Expanding the conversation: public engagement during the Pacific Plan review

By Tess Newton Cain and Seini O'Connor
25 February 2014

When the Pacific Plan was first adopted in 2005, it was envisaged that—as a 'living document'—it should evolve to meet the changing needs of Pacific people. The recent Pacific Plan Review was intended to help in this by reflecting on contemporary regional issues and reconsidering regional priorities.

From the outset, the Rt. Hon. Sir Mekere Morauta and his team announced [pdf] their intention for the review to be 'open, consultative and iterative'. They set out an ambitious, multi-stakeholder consultation schedule spanning all 16 of the Forum's member countries and its two associates (New Caledonia and French Polynesia). In addition, they invited members of the public to make written submissions, opening a website portal to accept these from January to August 2013.

The Review team received more than 70 public submissions. Individuals, civil society groups, academics, regional organisations and others made them. A large number of them were, as has been noted elsewhere, framed in terms of seeking to promote particular interests by partial groups or individuals. However, others reflected on the nature of Pacific regionalism, perceived failings of the Pacific Plan in previous iterations, and development challenges faced by Pacific island countries individually and the region as a whole.

As part of an integrated and ongoing engagement and communications process, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (which managed the review process) commissioned a digest [pdf] of the submissions. The digest contains a summary of each submission. The summaries include key messages. In addition, each submission was analysed and 'translated' to identify proposals for one or more of these areas:

- Regional Values: aspirations; foundational concepts on which a plan for the future can be based; cross-cutting issues including human rights and the preservation of culture and environment.
- Priority Regional Actions: strategic directions for the next decade; common priorities and shared concerns.
- New Forms of Regional Integration: proposals for innovative ways for countries to

work together, including new institutions and regional groupings.
- Process Improvements: how we can do things better; how roles can be better defined; how relationships can be enhanced and conversations be made more inclusive.
- Proposed Changes to the Pacific Plan's Composition: language, terminology and the text of the revised Pacific Plan.

The submissions digest is rich with voices from around the region, and will be an important reference in the development of a new 'framework for Pacific regionalism' proposed to replace the current Pacific Plan. In their final report—drawing from the original submissions and their consultations—Sir Mekere and his team suggested this framework include a statement of regional values and a clear pathway towards new forms of integration between Pacific countries.

However, the new framework has yet to be written—or to be fully endorsed by Pacific governments and their people. In early May, many Forum Leaders are expected to gather in Cook Islands to deliberate on the review's recommendations. If they accept them, the conversation on the future of Pacific regionalism is likely to intensify. In the meantime, the Forum Secretariat is encouraging the public to get involved early to shape discussions.

Disclosure: Seini O'Connor is the Pacific Plan Adviser at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. Her office managed the Pacific Plan Review and the submissions handling process, and oversaw the production of the submissions digest. Tess Newton Cain is the communications consultant contracted by the Forum Secretariat to prepare the digest of public submissions.

About the author/s

Tess Newton Cain
Tess Newton Cain is the Project Lead for the Pacific Hub at the Griffith Asia Institute and is an associate of the Development Policy Centre.

Seini O'Connor
Seini O'Connor is the Pacific Plan Adviser at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS).

Link:
https://devpolicy.org/expanding-the-conversation-public-engagement-during-the-pacific-plan-review-20130225/
Date downloaded: 25 April 2024

Australian National University

The Devpolicy Blog is based at the Development Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.