

“Socio Economic and Political Situation of the Pacific Islands”

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I am most honoured to be the key note speaker at this significant Members Mission Forum of the Pacific Region of the Council of World Mission (CMW). In the letter of invitation Dr Sudipta Singh, the Acting Regional Secretary provided some background information about CMW. This included the fact that it is a ‘partnership of 31 member denominations in 40 countries around the world, and it is pursuing the vision of, ‘Fullness of Life through Christ for all creation’. CMW is committed ‘to participate in the building of life-affirming communities, where justice becomes the hallmark of all relationships and bridges of understanding established to inform conversations’ and you have very strong interest in ‘articulating and living an alternative to the destructive forces of polarization, the perpetuation of violence and the propensity for revenge’. I firmly empathise with this vision and interest.

However, I have been asked to provided ‘a broader understanding of the issues and challenges in the region including Climate Justice, Freedom of West Papua, Nuclear issue, Plundering of Natural Resources by external forces...’ which it is hoped will help assist in the framing the conversation of the Church leaders at the Forum.

Caveats at the outset!

The topic ‘Socio Economic and Political Situation of the Pacific Islands’ is a very large one which can take a semester of teaching, and each one of the issues identified in the letter of invitation can also be covered in full length university courses! So at the very outset I would like to say that my address will be a very broad brush coverage of the current

circumstances of Pacific Island Countries (PICs), and making these generalizations, it is likely that errors of omission and commission are made.

As a public and engaged academic I have very firm commitment to both social and environmental justice which will inform my address this morning, and in this regard the views that I express are mine and not the institution that I work for.

Introduction

It is my privilege and pleasure to address this very distinguished audience about the socio-economic and political situation of PICS. Over the last two hundred years with ever more intensity powerful external forces have combined with internal factors to bring about dramatic changes in virtually all PICs. Albert Maori Kiki's (1968) autobiography entitled, 'Ten thousand years in a life time' provides an apt description of how Neolithic tribes in Papua New Guinea have had to adapt to forces of modernity in a generation. This massive transformation of PICS have made them part of the world economic and political system which on their own as individual nation's they have no control over, and together as small island developing states (Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in the UN, and as Pacific Small Island States PSIDS) they do have some leverage. Regionalism is important for PICs.

These countries have never all been small, isolated, resource poor and dependent. As the late Professor Epeli Hau'ofa has said in his seminal essay, 'Our Sea of Islands', island people have been connected in the past using impressive navigational technology and ocean-going crafts. With modern transportation and communication technology they have become even more-well connected. Since the early twentieth century their challenges have been to address the consequences of colonialism, globalization and the artificial barriers created by modern states to limit their movements as they have continued to search for new opportunities as they ancestors did over a millennia. The notion of small island states

have been challenged by the concept of 'big ocean states' (BOS). In this light Kiribati is a very large Ocean State (land area, 811 km² (313 sq mi) and an Exclusive Economic Zone of 3,441,810 km² (1,328,890 sq mi) (<http://brilliantmaps.com/kiribati/>).

Geographically there are 3 categories of PICs, the relatively large, mountainous, and resource rich continental islands of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, New Caledonia (Kanaky) and Vanuatu; the 'medium sized volcanic high islands of Samoa, and not so high Tonga; and the very small atolls of Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau. On the smaller side is the Cooks Islands which has a combination of volcanic high islands and atolls. Some of the archipelagic states have similar mixture of island types. These include French Polynesia, Tahiti Polynesia (Maohi Nui). There are also raised small limestone islands such as Niue and Nauru.

Although Oceania is a region of great diversity as shown by its geography, and also by the very considerable variety of cultures and languages; and by the political, social and economic conditions, there has been a tendency to lump all PICs together as if they were the same as shown in the repeated assertions about smallness, remoteness, isolation, fragility and limitation in terms of resources. There are huge differences among PICs as can be seen by a comparison of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Tuvalu. PNG is bigger than New Zealand in physical size, and has almost twice as many people. It has an enormous variety of ecosystems from snow-covered high mountain localities to hot humid swampy regions, from upland plateaus to large river valleys and coastal plains as well as a host of off shore islands both very large and small.

The cultural diversity of PNG is even more diverse than its topography with well over 800 distinct languages and several hundreds of dialects spoken. Tuvalu on the other hand comprises of 3 reef islands and 6 atolls (all under 3 metres) making its 25 square kilometres which 10,000 culturally homogenous people call their home.

PNG and other Melanesian PICs have a great variety of natural resources –fertile soils for agriculture, rivers for water and energy, forests, other flora and fauna, minerals and natural gas. The medium and smallest states have very little terrestrial resources –limited soils, no mountains and no rivers.

When speaking of these PICs we need to remember their diversity and that there are considerable differences in their potential and extent of disadvantage. A critical dimension of how Pacific Islanders fare depends on their political institutions and quality of governance.

Political Diversity

Whilst scholars of the Global South or the Third World have been discussing/debating post-colonial phase of politically independent countries with regards to the colonial legacy, in the Pacific both colonialism and neo-colonialism exist side by side. Direct political control is exerted by France in New Caledonia (Kanakya) and in Tahiti Polynesia (Maohi Nui). Indonesian control of West Papua is regarded by a clear majority of Pacific islanders (and not our Australian and Asian neighbouring states) as a fundamental violation of the right to self-determination of West Papuans. The United States of America which grossly violated the League of Nations Trusteeship of the Pacific in Micronesia has not ever left these former possessions, and American Samoa does not want independence.

Politically independent countries include Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Island, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau are self-governing in association with New Zealand. And the Commonwealth of Northern Marianas is a territory of USA. Guam belongs to the USA and is strategically very important.

There are struggles for independence and sovereignty in the French colonies, in West Papua, and by the Chamorro in Guam. In the former

US Pacific Trust Territories, and especially in the Marshall Islands, there are campaigns about American reparations regarding the 67 nuclear tests and their aftermath for the Marshallese. The latter feel strongly about being treated as human guinea pigs for nuclear experimentation. On Runit Island on Enewetak atoll a very large concrete dome (locals call it a tomb) covers radio - active soil and debris from 12 years of nuclear testing. With sea level rise, it is suspected that plutonium and other radio-active substances are being washed into the ocean with more regularity. This may initially endanger neighbouring islands and then perhaps the rest of Oceania.

Other sources of radio-active pollution in the region have come from nuclear tests conducted by the British and the French. Altogether 315 nuclear bomb tests were held across the region from the 1950s to the 1990s. The US tested a further 25 nuclear devices on Christmas Islands and 11 on Johnston Atoll. The UK did 12 atmospheric nuclear tests at Monte Bello Islands, Maralinga, and Emu Fields, and a further 9 atomic and hydrogen bomb tests on Malden and Christmas Islands. Over 30 years the French conducted 193 atmospheric and underground tests on Moruroa and Fangataufa in French Polynesia (<http://livingpeacemuseum.org.au/ALPM/exhibits/show/nuclear-weapons-in-aus-pacific/nuclear-testing-pacific>).

The United States has made reparations to the Marshall Islands in the past but there are on-going issues regarding how adequate the compensatory payments have been, and whether the long term loss of land, and health impacts of the tests have been accounted for.

In Hawaii too, there is a sovereignty movement led by indigenous Hawaiians who are opposed to militarization, and are seeking independence from USA.

By November 2018 there is to be a referendum in New Caledonia about whether it will continue to be part of the French Republic or be an independent state. It is expected that there will be mounting tension

between pro-France and pro-independence political parties and supporters as the date of the referendum draws near. This may take ethnic lines with indigenous Kanaks seeking self-determination, and those with French connections inclined to support the existing status quo.

Under the terms of the Bougainville Peace Agreement a referendum on the independence of Bougainville from PNG will be held before 2020, and a tentative date has been set for 15 June, 1919. A Commission has been established to oversee the steps towards this referendum but again there is a likelihood of growing tensions between those for and those against independence. In both countries there has been a history of violent conflicts.

Politics in PICs is as diverse as their political systems, cultures and levels of 'development'. Generally, political elites have sought to acquire power and variously hold on to it, primarily to benefit themselves, their families and supporters. Electoral systems, ethnic diversity, religious affiliation, and 'wantokism' have been used by such elites to operate in ways that are mostly contrary to the principles of 'good leadership and good governance' that they have paid lip service to (<http://www.forumsec.org/pages.cfm/political-governance-security/good-governance/forum-principles-of-good-leadership-accountability.html>). Acquiring power has also meant the use of extra-legal overthrow of democratically elected governments as in the case of Fiji. The Fijian military has executed 3 pro-ethno-nationalist coups overthrowing elected governments and an accord arrived at by elected leaders to maintain and enhance indigenous supremacist rule, and in December 2006 conducted a coup against the pro-indigenous Fijian party that had the democratic mandate. Although the Fiji military is renowned for its excellent peace-keeping work, its ethnic composition and propensity to intervene in national politics remain serious concerns.

In most jurisdictions, the executive is overly powerful. The legislature and even the judiciary is not able to hold state-power holders to account.

The 4th estate, the media is not able to play their crucial ‘watch-dog’ role as there are various formal and informal mechanisms, including violence against reporters/journalists to stifle the media. According to the most recent assessment of Reporters Without Borders there has been some improvement in the ranking of Pacific states, including Fiji.

Civil society organisations including trade unions are constrained by obsolete, and more recent restrictive legislation. This has implications for the broad masses of island people, as often state power is used to acquire and/ or consolidate material wellbeing.

Socio-Economic Statues

Colonialism made islanders dependent on metropolitan countries, and producers of commodities that they do not consume, consumers of products that they do not produce. Unequal exchange reinforced their dependence. Because of their strategic importance, and in a bid to strategically deny the influence of other powerful states, ANZUS have used ‘cheque book’ diplomacy. Open accusation of this form of diplomacy is being made against China and Taiwan in the contemporary period. Neocolonialism is alive and well in Oceania.

Given the limited resource base of Micronesian and Polynesian PICs, they have been exporters of their own people. These countries are heavily dependent on remittances which often account for the highest source of foreign exchange and GDP/GNI. Short-term labour migration to Australia, New Zealand and possibly beyond the region is of keen interest to PICs. In fact for a number of countries, more of their nationals are residing abroad than in the home country, This applies to the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau and Samoa.

The Melanesian PICs are generally dependent on agriculture and extractive industry as the main sources of livelihood and export earnings. Tourism can be considered to be an extractive industry. Logging, mining and fisheries are clearly extractive in nature, and their

‘development/exploitation’ has been carried out in most unsustainable ways. Windfall earnings at times of higher global price for these commodities drain out quickly, and these countries find themselves in debt. They tend to go with begging bowls for aid from their supposed friends. Elements of the elite have abused public office to acquire funds to invest in real estate in Pacific rim countries.

The broad masses of Pacific people are small farmers and workers. Many are semi-substance farmers in the informal sector. Low prices for copra, sugar, cocoa, coffee and other crops, and infrastructural impediments have caused rural poverty. Land tenure issues have affected private investment in rural places. There is massive rural -urban migration without ‘industrialisation’, and formal sector employment generation in towns and cities. More than two thirds of people eke out a livelihood in the informal sector providing both legal and illegal services and products. Urban poverty has increased, and as can be seen by the enormous growth of informal settlements, governments of PICs have failed to provide adequate land and housing for their citizens.

With very large youthful populations, there are challenges regarding education and training. Youth unemployment is a major challenge.

Social inequality has increased tremendously over the last 30 years. Gini Coefficient for PICs is at an all- time high. (The Gini coefficient measures the inequality among values of a [frequency distribution](#) (for example, levels of [income](#)). A Gini coefficient of zero expresses perfect equality, where all values are the same (for example, where everyone has the same income). A Gini coefficient of 1 (or 100%) expresses maximal inequality among values (e.g., for a large number of people, where only one person has all the income or consumption, and all others have none, the Gini coefficient will be very nearly one) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gini_coefficient). For these countries the Gini ranges from 3 to 5. The top 20% of income earners in these countries take away as much as 60% of total income, with the remaining 40% being shared by 80% of the citizenry-the lowest quintile or 10% consuming less than 5%. Over the last 30 years, regressive taxation

policies that PICs have adopted as advised by World Bank and International Monetary Fund have reinforced social inequality.

It is not surprising therefore that the proportion of island people in poverty range from 20% (Cook Islands) to over 60% (Kiribati).

With an increase in urban squatter settlements, rising youth unemployment, poor education, rising inequality, and islands impacted by climate change, life must be getting worse for many islanders. The mixed record of the Pacific Islands in relation to the MDGs would appear to endorse this. The poor living conditions evident in the likes of Betio, Ebeye, over the borrow pits in Funafuti, in Jenrok village Majuro, and in the informal settlements of Honiara, Port Moresby and Suva also attest to worsening livelihoods (Steve Pollard, 2012) (<http://devpolicy.org/poverty-in-the-pacific-a-forgotten-priority20120416/>)

Social problems linked with unemployment and poverty have emerged in many PICs. These include substance abuse (alcohol, marijuana and hard drugs), crime and deviance, sexual abuse and rape, violence and especially violence against women and children.

Vulnerable persons such as the elderly, chronically ill, the disable, the unemployed, and women are heavily reliant on family and community support which is generally not adequate. Formal social protection is either limited or non-existent. Contributory pension schemes such as provident fund are only for formal sector workers, and unlike the FNPF system which includes a pension scheme, elsewhere on retirement a lump sum payment is made to the retiree. Needless to say this money does not last too long!

More positively more Pacific islanders are educated, and this especially applies to women. In a number of PICs in recent years there has been more women university graduates. With the adoption of MDGs, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu doubled their efforts to get school-going age children into schools.

Life expectancy has also increased thanks to improved water supply, better nutrition and health services. Infant and maternal mortality remains high in some PICs, and Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) –

life-style diseases, have been taking their toll on islanders. Obesity is a problem in PICs.

I now turn to the topics of climate justice, plunder of natural resources, nuclear issues and freedom of West Papua.

Climate Justice

Although collectively PICs contribute only 0.3% of green-house gases which in turn cause global warming, PICs are ‘the canaries in the coal mine’ when it comes to facing the consequences of climate change. Atoll states such as Tuvalu, Kiribati and Marshall Islands are facing existential threats as they may ‘drown’ in the coming years. Already salt water inundation has affected fresh water lenses, and livelihoods. Extreme weather events such as TC Pam (Vanuatu) and TC Winston (Fiji) with winds of over 200 KMPHs together with huge waves have been enormously devastating of people’s lives and property, business and infrastructure. These powerful and destructive cyclones are anticipated to become more frequent, as sea level rise forces people to relocate, or leave their island homes altogether.

The Paris Agreement in October 2016, and COP 23 scheduled this year provide some glimmer of hope. The world has not achieved the 1.5 degree centigrade reduction in CO₂ emissions as yet, meanwhile the sea level continues to rise as glaciers in the poles melt with greater rapidity. Sadly for PICs, climate change denialists wield power in the biggest polluting country per capita in the world, and USA’s sheriff in the region, the government of Australia appears to be not at all perturbed by the arguments against coal mining (<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/malcolm-turnbulls-foolish-gamble-to-pander-to-big-fossil-over-adani-coal-mine-20170427-gvtusc.html>).

International and local civil society organisations have been strongly campaigning for climate justice and against the use and promotion of fossil fuels.

Plunder of Natural Resources

The commanding heights of Pacific island economies are controlled by foreign multi-national corporations, and to some extent by the state (government). As in most capitalist countries, there is usually a very close and even unhealthy collaboration/collusion between business interests and state power holders. This is not unusually at the expense of ordinary citizens, and the natural environment. This is especially most stark in relation to logging, mining and fisheries. The worst case example of terrestrial mining in Oceania has been in PNG. The environmental and social harm caused by the open-cast copper mine in Bougainville resulted in a civil war and embargo of the island that resulted in some 15,000 to 20,000 deaths. The OkTedi mine has been an environmental disaster. The companies involved are internationally owned and have large Australian shareholding.

In the Indonesian occupied West Papua, Grasberg mine owned by the American Freeport- McMoRan is the world's largest open-pit gold mine and third largest copper mine. In spite of protests by indigenous people that the mountains being reduced to graters are sacred to them, the Indonesia military and government have given the company pretty much free rein. Protestors have been periodically detained, shot and killed (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grasberg_mine).

Logging in the Solomon Islands has been extremely poorly managed with tax exemptions to crony Asian interests, and very little value added.

Fisheries likewise is characterized by incompetent and corrupt management. Distant Water Fishing Nations (DWFNs) have begun to provide somewhat fairer returns following the concerted efforts of the leadership to Parties to Nauru Agreement (PINA). Dr Transform

Aqorau, the former Director of PNA has pointed out that for 35 years, the small PICs have been tuna donors to USA, EU, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, Latin American nations, and that Pacific tuna has created value adding employment in Thailand, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, EU and the United states.

A new Pew report estimates that tuna fishing around the world generates more than US\$42 billion in revenue annually and finds that the total catch in the Pacific has the highest value. The report, [Netting Billions: A Global Valuation of Tuna](#), concludes that commercially landed Pacific tuna “generated dock values of more than \$6.5 billion in 2012 and \$5 billion in 2014. The end value of Pacific tuna surpassed \$17 billion in both years. When accounting for the full price of canned tuna, these values were more than \$22 billion in both years.

The share received by PNA members remain below the estimate illegal tuna fisheries of \$616.11 million a year <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/analysis/2016/05/02/illegal-fishing-costs-pacific-islands-millions-annually-in-lost-tuna-revenue>.

There are some concerns regarding issues of land grabbing, particularly in PNG and Vanuatu.

PNG has an extremely unsatisfactory track record in terms of managing its natural resources, and particularly the mining of its terrestrial mineral resources. Yet it is the very first Pacific country that has approved seabed mining. Gold and copper will be mined from the sea bed by Nautilus Minerals, a Canadian company from 2019 onwards (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-10/world-first-png-seabed-mining-project-forges-ahead/8107934>).

Nuclear Issue

Simon Winchester in his book, *The Pacific: The Ocean of the Future* (1991) has called this ‘staring sleepless eye of the earth’, atomic ocean on account of the Second World War related use of nuclear bomb, and the largest number of nuclear bomb tests conducted in the region. The first and only nuclear bombs used in war were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nuclear colonialism characterized American Pacific

Trusteeship, and the French used Mururoa and Fangataufa for atmospheric and underground nuclear explosions. Thyroid, and other cancers are prevalent among Marshallese and Tahitians. Fijian military personnel were also exposed to the tests by the British on Christmas Islands. It is unclear the impacts of the British nuclear tests at Maralinga on first nation people of Australia. I have outlined these tests earlier in the address.

For the Pacific, the Korean Peninsula has been a significant flash point for nuclear war as both North Korea and South Korea have had access to nuclear arms. Now with two rather unpredictable leaders in North Korea and USA concerns about a nuclear conflagration have heightened. Moreover, John Pilger has produced a film, 'The coming war on China' which anticipates a USA attack on that country. He says,

China is surrounded by 400 US military bases in what one strategist describes as a 'noose'... "Many of these bases are on China's doorstep, armed with missiles, naval battle groups, nuclear bombers, drones. US naval warships patrol just outside Chinese waters" (<http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/tv/current-affairs/the-coming-war-on-china-john-pilger-asks-is-beijing-really-the-enemy/news-story/e41a48c5738926be5c4568c2087d36e3>).

Again the Pacific is seen as a possible theatre of war –worst still perhaps a nuclear war.

Freedom of West Papua

As you would know Indonesia occupied West Papua during its struggle for independence against the Dutch in 1963. In 1969, following what has been called the UN's 'act of free choice', characterized as the 'act of no choice' Indonesia tightened its grip over the west half of the island of Papua New Guinea. Since then there has been a struggle by West Papuans for self - determination which has been by brutal force. Thousands have been detained and tortured, and scores of others have been killed. It is estimated that more than half million West Papuans

have been killed. This has been called a genocide of indigenous West Papuans (<http://countercurrentnews.com/2016/02/black-people-in-west-papua/>). Over a million Javenese have been settled in West Papua under the policy of *transmigrasi* against the wishes of customary owners of the land (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-28/rollo-west-papua-complicity/5049204>).

Foreign multi-nationals have been given logging, fisheries and mining licenses, and in a typical colonial fashion, the revenue generated has gone out of West Papua to Jakarta.

Conclusion

From this broad coverage of the socio-economic and political situation of PICs and the four significant topics of climate justice, nuclear issue, plunder of natural resources by foreign interests, and freedom of West Papua, it should be apparent region is not pacific. PICs are undergoing rapid changes as forces of globalization impinge on them. Migration of islanders both within countries and internally to Pacific rim countries is ubiquitous. Remittances from Pacific islanders abroad have become critical in the economies of several PICs. Remittance flows help in the alleviation of poverty and fund among other things, the access to education and health of islanders.

While Pacific island elites have the best of ‘both’ worlds (metropolitan and island), for the average islander, life is a struggle for survival. Social inequality and poverty have increased significantly. The numerous informal settlements in Pacific towns and cities provide evidence of this. Political instability characterizes many PICs, the exception being Samoa which has its own challenges.

This far resource rich PICs have not exhibited exemplary management and stewardship of their natural resources which have been subject to plunder by foreign interests.

The impacts of militarization and nuclear tests continue to affect Micronesia and Tahiti-Polynesia. A Pacific war is plausible as we peer into the future with flash points being the Korean Peninsula, and the power struggle between United States and China.

Given the internal and external dynamics facing PICs, the path ahead is challenging. There is a need for altruistic and ethical leaders who set their people ahead of personal interests. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or Agenda 2030 which came into effect in January, 2016 provide most useful and holistic framework of country, regional and global development framework. The SDGS include climate change, economic inequality, gender equality, poverty eradication, ocean health, peace and justice, and strong institutions, and sustainable cities and communities which have particular relevance to this region (<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>).

Partnerships of governments, donor agencies, civil society organisations including faith-based organisations are crucial in the achievement of these life affirming and just goals.

Vinaka vakalevu, Dhanvaad, Thank you.

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