

The UN Ocean Conference Regional Preparatory Meeting and Its Implications for Pacific Islands Countries: Some Observations

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) [Ocean Conference](#) will be co-hosted by Fiji and Sweden in New York this June. This In Brief aims to critically assess regional preparations for the conference to date. I provide personal observations as someone who participated in the preparatory meetings, and who has worked on oceans and fisheries issues in the Pacific islands region for 29 years. This In Brief is one in a series on Ocean Governance – a [collaborative research initiative](#) between the State, Society and Governance program at The Australian National University and the University of the South Pacific.

The UN Ocean Conference will provide the global community an opportunity to focus on [Goal 14](#) of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), which articulates principles that will shape global ocean management. The conference should also provide Pacific island countries (PICs) with a platform to showcase their unique contribution to oceans governance and management. In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals replaced the Millennium Development Goals, which for 15 years provided the framework against which developing countries measured their policies.

Setting the Groundwork

‘We cannot afford to fail’; ‘this is the last real opportunity that we have to make a difference’. These were some of the statements uttered in March 2017, when Pacific island leaders met in Suva for the Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Ocean Conference. The outcome document of the meeting is called the [Call to Action](#).

The preparatory efforts were organised around three working groups: marine pollution and environmental protection; climate change and coastal zone management; and fisheries and economic growth. The working groups comprised representatives of the UN Environment Programme in Samoa and the Council of Regional Organisations in the

Pacific (CROP), including regional technical bodies such as the Pacific Community and Suva-based civil society organisations. The working groups produced draft strategic priorities to be used as pointers by the Pacific island leaders in the development of the Call to Action paper. The Office of the Pacific Oceans Commissioner and the Secretariat of the Pacific Islands Development Forum also provided a focal point for the preparation of the analytical work that informed the leaders’ discussions.

There was, however, some confusion among participants about the organisation of the Regional Preparatory Meeting and the documentation of the outcomes of the leaders’ meeting. There were concerns about the lack of transparency of aspects of the proceedings as Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) insisted on some closed sessions. For example, after the first day of workshopping, PSIDS representatives convened a closed briefing session to develop a previously prepared draft of Call to Action, excluding PICs that do not have missions in New York, as well as civil society groups and CROP agencies.

While this can be seen as a time-saving approach, it pre-empts regional preparatory dialogues on a full range of possible actions. This caught some PICs representatives by surprise and confused participants about roles and responsibilities and who was shaping and coordinating the regional input.

Improving Process

The outcome statement from the Regional Preparatory Meeting was finalised by a group of officials during the plenary while leaders met to make their high-level statements. Again, conspicuously absent from the drafting committee were representatives from the CROP agencies, including the Office

of the Pacific Oceans Commissioner, although it is recognised that this was a meeting of government officials. It was notable that Australia, who had been excluded from the PSIDS meetings and the initial briefings undertaken by Fiji in Suva, participated in the drafting committee. Yet the Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Development Forum — an organisation that is a regional champion of the 'blue economy' and the UN Ocean Conference process — was not allowed on the drafting committee. When the final draft outcome statement was produced and cleared by the leaders, only the Pacific Ocean Commissioner and government representatives received copies; the participating civil society organisations and CROP agencies did not.

Moving from Development Aid to Assertion

In terms of policy positions, more innovative thinking is needed. Missing from the current dialogue on oceans are policy proposals that can generate opportunities to promote self-reliance and economic independence. While accessing finance to secure better ocean governance is necessary, if not well managed it can be disempowering. Often PICs seek funds from international forums for climate change and sustainable development action, but in the case of oceans, a more assertive and independent approach could be taken. The best way PICs could manage the region's ocean resources and marine environments is to integrate their Economic Exclusion Zones (EEZs) and the ocean environment into their domestic economies — developing ocean resources and using revenues generated from them to manage and enforce conservation and extraction.

There are steps that the PICs can take without international financial assistance. These include integrating their ocean EEZ and their ecosystems services into national accounting systems. For example, countries that are Parties to the Nauru Agreement have just initiated a study of ways to capitalise on the [Vessel Day Scheme](#) (VDS). This move is unprecedented and innovative; it could have a transformative effect on the VDS operation and funding. For now, the VDS is largely viewed as the lien of fisheries officials who enjoy the power of selling days, but if viewed as a national asset of PICs, the value of the ecosystem services provided by the oceans would become an asset in their national accounting systems. This would demonstrate that the oceans have value worthy of protection. Such innovative policy interventions are not yet part of the regional preparatory conference discussions.

PICs should review the way they perceive themselves and the oceans. They are the custodians of a billion-dollar natural capital asset that they could preserve as a cherished cultural and geographic asset, as well as a valuable source of income to support development today, and into the future.

Conclusion

In my view, the coordination of the regional preparatory process and input for the June UN Ocean Conference could have been improved and made more inclusive. For example, there could have been better communications between the co-chair and the various organisations to ensure inclusive regional coordination. The current dominance by the PSIDS runs the risk of the agenda-setting process excluding key players, and possibly being open to undue influence by foreign interns and advisers who work in some of the Pacific missions in New York.

To sustain ocean ecosystems and economies, more far-reaching, hard-hitting and novel thinking is required. PICs sit on the largest aquatic continent in the world, whose net worth can be measured in the billions, yet they are not fully benefitting from their natural ocean capital. Pacific island leaders and their advisers should not be advocating for more aid, but for more technical know-how on ways their economies can be better integrated with their largest geographic feature — namely the oceans — to create self-reliance.

Author Notes

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