

## The Pacific Islands Development Forum: A Shaky Future?

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### Introduction

Fiji Prime Minister Bainimarama recently announced that he will attend this year's Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders' Meeting in Tuvalu. This represents a shift in Fiji's relations with the PIF: Bainimarama has boycotted the PIF since Fiji's suspension from the group was lifted in 2014, citing concerns over alleged Australian and New Zealand dominance of the organisation. Bainimarama's re-engagement with the PIF raises questions about the future of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), the organisation established in 2013. This analysis explores the PIDF's history and what Prime Minister Bainimarama's decision to attend the PIF Leaders' Meeting means for the future of the PIDF.

### The Evolution of the Pacific Islands Development Forum

The PIDF was established at Fiji's initiative in 2013. It followed an 'Engagement with the Pacific' conference hosted by Fiji in 2012. Both the meeting and the establishment of the PIDF represented a new form of inclusive and participatory dialogue in the region, one that was not confined to governments but included civil society actors and stakeholders on an equal footing with governments. They did not include Australia and New Zealand, or other metropolitan states with a stake in the Pacific.

According to the PIDF's [strategic profile](#), its key purpose is to 'accelerat[e] the integration of the three pillars of sustainable development (environment, social, and economic) to balance the pursuit of economic growth against the needs of societies and the sustainability of the environment'.

The government of Fiji underwrote the PIDF's establishment, providing it with seed funding, premises and staff for its secretariat. Fiji hosted the first three PIDF summits in 2013, 2014 and 2015. The PIDF developed an international profile and, on paper at least, the usual architecture of a regional body — a leaders council, executive board, senior officials' committee, a secretariat, a portfolio of memorandums of

understanding with 'partner organisations', a logo and a website. In 2016, the PIDF achieved observer status at the UN General Assembly.

While Fiji's motivation for establishing the PIDF may have been spawned in part by its diplomatic isolation following the 2006 coup, it nevertheless seemed to many at the time that the PIDF was an idea whose time had come. Commentators spoke of the PIDF as evidence of a 'New Pacific diplomacy' (Fry and Tarte 2016), as challenging the traditional (and, some argued, increasingly stale) regional institutions that had operated for several decades.

It remains true that until the PIDF's establishment there was no formal mechanism for Pacific Island leaders to meet as a wider group of countries transcending their different cultural designations. Sub-regional bodies had certainly proliferated, yet the PIDF offered the prospect of being the only venue for Pacific Island leaders — alongside civil society and private sector representatives — to focus collectively on development issues unique to them, such as climate change.

Recent years, however, do not provide much confidence about the PIDF's future. The only PIDF summit to be held outside Fiji was hosted by Solomon Islands in 2016; it was poorly attended. No summits were held in 2017 or 2018. It would seem that the PIDF is running out of steam. What might explain that?

A first point to make is that the PIDF never succeeded in gaining universal acceptance by Pacific Island countries. Key countries such as Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Samoa have never committed to the PIDF. Even among the membership, commitment to the PIDF seems to be in retreat. The 2016 summit was attended by three heads of government (including the host and Fiji), with six other governments represented by ministers, special envoys or diplomats. It is understood that one of the reasons no summits were held in 2017 or 2018 is that no member state was willing to host one.

A second set of issues has bedeviled the PIDF over its short history: difficulty securing sustainable funding, and the problem

of establishing a focused work program. Funding is critical in ensuring the survival of an organisation. One weakness of the PIDF is that it has relied to a large extent on Fiji to subsidise its budget; a secure and reliable long-term funding stream has not been established. Linked to funding is the work program and, in this respect, the PIDF has sought to involve itself in climate change, the Sustainable Development Goals and the blue economy, among other issues. Yet these are already covered by existing regional organisations. The PIDF has not succeeded in demonstrating that its unique tripartite dialogue and consultative structure offers genuine value-add to the region's handling of these issues.

It can also be argued that the PIDF has been a victim of its early success, in the sense that it has been at least one of the factors contributing to the reform and reinvigoration of the PIF itself. The PIF's Framework for Pacific Regionalism (2014) sought, inter alia, to open up Forum processes and agenda-setting to greater public and civil society participation; indeed, PIF Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor has made this one of the trademarks of her term in office. Equally, the PIDF's advocacy of the green/blue Pacific economy has recently been taken up (with a distinct emphasis on the 'Blue Pacific') wholeheartedly by the Forum.<sup>1</sup> Finally, at the 2018 Forum meeting, leaders agreed on a revised funding formula that will, by 2021, ensure that Australia and New Zealand contribute no more than 49 per cent of the PIF budget (and not two-thirds as has been the case until now). This reform addresses, both symbolically and practically, one of Prime Minister Bainimarama's express concerns with the way the Forum has been run. In this regard, one could also argue that the new Pacific diplomacy brought about by the PIDF has been successful (Fry and Tarte 2016).

## Conclusion

The PIDF can mount a credible case that it has, in its short history, at least influenced the way more established regional institutions, particularly the Forum, operate. But it has never achieved take-off in its own right. In the eyes of many Pacific Islanders, it has never shaken off the perception that it was established as a vehicle for Fiji's foreign policy and is controlled by Fiji. In the current situation, Prime Minister Bainimarama's decision to re-engage with the PIF can only reinforce doubts about the future of the PIDF. Organisations are notoriously hard to kill off and the PIDF may retain vestigial value as a platform for Fiji's leadership ambitions in the region. Even so, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that its larger purpose has been served.

The PIDF's story may also provide lessons for institution-building in the Pacific, especially when considered alongside

the success of organisations such as the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) Office over a similar period. The latter has benefitted from a narrowly-focused agenda and work program, and a pragmatic and streamlined administrative structure (for instance outsourcing major services and functions). This has seen the capitalisation of PNA's signature Vessel Day Scheme soar from US\$60 million to US\$470 million in only six years. By contrast, there is a case for arguing that the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) has been suffering similar challenges to the PIDF: an overly-ambitious work program combined with the lack of a sustainable and reliable funding streams. Both the PIDF and the MSG demonstrate that political support alone is not enough to ensure the sustainability of an organisation.

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## Authors notes

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## Endnotes

1. For a fuller discussion of this, see Dornan, M. et al. 2018. What's in a term? 'Green growth' and the 'blue-green economy' in the Pacific Islands. *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 5(3):408–25.

## References

- Fry and Tarte 2016. *The New Pacific Diplomacy*. Canberra: ANU Press.
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