

Substance over speed on trade talks, warn Pacific NGOs

More than 30 civil society groups from the Pacific, New Zealand and Australia today launched a joint statement expressing concerns about any decision to enter negotiations for a new Pacific-wide free trade agreement (PACER-Plus). The statement, launched in Apia, Samoa, on the eve of the annual Pacific Islands Forum Trade Ministers' Meeting, called on Ministers to put the developmental priorities of the Pacific ahead of political timelines.

Pacific Trade Ministers will come under pressure this week to recommend the launching of PACER-Plus negotiations when Australia hosts the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting in Cairns in August. However, civil society organisations, churches and trade unions want enough time for Pacific countries to undertake national consultations and research before formal negotiations are even considered.

They are also critical of moves by Australia and New Zealand to limit the independence of a planned regional office that would assist the Pacific countries during any potential negotiations.

At a press conference held this morning, Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) coordinator Maureen Penjueli said rushing into negotiations would only lead to a bad agreement. "There needs to be first and foremost a consultation with all sectors of the Pacific community," said Ms Penjueli. "We need to have a discussion and debate around the impacts of a potential PACER-Plus, then and only if there is agreement to the idea should we enter into PACER-Plus negotiations."

Ms Penjueli said Pacific governments had outlined the need for such an approach in a draft roadmap for negotiations, but Australia and New Zealand had rejected this approach and were instead demanding negotiations be fast-tracked. "The Pacific's draft roadmap said negotiations might begin in 2013, and now Pacific Ministers are being told to launch negotiations this year," Ms Penjueli said.

According to Professor Jane Kelsey "any decision to launch the PACER Plus negotiations at this week's meeting of Forum Trade Ministers Meeting or the Forum Leaders Meeting, in the absence of Fiji, would not be lawful under PACER. PACER is a treaty that is independent of the Forum. Fiji's rights and obligations cannot be arbitrarily suspended by the other parties to PACER on the grounds that it has been suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum."

Adam Wolfenden from the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET) highlighted the issue of capacity of Pacific Island Countries to enter into negotiations. "In line with what the Pacific are asking for, Australia and New Zealand must adequately support an independent and meaningful Office of Chief Trade Advisor (OCTA)," said Mr Wolfenden. "This means the office must have staffing capacity to support Pacific Countries to assess what the costs and benefits of PACER-Plus might be, and to act as a negotiating point of contact. Australia and New Zealand should also have no say in the governance of the OCTA. It would be absurd to have a negotiating partner in charge of your negotiating capacity, Australia wouldn't accept that and neither should Australia demand it."

Meanwhile local Samoan NGO representative, Fiu Elisara from the O Le Siosiomanga Society, said that for Samoa, signing up to PACER-Plus would see an enormous loss in government revenue. "Expected revenue losses from tariff reductions under PACER-Plus

would see Samoa lose the equivalent of our national health budget,” said Mr Elisara. “We just cut our health and education budgets for the next year, in response to the global financial crisis. Now is not the time to be jeopardising government revenue.”

The *2009 Statement to Pacific Island Forum Trade Ministers regarding deliberations on potential PACER-Plus negotiations* is endorsed by organisations from across seven Pacific Island Countries and regional organisations like the Pacific Conference of Churches, the South Pacific and Oceanic Council of Trade Unions, and the Pacific Network on Globalisation. The statement is supported by organisations in Australia and New Zealand, including the National Assembly Uniting Church in Australia, Oxfam Australia, Oxfam New Zealand, AID/WATCH, and the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network.

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*Note that Ms 'Amanaki will not be in Apia, but that she is available for interview.

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