politician Sam Basil has plaintively complained that advocates should stop inundating parliamentarians' Facebook pages with gruesome photos of Indonesian atrocities in West Papua.<sup>26</sup>)

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### **Large Ocean States**

Increasingly, Pacific island countries are placing the oceans at the center of regional frameworks, identifying as "large ocean countries" rather than small island states. The launching of the Pacific Oceans Alliance by the Forum Secretariat and Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program in 2014 provides a significant mechanism to address regional concerns over the conservation, management, and exploitation of fisheries and seabed minerals.

The 2014 Forum leaders meeting in Palau focused on oceans, fisheries, and sustainable development, providing an important springboard toward the September 2014 Small Island Developing States (SIDS) global summit in Apia. The Apia Summit adopted the SAMOA Pathway, which updates action plans from previous SIDS summits in Barbados (1994) and Mauritius (2005) and maps out new international frameworks on climate, sustainable development, and aid cooperation.

At the same time, environmental groups such as the Pew Trust, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the World Wildlife Fund are working directly with national governments in Kiribati, Cook Islands, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Palau to develop marine sanctuaries and ocean protected areas. The green groups provide new avenues for finance, information, and advocacy outside traditional intergovernmental mechanisms.

### **Finding a Place to Talk**

When island leaders created the Pacific Islands Forum in 1971, they were seeking a place to freely discuss their concerns about trade, self-determination, and French nuclear testing. The early incorporation of Australia and New Zealand was recognition of the

realities of geography and shared history (as well as a crucial source of finance). But decades on, the initial equality between Australia, New Zealand, and their smaller neighbors has waned.

For many years, island officials have argued that ANZ financial contributions to the members of the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific drive policy in ways that disadvantage island nations. A 2005 review of regional institutions diplomatically noted: "Sometimes the confrontational style of political management practiced in Canberra and Wellington has intruded on the Forum and grated upon Pacific Island sensibilities. On occasion, the strategic priorities of Australia and New Zealand have been too openly assumed by their representatives to be also those of the island states."<sup>27</sup>

The 1970s tradition of informally forging a regional consensus has been overwhelmed by a growing agenda, a complex interaction of issues, and an expanded range of players eager to reengage with the Forum Secretariat as a regional hub. Major meetings have become a circus. Some overseas delegations outnumber participants from small island states. There are innumerable side events, dueling press conferences, and an ever-expanding number of Post-Forum Dialogue Partners arriving with their own media minders and celebrity dignitaries. Forum Secretary General Taylor acknowledges: "Presently, it is an uphill battle for the leaders to articulate and put forward their own collective agenda at the regional level when there are so many actors and partners at the table."<sup>28</sup>

Alongside the creation of a new Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting, the Forum Secretariat hopes that the new Framework on Pacific Regionalism will help clear a cluttered agenda, narrow the number of items placed before overwhelmed leaders, delegate tasks to regional ministerial meetings and provide a mechanism for non-state actors to engage in policy formulation. Leaders will need to make a political commitment to act regionally and build both a more inclusive secretariat and a more effective post-Forum dialogue.

It is unlikely that this transformation will proceed smoothly. There are looming decisions on climate and self-determination that will alienate powerful friends and exacerbate concerns about whether Pacific islanders can set the agenda within their own institutions. As countries move toward negotiation of a global climate treaty and forge new Sustainable Development Goals, regional institutions will find it increasingly difficult to paper over contested visions for the future.

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**Nic Maclellan** works as a journalist and researcher in the Pacific islands. He is a correspondent with *Islands Business* magazine (Fiji) and contributes to other regional media. He is co-author of: *La France dans le Pacifique: de Bougainville à Moruroa (Editions La Découverte, Paris)*; *After Moruroa: France in the South Pacific (Ocean Press, New York and Melbourne)*; and *Kirisimasi (PCRC, Suva)*.

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