Whitlam Institute
WITHIN WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY

PACIFIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD

LISTENING TO AUSTRALIA'S ISLAND NEIGHBOURS IN ORDER TO BUILD STRONG, RESPECTFUL AND SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIPS



A Whitlam Institute Research Project

By Peacifica

Dr Tess Newton Cain
James Cox, Dr Geir Henning Presterudstuen

February 2020

ISBN: 978-1-74108-504-4

Copyright: The Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University 2020.

Authored by:

peacifica.

Dr Tess Newton Cain,
James Cox, Dr Geir Henning Presterudstuen

Acknowledgements

In country research team: Melinda Kii, Linda Kenni, Lucrisha Nair

Research volunteers: Mansi Bhatt,
Leona Wedderburn, Claudia Whitaker.

Project advisory group: Chair: Dr Michael Mel (Peacifica, Australian Museum), Dr Nichole Georgeou (WSU), Dr Susanne Schmeidl (Peacifica, UNSW), Leanne Smith (Whitlam Institute), Dr Joanne Wallis (ANU), Marie Yaru

Thanks to Associate Professor Sandra Tarte and Dr Matthew Allen, at University of the South Pacific for hosting the Fiji expert seminar.

Cover Photo by Stefan Armbruster

About Peacifica

Peacifica is a new voice for peace in our region. We are a peacebuilding NGO and advisory that advocates for peace and justice in the Pacific region and works with Pacific islander peacebuilders. We believe that building peaceful societies and promoting a secure and prosperous region is an important and underappreciated challenge, and one in which Australia has a critical role to play.Peacifica is helping Australians and Pacific islanders to work together to realise a peaceful, secure and prosperous Pacific for all.

About the Whitlam Institute

The Whitlam Institute is building a nationally significant institution delivering distinctive, bold and inspiring policy research and programs that promote common ground, inclusive national identity and civic engagement for all Australians. We seek to be recognised across the political spectrum as delivering a nation-building agenda. Whitlam himself charged the Institute to "...help the great and continuing work of building a more equal, open, tolerant and independent Australia."



For more information about the Whitlam Institute, please visit our website: whitlam.org

Table of contents

Acronyms & abbreviations	2
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	7
The Project	9
The Context	13
Findings & Discussion	19
Key Messages & Recommendations	38
References	44

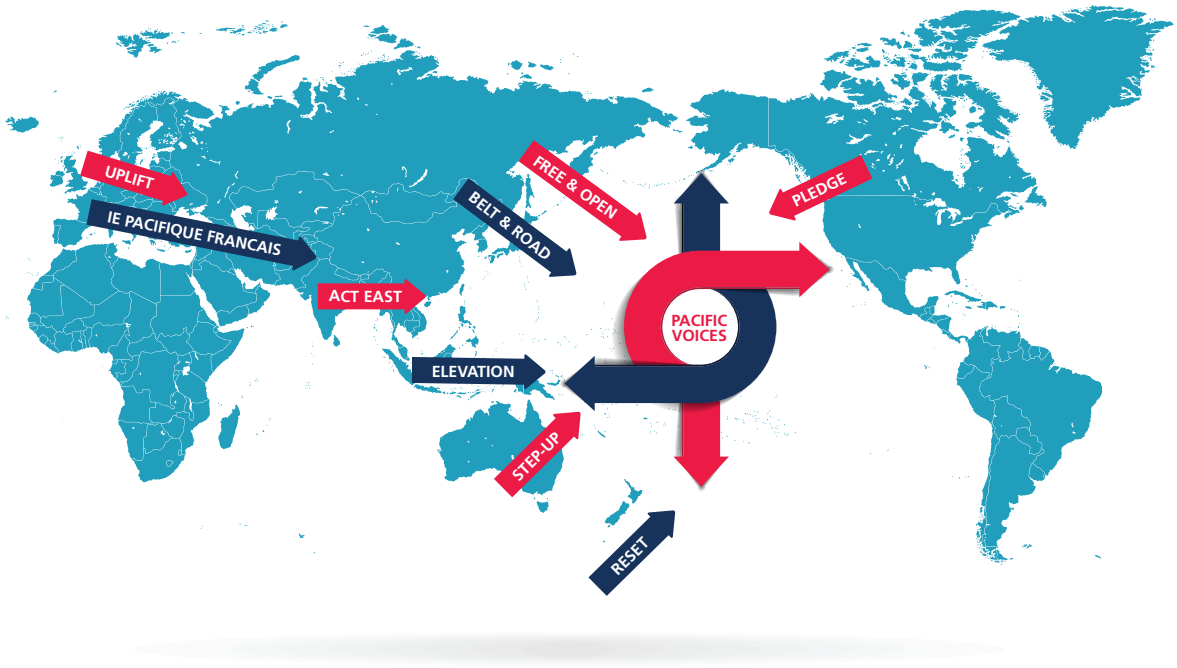
Acronyms & Abbreviations

ANU:	Australian National University
APEC:	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APTC:	Australia Pacific Training Coalition
ASSI:	Australian South Sea Islander(s)
CBO:	Community Based Organisation(s)
CCF:	Citizens' Constitutional Forum
CSO:	Civil Society Organisation(s)
DFAT:	Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade
DSE:	Development Services Exchange
F:	Fiji
FBC:	Fiji Broadcasting Corporation
FBO:	Faith Based Organisation(s)
FG:	Focus Group
KII:	Key Informant Interview
INGO:	International Non-Government Organisation
LDC:	Least Developed Country
MSG:	Melanesian Spearhead Group
NGO:	Non-Government Organisation
NSDP:	National Sustainable Development Plan
ODA:	Overseas Development Assistance
PACER (Plus):	Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations
PIANGO:	Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations
PIDF:	Pacific Islands Development Forum
PIF:	Pacific Islands Forum
PINA:	Pacific Islands News Association
PLS:	Pacific Labour Scheme
RAMSI:	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
RSE:	Recognised Seasonal Employer
SI:	Solomon Islands
SIBC:	Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation
SWP:	Seasonal Workers Program
TA:	Technical Adviser
USP:	University of the South Pacific
V:	Vanuatu

Executive Summary

After a long absence, the world has rediscovered the Pacific. Following this escalation of international interest in the Pacific over the last decade, the region finds itself the subject of as many as a dozen new international initiatives, most notably China's Belt and Road initiative, Australia's Pacific Step-up and the broader Indo-Pacific geostrategic phenomenon.

As these initiatives have proliferated, the Pacific peoples themselves have reclaimed their own voices, heard most prominently in the world's global climate discourse and in the region's own Blue Pacific initiative. But there is a way to go before the region's own voice has equal weight.



Australia's Step-up is one of many international initiatives facing toward the Pacific. A strong Pacific voice is emerging as a counterweight to them.

Australia's Pacific Step-up, while welcome, shares with its international counterparts this weakness: though well-intentioned, it has been conceived as an external initiative. The Whitlam Institute is concerned that Australia's past and emerging engagement in the region pays insufficient attention to Pacific perspectives – not only official positions but also the voices of ordinary people from across the region. The Institute engaged Peacifica to contribute to filling this gap, to learn from a cross-section of Pacific islanders about their perspectives on the world and their place in it and how other countries (notably Australia) can best contribute to their future. This report, and the field interviews and conversations that support it, are the first stage in a dialogue that the Institute and Peacifica hope will continue as a constructive contribution to the well-being of all Pacific people and to the promotion of a secure and prosperous region. We want to see an enhanced and comprehensive Australian foreign policy engagement that can better position Australia as a member of the Pacific community.

The research was conducted in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, three countries with which Australia has deep historical, social and economic connections. Its findings relate specifically to those places, but due to the methodologies employed, some can be inferred with confidence to apply more widely given their prominence across the research sites and broader discourses in the region. We will be taking the findings back to the region to explore these questions further.

The research team, comprising Australian and Pacific island researchers, spent time in the three countries in September and October 2019. Around 150 people from diverse backgrounds participated through a series of focus groups and key informant interviews, followed by expert seminars in November, in Canberra and Suva, at which initial findings were presented and discussed.

Critical to these conversations was the freedom given to participants themselves to identify what was important. The few questions asked by the researchers invited participants to reflect on their hopes for their future and what roles their own governments and people, as well as external ones had to play to realise that future. The team did not ask about climate change, labour migration or aid – all issues came from the participants themselves. From this the research team, led by Dr Tess Newton Cain, identified the key themes and recommendations that emerged from the data.

Key messages

Three key messages emerged from the conversations that comprise this research.

1 **Quality relationships matter more than quantities** of aid, trade or other engagement. Australia does not need to prove itself by giving the most – the country is already recognised as being intrinsic and essential to the Pacific island states. It is this underlying positive disposition that drives the occasionally very strong critique of Australia by its Pacific neighbours. They want relationships that put the concerns of Pacific peoples on a par with those of Australia, that reach beyond the narrow bands of government and civil society, that prioritise local ownership and that recognise our shared histories and identities. This valuing of quality over quantity is reflected in the mismatch between the increasing number of Australian programs, projects and initiatives and the infrequency of their being referenced by the people we listened to.

2 **Values, norms and ways of doing things matter** a great deal to Pacific islanders from Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu. Pacific islanders embody multiple identities from the village to the region, and these inform how they engage with the world, including with Australians. Interacting in sympathy with this 'Pacific Mode' of working together – in all its complexities and commonalities - is essential.

3 **Australia is one of many potential relationships for Pacific islanders**. The domestic concerns of Pacific islanders are connected more than ever before to global ones, notably but not exclusively through the climate crisis. Many participants in the research also recognise the region's geostrategic significance. This recognition of their needs and potential leverage are giving them more urgency and more confidence in working with international partners, chiefly other Pacific states, Australia, New Zealand and China. In this environment Australia's natural advantages are confounded by our inability to engage with the 'Pacific Mode'.

Recommendations

Positive change in Australia's relationship with the region must start with, but is not limited to, the Australian government. Even as the Pacific Step-up has been acknowledged as progress in the right direction, it is only a first step if Australia is to realise the full potential of its Pacific relationships. We recommend action in four areas to put Australia more firmly on that path:

1 **Shift gears on the Step-up:** The research participants see Australian engagement with the region, including the Pacific Step-up, predominantly as unilateral initiatives of Australia. They comprise things that are done **for** or **to** the Pacific, not **with** it. Pacific people are looking for reassurance that Australia shares their concerns and is working alongside them, as an equal partner, to address *shared* challenges. As a start we recommend that the Australian government:

- Convene a regional Partnership Summit, at which diverse participants from civil society, private sector, government, community and churches from across the region can explore themes of most significance to Pacific peoples. For the Australian contingent, strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and participation is essential.

- Deepen relationships beyond the capitals, both in the Pacific states and in Australia. A multiplicity of civil society, sporting, commercial, religious and cultural links are ready to be developed, in some cases building on existing initiatives.

- Improve government, private sector and NGO partnerships by encouraging Australian government agencies, businesses and INGOs to better recognise existing local capacity and support the development of new capacity where requested.

- Encourage INGOs to transfer power to local civil society organisations to increase perceived levels of trust, autonomy and open communication.

2 **Invest in Australia's Pacific Literacy:** Pacific islanders know more about Australia than we do about them. We are in effect stepping up without knowing where we are going. This can be addressed by:

- Promoting knowledge of the Pacific, including its languages, in Australian schools and universities and through mainstream media.[1]

- Developing a 'Pacific Capable' strategy to prepare Australia and Australians to live, work, and socialise with Pacific island people in their own country and in the countries of the region.

- Working with Pacific diaspora communities to build the capacity of government departments and agencies, contractors and INGOs that work in the region.

3 **Get our own house in order:** Pacific islanders look past Australia's coastline when they turn their gaze in our direction, and they see several things that make them uneasy. Among the most prominent of these are the status of Indigenous Australians, climate policy and inequality of trade opportunities. We recommend that Australia:

- Demonstrate a systematic, consistent and constructive long-term approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation in line with the Boe Declaration and the planned 2050 strategy, to be considered at the 51st meeting of Pacific Islands Forum leaders.

- Demonstrate real change in the status of Indigenous Australians. Pacific islanders want to be able to see that Indigenous Australians are visible and active throughout Australian society and that the Australian world-view is informed by Indigenous perspectives and leadership.

1 Some limited tertiary programs and media initiatives exist, but are not enough to meet the need. See the full recommendations for details.

4 **Level the playing field when it comes to access:** Travel to Australia, and doing business here, are perennial headaches for Pacific people. These concerns were raised repeatedly and by participants of all backgrounds. Action in this area would be a potent symbol of Australia's good faith towards the region. We recommend that Australia:

- Make it easier for all Pacific people to travel to and work in Australia through increased access to short-term visas, student and professional exchange programs.
- Prioritise products from the Pacific for regulatory and administrative processes (e.g. biosecurity approval) to get them into Australian markets.
- Hold a regular Pacific Expo in Australia to showcase both primary and value-added products and foster business to business ties.

In aiming to understand Pacific perspectives on the world and Australia's place in the region, this research started with two assumptions and finishes with them being confirmed – but with important lessons. One assumption was that Australia is respected and recognised for its decades-long contribution to the Pacific. The other was that listening to our Pacific neighbours more will lay the foundation for better relationships.

The first lesson for Australia cuts to the heart of our self-image as good mates. Despite Australia's valued history of contribution, the ways in which those we listened to talked about the distance between us, and their sense of sadness as they did so, should trouble anyone who values the idea of Australia as part of the Pacific community. The second lesson is the unexpected realisation that in seeing ourselves through Pacific islander eyes, we Australians will get to know ourselves better. If we want to realise our shared vision of a peaceful and prosperous future, not only must we improve our Pacific island relationships, we also need to work on things at home.



Introduction

'The Pacific' is enjoying a moment of unprecedented international attention. Pacific leaders are at the forefront of global action on the climate emergency and the Blue Pacific[2] is making the region more visible as a global player. Meanwhile, the region is one of many places where the expansion of China and the reaction of other countries is being played out. The region's leaders, for the most part, welcome this increased international interest, but are wary of the underlying geopolitics.

Defining 'the Pacific'

When talking about 'the Pacific' this report is referring to the region known variously as the Pacific islands, the South West Pacific or Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. It includes non-sovereign territories like New Caledonia, but does not include Hawaii.

Many issues that were discussed by the research participants were raised strongly and consistently across the three focus countries. This does not mean that such points can be generalised across the whole region, but it does provide grounds for informed assumptions and further research.

Where necessary this report will make it clear when issues and recommendations are specific to the focus countries or can be extended to the region as a whole.

This upsurge in interest is characterised perhaps more than anything else by a massive imbalance in power between the region and the international community. While the Blue Pacific has the potential for the region to be seen as a more powerful entity in its own right, it is still a new concept. The Pacific remains dwarfed by other international players in everything but geography. Pacific islanders have had little opportunity to articulate their own position or to demonstrate their own knowledge and capabilities in the context of international relations.

It is in this environment that Australia is implementing its Pacific Step-up[3]; and its increased diplomatic, aid[4], investment and military presence is in fact one of the more significant factors at play in the region. As the region's largest and nearest neighbour, and one that in some respects is part of the 'Pacific family', Australia has the opportunity both to strengthen the region's status and forge deep and long-lasting relationships at all levels of society. Australia, the Pacific and New Zealand can aspire to be a truly united Pacific family. More than a step-up, this has the potential to be a coming-together – if we all go about it the right way.

What do ordinary Pacific islanders think about all this? What do they want for their own futures, and what sort of relationships would they like with the rest of the world? And where does Australia in particular fit into this picture? The Whitlam Institute has engaged Peacifica to seek the views of Pacific islanders on these questions. The Institute recognises that the Step-up represents an important opportunity for Australia to demonstrate its role as a constructive regional and global citizen, in the belief that this will benefit not only our Pacific neighbours but also Australia's own strategic, economic and cultural interests. For Peacifica this research is an important contribution to its own mission to promote a more peaceful and secure Pacific region at a time when strategic, environmental and economic factors are increasing the risk of conflict.

This report amplifies the voices of Pacific island people from Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. It brings together the perspectives of around 150 citizens of these countries on the world, the future and their own place in it. In a series of interviews and focus group conversations the participants describe how they would like other countries to work with them and what they need to do themselves to facilitate good international relationships.

The participants, from many walks of life from city, to town, to village, relished the opportunity to talk about these issues – they were keen to speak their mind, in the knowledge that their views would be heard by policy makers in Australia and their own countries.

They are also very keen to know what happens next. They want to know how policymakers will respond to their messages, and how this dialogue will continue. It is in that spirit of dialogue that we offer this report. Its messages are directed primarily at the Australian government to inform the future implementation and refinement of the Pacific Step-up, but we hope they will be equally relevant to other partners and donors and valuable as a tool for Pacific islander civil society and governments. We will be taking the report back to the region through 2020 to continue the dialogue.

2 The Blue Pacific is a narrative developed by the Pacific Island Forum member states. The narrative "highlights the importance of the Pacific taking ownership of its future. [It] speaks to the unique challenges and distinct priorities of each island nation, while also emphasising the collective potential of the region's shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean; recognising our shared ocean identity, ocean geography, and ocean resources." (Tukuitonga 2018]

3 Through the Pacific Step-up, Australia aims "[to take] our partnerships with the Pacific to a new level. We want to work with our Pacific partners to build a Pacific region that is secure strategically, stable economically and sovereign politically." (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019) Various arms of government are involved. See the 'Context' section for more details.

4 In the 2019/2020 budget the amount of aid directed towards the Pacific was $1.4billion, which is 35% of the total (Davidson; 2019)

The Project

This project involved qualitative research into the perspectives of Pacific islanders from Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu on how their countries and Australia can collaborate to realise a mutually beneficial, shared future. The choice of research locations was in part determined by the structural constraints of the project, including limited economic and human resources, which precluded the inclusion of more than three research sites. Given the research team had existing research expertise and local networks in Vanuatu, Fiji and Solomon Islands these emerged as natural target locations. The fact that these three countries all have long-standing structural relationships with Australia as well as distinctly different political histories, geographies and international relations ensured both density of research data and diversity in research themes.

Highlighting our commitment to privileging local perspectives, the project was developed and implemented in collaboration with local research partners in each of the three research countries:

Fiji:	Citizens' Constitutional Forum (CCF), Suva.
Solomon Islands:	Development Services Exchange (DSE), Honiara.
Vanuatu:	Linda Kenni, Development Consultant, Port Vila.

These local partners had continuous input into research design and development of research material, ensuring that the project remained culturally appropriate and in line with local regulations. Our local partners were also instrumental in the recruitment of research participants and in charge of conducting focus groups in their respective countries. They also shared their thinking in relation to the preliminary analysis of the data, which was a key part of the overall project. CCF and Linda Kenni presented in the expert consultations (see below).

The full research team is as shown:

Fiji		
Louchrisha Hussain	Country Liaison	CEO, CCF Fiji
Lucrisha Nair	Researcher	Program Manager, CCF Fiji
Dr Geir Henning Presterudstuen	Researcher	Senior Lecturer in Anthropology, Western Sydney University
Solomon Islands		
Jennifer Wate	Country Liaison	CEO, DSE Solomon Islands
Lucrisha Nair	Researcher	Consultant to DSE Solomon Islands
James Cox	Project Director, Researcher	Executive Director, Peacifica
Vanuatu		
Linda Kenni	Researcher & country liaison	Development Consultant
Dr Tess Newton Cain	Research Director, Researcher	Adjunct Associate Professor, Griffith Asia Institute

Empirical research was conducted in October 2019. Dr Tess Newton Cain conducted key informant interviews and liaised with local partners in Vanuatu, Dr Geir Henning Presterudstuen led the in-country research in Fiji, while Mr James Cox was in charge of strategy and data collection in Solomon Islands. The breakdown of participants was as follows:

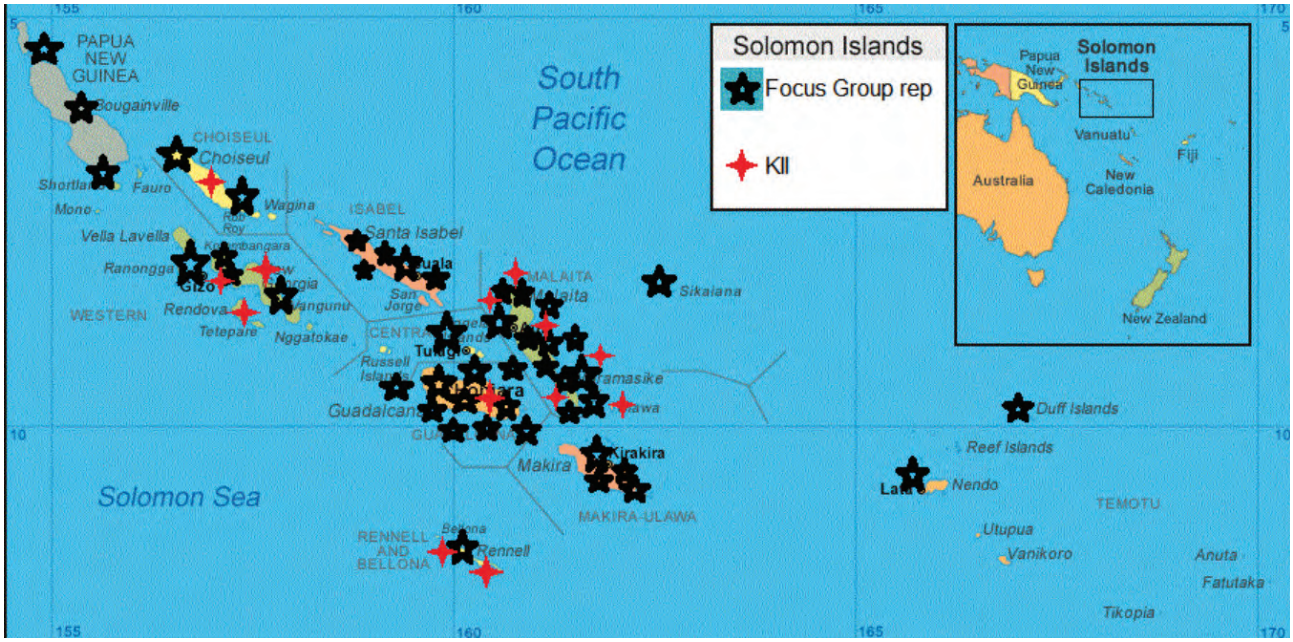
	Focus Groups				**Key Informants**		
		Women	**Men**	**Youth (< 30 yo)**	**Women**	**Men**	**Total**
Fiji	5 FGs	12	32	8	5	3	**52**
Focus groups were held in Suva and a surrounding village with participant groups from Suva (and surrounding areas of Serua and Kasavu), Lautoka, Kadavu and Koro Island. Interviews were held in Suva. Participants included business leaders, civil society representatives, civil servants and academics.							
Solomon Islands	5 FGs	18	20	13	6	4	**48**
Focus groups were held in Honiara and at a workshop outside the city attended by representatives from across the country. Interviews were held in Honiara. Participants included private sector, civil society, civil service, MPs, youth, students, church. Overall participants from every province were represented in the research.							

	Focus Groups				Key Informants		
		Women	Men	Youth (< 30 yo)	Women	Men	Total
Vanuatu	4 FGs	22	11	8	6	4	**43**
Focus groups were held in Port Vila and Tanna. Interviews were held in Port Vila. Participants included civil society, unemployed, working mothers, civil servants, private sector, teachers, retirees, lawyers, academics.							
Total	14 FGs	59	56	29	17	11	**143**

After the main stage of data collection we sought further advice from the broader research community through two consultation meetings with Australian and Pacific experts. These expert consultations were held at the Australian National University (ANU) on 7 November 2019 and at the University of the South Pacific (USP), Suva on 28 November 2019.

Methods

The project combined two well-established qualitative research methods (see the discussion of the theoretical foundation below) to gain in-depth understanding of social issues, as well as people's experiences of these. Underpinned by a grounded theory perspective, this methodological approach was taken in order to obtain data from purposefully selected groups with particular insights or a breadth of experiences rather than from statistically representative samples of the population. Our key emphasis was on consulting with representatives from six broadly defined participant groups: youth, women, men, regional or 'out of capital' residents, experts and private sector representatives. Additionally, in Fiji, we endeavoured to recruit people from a variety of ethnic and cultural groups and religious affiliations.



This shows the location of the research participants' homes in the Solomon Islands consultations. Many participants identified multiple 'homes'. All provinces were covered, as well as Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. Image: Melinda Kii/DSE

Focus Groups

Given this research project explicitly set out to amplify Pacific island voices in order to inform discussions about Australian engagement in the region from the bottom-up, focus group discussions were identified as a key method of data collection. Focus groups allow for a variety of paradigms, world-views and perspectives to be discussed concurrently and provide research participants with an active role in shaping the form and content of research discussions. Local research partners organised and facilitated these discussions, ensuring they were set up and conducted according to local cultural protocols. Although all focus groups were structured around key research themes, the format allowed for moderators and participants to interpret these key topics in the context of local discussions and add new topics for consideration. The result was that data collected provided both a snapshot of the specific key concerns and considerations of each of the three countries, as well as a broad overview of people's experiences and expectations of Australian engagement in the region.



Key informant interviews

In addition to consulting a broad representation of local communities, it was a key priority for our research project to gain insights from local experts in the fields of community development, international relations, Australia-Pacific relationships more broadly and from the private sector. We thus identified key informants in each of our three research sites that were targeted for in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews.

Typically, data collected from in-depth interviews of these kinds are not generalisable to the population at large but are rather designed to create thematic categories from research data that can be compared and analysed with the lived experience of research participants. In this research project the purpose of key informant interviews was two-fold: First, to provide insights and opinions from prominent people working on the frontline in political decision-making, diplomacy, business, lobbying and international development in the region. These respondents can, in the context of this research project, be considered the expert voices on how relations between Australia and Pacific island countries are experienced and understood politically. Secondly, these interviews add depth to the research data by adding specificity and detail from a variety of vantage points, including the business sector, faith-based communities and the public service.

Theoretical foundation

This project follows the tradition of grounded theorising. Grounded theory sets out to discover or construct theory from data, systematically obtained and analysed using comparative analysis. In the context of this project, that principle is articulated in how research themes and analytical concepts emerged from the research data rather than being pre-determined by the researchers. Data collection commenced with a broad query about how participants view their own country and relationships with other countries before letting local perspectives inform a gradual development of more specific topics such as attitudes to Australia and Australians. By continuously reviewing, comparing, contrasting and analysing responses, researchers then identified recurring themes and patterns in a manner that is common to all empirically driven theorising. This flexible research design allows participants' own perspectives to become a central part of the analysis, reflecting our overall commitment to amplifying Pacific voices.

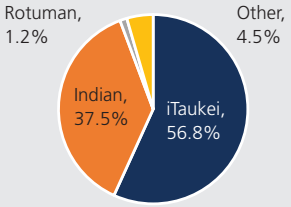
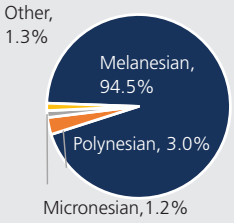
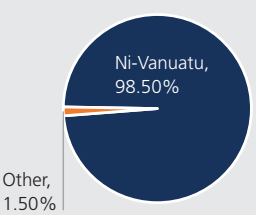
Qualitative research methods like those employed here are consequently not strictly driven by set sample sizes but rather by the principle of data saturation. In practical terms this means that collection continues until a point is reached where no new information is obtained. While this study was based on an expected sample size for key informant interviews of approximately 30 individuals (10 in each of the 3 research locations) and approximately 120 focus group participants (40 in each research location), we were predominantly guided by the concept of saturation as it became evident through comparison and data analysis. The thematic organisation of this report emerged as a result of this process.

Issues and Limitations

This report lays no claim to presenting the complete analysis of Pacific islanders' perspectives on Australia's engagement in the region. By using purposely selected participants, this project does not provide a view that is representative of the region or the respective countries as a whole. While participants came from a broad cross-section of our three research settings, our emphasis on experts and collaboration with local research partners that have an active profile in their respective civil sector made sure Pacific islanders that have had an ongoing interest in politics, local development, international relations, civil rights discourses, business and community development were privileged in data collection. It is unclear to what extent their experiences are reflected in the broader population and the results presented here ought to be contextualised in relation to future research targeting different demographics and larger sample sizes.

Our comparative analysis also reveals that participants across the three countries emphasised different concerns, viewpoints and experiences. This is not surprising given the ethnic, cultural, political and linguistic diversity in the region, as well as the different political circumstances of the countries we chose to do research in. The divergent responses also call for caution in generalising these results across the Pacific Islands region. Although there were many recurring themes across the different research sites these belie nuances and differences that need to be explored in more detail through further qualitative inquiries within and beyond the countries that were chosen for this study. This diversity is in itself a key lesson of the research: any generalisations of 'the Pacific' are likely to miss important local distinctions. Pacific literacy hinges on understanding this diversity and finding ways to navigate it.

Context

	Fiji	Solomon Islands	Vanuatu
Population	912,241 (2018)	599,419 (2016)	272,459 (2016)
Ethnicity			
Population	1970 (UK)	1978 (UK)	1980 (France & UK)
Prime Minister	Frank Bainimarama	Manasseh Sogavare	Charlot Salwai Tabimasmas
Population	1970 (UK)	1978 (UK)	1980 (France & UK)
GDP (PPP)/per cap ($US)	$9.1 billion/$10,251 (2018)	$1.2 billion/$2,307 (2019)	$820 million/$2,850 (2018)
Australian - aid ($AU)	$51 million (2018-19)	$198.3 million (2018-2019)	$63 million (2018-19)
- 2-way trade	$2.09 billion (2017)	$316 million (2017)	$300 million (2017)
Diaspora in Australia	48,000 (incl Indo-Fijian)*	2,000	1,000
Australian expatriates	3,000	1,500	3,000

Sources: DFAT country data, CIA World Factbook

Fiji

This research was conducted in the context of what people locally have described as an ongoing road to a fully functional democracy in Fiji. Fiji has a long history of political instability and military intervention stretching from the first of many coups d'état in 1987 to the military intervention in 2006. The two most recent general elections (2014 and 2018) were conducted under a new Constitution that, among other things, removed long-standing features of Fijian legislation such as race-based electoral rolls and representative quotas, the Great Council of Chiefs, an unelected Upper House and district-based representation. The Fiji First Party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama, has won a majority government in both elections and thus had a mandate to implement its own policy agenda both locally and internationally.

This relative parliamentary stability belies ongoing tension across various parts of society. There are continuing concerns about issues such as press freedom, freedom of assembly and judicial independence among local and international organisations. Many in Fiji's civil society also experience little political or economic support for their work. A common sentiment expressed during research interviews and focus groups was that there is a need to develop a more inclusive and consultative style of governance.

Notwithstanding these internal political concerns, Prime Minister Bainimarama and his Fiji First government has raised Fiji's international profile considerably in the same period. After years of being subjected to political sanctions, including suspensions from the Commonwealth and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and trade restrictions from key international partners such as Australia, Fiji currently enjoys strong economic, diplomatic and political relations with both traditional allies and emerging regional powerhouses such as China. In addition, Fiji has taken on regional leadership positions through the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) and is an outspoken voice in the global fight for action on climate change. During the time of the majority of key informant interviews and focus groups the Prime Minister was in New York addressing the UN General Assembly in a much-publicised speech aiming to set the international agenda for climate action.

Fiji's position in the world, its challenges and opportunities, as well as the perceived tension between Fiji's global presence and lack of real local reform were key issues dominating discussions during the research phase in Fiji. While many people seem cautiously optimistic about Fiji's increasing significance as an international player and the possibility of leveraging that for positive economic outcomes, concerns about the local human rights situation remains.

Solomon Islands

Two decades since the start of the Tensions[5] and two years on from the end of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), 2019 saw a peaceful national election resulting in Manasseh Sogavare claiming the prime ministership for the fourth (non-consecutive) time. Many Solomon Islanders want to look ahead and focus on strengthening the country's economy to realise its potential as one of the Pacific's largest countries. For others, the underlying causes of the Tensions – and new drivers – are still present and unresolved. Particularly in civil society, there are fears that violent conflict could return if these issues are exacerbated.

'The Switch' in Solomon Islands' recognition from Taiwan to China in mid-September of 2019 had the potential to do just that. It was marked by the immediate withdrawal of Taiwan's diplomatic presence and the abandonment of a number of valued aid projects. Despite a consultation process that saw a government taskforce travel widely to other Pacific states, and to China and Taiwan, Solomon Islands citizens themselves felt that they had not been consulted. While many people were sad to see Taiwan go, and some were concerned about China's entry, it was the way the government had made the decision that concerned people the most. The Switch dominated public conversation and the media during the research visit in early October.

The Switch has exacerbated tensions in the country. Permits have been denied for civil protest about it and other issues. Some provinces, most notably Malaita, are calling for greater autonomy, a call that may be strengthened by the overwhelming vote for independence in neighbouring Bougainville. A petition with 6000 signatures calling for the Prime Minister to step down was submitted to parliament during the research visit. The country has remained peaceful, but not untroubled.

The country's private sector struggles to grow, facing challenges with internal capacity, external competition and the high cost of doing business. The new fibre optic data cable, majority funded by Australia, is keenly anticipated and is perhaps the most visible evidence of the Pacific Step-up.

Vanuatu

Vanuatu will go to general elections in March 2020, and this was an issue that was very much front of mind for many of those who participated in this research. The outgoing Prime Minister, Charlot Salwai Tabimasmas, joins a very small group of people who have led governments in Vanuatu for a full parliamentary term. There is a strong sense that 2020 will be very significant year for the country. As well as the elections, there will be celebrations of the 40th anniversary of Independence, and the hosting of the PIF Leaders' meeting. Vanuatu is expected to graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) status by the end of 2020.

The recent uptick in Pacific focus in Canberra, Wellington, Washington and elsewhere has been significant for Vanuatu. There have been numerous visits to Vanuatu by various countries' ministers, defence and security personnel and others. In addition, members of the Vanuatu leadership have been invited to other countries to meet with their counterparts. There have also been a number of 'soft power' activities, including sporting visits and cultural exchanges. Whilst there is an overall level of awareness and interest in these aspects of political and social discourse, the focus of most people remains on issues that are essentially local in nature.

Underpinning many conversations in Vanuatu are twin concerns about the state of the economy and the quality of governance and political leadership. The country adopted a new blueprint for development in 2017: the National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP). It envisages that sustainable development for the country will progress in line with three pillars: social, economic and environmental. The 2020 elections will be the first to be held since the adoption of this plan. Whilst it appears to have been better socialised than previous development plans in Vanuatu, it is not guaranteed that the contents of the NSDP will necessarily inform policy platforms in the lead up to the elections, nor how people will exercise their votes.

Commentary and Media

The recent and current political and policy preoccupation with Australia's relationships with the countries of the Pacific islands region is reflected to a degree in contemporary commentary. However, there remain serious gaps in what is available, when it comes to ascertaining the views and concerns of Pacific islanders. A notable exception is a predominantly quantitative study undertaken in Vanuatu during 2018 (Clarke & Feeny; 2019). An important contribution of this research into P*acific Perspectives* is to address and rectify this imbalance.

The Pacific Step-up originated with a speech made by then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at the meeting of Pacific Islands Leaders Forum in Pohnpei, the Federated States of Micronesia, in 2016 (Hayward-Jones: 2016) and was given its official imprimatur by virtue of its use in the Foreign Policy White Paper (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). More recently it has been adopted as a signature initiative by Prime Minister Scott Morrison (Morrison, 2018). Since then the use of this term has become accepted within Australian policy and diplomatic circles (Newton Cain, 2019a). Its usage has certainly been noted by Pacific leaders and commentators and we have seen instances of it being reflected back in speeches and comments that they have made, including on social media.

Academics and others have stressed the need to increase the number of Pacific voices in the conversations in order to make them more meaningful. It is significant to note that in some cases, these calls are themselves framed in terms of Australia and Australians doing the talking to people in and from the Pacific, most particularly when it comes to security discourses (George; 2019). It is not surprising to see that a prominent location for analyses of this type is found in the security arena, given that this lens has historically been one most favoured by Australian policy makers in relation to the Pacific, and one which has seen a resurgence in prominence recently (Newton

5 The Tensions describes a time of widespread violence and the collapse of the Solomon Islands government. They ran from 1998 until 2003, though their complex causes and effects extend well beyond that timespan. More than 35,000 people were displaced by the violence. The multinational RAMSI initiative was instrumental in stabilising the country and continued until July 2017.



Cain; 2018). However, there have been some attempts to caution against narrowly framing Pacific relationships through a securitisation lens (Poole; 2019). Indeed, for some this is seen as counter-productive as it may prompt greater resistance to Australian influence on the part of Pacific island states (Wallis; 2018).

More significantly, there has been less recognition of the importance of *listening* when it comes to discussions about bilateral and multilateral relationships, whether in relation to security or in other realms. From the outset, the Step-up has been framed as Australia reaching out to the Pacific rather than an exercise in regional collaboration or co-design, and while a key message is that Australia wants 'more than just talk' (Wyeth 2019) the level of engagement remains on Australia's terms. That is not to say that the importance of listening for the future of Australian engagement in the region has not been articulated. This includes exhortations that Australia needs to commit to a 'listen and learn' approach that includes more nuance and diversity than has been evident to date (Newton Cain; 2018).

At the heart of these critiques, and others, is a recognition that what is really needed when it comes to protecting Australia's interests in and with the Pacific is real investment in building and sustaining relationships. For as long as this component is disregarded or deprioritised, key aspects of the Pacific Step-up will be sub-optimal, particularly when it comes to ensuring their legitimacy (Fletcher & Yeophantong; 2019).

In some areas, there have been calls for Australian policy makers to not only look for greater collaboration with Pacific island countries and their leaderships, but to acknowledge and embrace that it is the island states who are the leaders in these critical conversations (Teaiwa; 2019). Very recently we have seen leading Pacific island voices address issues of Australian domestic policy where they see disconnects that can undermine the avowed foreign policy objectives associated with the Pacific Step-up (Bhagwan; 2019). This has been most notable in relation to the issue of climate change and was highlighted starkly at the meeting of Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders in August of 2019 (Armbruster & Newton Cain; 2019). However, there are other areas where these tensions can also arise including around trade relationships, ease of travel between the Pacific and Australia and labour mobility (Orton & Howes; 2019).

Another aspect of this discourse relates to the *manner* in which Australia engages with Pacific island countries. When it comes to engaging in conversations with Pacific island people and communities, there is a legitimate concern that Australian officials (and others) lack key cultural awareness and other competencies thus making it difficult for them to gain traction. This deficit comprises two aspects. The first is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the complexities and fluidities of Pacific geographies, histories and cultural expressions (Teaiwa, 2014). The second is an inability or refusal to behave in ways that are culturally positive in Pacific contexts. This has significant implications both for the quality of personal relationships between Australians and Pacific islanders, and for strategic reasons (Newton Cain, 2019c).

A significant aspect of the extent and shape of this Pacific lacuna in the Australian discourse is a dearth of knowledge about the region on the part of the majority of Australians. It is a truism that Pacific island people have a very good general knowledge about Australia and are often bemused to learn that the reverse is far from true. In particular, the voices of members of the Pacific diaspora are given insufficient amplification. And yet, there are critical resources (including those relating to linguistic and cultural competencies) located in these communities (Vivekananthan & Cartland; 2019). There are calls to invest in sharing Pacific and Australian cultural heritage, with particular benefit to regional areas in both (Urwin, 2019). Activities of this type can assist in addressing the deficit in Australian knowledge of its near neighbours.

Pacific islanders are keen consumers of – and participants in – local traditional and social media. Over the course of the research period, we tracked prominent news stories in the media of the three focus countries, with particular reference to Australia. In general this exercise showed that public discourse is dominated by local concerns. There was not a lot of reporting about Australia during that time, and what reporting there was mostly concerned issues that intersected with domestic concerns.

In Fiji, Australia received relatively little media attention over this period. Key topics included Australian domestic policy, climate change and sport, with discussions of the Rugby World Cup being predominant. New Zealand received more coverage. Twitter showed some engagement by Fijian commentators with Australian media through retweets and comments.

Mainstream and social media in Solomon Islands was dominated by the Switch to China. Mainstream media covered the resignation of various ministers and the formal steps of the transfer, while social media commentary was

Fiji	Solomon Islands	Vanuatu
14 September to 11 October	25 September – 7 October	28 September – 17 October
Fiji Times *Fiji Sun* Fijian Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) Fiji Village Twitter	*Solomon Times* *Solomon Star* Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) PINA (Pacific Islands News Association) Yumi TokTok Forum (Facebook) Forum Solomon Islands –International (Facebook)	*Vanuatu Daily Post* Loop Vanuatu Yumi Toktok Stret News (Facebook) Pacific Media Watch (Asia Pacific Report) Twitter

overwhelmingly critical of the government's handling of the crisis. Discussion of Australia during this time was unsurprisingly limited, confined to reporting on a tourism drive for Australians, and a meeting between the two countries' Foreign Ministers.

In Vanuatu, three issues dominated international reporting during the research period: labour mobility, West Papua and kava. Australia's Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) was presented in the Vanuatu Daily Post as an important opportunity for ni-Vanuatu. A new intake was encouraged to act as ambassadors for their country and to abstain from alcohol and kava (28 September). The expulsion of a hotel worker from Australia for drunkenness was reported on 12 October.

On social media, West Papua was a hot topic, with emphatic support for West Papuan rights. Australia was singled out as needing to do more, with Prime Minister Salwai's comments on the topic at the UN General Assembly[6] stimulating considerable discussion.

The announcement that Australia planned to increase allowable imports of kava to 4kg per person generated a lot of online discussion in Vanuatu. Comments on Yumi Toktok Stret varied from straightforward welcome of the announcement to scepticism of Australia's sincerity and intentions. There were several different discussions on the topic.



6 https://asiapacificreport.nz/2019/09/30/australia-needs-to-step-up-on-west-papua-says-vanuatu-at-un-assembly/

Findings & Discussion

A series of primary and secondary themes emerged from conversations in Fiji (F), Solomon Islands (SI) and Vanuatu (V). These themes have been captured in a table under each of the questions asked by researchers. *Primary themes* are ideas that emerged a number of times in a country, while *secondary themes* may have come out more than once but were less prominent. Maintaining coding for country of origin shows both the diversity and consistency of different ideas between the three research locations.[7]

What makes your country special?

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
The visibility and enduring nature of **traditional/customary systems** & practice **(V)**	The country's **human resources**, particularly a large population of young people **(F)**
Depth and richness of culture. Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia all represented. **Multiple identities are common.** The value placed on home – clan, cultural values & practices, tradition, ancestors. Knowing your neighbours, "wantoks" **(SI)**	**A talented and resourceful population**, evident in cultural practices and sport **(F)**
Multiculturalism (F)	**Natural resources (SI)**
Peace and **harmony** – minimal conflict between different cultural groups **(V)**	Long **history of political violence** and instability **(F)**
Customary forms of relations between people and the land. Customary values such as reciprocity, respect and collaboration **(F)**	Vanuatu is a **democratic** country **(V)**
Home is the place of security, comfort and peace to which you always return. A place (and time) of simplicity **(SI)**	Vanuatu is a **Christian** country **(V)**
Rich in natural resources. **(F)**	**Christianity** is a defining feature for almost everyone – and largely (but not always) positive: not always a unifying force **(SI)**
The **colonial legacy** arising out of being a French/UK condominium **(V)**	Scenic **beauty (SI)**
Right now, that's where we are as we are trying to take stock of what makes us Vanuatu, of what makes us different from other countries in the world [KIIV 001]	
Culture & church are valuable in letting you be authentic and effective – but can be abused [KIISI 009]	

These data reveal a strong sense of local identity and pride in where people come from.

A notable area of commonality across the data is the continuing significance of customary systems and practices. Whilst participants recognised (and indeed celebrated) the diversity of customary practice within their countries, there was universal recognition of the very widespread significance of these traditional forms of being and doing. This recognition was coupled with a desire on the part of participants that these systems should be continued, even as other aspects of their societies and economies may change. A common thread was the expressed wish of participants that the future of their countries should include a blend of traditional and modern outlooks. In some cases, participants articulated that this blended approach entails some tensions, including around gender equity.

> *We're a Goldilocks country – we're not too big, we're not too small – we're not too near, we're not too far – not too hot, not too cold – we're not too small that economically we would struggle, we're not too big that socially we would be torn apart by some of the tensions that are afflicting other Melanesian societies* [KIIV 009]

7 Thematic responses were mediated by ways in which the issues were discussed by participants, not by guidance from researchers. The research team reviewed, aggregated and revised the data several times before finalising these lists.

The Fiji data is distinct with its reference to the importance of multiculturalism, which includes an acknowledgement of its problematised nature. Across the responses we received, it is obvious that people see the relationship between indigenous rights and the primacy of indigenous values on the one hand and equality before the law and citizenship rights for everyone on the other as a key aspect of modern Fiji. This is perceived to be a uniquely Fijian issue that needs to be solved locally but with international support.

A further element uncovered in the research is the tendency of participants to look to the past when analysing the current situation and when identifying strategies for dealing with future problems. Fiji participants were concerned about what cultural and human resources the country has available to negotiate social change in the present and how this is operationalised politically. There is a strong sense that the present moment is one in which 'traditional' values and relations are under pressure and need to be reaffirmed or redefined. Many expressed a concern about the future viability of village life, and its associated social organisation and values, unless significant investments in infrastructure are made. Related to this is a broader concern about the vulnerability of Fiji's natural resources, including land, water and products of potential commercial value, that might be under threat from climate change, over-development and foreign ownership. At the same time, participants across the study indicated limited confidence in political leaders to deliver the sort of change considered necessary. Similarly, participants in Solomon Islands expressed a sense of loss in recent years, reflected in concerns about diet, environmental degradation, demographic changes and climate change.

Several participants described Vanuatu as a 'young' country. This is reflected in the prevalence of the colonial legacy as a reference point in the data in response to this question and elsewhere. However, the stronger aspect of references to the colonial legacy is its duality and the lingering impacts this has had, both positive and negative.[8]

What would you like your country to look like in the future?

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
Improve **governance** by including a commitment to community consultation, protection of human rights and openness in decision-making **(F)**	**Constitutional and legal reform (SI)**
Improve **governance and leadership** – this is focused almost exclusively on political leadership **(V)**	Civics and political awareness raising to improve **political accountability (SI)**
Good **leadership** that is empowering and 'envisioning' **(SI)**	Improve the **status of women** with particular focus on having women in Parliament **(V)**
Blend customary and modern outlooks, balancing the land-based culture and national identity. Challenge the rise in tribalism and address negative cultural practices while still celebrating the nation's diversity **(SI)**	Increase emphasis on **traditional values and knowledge**; stronger protection of indigenous rights and issues **(F)**
Increase **inclusivity in decision-making** – of women, young people, people living with disabilities, people living in rural & remote areas **(V)**	Improve **ethnic relations (F)**
Invest significantly in infrastructure to make village life attractive and **decrease the inequality between rural and urban** locations **(F)**	**Increase economic opportunities** and activity, including greater integration with the cash economy, more employment opportunities and increased trade **(V)**
Increase development through **more infrastructure and better quality of services**, especially in locations outside the main urban centres (Port Vila & Luganville) **(V)**	Restructure the economy so that Fiji becomes less reliant upon imports and can be **more self-sufficient**. This includes investing in local agriculture & strengthening the village economy **(F)**
Retain well-educated and trained people to help grow local economy & strengthen civil society **(F)**	**Maintain culture and language (V)**
Raise education standards for all, in formal and vocational education and targeted literacy programs and workshops **(SI)**	Invest in **creative arts (SI)**
	Increase **training and skills development** programs **(V)**
Deal with key challenges of **climate change, urban drift, and food and land security**. Natural resources need to be protected effectively **(F)**	Local to global action on **climate change (SI)**
Increased ownership and localisation in multiple spheres and a reduced reliance on foreigners **(V)**	Support Vanuatu **industry and products**, e.g. by value adding/manufacturing **(V)**

8 Vanuatu (then known as the New Hebrides) was ruled as a condominium by the UK and France between 1906 and when Independence was achieved on July 30, 1980.

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
Stop being held back, utilise resources better, **become independent** from aid, catalyse small business, end corruption **(SI)**	**Aid funding to be disbursed at community level (V)**
Strengthen bilateral relationships to make them more beneficial (to Vanuatu) (V)	**Align aid projects** with the NSDP **(V)**
	Put limits on Chinese investment, including more control over where and how investment occurs in the country **(V)**
It can be quite depressing when you see the current level of leadership and governance [KIIV 005]	*You can make great speeches at the United Nations but if you are not putting those principles into practice at home, what's the point?* [KIIFJ 002]

Two strong threads emerge from discussions of what participants want for their countries' future.

First, they want to see improved governance, with a particular focus on lifting the quality of political leadership. In some cases, this was expressed in terms of a nostalgia for past leadership. The second is a desire for increased economic self-reliance.

In Fiji, the overarching concern for participants was their perception that current leadership is non-consultative. Most expressed the belief that local knowledge is never taken into account in national decision-making. Despite this, it is evident that the participants in Fiji have a broad, holistic view of development. They consider the practical challenges associated with securing their livelihood and sustainability intrinsically linked to questions of political governance.

Inequality and poverty, ethnic relations, climate change and economic shocks are some of the major issues facing Fiji and will continue to do so in the future. The on-going outmigration of well-educated and trained people means that there are issues around the country's capacity to meet these challenges [KIIV 009]

Similarly, in Solomon Islands, participants indicated that they have a strong desire to 'stop being held back' and see politics as the locus of primary obstacles – political self-interest, corruption and limited accountability. All of these are seen as getting in the way of positive change, as evidenced by limited economic development, social and cultural expression.

Solomon Islands problems should be solved by Solomon Islands solutions [FGSI 003]

In Vanuatu, the quality of political leadership is of great concern. This may have been heightened during the research period given the advent of general elections[9].

The data also reveal the aspirations of some participants for their countries to become more inclusive societies in future. For example, responses from Solomon Islands reveal a desire to

It can be quite depressing when you see the current level of leadership and governance [KIIV 005]

achieve an improved standard of living for all (including youth, women, people with disabilities), prioritising youth, women and the most remote parts of the country; and ensuring that villages are active and creative places. Decentralisation is seen to be a vehicle for achieving these objectives.

Secondly, participants aspire to greater economic self-reliance. This aspiration was manifested in a number of ways including a desire to be less reliant on aid from development partners, a wish to see foreign direct investment better controlled and monitored and a call for a greater focus on economic opportunity for Pacific islanders within bilateral relationships and programs, especially with Australia.



In Solomon Islands, the centralisation of development in Honiara and one or two other centres is an issue of concern, as is the limited access that women and youth have to the benefits of development. Many see thriving villages as key to a successful nation and point to village change as a significant – and largely absent - indicator of progress. Similar sentiments are expressed in some of the responses obtained from Vanuatu.

9 General elections will be held in Vanuatu during March 2020



In the village, 'Life goes on' [KIISI 009]

A majority of women in the villages are illiterate and live in their own world, unaware of what is happening with the government of the day [FGSI005]

In Fiji, an added dimension to the desire to build an inclusive society stems from persistent concerns about ethnic divisions and long-term damage caused by Fiji's history of political violence. While there is a strong sense that these are challenges that need to be solved in Fiji, many participants also said that international support to maintain and safeguard political stability, democracy and human rights is necessary.

Issues of sovereignty and local ownership of development were significant in this data. For example, in Vanuatu, the NSDP (Government of Vanuatu; 2017) appears to have been well socialised since its development and was mentioned frequently[10]. The data reflects a belief on the part of respondents that the primary responsibility for taking the country forward rests with the state. However, there are numerous indications of dissatisfaction about the quality of current political leadership. This dissatisfaction appears to encompass concerns about the willingness of political leaderships to prioritise national interest over personal agendas, as well as a perception that governments do not have sufficient capacity to take countries to where the participants want them to be. Similar concerns were expressed by participants in Solomon Islands and Fiji.

We need to see the government utilising its resources [KIIV 008]

Fiji participants recognise Fiji's relatively high levels of education and high percentage of young people as key resources for the future, but many remain concerned about significant outward migration and how that might affect the country, for example by exacerbating 'brain drain'. On one level this is seen as having a negative impact on the country's ability to diversify the economy and develop a stronger civil society. On another, people are concerned about potential broader demographic changes that might effectively see the depopulation of large parts of rural and remote Fiji.

The data shows that participants, particularly in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, see customary culture as playing a major role in development in the future. However, in Solomon Islands recent resurgence in the expression of localised (including provincial) identities over national ones is seen to pose a significant risk to the country's future.

A point of frustration expressed by the Fiji participants was that the country's leadership role and agenda for global change has not been reflected in positive changes at home. Adding to this is a concern that the economy is currently vulnerable and that not enough is being done to make sure Fiji has the capacity to deal with significant future challenges, including climate change, urban poverty, ethnic tensions, the breakdown of the sugarcane economy and a global economic downturn.

Whilst the main focus here is on issues that are very much domestic, there is certainly an awareness of the role of bilateral relationships in these spheres. This is especially prominent in relation to the place of aid and development assistance. The uses and means of deployment of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) was a common theme in the discussions and often provided points of comparison between Australia and other bilateral partners.

Opportunities need to be presented to them [youth]. The economic aspect, but the social aspect as well, in terms of quality education, health ... and then a sense of national identity. [KIISI 005]

Western education is good. Our mistake was thinking that it was better than ours [KIISI 002]

10 Of interest, but untested, is the apparent lingering impact of the means by which the NSDP was developed which involved extensive community outreach consultations by staff from the Prime Minister's Office. The impact of this type of engagement appears to have endured as evidenced by references to the importance of inclusive consultation around development, including that supported by aid projects

How do you feel about your country's current relationships with countries other than Australia?

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
The fact that **more countries (than Australia) are showing an interest** in the Pacific Islands is something Fiji can capitalise on **(F)**	Fiji must **nurture good relationships with other Pacific island countries** and develop a stronger regional voice **(F)**
Local **Pacific island leaders are becoming increasingly confident and aware of their importance** and thus better at negotiating **(F)**	Our **relationships with other countries are healthy** – they support us as a small country **(V)**
Solomon Islanders have long memories of foreign contact, going back to the Spanish and right up to RAMSI. The contact is seen as mostly having positive effects **(SI)**	**Longstanding relationship with the UK**, particularly through the Army, should be nurtured **(F)**
Other countries are more fortunate, advanced, educated **(SI)**	The **USA is a potential trading market**, particularly for yaqona/kava **(F)**
China is seen as a leading player in the region and one that is making significant and tangible investments (infrastructure, sports stadia, hotels) **(F)**	**China has a hidden agenda** when it comes to the relationship with Vanuatu **(V)**
China has made a significant contribution to infrastructure in Vanuatu, including in rural areas **(V)**	**There is a benefit from having the UK/France legacy (V)**
Concerns about Chinese presence in the business sector, including encroachment into indigenous spaces and practices that prompt disapproval in the community **(V)**	**New Zealand is singled out as the country most inclusive of Pacific islanders (SI)**
New Zealand is generally held as an equally important partner as Australia both historically, in the present and in the future. A key element here is that New Zealand is seen as having a much stronger understanding of, and track record of protecting, indigenous rights **(F)**	**New Zealand has, particularly under the current government, showed a much more engaging and respectful approach** to relations with Fiji and the Pacific than Australia has **(F)**
Foreigners need to do more to understand Solomon Islands culture, and not see us as 'less developed', 'primitive' **(SI)**	*These countries have good, genuine intentions for our country. It's just the way our government leaders respond and manage these relationships that is important. Otherwise they might chase some of our traditional friends away with the way they are doing things*. [KIISI 008]
The church is almost universally the primary channel for engagement with people from other countries for Solomon Islanders as they grow up **(SI)**	

There is a sense that Fiji (and other Pacific island countries) has a stronger international profile and more avenues for getting their demands met now than in the past. Some of this is attributed to successful political positioning in the context of climate change and an ability to use this issue as leverage to get their voices heard. The fact that the region is now increasingly seen as strategically important by countries other than Australia and New Zealand (predominantly China but also Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan and the United States) was also generally highlighted as a positive opportunity for Fiji and other Pacific states to be taken more seriously at the negotiation table.

Many participants in Fiji had the impression that China's presence was also the main reason Australia had "woken up" and started to take more interest in the region again. China is seen to have a less interventionist approach to foreign relations than Australia and also to be more sensitive to local issues and culturally specific dynamics. It is worth noting that there is a long-standing presence of Chinese in Fiji and that the relationships between "local Chinese" and Fijians have traditionally been strong. This may lead to many Fijians consequently seeing China's interest in the region against this backdrop, making them inclined to take a cautiously optimistic approach.

> *It [China's interest in the Pacific] is probably a good thing. Why? Because the Pacific islands could potentially play one against the other. From a geopolitics points of view. What has happened in recent times is that China is slowly moving in … so now Pacific island countries are best positioned to get what they want in many ways. China is giving aid. Australia giving aid. NZ giving aid. Europe giving aid … while the US went asleep for a while only now realising that someone else is over here now. China is giving infrastructure, soft loans, grants, building sporting complexes in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, now that's going to happen in the Solomon Islands…and it resulted in Australia waking up again"* [KIIFJ 003]

Sovereignty and independence are not forgotten in these analyses. Participants often stressed that Fiji's leaders need to make decisions that are best for Fiji and the region. There is a strong sense that indigenous rights, in Fiji and globally, is a key issue that should underpin development and governance, highlighted by a significant number of participants who expressed a desire to connect more effectively with Maori and Indigenous Australians.

Participants are also aware and proud of the relationships they have nurtured with other countries through their international military work and participation in national armies (UK and Australia) as well as on the sporting field. Many think Fiji could leverage more from the respect and positive reputation they have achieved on the back of these efforts[11].

The church is the first developer of the Solomon Islands. The churches had the boats and ships. [KIISI 003]

In Solomon Islands, although Australia is often described as the major player, other countries are prominent including New Zealand, Japan, the United States and other Pacific island states. Foreign contact, especially as mediated into people's early lives through the church, is seen to have introduced traits like "discipline, culture, manners and commitment".



The Protectorate years are remembered by participants as a time of good governance[12]. However, negative effects, like interfaith rivalries, the suppression of customary culture in some churches, the destruction of sandalwood forests (and contemporary resource extraction) and the intrusion of negative aspects of popular culture are also recognised.

The question of China and Taiwan was raised frequently in interviews and focus group discussions. Taiwan was universally well regarded, however, some participants were concerned about China's potential influence. A great deal of criticism was directed towards the way in which the Solomon Islands government made the decision to switch away from recognition of Taiwan.

In discussions around bilateral relationships, other than the relationship with Australia, the impacts of the relationship with the China were frequently raised in the data from Vanuatu. A range of reactions and perceptions, positive, negative and neutral, were shared by participants. Concerns about Chinese influence are focused around issues that intersect with domestic concerns – protection of reserved businesses, local content in large projects, working conditions on Chinese projects and in Chinese businesses. The issue of debt was of lesser concern and the prospect of China wanting to set up a military base in Vanuatu is of negligible concern.

Participants in Vanuatu also noted that the colonial legacy of France and the UK is still very present and continuing relationships with these countries are largely seen as beneficial. New Zealand, Japan and the United States were also identified as countries with significant bilateral relationships in the Pacific.

Militarisation is not imminent and it's not even a mid-term liability, but we've got roads now. We've got roads where we had no roads before and people in the islands who are the beneficiaries are unequivocal about it and they are unanimous in their praise and their affection for the people that brought them the roads and that's not nothing, that's a really big deal [KIIV 009]

The US is trying to come in but has a long way to come. I think it's left Vanuatu for too long and now that China's coming in it's really seeing that as a threat and it's trying its very best to try and revive its relations with Vanuatu [KIIV 008]

11 Fiji's Defence Minister has recently suggested that the creation of a 'Pacific Regiment' in the Australian Defence Forces, made up of Pacific islands personnel, would be a tangible way to strengthen regional ties. (Boyle; 2019)

12 The British Solomon Islands Protectorate was established in the south of the present country in 1893 and ended with the country's independence in 1978.

How would you like relationships with countries other than Australia to look in the future?

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
Fiji and the Pacific island region more broadly are becoming more prominent actors on the world stage (F)	Stable **relationships with South-Eastern Asian archipelago countries (SI)**
Fiji should **strengthen regional institutions and foster stronger relationships with other Pacific island countries (F)**	Need for more **transparency in government-to-government agreements (V)**
Strong, friendly ties with a range of countries that are complementary to Solomon Islands interests: **An 'oceanic agenda for the future' (SI)**	**Protect the environment and address climate change (SI)**
Mitigate the risk of future conflict through deeper international relationships **(SI)**	**Address basic issues** like sanitation, non-communicable diseases **(SI)**
There needs to be **stronger relationships between Fiji's civil society and international actors (F)**	
China is here to stay **(F)**	**Protect Melanesian values from erosion by Chinese influence (V)**
Proceed carefully and **closely scrutinise the relationship with China (SI)**	Land can only be leased by Joint Ventures to **minimise alienation of land (V)**
Stronger relationships between Fiji and indigenous peoples globally (but particularly in New Zealand and Australia) **(F)**	VIPA needs to be strengthened to **only allow good foreign investment** into the country **(V)**
Reserved businesses to be protected for ni-Vanuatu people **(V)**	**Address capacity gaps** through more commercial partnerships **(SI)**
I don't know how far Australia is supporting us with infrastructure but I think that is where China is good at it [KIIV 002] *China is listening and looking, observing* [KIIV 003]	*The Pacific Islands is a very important region for the world for many reasons. Whether it is for our marine resources, or as our individual voices in the UN. From a geopolitical point of view we are very interesting* [KIIFJ 003].
There should partnerships rather than the company outside coming, taking the cream of the cake and taking it outside … Ensure that money remains in the country and expertise is passed on [KIISI 007]	*We need to redefine what regionalism is…when we talk about our issues here in the Pacific and Fiji…how do we define ourselves in the region right now? Do we influence the Pacific in the right way? Do we have a model like that of Ratu Kamisese Mara that talked about 'The Pacific Way'? We are losing that Fijian leadership and I think we are also losing out to the other Pacific island countries. They are all getting stronger in their traditional identities and that is missing in Fiji* [KIIFJ 005].

The Fiji data in particular reflects that the current historical moment is one in which Australia's dominant role in the Pacific island region is challenged by other international actors. Pacific island countries are growing in confidence to dictate at least some of the terms on which the region engages with global actors. This position was articulated most clearly in the Fiji data. Participants see this is an opportunity for Fiji and other Pacific island countries to develop a regional position on key issues and articulate their interests more clearly in negotiations with a series of actors.

In Fiji, relationships within the region – through organisations such as the MSG and PIF – appear to be those that are of most immediate concern for the participants. This reflects the view that Fiji is a natural leader in the region with a responsibility to act and talk in a way that benefits other, smaller, Pacific island countries. However, there is some concern that Fiji has not done enough to build and maintain strong regional relationships on local terms but has instead been too focused on nurturing a global profile for their own benefit.

In Solomon Islands, the (very new) relationship with China dominated discussion, but concern was directed more towards the Solomon Islands government. Participants expressed very little confidence that the present government will act in the long-term best interests of Solomon Islanders. Several participants observed that regional solidarity between Pacific island states, New Zealand and Australia could be an important way to manage the relationship with China.

Also in Solomon Islands, there is some feeling – expressed more vis-a-vis Australia – that the Tensions could have been averted if deeper, more trusting and responsive relationships had been in place. For these participants, reducing the risk of a resurgence of violence is a priority for relationships with long-standing friends. The role of China (or perhaps the government's actions in that regard) are seen as a potentially significant driver of conflict.

In Vanuatu, the relationship with China also dominated responses to this question. Responses appear to be largely informed by an increased presence of Chinese people and businesses, including in places that have been almost exclusively occupied by indigenous people to date, as well as making inroads into sectors of the economy that are reserved for indigenous investors. The greatest levels of negative responses arise where these recent developments clash with pre-existing local concerns such as livelihood opportunities. This may be influenced by the lack of opportunity to participate in a cash economy which is a longstanding challenge in Vanuatu, as well as elsewhere in the region.

A Sea of Islands meeting the Belt and Road [KIISI 011]

How do you feel about your country's current relationship with Australia?[13]

Negative	Neutral	Positive
Australia does not understand the Pacific well and their engagement is largely only based on their own priorities and ambitions and not what Pacific island communities need and desire (F)	**Australia is a very strong presence and influence in Vanuatu (V)**	**There is a long-standing, strong and deep relationship between Australians and Fijians that is largely maintained through people-to-people relations (Pacific island diaspora in Australia, Australian tourists in Fiji, sports connections, business relations) and aid (F)**
Interactions with Australians (in multiple spheres) are overshadowed by poor attitude and approach (V)	**Australia has taken its role in the Pacific islands for granted for too long and are now in a position where their role has to be redefined and remade (F)**	**Australia is the 'big brother', with clear moral and strategic imperatives to help the Solomon Islands. We are so close (SI)**
Australians are perceived as being dominant, remote, sometimes racist (SI)	Solomon Islands is losing sight of, taking for granted the value of the relationship with Australia and New Zealand **(SI)**	**The relationship with Australia is overwhelmingly viewed as being positive for Vanuatu (V)**
Australia is a racist country and much of their engagement with Pacific island communities is framed by this **(F)**	**Australia's engagement is a reaction to China (V)**	
At present Australia is not doing enough for the region, highlighted by their lack of action on climate change and their own human rights record. Many current policy initiatives are based on tokenism rather than genuinely important, structural changes (F)	Australia's engagement is a reaction to China **(F)**	**Australia's main and most tangible contribution in Fiji and for Fijians has been in creating job opportunities (in Fiji through development projects and investment and via working visa opportunities to Australia) (F)**
Australia is not seen to support the Pacific island states on things that really matter on the international stage **(F)**		
Dealing with the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT) is too complex (V)		

13 In this table, **bold** entries are primary themes, plain text ones are secondary.

Negative	Neutral	Positive
There is a lack of localisation in Australian projects (V)	**Ambivalence about the role of Australian aid and Australian Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) – recognition and gratitude for the work that has been done in myriad sectors (especially RAMSI), but concerns about aid coordination and a lack of transparency around the work of INGOs (SI)**	
There is a lack of localisation in Australian projects **(F)**		
Too much reliance on International NGOs (INGOs), crowding out local NGOs/Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)/Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs)/Community-Based Organisation (CBOs)s **(V)**		
Visa restrictions are frustrating and demeaning (SI)		Labour mobility is generally viewed as positive **(V)**
Visas and ease of travel are sticking points in how this relationship is viewed **(V)**		
Commercial relationships are weak and transactional. Partnerships incorporating mentorship and capacity building are needed **(SI)**		
Awareness that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are missing from the relationship **(SI)**	There is interest/concern in relation to indigenous Australians and how they are regarded and treated (also their absence is noted) **(V)**	
The blackbirding legacy and the way Australian South Sea Islanders (ASSI) people are treated are concerns **(V)**	The history is mixed, going back to blackbirding, failure to act to prevent the Tensions, a tendency to heavy-handedness and transactional rather than deeper relationships (SI)	
Suspicion around cultural agendas - gay rights, negative popular culture **(SI)**		
They [Australians] talk about us in a way that's not good [KIIV 007]	*You can 'understand' the politics and the context, but it's actually understanding the cultural context, the social context, even the faith-based context, that is important. And in order to understand that you need to give the space and voice to Pacific people* [KIIFJ 002].	

It is an interesting time for Australia in terms of redefining its role in the Pacific. [KIIFJ 001]

The data from all three countries indicate that bilateral relationships with Australia are strong, long-standing and multi-faceted. They go beyond government-to-government engagement and permeate almost all areas of life in the target countries. Whilst there are numerous similarities in how these relationships manifest, they are not uniform.

For example, the data from Fiji makes reference to military ties, which do not apply in the other two countries. Sporting connections are also more developed. Fijians perceived their skills and abilities in rugby league and rugby union as highly recognised in Australia. Sport is highlighted as a major arena for interaction between Fiji and Australia and a space where Fijians have opportunities to flourish.

In Solomon Islands, the impact and legacy of RAMSI is of particular significance. Even though many participants expressed a feeling that Australia could have played a role in avoiding the Tensions, and there are aspects of RAMSI that are critiqued, it is overall a significant asset in the relationship. Vanuatu's strong presence in the Seasonal Workers Program (SWP) adds a dimension to the relationship that is not as strongly felt in the other countries. In each country, Australia's influence and impact as a first responder at times of natural disaster and as an ongoing development partner is recognised as the dominant aspect of the relationship, particularly in the civil society sector and in non-urban areas.

Participants were able and willing to point to various aspects of the relationship their country has with Australia which cause concern, frustration and, at times, resentment. The responses reveal a complex picture

The criticisms range from particular concerns about the way Australian people behave or are perceived to behave when in the target countries, through to more generalised critiques of Australian domestic policy and how that is seen to colour Pacific engagement. For example, in Fiji, village-based focus groups were predominantly positive towards Australia and Australians, whereas key informants who were Suva-focused were more critical.

Layered over and stifled by a degree of parochialism that is not only unnecessary, it's counter-productive [KIIV 009]

It's a fact – there is a big country right next door, in the neighbourhood, the big brother. It's just that sometimes in the family the big brother's got his own agendas [that are] not in the interests of the other siblings. [KIISI 005]

A particular area of concern was around a lack of localisation in Australian aid projects[14]. This was reflected in criticisms of the work of INGOs, including how they share information and resources with local NGOs, the lack of employment opportunities for Pacific islands people within those organisations and their failure to appreciate and make appropriate use of local knowledge, skills, and expertise. This was expressed in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu with particular reference to issues of aid coordination and transparency.

Australia hasn't done enough. They still see us in the Pacific as people to be helped…that we have nothing of value to offer. [KIIFJ 004]

In Fiji, while there is a strong recognition of the importance of Australian aid and support, the overall perspective of participants is that Australia lacks a genuine interest in Pacific island communities, fails to recognise the resources available in Fiji and does not do enough to support the further development of local capacities. It is telling that while most participants report having good relationships with individual Australian people or specific Australian organisations there is widespread discontent with the broader structural relationship with Australia.

Participants in Solomon Islands said that locals are made to feel inferior to foreign consultants through a combination of attitude and pay differentials. A major exception to this appears to be programs targeted at women and people with disabilities, which are characterised by patience and concern on the part of the (Australian) personnel associated with their delivery and implementation. Many reported improvement in Australian engagement, particularly through more recent initiatives from the Australian High Commission.

In Vanuatu, concerns about Australian over-use of INGOs to deliver the aid program almost certainly reflects the rapid expansion in the visibility of these organisations post Tropical Cyclone Pam[15], especially in rural areas where they had a much smaller presence previously. The lack of sharing of resources with local NGOs has led to a perception that local NGOs were being crowded out. Participants were also concerned that these foreign entities (and by association/proxy 'Australia') were seen to be driving the agenda rather than either the government of Vanuatu or local communities.

The issue of visa restrictions that affect Pacific islanders' ability to travel to Australia was a point of concern for participants in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu[16], with reference to this being something that was considered demeaning and a source of frustration[17]. This issue seems to be felt by all levels of society, as it has also been raised by Pacific island leaders on numerous occasions, including during Prime Minister Morrison's visit to Vanuatu in January 2019 (Newton Cain; 2019b).

Australia needs to show the political will to do something and unless they do that the Pacific Island countries will say: hey look, you're not doing enough. Your actions don't speak. [KIIFJ 003]

I haven't really followed Australia's engagement with the Pacific in recent years because there is little of substance…that is not to criticize the people working locally but they are often working on small budgets and with little support from their own governments. [KIIFJ 008]

They come in and just decide on activities and decide on whoever they felt like giving that responsibility to. They need to come down to people's level. [FGV: Outer island]

A striking issue to emerge from the research was participants' perceptions of Australian Indigenous issues. They reflected a sense of unease as to how white Australia engages with people of colour at home, with a clear indication that this is seen to be significant for how Australia projects itself in the region. A secondary theme that emerged from the Fiji and Solomon Islands data is that many participants felt a natural affinity to Indigenous Australians and that they wanted more opportunities to build these relationships. Some of the distrust about Australia's real intentions and ideologies, including racism, may stem from the treatment of Aboriginals in Australia rather than Australian conduct in the Pacific *per se*. In Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, participants made reference to the absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – their cousins – from the bilateral relationship and from

14 See, also, Flint, Duituturaga & Jirauni (2018).

15 March 2015

16 It is significant to note that participants made very few references to the 'Pacific Australia Card' that was announced as part of the Pacific Step-up by the Australian Prime Minister during the November 2018 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting (SBS; 2018).

17 It is possible that the frustration with the visa process is exacerbated in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu because applications from those countries have to be processed in Fiji. They have no point of contact with the Australian government in their own countries for visa issues.



engagement with Australians[18]. This important point needs to be viewed in conjunction with the perception of Australia as a racist country and how this affects engagement with Pacific island countries and Pacific people.

> *The labour mobility scheme is designed in a more recent labour market phenomenon. It is not a shared relationship. There are stringent rules on repatriations and remittances. More of it is to your advantage than it is to our advantage. It is a transactional relationship.* [KIISI 001]

Economic relationships were less significant in response to this question than elsewhere. However, in Solomon Islands, participants indicated that they see commercial links as being limited and transactional. In addition, there was some ambivalence towards labour mobility schemes. The PLS is well regarded, but the SWP received some criticism[19]. On the other hand, others observed that the more responsible workers were better able to save effectively through the scheme.

More than one participant drew a line from blackbirding to the schemes.

> *If you look at places in New South Wales and Queensland where there was indentured slavery, we South Sea Islanders did not prosper as the Indian slaves did elsewhere. We got thrown out. We can claim ownership to the building and growing of some of these regions of Australia – North Queensland, some of New South Wales.* [KIISI 001]

> *Why are you asking us to be partners with you if you are keeping an eagle eye on us as if we are not capable?* [KIISI 009]

Over and above these substantive issues, a shared concern about relationships with Australia and Australians is one of 'tone'. This is reflected throughout the data, not only in response to this question. In Fiji and Solomon Islands, participants noted that they consider Australia to be a racist country and that this frames Australia's engagement with the Pacific. In Fiji, participants reflected an overall sense that Australia's approach is, at times, overbearing, paternalistic and, as a consequence, ineffective. In Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, participants referred to a perception of Australia's tendency to heavy-handedness when it comes to engaging with their countries. This was seen as being coupled with the adoption of a transactional approach to the bilateral relationship rather than a focus on developing deeper relationships. In Solomon Islands, comparisons with New Zealand were made often, with New Zealanders commonly regarded as being far more willing and able to engage with Solomon Islanders on their own terms. Australians are often seen as being aloof and unwilling to trust in the capability of Solomon Islanders.

18 There have been some very recent and apparently positive developments in this regard, including the participation of Indigenous entertainer Sean Choolburra, in the 2020 Australia Day celebrations in Port Vila and similar events in Honiara in recent years.

19 This is noteworthy given the very low participation of Solomon Islands in the SWP and the PLS to date. In 2018-2019, 20 Solomon Islanders (out of 203 in total) participated in the PLS and 314 (out of 12,200) in the SWP (Howes & Lawton; 2019)

How would you like your country's relationship with Australia to look in the future?

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
Needs to be based on a **genuine partnership** between Australia and Fiji, focusing on **reciprocity and collaboration**, not just Australia's fleeting interests in the region. **(F)**	
The relationship has to be a real one – **a partnership of equals (V)**	**Vanuatu to make its own decisions** about governance and security **(V)**
Want a strong partnership with a long-term partner; built on **recognition that the two countries need each other (SI)**	**Australia needs to take into account that their priorities might not be shared by Pacific island countries** and stay out of internal affairs in these countries (F)
Policies and programs are to be **owned and driven by Vanuatu** (NSDP) **(V)**	DFAT and others need to be better at **utilising local people to solve local problems (F)**
Solomon Islanders want to build **links with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (SI)**	
Increased focus on **people-to-people links** (via ministerial visits, scholarships, military links, sports) **(V)**	
The relationship needs to mature – to become an economic partnership (trade/increased labour mobility/opportunities for skilled employment for ni-Vanuatu people in Australia) **(V)**	
More needs to be done to **support the Solomon Islands private sector (SI)**	
Australia needs to **engage more with local communities and civil society** to develop a better understanding of what people (not just the government) need and want **(F)**	**Deeper community level engagement (SI)**
Development and a**id projects should be focused on local communities** rather than go through the government **(F)**	**Focus on funding local NGOs/CSOs** rather than INGOs **(V)**
Investments need to **focus on local capacity building and supporting locally driven initiatives (F)**	Greater **recognition of capabilities of ni-Vanuatu people** and more focus on them being the ones to deliver projects **(V)**
Fijians need to see real, tangible results of Australia's engagement – such as **easier visa options to visit Australia and better market access for Fiji products (F)**	**Visa reform (SI)**
The main thing Australia could do for Fiji is to take **action on climate change (F)**	
Australia has more to do as a regional leader (SI)	
As the largest closest neighbour, Australia will remain a major force and influence in Fiji. Improved relationships would mean Australia providing more capacity building and infrastructural support for Fiji [KIIFJ 006]	*Everybody knows about the Aborigines – it's in the books and that. But nobody has seen them live, in terms of an Aborigine coming to visit. Very few and far between in terms of that connection* [KIISI 005]
Can Australia just show us the respect and take the climate seriously? [KIIFJ 007].	*While we respect the relationship they are giving we want a genuine relationship* [FGV: Outer island]

When it comes to hopes for the future of relationships with Australia, the data from all three countries reveal a desire for relationships that are genuine partnerships. Participants told us that they are looking for relationships based on reciprocity – of interest, of respect, and of trust – with a focus on collaboration to address shared challenges. In other words, people are looking to have relationships that are conducted in ways that are resonant with Pacific islanders; that are a 'Pacific Mode' of working together. Much of the data that was captured in response to this question builds on responses to the previous question. Participants want the future relationship to be one where the positive aspects of the current relationship are amplified and where the problems that they see are addressed to the mutual benefit of all concerned. Furthermore, participants in Fiji and Solomon Islands said that they wanted to see more engagement with local communities and civil society by Australia and Australians[20]. The data from Fiji and Vanuatu also reflects participants' concerns that Australia should stay out of the internal affairs of those countries.

I look forward to the day when I see Pacific islander and Fijian consultants on externally funded projects and when I see a clear, locally based succession plan being integrated into project- or organisation funding. NGOs have to be sustainable –they need to develop the resources and competencies to run without external funding after the initial phase. [KIIFJ 001]

Participants are acutely aware that their countries are reliant upon Australian aid and development support but express frustration that much of what is received is not appropriately targeted, culturally appropriate, or delivered in collaboration with local communities. Fiji participants think Australia could contribute much more to nurture and develop local capacities that can be utilised more consistently in Fiji. The desire for more localisation also appeared in the data from Vanuatu.

Another key theme is that Australia needs to engage with Fiji and the broader region on Pacific terms. This appears to reflect concerns around respect and reciprocity that are recurring values brought up in responses – a shared set of values that together may form part of the 'Pacific Mode.'

Similarly, other participants expressed a desire for Australia to engage with Pacific countries and Pacific islands people on their own terms and with a better understanding of Pacific cultural norms and modes of engagement.

There is some ambiguity in the data about how Australia can best deal with Fiji on a political and diplomatic level. Some participants indicated that Australia needed to work constructively with Fiji to make sure they continued to move towards a fully participatory democracy, help safeguard the current Constitution and improve the human rights situation. Others clearly stated that Australia needed to stay out of internal affairs and engage with Fiji without specific conditions. It is possible that these differing approaches follow local political fault-lines.

I would like Australia to understand the world from our point of view, understand what we see as important for a Fijian community and household … that it's not about wealth but about the intangible things we value [KIIFJ 004]

As a Pacific islander, these are our countries, this is our place. Whatever countries want to do to help us should be something that is beneficial for us but also creating relationships. That is what our culture is all about, creating lasting relationships, not just to fulfil their own agendas and leave us. [KIISI 008]

The invisibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participants is emblematic of the distance that is seen to exist between Solomon Islands and Australia. Participants reported that Solomon Islanders want to know an Australia that is multicultural with Indigenous Australians at its heart. They see and value the ethnic and cultural ties that link them to black Australians across the island chains.

This exemplifies the thirst for mutual knowledge, understanding and respect that was common among participants – they won't truly know and trust Australia until they know Aboriginal Australia. And the relationship needs to go deeper than government – there should be opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and Solomon Islanders to know each other at all levels.

In Vanuatu, the focus on a desire for an economic partnership indicates a desire for self-reliance on the part of participants. Vanuatu's experience as a sending country to the SWP and Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme[21] is largely considered to be a positive one and this may well be informing a desire for more opportunities, including for skilled employment, for example via the PLS. However, it is important to note that there is no expressed desire to migrate permanently to Australia.

There are already affinities there that we should put into a syllabus: Australia there, the Aborigines, South Sea Islanders, Bougainville… So we can say 'oh yes, Australia is not a white country, it is one of us, it is part of us. So we can come and talk in your institutions…' [KIISI 011]

20 Some initiatives under the Pacific Step-up such as the PacificAus Sports Partnership and the Pacific Church Partnership Program may appear to address concerns of this type, however they were not mentioned by the participants in this research.

21 In general discussion the two are not necessarily distinguished and often a shorthand term of 'picking apples' is used to encompass seasonal work, regardless of which country it takes place in or what the actual work is.

How can your country work to improve the relationship with Australia?

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
Good, stable government and a culture of democracy across all levels of society **(F)**	Government needs to **liaise with all the people** in Vanuatu to better inform conversations with Australia **(V)**
Improve standards of **governance and leadership (V)**	**Don't allow the new relationship with China to affect relationships with long lasting partners (SI)**
Ensure that the government is more accountable and responsible, less corrupt **(SI)**	**Facilitate negotiations between local CSOs, INGOs and the Vanuatu government** to make changes about how funding is allocated and who delivers programs **(V)**
Be more assertive and negotiate better **(V)**	
Development should be be driven from the community level, however, that is contingent on investment in local human resources as well as a commitment to a free and well-supported civil sector **(F)**	*Fiji needs to engage young people, who are the country's main resource for future development, in public consultation and decision-making. This calls for a cultural change where cultural values regarding respect for authority and elders do not get in the way of getting the best out of the young as a resource.* [KII FJ001]
Local leaders will have to be more honest and outspoken, as well as more confident and assertive, when dealing with Australia (and other countries) **(F)**	
Take responsibility for own future. Build civil awareness of the political process, unite the nation **(SI)**	*For an economy to grow we must have strong institutions. And then state and society must grow together – strong institutions and educated societies* [KIISI 001]
Develop a more diverse and flexible business sector as well as build stronger relationships between business and civil society **(F)**	

The question of what is required on the part of the target countries to achieve better relationships with Australia prompted some of the strongest levels of convergence across the three target populations. Participants in all three countries referenced the need for strong democratic institutions and good government at home in order to take the bilateral relationships with Australia to the desired level.

When it comes to what is required on the part of the target countries and their leaderships to improve bilateral relationships with Australia, participants in Fiji and Vanuatu responded that they felt that their local leaders needed to be more honest, outspoken and assertive. In addition, in Fiji and Solomon Islands participants indicated that the private sector was part of how the bilateral relationship could be improved in the future. They identified a need for their countries to develop more diverse and flexible business sectors and for there to be stronger relationships between business and civil society in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, participants from all three of the countries expressed the need for their own governments to invest in local human resources and demonstrate a real commitment to a free and well-supported civil sector.

It is interesting to note that the focus of these expectations or aspirations is on what can be done in the domestic sphere. There was no reference to investment in greater resources to be deployed overseas, for example by opening more diplomatic missions or increasing resources to existing ones. This domestic focus is in keeping with the broad themes of responses across the board.



[I am disappointed at] the lack of knowledge of the government and its role in the country. The majority of the youths I work with have no idea even about the national general elections. [FGSI 005]

I am quite optimistic about the future, but then again you need to work for it. [KIISI 008]

How can Australia work to improve the relationship with your country?

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
Show more respect for Pacific island stakeholders and be better at listening to local needs **(F)**	**Recognise the contribution that South Sea Islanders made to Australia through blackbirding (SI)**
Develop more coherent, long-term strategies for engaging with the Pacific rather than focus on case-based projects **(F)**	**Develop and support Pacific media content** to increase knowledge about the region **(F)**
Allow Solomon Islands to determine its own development pathway, find the middle ground and deepen people-to-people connections **(SI)**	**Open up the market for Fijian products** (such as dalo/taro and yaqona/kava) **(F)**
Reform the ways that INGOs and local NGOs work together (SI)	**Demonstrate more trust in local partners (SI)**
Work more closely with local communities and civil society to develop succession plans and build capacity locally **(F)**	**Work only with local CSOs** and not INGOs **(V)**
Be better at utilising local knowledge and resources in the development and delivery of programs **(F)**	**Support women's leadership** in the Pacific **(F)**
Improve on localisation – Technical Advisers (TA) should come in, transfer knowledge/skills and leave; make more use of local TAs **(V)**	**Prioritise links with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (SI)**
Create more formal employment opportunities and skills development, including **more diverse scholarship opportunities (SI)**	**Continue cooperation in law and order & security, including human security (SI)**
Ease visa restrictions and strengthen working-visa programs for Fiji citizens **(F)**	**Open more doors to ni-Vanuatu people to work in Australia beyond SWP** – Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) graduates and skilled workers **(V)**
Lessen visa and immigration restrictions: Let Pacific islanders 'arrive with dignity' **(SI)**	**Respect ni-Vanuatu people more (V)**
Improve process for obtaining a visa to visit Australia or do away with the visa altogether **(V)**	
Economic investment strategies need to move with the times and address key issues in contemporary Fiji **(F)**	
Invest in Solomon Islands business opportunities, in partnership with locals **(SI)**	*I was disappointed when the investment into Pacific Islands media [from Australia] was to be the provisioning of television programs…I really don't need to see The Bachelor or Married at First Sight. That amount of money could actually have been given to local media organisations to produce content* [KIIFJ 002].
Do more than take the cheaper, easy route on **climate change (SI)**	
Do more on the big issues – **climate change and infrastructure** projects benefitting the region **(F)**	*Australia has been very generous in setting aside 3 billion dollars for the Pacific. One billion aid and the rest for infrastructure and development, and that's good. But it's a token. Australia needs to do more on climate change and for the Pacific islands* [KIIFJ 003]
I would expect the leaders and influential people in Australia to be setting an example for us [KIIV 005]	
We need a lot more trade and investment between us, prioritising links with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Don't start in Canberra – start in Queensland. Follow the frothings on the sea, where the canoe paddles [KIISI 011]	

The primary area of convergence in relation to this question was the need to make better use of local knowledge and resources by those who are implementing programs on behalf of the Australian government. This extends from the design of programs and projects through to their delivery. This primary concern encapsulates other concerns such as lack of employment opportunities for local people within Australian programs and reports by local NGOs and CSOs of restricted access to funding. The data across all three countries reflect mixed feelings around the role of INGOs. While their work is acknowledged and, largely, appreciated, there is some concern about the displacement of local organisations. Some INGOs, working with local partners, are not timely in providing funds and feedback, and are perceived to pass on onerous reporting requirements.

Connected to this issue is the concern about the quality of relationships between Australia and Pacific island countries, and between Australians and Pacific islanders. The participants indicated that more needs to be done on the Australian side to develop these relationships in ways that are respectful, sustainable and mutually beneficial. Across each country, participants indicated that they felt it was important that Australia and Australians should demonstrate respect for local people and culture and be better at listening. For example, in Solomon Islands, although participants place first responsibility on their own country to solve its own problems, they have many specific recommendations for Australia. Central among these is the active creation of multidimensional relationships in which the wishes of Solomon Islanders are respected and balanced against those of the Australians.

You have to think positive. And this is the country that we live in, regardless of what other people say about it. They don't live here. We live here. Some of the descriptions that have been labelled to our country, they don't help either. And some of the reports that have been written by those that make reports do not help us either. So one wonders what exactly are they trying to do when they do those reports, those reviews, those consultancy reports and all of that. Sometimes I read it and I don't recognise my country [KIISI 003]

Similarly, in Fiji there is a sense that Australia consistently ignores the issues that concern most Fijians both on the grand scale (climate change) and on the detailed policy level (visa restrictions and labour mobility schemes). It is evident that most respondents did not necessarily see Australia as a place they wanted to migrate to permanently, but rather a place they wanted to engage with economically – that is, do trade with, gain education in or work in temporarily.

Remove the visa requirement, to allow South Seas countries to be able to have access to a region that they helped to develop. … let us work on those values of history to gain a foothold in the way that we develop these two societies together [KIISI 001]

Many participants said that Australia needs to ease visa restrictions and strengthen working visa programs. This 'strengthening' includes both increasing the number of opportunities available and investing in how the programs operate in order to maximise benefits to Pacific workers and minimise risks associated with poor working conditions and other abuses.

The emphasis on ease of access to Australia should not come as a surprise. It is a sticking point and a source of frustration in numerous Pacific island countries. The main cause of concern is the administrative (and concomitant) financial burden that the process of obtaining a visa entails. It is a particular issue in the Vanuatu context as visa free access to Australia has been stipulated by the government as a precondition for ratification of the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus[22]. In Solomon Islands, some participants identified discriminatory treatment at the port of entry to Australia as another aspect of this issue.

There's a lot that Australia has to do better. Climate change for example. It is staring us in the face. I come from an island where every day you walk with your feet wet. Is Australia doing much in that area? Perhaps not much [KIISI 006]

I see that those countries who want to help us mitigate climate change are really friends for us [KIISI 008]

Another key theme to emerge from this part of the data focused on how Australia can do more to enhance economic opportunity. Participants in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu identified that creating more opportunities for formal employment was an important way in which Australia could contribute to an enhanced future relationship. Issues related to scholarships and training were also raised. Participants in Solomon Islands indicated that the current profile of scholarships which are oriented towards public-sector related skills is perceived as too narrow. Business and entrepreneurial skills, and arts/cultural skills are also valued and sought after.

More generally, participants in Fiji and Solomon Islands expressed a desire for Australia to do more on 'big' issues such as addressing the causes of climate change and investment in infrastructure projects that benefit the region.

Particularly noticeable in the data from Solomon Islands was that many participants see a need for Australia to come to terms with its own past if it wishes to be a true partner.

Compensation for the blackbirding is not right, its's just a one-off payment and that's why it's not suitable. We need to be recognized that it was our ancestors that were chained and taken to Australia and built Australia. Recognition or acknowledgement is better than compensation [Minority FGSI 003]

22 The other main issue is the removal of the ban on commercial importation of kava. A trial of commercial importation of kava to Australia is due to commence during 2020 (Fox; 2019)

Key Messages & Recommendations

What key messages emerged from the data?

Quality relationships matter more than quantities of aid, trade or other engagement.

One thing that comes across loud and clear from all of our data is the very high value that is placed on the relationships with Australia and Australians by the participants in this research. We use the term 'relationships' deliberately because this is a space characterised by connections that are many and varied. They are not confined to capital cities or one particular sector. They span education, sport, commerce, cultural exchanges, faith linkages, diplomatic engagements, and much more. In each of the countries where we worked, it was clear that Australia's presence is one that is wanted. **Indeed, it is the importance of the relationship that underpins participants' criticisms of how Australia engages – participants desire to see the relationship not just preserved but enhanced. What could be seen as a contradiction – the support for Australian relationships and detailed criticism – in fact speaks to the desire among Pacific islanders for these relationships to realise their full potential.**

A key theme expressed across the board is a desire for relationships to be deepened and developed in ways that speak to their quality rather than quantity. This includes, but is not limited to, moving beyond the portrayal of bilateral relationships in one-dimensional terms, whether by reference to aid, security, or some other paradigm.

The data nonetheless indicate a strong thread of wariness about Australia's motives and its conduct within its Pacific relationships. Participants told us that they want Australia to fully embrace being a member of the Pacific family. This includes taking on a share of responsibility as the region's largest and wealthiest country. Participants were mindful of the considerable and extensive assistance that Australia has provided to the region over many years. However, there appears to be a mismatch between the number of Australian programs, projects, and initiatives (some of which predate the Step-up) and the infrequency with which they were referenced by the people we listened to. Very few programs and their dollar value were raised by the research participants: notable exceptions were labour mobility programs, APTC, Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development and RAMSI.

There is a sense of sadness and frustration (bordering on resentment at times) about the ways in which Australia and Australians are seen to behave in relation to Pacific island countries and towards Pacific island people. The obstacles that face Pacific island people who wish to visit Australia present a particular sticking point. There were numerous observations of high-handedness, racism and limited cultural competence. This research would indicate that Australia's forms and style of interaction appear to align poorly with the 'Pacific Mode'.

At an institutional level, this sadness and frustration was reflected in very strong concerns about the lack of local ownership and participation in Australian engagement across government, civil society and private sector relations. At the government-to-government level we saw that there is a desire to see greater alignment of Australian programs, projects and initiatives with national development agendas. At an organisational level, we heard numerous concerns about over-reliance on INGOs causing local civil society groups to feel marginalised. This is particularly significant when it comes to issues of funding and employment. **Essentially, local civil society groups want to see a greater sharing of resources, with them at the forefront of service delivery activities, particularly in rural areas.** Development practitioners in these countries want to see their expertise and skills properly valued, including through employment opportunities and appropriate levels of remuneration. Private sector partnerships were critiqued as being extractive, with little skills transfer and limited acknowledgement of the capabilities of local businesses.

Values, norms & ways of doing things matter…a lot

Across the data from all three countries we were struck by the immense value that is placed on Pacific cultures and traditions. It is fundamental to Pacific islander identity. Pacific island people routinely hold in their minds, consciousness and actions a recognition, and indeed a celebration, of their cultural diversity alongside a sense of commonality of interest, respect, trust, reciprocity and an understanding of culture. **We have termed these characteristics, which were articulated in each country, a 'Pacific Mode'.**

This 'Pacific Mode' already operates in some key spaces, especially within the mechanisms for Pacific regionalism. However, what our data shows is that there are some very strong perceptions that Australia has yet to develop an understanding and appreciation of the 'Pacific Mode'. This is an echo of critiques elsewhere that Australia is not playing its full part in Pacific regionalism, leading some to suggest that the membership of the Pacific Islands Forum should be reviewed (Carter; 2019).

Describing the 'Pacific Mode' is not an attempt to somehow 'flatten out' the vast array of cultural and linguistic diversity in the region. Neither is it about somehow distilling or essentialising 'Pacific culture'. Rather, **the 'Pacific Mode' can act as a reminder that when engaging with Pacific people we should expect and want to be in spaces that are informed by all of its complexities and commonalities.** It is in these spaces that meaningful, and mutually beneficial, relationships can be forged and sustained.

A significant subset of the data that feeds into this key finding draws from responses that highlighted the absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia's projection and portrayal of itself in the region. Participants reflected a desire to engage with Indigenous Australians and expressed sadness and disappointment that this was not something that happened often, if at all. A related issue, particularly in Solomon Islands

and Vanuatu, was the historical practice of blackbirding. Blackbirding is perceived to be an aspect of Australia's relationships with the Pacific yet to be fully addressed and resolved.

Australia is one of many potential relationships for Pacific islanders

Like people anywhere, the participants' lives are dominated by domestic concerns – health, education, livelihoods, peace, justice and the quality of their leadership and institutions – but they are also concerned about international issues and relationships as they intersect with these preoccupations. This is most readily apparent in the existential climate change threat they face, in which their domestic concerns are indeed intimately linked to a wider global agenda. However, this more recent nexus connects to a pre-existing sense of the linkage between domestic concerns and international relations deriving from a long tradition of close ties with countries such as Australia.

Many participants recognise the geostrategic place that the Pacific occupies and some see the current interest in their part of the world as an opportunity for Pacific island countries, whether singly or working together, to establish new relationships or modify existing ones to better align with their own needs and aspirations.

Whilst there is no clear view as to whether Australia is (or wants to be viewed as) a 'Pacific' country, its legitimacy as part of the regional community is generally accepted. Australia is nonetheless just one of many countries with which participants see they and their countries can form and deepen relationships. They see opportunities to partner with other Pacific island countries, New Zealand, China and others. In the main, they expect that Pacific island countries will maintain multiple relationships both bilaterally and multilaterally[23].

Given this 'friends to all and enemies to none' approach, it is unsurprising that we heard comparisons between how different countries and their citizens behave toward and in our target countries. In particular, there were numerous comparisons between Australia and New Zealand or China. We received the impression from participants that New Zealand and its citizens were perceived to have a deeper understanding of Pacific issues and this is evident in how diplomatic relationships are conducted. Much was also made of the stronger position of Maori and Pasifika cultural values in official NZ policies and the visibility of leaders from those communities in the international arena, including in the region. New Zealanders could be seen to operate more effectively in the 'Pacific Mode'.

The role of China is a significant issue for many people. However, there is not a great deal of consensus about its impacts. Two points have emerged from this data. First, participants see that it is the responsibility of their governments to manage bilateral relationships with China. Secondly, there is a perception among some that Pacific regional collective action (which includes Australia) may be a way to balance China's influence. Although not as strong a theme, there were certainly indications that Chinese modes of engagement were perceived as more acceptable than Australian approaches in some areas.

Recommendations

Positive change in Australia's relationship with the region must start with, but is not limited to, the Australian government. Even as the Pacific Step-up has been well received as progress in the right direction, it is only a first step if Australia is to realise the full potential of its Pacific relationships. We recommend action in four areas to put Australia more firmly on that path:

1 Shift gears on the Step-up

The increased level of Australian interest in the Pacific is well recognised in the region, but it is struggling to gain traction as Australia's desire to *do more* conflicts with Pacific islanders' wish for Australia to *do better*. This is because the Pacific Step-Up currently operates as something that Australia is doing **to** or, possibly, **for** the Pacific. Instead, the Step-up needs to transform into a deep-seated, multi-faceted and nuanced commitment to working **with** the Pacific. There needs to be a move away from Australia's relationships with the Pacific being characterised by a donor/recipient dynamic. Instead, Australian relationships with the Pacific need to be built on foundations of mutual respect, reciprocity, and trust. This requires much more than a change in rhetoric or messaging. As has been stated elsewhere (Newton Cain; 2018, Cox; 2019), Australia needs to listen more and listen better. This research demonstrates that Pacific people are looking for reassurance that Australia is listening to their concerns and working alongside them, as an equal partner, to address *shared* challenges. Australia needs to be open to what it can learn from the region. To get this process underway we recommend that the Australian government:

- **Convene a regional Partnership Summit**

  There are very few opportunities for open dialogue between multiple types of stakeholder from Australia and the region. Meetings tend to be confined to one type of institution and to have detailed and restricting agendas. This could be seen to result in the same conversations happening again and again and stifle the opportunity for new perspectives to emerge. A forum in which different types of people from across the region have the chance to speak and listen, guided by themes rather than a set agenda, could be a way to break out of these closed loops.

  A summit would be the launch pad for ongoing cross-sectoral dialogue led by Pacific voices and using 'Pacific Mode' protocols and methodologies. With diverse country participation by the Pacific community of PIF member states, it should allow for the organic development of themes, as led by Pacific islanders, and have as its primary purpose the development of deeper trust, greater understanding and mutual respect. Participation in this summit (and any pre- and post- dialogues connected with it) needs to go beyond the usual suspects to ensure voices are heard from government, civil society, sporting groups, the private sector, faith-based groups, traditional leaders, and the

23 The particular political realties around Taiwan and China are an exception to this

community more broadly. The Australian contingent must include significant leadership and participation by Torres Strait Island and Aboriginal people.

- **Deepen relationships beyond the capitals**

  The network of relationships needs to be both broadened and deepened. In Australia, this is more than having Pacific temporary workers contributing to regional towns and economies. There are cultural, sporting, church, and economic relationships to be further developed[24] and nurtured, with reciprocity at their core. In the region it is again these cultural, sporting, church and economic relationships that require development and sustenance. There should also be strategic investment to support both existing spaces for economic, cultural and other relationships between Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people and indigenous Pacific islanders, as well as the creation of new ones.

- **Improve government, private sector and NGO partnerships**

  Participants from all backgrounds observed that although they have experienced some good relationships with Australian counterparts, others tended to be extractive or unequal. They strongly called for partnerships that respect local capacity and expertise while building other capacities that they acknowledge they lack. Medium-term exchanges of personnel are particularly sought after.

- **Encourage INGOs to transfer power to local civil society organisations to increase perceived levels of trust, autonomy and open communication**

  The frustration expressed by many local civil society leaders about delays in project approvals and funding, onerous reporting, lack of financial autonomy and poor communication confirm the need to give substance and urgency to the localisation agenda currently being discussed by Australia-based INGOs[25]. Remedying this situation requires change both in those organisations and their donors (notably DFAT) to find a better balance between accountability and respect for local agency.[26]

2 Invest in Australia's Pacific literacy

In order for Australia to be able to act confidently in the 'Pacific Mode', gaps in Pacific literacy need to be addressed. The data we have collected here reflect a truism that whilst Pacific island people have a good general knowledge about Australia, the reverse is far from true. Moreover Australians fare badly in comparison to others, notably New Zealanders and Chinese. It is instructive that those two countries each engage positively, but very differently, with the 'Pacific Mode'. Australian policy, engagement and interactions are thus hampered by a severe lack of Pacific literacy. This is nothing new: it has been called out by scholars such as Katerina Teaiwa and others for many years. However, in this period of 'stepped up' engagement this deficit is amplified. To remedy this, we recommend that Australia commit political, social and economic resources to:

- **Promote knowledge of the Pacific in Australia via schools, universities and the mainstream media**

  Very little space is allotted for Pacific studies in curricula at any level. Pacific studies are on the periphery of the tertiary sector and Pacific language study is a low priority even within this area of study.[27] Despite some positive recent initiatives in Australian news media,[28] Pacific islanders and their concerns feature seldom, if at all, in other popular media. Pacific literacy can start with the normalisation of awareness of Pacific islands perspectives and history, in much the same way that is happening with awareness of Australia's Asian neighbours.

  Developing Pacific literacy is an opportunity to recognise and learn from the extensive Pacific diaspora communities in Australia. Australians can practise listening to and learning from Pacific islanders in the classroom and on our TV screens.

- **Develop a 'Pacific capable' strategy[29]**

  In addition to this general awareness, Australians need to be prepared to live, work and socialise with Pacific island people in their own country and in the countries of the region. The strategy would encourage potentially Pacific-focused organisations to build specific measures into their strategies and operations to build staff and organisational capability, with specific provisions to include and learn from Pacific islanders in the region and in Australia.

- **Work with Pacific diaspora communities** to build the capacity of government departments and agencies who work in the region (including DFAT, Department of Defence and others), contractors and INGOs particularly in the areas of linguistic and cultural competency. This can also include the secondment of Pacific islander public servants to Australian agencies.

24 For more on how church partnerships can contribute to Pacific development see Cochrane; 2018.

25 See, for example, Lehoux (2016).

26 This is in line with recent recommendations from Georgeou and Hawksley (2020) who suggest that the principles of "co-production of knowledge" and "research partnerships" are instrumental in developing effective strategies for research and program delivery.

27 There are very limited opportunities to study the Pacific in Australian universities beyond the offering of a Bachelor of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University.

28 The 'Sean Dorney Grant for Pacific Journalism' administered by the Walkley Foundation and The 'Pacific Project' at The Guardian (funded by the Judith Neilson Institute for Ideas) are very recent attempts to improve this. Neither of these initiatives receive government funding.

29 Similar to the 'Asia Capable' strategy (Asia Link: 2012)

3 Get our own house in order

Across numerous aspects of the data, it is evident that Pacific islanders know us far better than we know them. When they see Australia, they look past our borders to the country within, and are not at ease with what they find. This adds to the general sense of wariness that participants expressed about Australia's true intentions and whether there is a genuine commitment to building and sustaining true partnerships and relationships in the region. By looking critically at what is happening at home and addressing areas where domestic policy and politics are in tension with avowed foreign policy objectives, Australia can better position itself to engage in the region.

Here we recommend that Australia:

- **Demonstrate a systematic, consistent and constructive long-term approach to climate change** This needs to encompass mitigation and adaptation in line with the Boe Declaration and the planned 2050 strategy[30] to be considered at the 51st meeting of Pacific Islands Forum leaders
- **Demonstrate real change in the status of Indigenous Australians.** Indigenous people need to become visible in all walks of Australian life and thus be in a position to help shape Australia's representation to and engagement with the world

4 Level the playing field when it comes to access

The data we collected echoes what we have heard from Pacific people before, including from national leaders. They want to be able to travel to Australia more easily and they want to see what they produce being sold to Australians. These issues are not going to go away and there needs to be a lot more honesty in the conversations around them. Expanding labour mobility schemes and introducing an 'Australia-Pacific card' for certain already privileged groups does not address the expensive, cumbersome and intrusive administrative barriers to respectful and efficient travel to Australia faced by most Pacific islander people. Lobbying Pacific island countries to engage more fully with PACER Plus, whether by becoming signatories or by way of ratification, without acknowledging the influence of domestic farming interest groups is inappropriate and may prove counter-productive. To address these concerns, we recommend that Australia:

- **Make it easier for all Pacific people to travel to and work in Australia.** This includes offering increased access to short-term visas, student and professional exchange programs and minimising onerous administrative and financial burdens
- **Prioritise products from the Pacific** for regulatory and administrative processes (e.g. biosecurity approval) to get them into Australian markets
- **Hold a regular Pacific Expo in Australia.** The excellence of many Pacific products is not well known to Australians and investment in prioritising Pacific products needs to be matched with investment in building up the Australian market. A regular Expo would showcase primary and value-added products, foster business-to-business ties and offer an incentive to Pacific producers to get their products ready for the Australian market.[31]





30 Leaders at the 2019 meeting of Pacific Islands Forum Leaders agreed that a draft strategy would be developed for them to consider at the 51st meeting of Pacific Islands Forum leaders in Vanuatu (Armbruster & Newton Cain; 2019).

31 See also, Bohane (2019). Bohane suggests 'Pacific villages' in Sydney and Brisbane as conduits for Pacific products.

References

Armbruster, Stefan & Newton Cain, Tess (2019) "Trying times in Tuvalu" in Devpolicy [https://devpolicy.org/trying-times-in-tuvalu-20190820/] (accessed 27/01/2020)

Asia Link (2012) Developing an *Asia Capable Workforce: A National Strategy* [https://asialinkbusiness.com.au/uploads/documents/AsialinkBusiness_Developing-Asia-Capable-Workforce.pdf] (accessed 22/01/2020)

Bhagwan, James (2019) "A climate plea to Scott Morrison from a churchman of the Pacific's sinking nations" in *The Sydney Morning Herald* [https://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/a-climate-plea-to-scott-morrison-from-a-churchman-of-the-pacific-s-sinking-nations-20190808-p52f4a.html] (accessed 27/01/2020)

Bohane, Ben (2019) "From the ocean to the east, it looks like Australia's Pacific policy is all at sea" in *Sydney Morning Herald* [https://www.smh.com.au/world/oceania/from-the-ocean-to-the-east-it-looks-like-australia-s-pacific-policy-is-all-at-sea-20191220-p53lrd.html] (accessed 24/01/20)

Boyle, M (2019) "Seruiratu suggests Australia look to Pacific for military recruits" in *FBC News* 14 October 2019 [https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/seruiratu-suggests-australia-look-to-pacific-for-military-recruits/] (accessed 28/01/2020)

Carter, George (2019) "The Pacific should persist with Australia on climate change" in *East Asia Forum* [https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/09/16/the-pacific-should-persist-with-australia-on-climate-change/] (accessed 22/01/2020)

Clarke, Matthew & Feeny, Simon (2019) "The dragon versus the kangaroo: perceptions of Chinese and Australian influence and development assistance in Vanuatu" i*n Australian Journal of Political Science* **54/3**: 334-354

Cochrane, Rebekah (2018) "How to collaborate with Pacific churches for development research: Guidance for effective approaches to collaborations with Churches in the Pacific for development research" published by the Research for Development Impact Network

Commonwealth of Australia (2017) *Foreign Policy White Paper*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: Canberra

Commonwealth of Australia (2019) "Stepping up in the Pacific" [https://dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/pages/the-pacific.aspx] (accessed 30/01/2020)

Cox, James (2019) "Australia in the Pacific: what are we stepping up to?" in *Peacifica Blog* [https://www.peacifica.org/post/2019/05/27/australia-in-the-pacific-what-are-we-stepping-up-to] (accessed 30/01/2020)

Davidson, Helen (2019) "Foreign aid declines further in the budget, with focus on the Pacific" in *The Guardian* [https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/apr/03/foreign-aid-declines-further-in-australian-budget-with-focus-on-pacific] (accessed 31/01/2020)

Fletcher, Luke & Yeophantong, Pichamon (2019) Enter the Dragon: Australia, China, and the New Pacific Development Agenda (published by Jubilee Australia, Caritas and UNSW)

Flint, Josie, Duituturaga, Emele & Jirauni, Josaia (2018) "Tracking Progress on Localisation: A Pacific Perspective" published by the Humanitarian Advisory Group and the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO)

Fox, Liam (2019) "Easing of Australia's kava import restrictions welcomed in Australia and around the Pacific" for *Pacific Beat* 15 October [https://www.abc.net.au/radio-australia/programs/pacificbeat/easing-of-australias-kava-import-restrictions-welcomed/11602668] (accessed 20/01/2020)

George, Nicole (2019) "Gender, security and Australia's 2018 Pacific Pivot: stalled impetus and shallow roots" in *Australian Journal of International Affairs* **73/3**: 213-218

Georgeou, Nichole & Hawksley, Charles (2020) "Enhancing Research Impact in International Development: A Practical Guide for Practitioners and Researchers" published by the Research for Development Impact Network

Government of Vanuatu (2017) *Vanuatu 2030: The People's Plan*

Hayward-Jones, Jenny (2016) "Turnbull's first Pacific Islands Forum" *Australian Outlook* 15 September [http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/turnbulls-first-pacific-islands-forum/] (accessed 04/10/2019)

Howes, Stephen & Lawton, Holly (2019) "The Pacific Labour Scheme: is it a flop?" *Devpolicy Blog* [https://devpolicy.org/the-pacific-labour-scheme-is-it-a-flop-20190729/] (accessed 21/01/2020)

Lehoux, Frederique (2016) "Localisation in Practice: A Pacific Case Study" published by CARE and Live & Learn

Morrison, Scott (2018) "Australia and the Pacific: A New Chapter", speech delivered at Lavarack Barracks, Townsville 8 November [https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-australia-and-pacific-new-chapter] (accessed 04/10/2019)

Newton Cain, Tess (2018) "Walking the Talk: Is Australia's Engagement with the Pacific a 'Step Up' or a Stumble?" published by The Cairns Institute

Newton Cain, Tess (2019a) "The State of the Step-Up: Australia's engagement with the Pacific islands region" in *State of the Neighbourhood*, Griffith Asia Institute: Brisbane, pp 37-47

Newton Cain, Tess (2019b) "Yes Morrison showed up in the Pacific but what did he actually achieve?" *The Conversation* https://theconversation.com/yes-morrison-showed-up-in-the-pacific-but-what-did-he-actually-achieve-109792 (accessed 03/01/2020)

Newton Cain (2019c) "Australia shows up in Tuvalu and trips over" in East Asia Forum [https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/08/30/australia-shows-up-in-tuvalu-and-trips-over/] (accessed 06/01/2020)

Orton, Beth and Howes, Stephen (2019) "The backpacker visa is morphing into an unregulated agricultural one" in *Devpolicy* [https://devpolicy.org/the-backpacker-visa-is-morphing-into-an-unregulated-agricultural-one-20191017/] (accessed 27/01/2020)

Poole, Avery (2019) "Time to collaborate on Pacific step up" in *The Canberra Times* [https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6463750/time-to-collaborate-on-pacific-step-up/] (accessed 27/01/2020)

SBS (2018) "Australia focuses on Pacific after APEC meeting ends in disagreement" [https://www.sbs.com.au/news/australia-focuses-on-pacific-after-apec-meeting-ends-in-disagreement] (accessed 03/02/2020)

Teaiwa, Katerina (2014) "Reframing Oceania: Lessons from Pacific Studies" in Hilary E. Kahn (ed.) *Framing the Global: Entry Points for Research* published by Indiana University Press

Teaiwa, Katerina (2019) "Pacific leadership on climate change is necessary and inevitable" in *The Sydney Morning Herald* [https://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/pacific-leadership-on-climate-change-is-necessary-and-inevitable-20190704-p5240u.html] (accessed 27/01/2020)

Tukuitonga, Colin (2018) "Looking to 2019: The Blue Pacific narrative will be key for our region" *Pacific Community Web Stories* [http://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2018/12/looking-to-2019-the-blue-pacific-narrative-will-be-key-for-our-region] (accessed 21/01/2020)

Urwin, Chris (2019) "Cultural heritage key to regional development in PNG and Australia" in *The Interpreter* [https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/cultural-heritage-key-regional-development-png-and-australia] (accessed 30/01/2020)

Vivekananthan, Jeevika & Cartland, Tara (2019) "Kinship is vital to Pacific disaster response" in The Interpreter [https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/kinship-is-vital-to-pacific-disaster-response] (accessed 27/01/2020)

Wallis, Joanne (2018) "Australia needs to reset its Pacific policy" in East Asia Forum [https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/06/01/australia-needs-to-reset-its-pacific-policy/] (accessed 27/01/2020)

Wyeth, Grant (2019) "Australia's Pacific Step-Up: more than just talk" in *The Diplomat* [https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/australias-pacific-step-up-more-than-just-talk/] (accessed 27/01/2020)



Whitlam Institute
WITHIN WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

Female Orphan School
Western Sydney University Parramatta campus
Cnr James Ruse Drive & Victoria Road Rydalmere NSW 2116
Locked Bag 1797 Penrith NSW Australia 2751
T+ 61 2 9685 9210 E info@whitlam.org
whitlam.org

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY