



**Media Release**  
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## **No strings to independent Pacific trade advice: Australian NGOs**

Australian Non Government Organisations expressed concern at reports of Australia's attempt to compromise the ability of Pacific island countries to determine the role and mandate of the Office of Chief Trade Adviser (OCTA).

Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET) and the aid watchdog, AID/WATCH, called on the Australian Government to support the OCTA and ensure funding for the Pacific-led trade advisory body does not come with strings attached.

The establishment of OCTA, an independent advisory body, was critical to the Pacific island countries' agreement to commence negotiations with Australia and New Zealand for a regional free trade agreement known as PACER-Plus.

The annual Forum Trade Ministers' meeting held in Tonga this week ended without a clear resolution on OCTA's role. The OCTA was a key point of contention at the meeting. The trade ministers have decided to defer the decision to the Forum Leader's meeting in September.

"The main reason why the decision is being deferred is because Australia wanted to make its funding contingent on OCTA working only on PACER-Plus. Yet Pacific island country ministers made it clear that decisions over OCTA's mandate and activities should be determined by the island countries without interference from donors," said AID/WATCH Co-director, Gary Lee.

In recent months, the Pacific island countries have taken significant steps towards increasing their control and ownership of OCTA, including adopting a Constitution to ensure OCTA's independence. They have also requested that Australia and New Zealand deliver on their commitment announced in 2009 to provide funding for the OCTA for three years.

At the conclusion of the Forum trade ministers' meeting, Australia and New Zealand announced that funding for the OCTA will continue.

"While we welcome the decision to continue funding for the OCTA, the government should make clear that there'll be no conditions attached to the funding which limits the mandate and activities of the OCTA," said Harvey Purse, AFTINET's trade justice campaigner.

"We remain concerned that both Australia and New Zealand are attempting to limit the OCTA to only advise on PACER Plus matters. It is important that Pacific island countries receive full and complete advice especially given they are also negotiating other treaties such as the Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union. Confining the OCTA to only give advice on PACER-Plus is like Australia telling its Trade Department to limit itself to only negotiating one agreement at a time," said Mr Purse.

"If Australia is genuinely committed to listening and responding to the needs and priorities of Pacific island countries, then it must support the OCTA on the terms set by the Pacific island countries," added Mr Lee.

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