Chapter 4

Pacific Regionalism: Perspectives on the Pacific Plan

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**Pacific Leaders plot a new course**

The question of regional change, whether to cooperate more closely, even to integrate or not, has been put fairly and squarely on the regional agenda. The focus of this paper will not be so much on past or present trends, and what analyses of them might point to for the future, but rather on some of the practicalities of the present situation, some of the issues which will need to be faced if the region is to move forward regionally, and finally what some of the appropriate steps might be if the region is indeed to move forward.

The term ‘moving forward’ requires an explanation and it is important to define it in terms of regionalism in the Pacific today. Inevitably there will be several different explanations. Some will argue for closer cooperation and integration, as did the Forum leaders in accepting the recommendations of the Eminent Persons’ Group in April 2004. Others may argue for other alternative options, for the status quo, or for a focus on what some have, perhaps disparagingly, called ‘sub-regionalism’ defined as closer cooperation within groups defined by geography and, to a degree, culture: Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia. Another group still may argue for a focus on the linkages which the island countries of the Pacific are increasingly developing with the major developed countries on the rim of our great Pacific Ocean.

The intention of this paper is to look at some perspectives on the Pacific Plan, that being the course on which the governments of the region have said that they are agreed. What changes do the region’s leaders intend and how do they hope to bring them about?

*The Auckland Declaration*

It is important to keep in mind precisely what the Forum Leaders did, and did not, agree on the question of the region’s future. At the Pacific Islands Forum Special Leaders’ Retreat held in Auckland on 6 April 2004 the Leaders adopted The Auckland Declaration and a series of Leaders’ Decisions regarding the region’s future.
First, they endorsed a rather striking Vision for our region:

Leaders believe the Pacific region can, should and will be a region of peace, harmony, security and economic prosperity, so that all its people can lead free and worthwhile lives. We treasure the diversity of the Pacific and seek a future in which its cultures, traditions and religious beliefs are valued, honoured and developed. We seek a Pacific region that is respected for the quality of its governance, the sustainable management of its resources, the full observance of democratic values, and for its defence and promotion of human rights. We seek partnerships with our neighbours and beyond to develop our knowledge, to improve our communications and to ensure a sustainable economic existence for all (Decision 1, page 1).

Pacific Island Leaders went on to agree, at their Special Leaders’ Retreat on 6 April 2004, to:

Endorse and lead the development of the Pacific Plan, intended to create stronger and deeper links between the countries of the region. The Plan should:

Assess options and provide a strategy for deeper and broader regional cooperation, taking into account the broader international environment and agreements in which Forum members participate.

Identify the sectors and issues in which the region can gain the most from sharing resources of governance and aligning policies.

Provide clear recommendations to Leaders on the sequence and priorities for intensified regional cooperation.

Be used as a springboard for stimulating debate on how to shape the region’s longer-term future.

Be carried out by a Task Force of people from within the region, managed by the Secretary General.

Be overseen in the first instance by a core group of Leaders (comprising the immediate past, current and incoming chairs and a representative of the Smaller Island States), this composition to be reviewed after each Forum.

Be started as soon as possible. The Forum Secretariat to complete an assessment of existing mechanisms and processes for regional cooperation in time for the 2004 Apia Forum, along with draft terms of reference and recommendations from the Secretary General for membership of the Task Force (Decision 2, pp. 1 and 2).

These are the specific decisions of Forum Leaders regarding the Pacific Plan which is to be prepared for consideration by Leaders at subsequent Forum meetings, with likely adoption at the Papua New Guinea Forum in October 2005. I make no apology for going over them in full for whether one agrees with them or not, the regional ramifications of these decisions are potentially far-reaching.

At the outset I talked of Forum countries ‘moving forward’ with regional cooperation. What the terms of the Auckland Declaration make clear is that moving forward with a Pacific Plan, as Leaders have said they are resolved to do, will involve the pursuit of ‘stronger and deeper links between the countries of the region’, ‘deeper and broader regional cooperation’, ‘increased sharing of resources’, the ‘alignment of policies’, and overall ‘intensified regional cooperation’. Since the key decisions to move down this path, taken in Auckland in April 2004, intensive discussions have taken place between the governments of the region and a process of consultation with non-government organisations and actors has begun.

The calls for change

The immediate background to these decisions included both outspoken calls for change and dramatic events within the region itself. In the past few years, many academics, mostly Australian, and some government officials have commented often, and mostly negatively, about the plight of the Pacific Islands region. They have written of an ‘arc of instability’, of the ‘Africanisation of the Pacific’, of the view that ‘many of these countries are too small to be viable in the normal understanding of that expression’, all this fed by academic advice that appears to believe that ‘nothing we’re doing at the moment is working and that we have to raise the stakes’. There has also been talk of the need ‘to put a regional floor beneath the Pacific economies’, and an Australian parliamentary committee called for favourable consideration of a Pacific and economic community which over time would involve a common currency, a common labour market and common budgetary and fiscal standards.

There has been a natural inclination on the part of some in New Zealand to be sceptical about these proposals and to discount the need for some of them. New Zealand commentators often feel that Australians tend to forget about Polynesia, our own home region where, Tonga perhaps excepted, there is stability and significant prosperity. But it is important to remember that it is not only the more conservative of Australia’s politicians and academics who have called for new regional approaches. For example, in Mr Goff’s presentation to the 39th Foreign Policy School I was interested to hear of the exchange between Walter Nash and Peter Fraser on the question of a possible confederation. And in 1982 Mike Moore, then a Labour Party backbencher, published his A Pacific Parliament. Then more recently, one of New Zealand’s most experienced Pacific journalists, Michael Field, whom few would

2 Prime Minister Howard, Dominion Post, 23 July 2003.
3 Professor Ron Duncan, Australian National University, Time Magazine, 7 July 2003.
accuse of right-wing tendencies, has written of the need for political and economic integration: 'It [the successful cooperation of the South Pacific Games] raises the question of why not a unified state across the Pacific; not so much a Pacific Union along European Union lines, but something away from sovereignty ...'.

The real impetus for change towards more intense regional cooperation is of course the hard reality in several parts of the region. These include the dire situation in the Solomon Islands, concerns about trends elsewhere in Melanesia, the predicament of Nauru, and rising concerns about governance issues elsewhere in the region, including the political and human rights situation in Tonga.

The challenges to be faced

For progress to be made towards closer political and economic cooperation, the pooling of resources and the alignment of policies between Pacific Forum countries, all specifically called for by Forum Leaders, some major challenges will have to be faced. These must include: the issue of political buy-in throughout the region and the question whether there are sufficient underpinning values which are shared by Pacific peoples; how closer political and economic cooperation among all Forum countries will affect, and will be affected by, the existing Closer Economic Relations partnership between Australia and New Zealand; geopolitical issues regarding the geographical reach of any new Pacific community and the constitutional requirements for membership affecting not least the French and United States territories of the region; calls for adoption of a common currency in the region; the touchstone issue of free movement of peoples through the region; and finally the need to find truly Pacific solutions to Pacific challenges.

There are many other issues that could be added, but this is my selection of some of the more complex issues. Each will now be dealt with in turn.

Political buy-in?

Quite obviously, none of what the Auckland Declaration envisages will happen without political buy-in from all the intended participants. If Leaders adopt the Pacific Plan in Papua New Guinea in late 2005, as intended, that will involve the formal commitments of the region's governments. The Forum Islands Secretariat has begun a process of public consultation on the subject. Whether this process will be comprehensive enough to ensure widespread public buy-in remains to be seen.

In the case of Forum Island Countries, including their governments, there is very little indication yet of likely attitudes, beyond the endorsement of the Auckland Declaration by their leaders. There remains little sign of debate in the Island capitals of the region and few politicians have spoken out. The attitude of Prime Minister

Qarase of Fiji could reflect other views as well. Asked about political union, Qarase confirmed that the idea of a formal union was on the table, but said: 'I think we should leave it at that. We should not rule it out; it's an option that can be considered some time in the future'. There are signs of a determination to proceed with closer political and economic cooperation, and to keep all options on the table, on the part of key Pacific leaders. Prime Minister Hon. Tuila'epa Aiono Sailele Malielegaoi of Samoa, speaking also as Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, said in March 2005:

Remember, also, that in terms of regional integration, the EU started on a limited scale through sector cooperation, before moving to deeper integration, and to the broader community we see today. Australia and New Zealand also began their process of Closer Economic Relations by developing free trade in goods. ... I know there are a range of views about just how close, how integrated that relationship should be, but the point is that few predicted this thirty years ago. It is a process still evolving ...'.

Australia's situation is interesting. On the one hand, most of the recent calls for increased political and economic cooperation, even integration, have come from Australia, made largely by politicians, academics and journalists. On the other hand, it is hard to get a sense of a clear Australian commitment to be involved, as Australia the nation, in a wider regional grouping. Many Australian statements seem to hint that changes are necessary to make Australia's neighbourhood more secure and more manageable for the future. Greg Fry spoke of differing Australian motivations. David Lange was unable to resist giving his take on Australian attitudes: 'This business of being the saviour of the Pacific is not neo-colonialism,' he said, 'It's neo-nutcracker.'

In New Zealand, some of the kinds of viewpoints expressed in Australia are being repeated here. The Dominion Post newspaper editorialised perhaps a little pompously: 'But the senior Forum countries need to show leadership. New Zealand, in particular needs to shed its fear of paternalism. To stand back for fear of looking like Big Brother is not necessarily to act as a friend of Pacific nations.' And querying underlying New Zealand attitudes to the Pacific, Michael Field has asked why questions about the Pacific are so often referred to anthropologists but no-one asks anthropologists what they think about Europe. Because of its Polynesian populations and close connections with its Pacific neighbours, New Zealand should be in no doubt of its keenness to be included within any new political or economic arrangements in our region. The reverse would be unthinkable to many New Zealanders.

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9 New Zealand Herald, 7 April 2004.
10 Prime Minister Tuila’epa in his address The Future of Regionalism in the Pacific, delivered in Wellington and Auckland in March, 2005 and published by the Pacific Cooperation Foundation and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2005, pp.5-6.
11 Dominion Post, 6 April 2004.
12 Dominion Post 6 September.

8 The Auckland Declaration, Pacific Islands Forum Special Leaders' Retreat, Auckland, 6 April 2004.
The Pacific Cooperation Foundation, established in 2003 was created not least to seek to increase New Zealanders' awareness and understanding of the Pacific neighbourhood in which we live. Already The PCF has begun cooperative relationships with media in New Zealand and, with financial support from the Foundation, some quality newspaper articles have been published which may not have happened without that support. The task of increasing Pacific awareness is a huge one and one which requires cooperation of a number of groups.

But we in New Zealand do have an enormous amount to build on within our own society. Over a decade ago, Witi Ihimaera wrote, in a wonderful essay entitled The Long Dark Tea-Time of the South: New Zealand's Search for a Pacific Identity:

... a good start would be to stop thinking of the Pacific as the 'South Pacific' (this is limiting and defensive), improve the Australian connection, and most of all put 'New Zealand's backyard' [a term still used by New Zealand's politicians occasionally today] where it truly belongs - in front, not back of us. If the 21st century really does become the century of the Pacific, with all its attendant excitement and changes, then we need to put the Pacific ... where we as Pacific peoples can truly see it.

'I myself am driven by this ... belief that once, New Zealand almost had a Pacific identity. My ancestors tell me so ... Let the time of regaining Maori identity and of searching not only for Pacific identity but New Zealand identity be over.'

Australia too, recognises the New Zealand Pacific identity, with the Australian Senate generously entitling a whole section of its Senate Report New Zealand's Emergent Tangata Pasifika Identity, and while this Pacific identity may only just be emerging for Pakeha/Paaliagi New Zealanders, there is increasing recognition that it does exist. Last year at the time of the Pacific Forum in Auckland, Tapu Misa, a Samoan New Zealand columnist, wrote:

If there is an element of self-interest in our Government's desire to promote our Pacificness this week, it's not surprising. Wellington is comprehensively out-muscled by Canberra economically and militarily, and it's in our emerging Pacific identity that New Zealand has an edge. Pacific leaders have some tough questions to tackle over the next week. But as Pasifika peoples know, the region is more than the sum total of its problems. There is dynamism here, creativity, humour, as well as cohesiveness - and a sense of connectedness with the rest of Oceania that may well end up being our saving grace.

15 Senate report (above) 230.

Shared values?

The geographic dispersal of the countries of the region, the enormous variety of different ethnicities and cultures, and the economic disparity between wealthy developed and least developed developing countries all suggest that reaching agreement on common or shared values will be a major challenge. Many would regard the problem as insurmountable. But this may be one of the few areas on which the European experience could be valuable for the Pacific - simply in demonstrating that if countries as diverse as Cyprus and Finland are able to find sufficient common ground to underpin their integration within a political and economic community, then the same might be possible for the Pacific.

Already there is agreement on a shared Vision - quoted in full earlier - and there are of course cultural, ethnic and historical linkages. Some observers see hope for the future unity of the region in evolving identities. Steven Roger Fischer has written:

In the twentieth century, the concept of the insular tribe inflated to include the 'national tribe', a revolutionary notion for the Pacific. Now, in the twenty-first century, in tandem with similar movements in Europe, Africa, the Americas and Asia, all peoples of the Pacific are beginning to recognise the viability of the 'regional tribe' ... 

A Fiji educationist and former politician, Tupeni Baba, now of Auckland University, is reported to have argued:

Common cultural factors have been embedded longer and are therefore more enduring than the divisions created by national boundaries established in more recent times. There is much to suggest that the cultural ties as a result of movement of Pasifika peoples across the ocean from one island to the next, over thousands of years, have had a definite impact on their ways of life.

The well known Tongan writer, Epeli Hau‘ofa, has eloquently extolled the power of the Pacific, even spiritual in its force:

... we all know that only those who make the Ocean their home and love it, can really claim it theirs. Conquerors come, conquerors go, the Ocean remains, mother only to her children. This mother has a big heart; she adopts anyone who loves her.

Hau‘ofa makes it clear that he is not just talking about the indigenous people of the Pacific, but about all those ‘who make the Ocean their home and love it’. I would support his ethnic inclusiveness and wonder if all New Zealanders will qualify. Our Maori and Pacific Island peoples obviously would. And if the Pacific Cooperation Foundation does its job, along with other promoters and supporters of the Pacific.

19 'Our Sea of Islands' in A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands, USP, Suva, 1993.
it is hoped that Pakeha/Paolagi New Zealanders gradually will regard the Pacific as their home as well. Australia is also becoming more Pacific-focused. For example the Australian Senate Committee has recently recommended the establishment of an Australia-Pacific Council, some of whose functions, particularly that of raising awareness of the Pacific in Australia, are similar to the functions of New Zealand’s Pacific Cooperation Foundation. Over time it is likely that attitudes and awareness towards the Pacific will also change in Australia.

We must not underestimate the seriousness of this particular challenge. Clearly there are differences between ‘Western’ and ‘Pacific’ world views. It is hard to predict at this stage whether the Pacific emphasis on culture and spirituality, and sometimes contrasting Western views will impede development of a sense of Pacific identity. Hopefully an accepted sense of shared values underpinning regional integration will develop, but this remains to be seen. Looking again at precedents elsewhere in the world we should not assume that this particular challenge is necessarily insurmountable.

**Australia/New Zealand bilateral ramifications**

Given the Closer Economic Relations (CER) between the two countries, the arrangement for the free movement of each country’s citizens between them and the attention that is paid by opinion leaders in New Zealand to ways of enhancing the relationship, it is surprising that there seems so little debate about the possible ramifications on the bilateral relationship between Australia and New Zealand of closer cooperation among all Forum countries. A Trans-Tasman Leaders Forum was held in Wellington in May 2004, with leaders of high stature present from both countries. There was a great deal of discussion and debate reported, about the bilateral relationship and its future but there was nothing at all reported about the relevance of the proposed Pacific Plan or the Forum’s Auckland Declaration, to which both prime ministers had agreed only the previous month.

It was possible that it was thought premature to consider these issues before the Forum Leaders adopted a more specific Pacific Plan later in 2004 or in 2005. It is preferable to think that the imminent Forum meeting was the reason rather than any sense that what happened between Australia and New Zealand on the one hand, and the Island countries of the region on the other, could never be high on Trans-Tasman priority lists. Only time will tell on this.

**Geopolitical issues**

How far geographically should a Pacific community, if that should be a desired outcome, extend? Already, the member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum span the world’s largest ocean. This has always presented enormous challenges to individual Pacific countries and will present equal challenges to the cohesion of any new Pacific community. But the peoples of the Pacific have demonstrated from the beginning of Pacific history the capacity to harness the Ocean and not to let it thwart their will.

From a practical viewpoint, a more pressing geopolitical issue may be whether the members of any new Pacific community need all to be fully independent states, as is the case with the Forum, or whether the precise constitutional status of members might not be critical. There is the question of the French territories, particularly New Caledonia and French Polynesia where for decades there has been political debate on appropriate future political options. There are also the US territories. Fischer, after referring to recognition of the viability of the ‘regional tribe’, continues:

> It will then no longer matter, for example, that Samoa – Western Samoa and American Samoa – is split in two, not when, at a higher level, all Samoans will in fact be one again: as equal citizens of a larger federation.  

These issues have direct ramifications for Tokelau, now a dependent territory of New Zealand and, if reason prevails, unlikely given its size and population ever to seek full independence or even full self-government on the model of say the Cook Islands. Nevertheless the future political status of Tokelau has yet to be determined by its citizens. And there could also be relevance for Niue, whose declining population could lead Niueans to consider that the country’s present constitutional status of full self-government is not sustainable. For them, a change of status which enabled them to remain full citizens of a wider Pacific community might not be unwelcome. Conceivably some similar considerations could be relevant to the situation of Nauru, in its future relationship with Australia.

Handed imaginatively therefore, the formation of a wider Pacific community, or federation or union, whatever it’s called, could not only strengthen regional solidarity but also make it easier for separate Pacific peoples to make sensible constitutional arrangements to suit their own particular circumstances and needs.

**A common currency?**

For full economic and political integration obviously a common currency would be necessary. Yet so far proposals for a common regional currency have come only from Australia, the country which, because of its economic size and power, would be affected least by the adoption of a region-wide currency. Australia’s senator Graeme Dobell believes that the centre-piece of Australian policy towards the Pacific should be advocacy of a Pacific Economic Community, of which ‘the adoption of the Australian dollar as the currency of the Pacific’ would be a crucial part. He believes to be necessary to succeed in ‘placing a regional floor beneath the Pacific economies’. Dobell recognises it will be difficult to sell this idea in the region, suggesting that the promise of labour mobility would enable...
Australia ‘in return’ to ‘demand some real reforms from the Islands; in particular the adoption of the Australian dollar as the currency of the Pacific.’

The Senate Committee also gave the objective of a common currency high long-term priority. Its first and most important recommendation on the subject of a proposed Pacific economic and political community included the following:

Over time, such a community would involve establishing a common currency, preferably based on the Australian dollar.21

Whatever the economic logic behind the proposal for a common currency based on the Australian dollar, it is clear that, as the Senate Committee acknowledged, a common currency is not likely to be achieved in the short term. New Zealand’s Finance Minister has indicated that he will have none of it: ‘A single currency remains off the agenda here,’ he said late last year.22 And Fiji’s Prime Minister has been even more adamant: ‘It is totally out of tune for Fiji ... and we will oppose any move in that direction.’23

The simple fact of the economic dominance of Australia in the region means that while adoption of a common currency that was not based on the Australian dollar simply wouldn’t work, nor would it be acceptable to Australia, adoption of a common currency based on the Australian dollar would presumably involve passing central aspects of financial and economic policy into the hands of the Australian Treasurer and the Australian Reserve Bank. Few of Australia’s partners in the Pacific Islands Forum would be keen to take this course.

It remains to be seen whether in time political commitment to an economic and political community would come to outweigh the natural objections of most of the Forum to a common currency. Or possibly economic ingenuity could result in arrangements for a common currency which could make it more palatable for all participants.

Free movement of people?

Many observers recognise that the issue of the free movement of peoples within the region will be one of the most sensitive and difficult of all the challenges needing to be overcome if significantly increased political and economic cooperation, including integration, is to be achieved. A theoretical plan could be devised which included, illogically of course, much economic and political integration but omitted any mention of the movement of people or the mobility of labour. But politically this would be simply impossible. The history of restrictions imposed by New Zealand and Australia on the movement of peoples in the region (but not between each other) has exacerbated the sensitivity of the issue. With the free movement back and forth to New Zealand of Cook Islanders, Niueans and Tokelauans, all of whom hold New Zealand passports, and immigration quotas and occasional work permit arrangements for some other Polynesian Island countries, New Zealand is often regarded as having performed better in this area than Australia. But in 2004 New Zealand spoiled its image by requiring Tongan women, including senior officials and department heads, to undergo pregnancy tests before being issued visas to visit New Zealand. As a NZ Human Rights Commissioner I would like to emphasise that the Human Rights Commission very much shares these concerns. The Minister of Foreign Affairs in Chapter 2 of this book, seems to be suggesting that an alternative way of tackling the issue of freedom of movement within the Pacific region is under consideration. This should be pursued.

Australian proponents of increased freedom of movement have been conscious of the sensitivity and importance of the issue both in Island countries and in Australia and New Zealand. Graham Dobell, op.cit, implies that offering something to Island countries in this area would be so valuable to them that it would ensure acceptance of Australian demands for economic reforms, including a common currency.27 And the Senate Committee reported strong arguments from Australian industry about its needs for labour.28

Failure on the part of New Zealand and Australia to actively pursue the issue of freedom of movement within and throughout the region would doom any nascent move towards a political and economic community. Without that, statements agreed by Australia and New Zealand, and in some cases no doubt promoted by them, about the need for closer cooperation and integration, would be viewed as hypocrisy.

Graeme Dobell, talks imaginatively in his paper about the need for a ‘Pacific Peoples Policy’.29 The development of such a policy must surely be at the heart of any attempt to move towards a Pacific Community. The complexities are of course enormous, and include the challenge of avoiding the depopulation of the smaller Island countries, the cost to Island countries of a greater brain drain than they have already, and, in Australia and New Zealand the familiar but difficult challenges which always arise with increased immigration. Politically it is inevitable that movement in this area will be gradual and probably initially very slow. But discussions need to commence. Without at least that much, a question mark will hang over the goodwill of New Zealand and Australia in the entire enterprise of freedom of movement for the peoples of the Pacific.

Finding a truly Pacific solution

When we contemplate options for the future of the Pacific region, and consider that the options which have received most publicity are not ideas which have emanated, or at least been articulated, from any of the region’s Island countries, that should

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23 Dobell, (above).
24 Senate Report (above) xiii.
27 Dobell, (above).
28 Senate Report, (above) 69.
29 Dobell, (above).
give us pause. Certainly leaders of all member states of the Pacific Islands Forum signed on to the Auckland Declaration, including its decision to embark on a Pacific Plan, and the regional cooperation and integration which it foreshadows. But is that enough?

It is my contention that in this whole endeavour new policies, new regional frameworks, will not be sustainable if they are open to the criticism that they are proposals or ideas from outsiders. This does not imply that we should not be open to activities elsewhere which could be adapted to meet our needs, or provide salutary lessons. This is as it should be. But I am concerned when I hear assertions that the Pacific should consider a European Union model, for instance. That quite simply overlooks the point that we are not the same as the Europeans, our history is different (significantly less warlike and militaristic), our challenges and our aspirations are different.

What the countries of Europe are achieving is certainly remarkable. But I am sure that it is proving successful because uniquely European solutions are being found to uniquely European challenges. Here we need to ensure that our focus is kept not on what might work elsewhere in the world, but on what will work for us – uniquely Pacific solutions for uniquely Pacific challenges.

Ways forward

At their Special Leaders’ Retreat at Auckland on 6 April 2004, Forum Leaders endorsed the development of the Pacific Plan and made it clear that they would themselves lead the process. Here I would like to focus on just one key aspect of their decision. They decided that the Pacific Plan should:

Be used as a springboard for stimulating debate on how to shape the region’s longer-term future (op cit. Decision 2, p 2).

This, I suggest will be critical if there is to be an outcome which will be acceptable not only to present governments but also to Pacific peoples. For without the full support of the peoples of the region, this whole exercise will ultimately be viewed as just a flash in the pan, a waste of time, and even worse than that because it will have increased popular cynicism towards any new and better ideas on regionalism which might emerge in the future.

How then might such a debate be pursued? Obviously it has to involve opinion leaders throughout the region, but I suggest that that would be just a start. Forum Leaders have decided in a separate decision* that the Forum should strengthen its engagement with civil society. The subject of the region’s long-term future should be the focus of sustained and continuing engagement with civil society.

The stimulation of debate, and engagement with civil society and others, will require much more than ensuring that Forum Leaders, and their Secretary-General, are listening to expressions of opinion. There will be need for dialogue, for information material, for discussion papers and the like. Such material will need to be widely distributed throughout the region: to schools, to tertiary institutions, to trade organisations, to political organisations, to civil society organisations – the coverage will have to be complete and in appropriate local languages.

The focus of the debate will have to be more than politicians and officials telling people what they should think. Discussion papers will be necessary which describe the new challenges which have led leaders to pursue a Pacific Plan, to describe how closer political and economic integration should help the countries of the region and, most important, Pacific peoples, to meet those challenges and to take advantage of new opportunities which are emerging. It should recount what has been achieved regionally in the Pacific so far and how that has come about. But other options will have to be discussed and fairly described, including for example, arguments that regionalism within Polynesia and within Melanesia and within Micronesia, might be a better way to go, or focussing on increased integration between the Island countries of the Pacific and their neighbours on the Pacific rim. And the challenges facing movement towards closer economic and political cooperation, some of which are discussed in this paper will need to be frankly discussed.

The process of debate, I suggest, needs to be planned as a long-term exercise. Not so long that people will totally lose interest. But long enough to allow new ideas to be discussed and, most important of all, to encourage a truly Pacific solution which could be embraced by a majority of all Pacific peoples so that, ultimately, the Pacific Plan will become not just a plan for governments and regional organisations, but will be acknowledged also as a Pacific Peoples’ Plan.

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30 Pacific Islands Forum Special Leaders’ Retreat Leaders’ Decision 12, p 3.