

*The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 1991*

---

In 1991 the international agenda of the Pacific Islands was dominated by economic development and environmental issues. Economic development had ostensibly always been a central task of the multilateral institutions of the region, and environmental concerns—for example in relation to nuclear testing, the dumping of radioactive wastes, and the incineration of chemical weapons—had often appeared on the regional agenda. Nevertheless, the developments of 1991 amounted to a significant change in thinking about the extent to which, and how, regional collaboration might be pursued in relation to such issues. They did not just become a new priority in the rhetoric of regionalism, dominating, for example, the deliberations of the South Pacific Forum meeting at Palikir, Pohnpei, in July; there was also significant institutional change, increased availability of resources, and new policies. These issues were also linked conceptually in the general acceptance within the South Pacific Forum of the notion of “sustainable development” and in the broader notion of “regional security” that gained ascendancy in the new post-Cold War environment.

An important indication of the new priority accorded environmental issues in 1991 was the implementation of a 1990 proposal to create a fully autonomous regional environmental agency similar to the Forum Fisheries Agency or the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission. There was already in existence a small regional environmental program (SPREP) man-

aged by the Forum Secretariat, the South Pacific Commission (SPC), and the United Nations Environment Program and housed within SPC headquarters in Noumea. However, that arrangement was seen as too restrictive in terms of the expanded role and high priority that Pacific Island states now envisaged for such a program. Underlining SPREP's new autonomy, it was decided that it should move to headquarters in Apia in 1992. In view of the jealousies and tensions between the SPC and the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation (SPEC) that attended the old SPREP's establishment within the SPC in 1978, it is notable that the move to autonomy, and physically out of SPC headquarters, was achieved without rancor. Concerns that there be equality between independent states and territorial administrations in the governing body of the new agency were assuaged, and the transition proceeded smoothly with the support of the South Pacific Commission.

The new agency has been given a fourfold increase in budgetary resources and staffing. This means that its new staff will be about half the size of the SPC and Forum secretariats, making SPREP a major regional institution in the network of the South Pacific Organizations Coordinating Committee (SPOCC). The old SPREP, though grossly understaffed, was already involved in a wide range of programs concerned with natural resource management, conservation of biological diversity, control of marine pollution, coastal resource management, environ-

mental education, assistance with national environmental management strategies, climatic change, and sea-level rise. The new SPREP, under a slightly restructured program, will cover the same range of issues, but greater emphasis will now be given to its role in coordinating and pressing a regional position in relevant international forums and in relation to global legal conventions concerning particular environmental matters.

In 1991 SPREP focused on the coordination of a regional position at the preparatory meetings for the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) to be held in Brazil in June 1992. As part of this process, a Ministerial Declaration on Environment and Development was issued at the SPREP Intergovernmental Meeting in July, and a South Pacific regional statement was presented at the third meeting of the UNCED Preparatory Committee in August. A second focus of SPREP's role in collective diplomacy in 1991 concerned the pressing of a South Pacific position in relation to negotiations on a Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The other significant issues on the regional agenda in 1991 came under the general heading of economic development. The prominence of these issues did not simply result in more resources being devoted to existing programs. Underlying the discussions and policy changes were changing notions about how national development might best be promoted and about the role that regional collaboration might play in that process. Essentially, this change amounted to an acceptance in 1991 of four propositions:

that national development is dependent on a strong export-oriented private sector;

that regional programs have a role to play in developing these national private sectors and accordingly should give greater emphasis to "issues involving the private sector including trade and investment";

that the Forum Secretariat should become more directly involved in providing assistance to individual member countries in relation to structural adjustments and other development strategies; and

that the Forum Secretariat should develop a regional development plan incorporating a unified set of development priorities for all regional institutions, and should coordinate negotiations with donors seeking to contribute to regional programs.

What was being developed was a role for the regional organizations as a resource to assist national development planners, as well as to provide a collective voice aimed at influencing the market and investment structures within which the island countries have to operate. This is not integration as in the European Community model. There is no attempt to integrate the regional market, labor force, or product. Rather, the role for international collaboration under this model is collective diplomacy (an integration of diplomatic resources) and the provision of a regional research and technical capacity to supplement national capacity.

Although "regional security" remained on the agenda, it was a very different conception from the one that prevailed in earlier years. It did not emphasize regional collaboration to exclude the influence of a potentially undesirable state, which had been a dominant notion during the Cold War. Indeed, during the 1991 Forum the Australian foreign minister suggested that consideration be given to making the Soviet Union a dialogue partner. Nor did the prevailing conception of regional security include the discussion or resolution of security problems within, or foreign policy orientations of, particular states that were perceived to threaten regional order. Such a view of regional security was observable in the past. Significantly, there was no attempt to raise Bougainville as a regional security issue in the way that Australia and New Zealand had sought to raise the issues of the Fiji coups, the links with Libya, and the Soviet fishing agreements with Vanuatu and Kiribati. In the late 1980s some saw the actions of a sovereign state as an important part of the regional security agenda. Yet the worst internal security problem the region has seen has not been raised at the regional level, partly because no Cold War context exists, and partly because Australia and New Zealand are not anxious to repeat the Fiji experience and they agree with the Papua New Guinea government's approach.

The prevailing conception of regional security in 1991 was a broader one that had for some years appealed to most island states but was embraced with less enthusiasm by the larger Western countries involved in the region: the real threats to South Pacific

security are environmental, economic, or posed by organized crime, drug runners, and carpetbaggers. With the end of the Cold War the larger states could also actively support this broader notion, as was evident in Australia's and New Zealand's initiative in seeking regional coordination of law enforcement in relation to organized crime and drug running. Although it may seem obvious that military threat would be emphasized less in, for example, the Australian view of the post-Cold War security environment in the region, this does not necessarily follow. Some in defense circles in Canberra believe that the broader Asia-Pacific region is more open to military threat, particularly if the United States presence diminishes and a "vacuum" is created. However, the Australian government has not sought to influence regional security discussions in that direction in the Pacific Islands (as it has in Southeast Asia).

The changing priorities and changes in conceptualization evident in the 1991 regional agenda largely reflected the changing global context. Part of the context was provided by the changing structures and practices of the global economy within which the island states were working. Just as such change had given new impetus to regional collaboration elsewhere—for example in North America, Southeast Asia, and Latin America—the need to compete on the changing world market, and to make economies leaner, pushed economic development higher on the regional agenda. The context was also influenced by the transformation in the economic philosophies underlying the new policies, affecting both the way in

which development was conceptualized in the Pacific Islands and the perception of an appropriate role for international collaboration in the process.

Another significant part of the new context was the change in perceptions and state practices associated with the end of the Cold War and with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This brought economic and environmental issues to international attention. They were seen as the new priorities—or threats—of the age. This change in perception—and, in the case of environmental issues, the release of new resources for cooperation on them—created a new context for their consideration in the island region. The end of Cold War thinking took military security issues off the regional agenda and changed perceptions of nonmilitary issues that had previously been viewed through Cold War lenses.

There was a remarkable degree of agreement among Pacific Island countries, and among larger states involved in the regional institutions, about the approach taken to these economic, environmental, and security issues in 1991. Absent were the big rifts that had characterized past attempts to agree on priorities, conceptualization, and necessary policies in these areas. There was no important division along the lines of Melanesian versus Polynesian, territorial administration versus independent state, metropolitan versus island state, francophone versus anglophone Pacific, or smaller island state versus larger island state. The Palikir Forum, in particular, was seen as a model of cooperation after the divisiveness and resentment associated with the Vila Forum in 1990. This may

have been partly because the then Australian prime minister could not attend, and because Australia did not seek to promote a major regional initiative. The Melanesian Spearhead was not a force at this Forum, despite agreeing on certain regional objectives, including Forum observer status for the FLNKS, at their meeting in Santo earlier in the year. The absence of Walter Lini and Solomon Mamaloni, and the strained relations between Honiara and Port Moresby over the Bougainville issue may have contributed to this lack of action.

The institutional changes associated with the decisions on economic development, environmental, and security issues should further strengthen the capacity of the region to influence the international structures within which Pacific Island states operate, and to work more effectively within existing structures. In their approach to these issues, the island states are further developing the use of collective diplomacy, which has proved to be a remarkably successful strategy for them in recent years, particularly in relation to driftnet fishing, radioactive waste dumping, and obtaining United States recognition of their right to exercise jurisdiction over migratory species of fish.

The regional institutional network appeared to be more settled in 1991. This was not always the case. The struggles over which organization would gain jurisdiction over a particular program, who could be a member of what organization, whether or not the region should move to a single organization, and the relative rights of various members of particular organi-

zations, had provided the high politics of regionalism. In 1991 there was a general acceptance of the SPOCC network, both by those who would have preferred to go further in the rationalization process toward a single regional organization, and by those who saw the new structure as a front for the Forum.

The successful move of SPREP out of the SPC and into the SPOCC network as an independent agency was a good test case. The success results partly from the way the SPOCC structure circumvents the thorny issue of the Forum's strict membership criteria. The various agencies in the SPOCC network allow membership or offer services to territorial administrations that would not qualify for Forum membership, permitting a rationalization of the cooperative process without threatening the political purity of the Forum itself. A further test of this system may eventuate if plans announced in 1991 by the new director of the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), Sir Peter Kenilorea, to bring all fisheries programs under the FFA, are accepted. The carrot he held out to SPC members who do not qualify for Forum membership is that FFA services would be made available to them. This may be too much for the supporters of the SPC, who may view this as a further denuding of SPC programs, particularly after the loss of SPREP.

The regional system was further strengthened by the decisions made during the year on several key regional posts. The choice of the former Kiribati president, Ieremia Tabai, as Henry Naisali's successor in the director-general's slot at the Forum Secretariat was a popular one. The appointment of

Jacques Iékawé from New Caledonia as secretary-general at the SPC, though more contentious, brings a very experienced administrator to the job, as does the appointment of Philipp Muller from Western Samoa as director of SOPAC, and Jioji Kotobalavu from Fiji as executive secretary of the new Joint Commercial Commission. Sadly, however, Iékawé died unexpectedly on 10 March 1992, before assuming office.

Although the developments of 1991 generally suggested a strengthened regionalism and wide acceptance of the SPOCC regional structure, one house-keeping issue suggested that old rivalries and tensions are not far below the surface. The question of the proposed new site for the SPC dominated the South Pacific Conference in Nuku'alofa in October, opening up a number of old wounds and causing a significant new rift in the Pacific Island community.

Siting issues have always been highly contentious because of the economic and political benefits associated with hosting an international institution; nevertheless it seemed as if a consensus had been reached on the future site of the SPC headquarters when the South Pacific Conference opened in October. The issues involved had been exhaustively canvassed in several previous conferences and committees. In 1991 the subcommittee charged with examining the issue recommended acceptance of a French government offer of a site in Noumea called Receiving. The subcommittee's choice reflected the fact that the Noumea authorities had refused refurbishment or rebuilding at the Anse Vata site that the SPC has occupied since 1948 on the

grounds that it had been rezoned for tourist development. But the choice was only recommended after guarantees were obtained from the French government that it would pay the bulk of the building costs, subsidize operating costs, and offer security of tenure. With these concessions won, the issue was thought to be over. The recommendation was accepted by the Committee of Representatives of Governments and Administrations (CRGA) immediately prior to the meeting of the Nuku'alofa conference. Consequently, most delegates and observers were surprised that this issue not only dominated the conference, but also created deep divisions among its members.

During the conference, however, it became clear that all delegations, except those from the French Pacific, were upset with the way the French government and the Noumea authorities had sought to push the SPC out of the Anse Vata site. A division grew then between those who felt that despite the way in which this had been done there was no choice but to go to the Receiving site and those who felt that an alternative site outside New Caledonia should be considered. The former included the Melanesian countries who were supporting Receiving on the grounds that it was important to keep the SPC in Noumea for "Kanak sovereignty," in the belief that they were supporting the wishes of the FLNKS. The Melanesian countries were in a strange alliance with France, which also spoke of Kanak sovereignty; American Samoa and the Cook Islands, who felt that due process had been observed and saw no alternatives; and New Caledonia, whose Kanak rep-

resentative said it was important for Kanak development that the SPC move out of Anse Vata. On the other side were Fiji, Tonga, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, and Western Samoa.

The expression of discontent with Receiving as the only option could have been seen as a last jibe at France before accepting the CRGA recommendation, but the intervention by Fiji's minister for Trade and Commerce, Berenado Vunibobo, ensured that the differences would turn into a serious rift. The minister attacked island delegates for their lack of statesmanship in allowing the French government to get away with pushing the SPC off its land and accused them of being bought off by France's "thirty pieces of silver." He also attacked the subcommittee for not having seriously explored other potential sites outside Noumea and for producing a "lousy" report, and the French delegate for daring to present the argument for Receiving in terms of Kanak sovereignty, something the French had shown little regard for in the past. He concluded his dramatic speech with an eleventh-hour offer to host the new headquarters in Suva with the building costs met fully by the Fiji government.

As a result of the minister's intervention the siting question was reopened. Although there was considerable resentment on the part of some delegates about the timing of the offer and the manner in which Vunibobo attacked other delegates, the conference agreed to delay its decision so that Fiji's offer, and other offers if forthcoming, might be considered. A special South Pacific Conference was scheduled for March 1992 to make a final decision on the matter. By the end of

the year it looked as if there would be at least three proposals on the table—for Suva, Pape'ete, and Receiving in Noumea.

As it stands, it will be difficult to reach a compromise. The Melanesian countries are highly unlikely to back a proposal that goes against the wish of the FLNKS to keep the SPC in Noumea. They are particularly unlikely to back a move to Suva, following what they saw as Vunibobo's insulting behavior toward them. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine a situation where Fiji, Tonga, Tuvalu, and others would accept a move to Receiving. The only option on which a compromise is possible is one that is currently not on the table, namely to rebuild at Anse Vata. Although this would entail a reversal of French policy and possibly the French state overriding New Caledonian views, it is quite probable that this could happen. That the considerable anti-French feeling expressed in rela-

tion to the issue at the South Pacific Conference already threatens the diplomatic gains that the French government has achieved in the region over recent years would not be lost on the French government. Further, the FLNKS has subsequently made it clear that its preferred position is that the SPC stay at Anse Vata (not move to Receiving so that tourist development might aid Kanak development as was thought at Nuku'alofa). This allows the Melanesian countries to move their support to redevelopment of the Anse Vata site and removes the "Kanak development" figleaf from the French defense of the move to Receiving. If the French government does not act to defuse the situation, this issue could damage relations within the SPC and the Forum, and even undermine the delicate understandings on which the SPOCC regional network is based.

GREG FRY