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Australia must support independence of Pacific Trade Advisor

Reports from the recent Pacific Island Trade Officials meeting in Palau last week indicate that Australia has again been criticised by Pacific Island trade officials and non-government groups for failure to support the capacity for the Pacific Island countries to participate in negotiations for a free trade agreement, known as PACER-Plus.

The Constitution of the Office of Chief Trade Adviser (OCTA) was the main point of contention, with Australia calling for a delay to the incorporation of OCTA and for it to be discussed at the next Forum Trade Ministers' meeting in May.

A number of Forum Island Countries strongly believe that since the OCTA was established to assist them in their PACER-Plus trade negotiations with Australia and New Zealand, they and they alone should decide what should be in, and not in, in the Constitution. Forum island countries have repeatedly emphasised the critical importance of an independent OCTA that is controlled and owned by the island countries. They have agreed on this and incorporation has been completed.

AFTINET Trade Justice Campaigner Harvey Purse said, "From its establishment the OCTA was always intended to provide independent advice to the Forum Island Countries (FICs) in their negotiations with Australia and New Zealand. It cannot be seen as independent whilst its funding comes through the Pacific Islands Forum, in which both Australia and New Zealand have a significant say. The decision by the FICs enshrines the concept of the OCTA's independence".

The current funding arrangements from Australia and New Zealand for the OCTA are due to expire in a few days - on March 28. Whilst Australia has indicated that it would continue to provide funding, it is unclear after the Palau meeting how Australia will proceed without the incorporation of their comments on the OCTA Constitution. Reports also indicate that New Zealand is yet to commit to any further funding.

"Australia needs to publicly commit to ongoing funding of the OCTA within the next few days. It needs to do so under the arrangements agreed to by the Forum Island Countries regardless of its views on the constitution of the OCTA, which is entirely a matter for Forum Island Countries, not Australia and New Zealand", Mr Purse said.

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