
SEEING LIKE A REGIONALIST:

THE DILEMMAS OF
INTER-GOVERNMENTAL
CO-OPERATION IN THE
BLUE PACIFIC

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DLP investigates the crucial role that leaders, networks and coalitions play in achieving development outcomes.

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Boats on the shore of Tulagi, Solomon Islands
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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The research project [Transnational leadership in the Pacific Islands](#) is a part of the Developmental Leadership Program, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Government of Australia. It looks at regional leadership across the Pacific, asking how transnational leaders in the Pacific understand their role and function.

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KEY FINDINGS

- Regional leaders have a shared vision of a more economically prosperous, environmentally sustainable, and politically emboldened Pacific.
- But they also identify three core dilemmas at the heart of the regional project over which there is considerable disagreement: i) empowerment or vulnerability; ii) self-sufficiency or interdependence; and iii) traditional regional donors or China.¹
- Regionalists perpetuate familiar narratives of both empowerment and vulnerability to legitimize regional organizations (ROs) as a mechanism to overcome issues facing SIDs, bringing them into conflict with national politicians.
- There is tension among regionalists about how to deliver self-sufficiency and national development objectives: through incremental reform or a more radical rethink of ROs.
- Rising geopolitical tensions have generated considerable concern among Pacific regionalists, who fear an increase in short-termism that incentivizes duplication and funding mechanisms that may cause more harm than good.
- The core dilemmas at the heart of the Pacific regional project are managed rather than resolved. This persistent tension helps explain why there is both greater regional solidarity and increased fragmentation.

¹ Our distinction here is that China tends to focus on bilateral assistance to countries whom provide it with diplomatic recognition. China has not usually been considered a partner to, or member of, Pacific regional organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Pacific regionalism has long attracted both hope and despair (for discussion see Bryant-Tokalau 2006; Fry 2019; Herr 2006; Tarte 2014). The hope is that regional organizations (ROs) can overcome the challenges of small island developing states (SIDS)—e.g. diseconomies of scale, isolation, vulnerability to economic and environmental shocks—by allowing independent nations to pool resources and burden share, especially in diplomacy. The despair is that this dream of empowerment from within in the face of belittlement and dependence from without is never fully realized.

There have been stunning successes, like the influence of Pacific SIDS on international climate negotiations (Carter 2015) or the increased fishing revenue generated by the Parties to the Nauru Agreement or PNA (Aqorau 2020). But the more common story is of disappointment, either as a result of disunity and fragmentation, duplication of services, or overreach by RO secretariats.

Despair at the state of Pacific regionalism is a recurrent feeling that tends to become most salient during periods of political turmoil in Fiji in particular. This despair reached its peak in 2021, when five Micronesian states announced they were withdrawing their membership of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the premier RO. Although they eventually returned, the decision nonetheless sent shockwaves through the region.

This move was monumental precisely because Pacific SIDS appear to need the region now

more than ever due to two existential threats: climate change and escalating geopolitical tensions between the USA and China. Pooling resources and burden sharing will be key to adaptation, just as collective action underpins international advocacy for the 'Oceans Agenda' and the shared vision of a 'Blue Pacific'. Diplomatic solidarity translates into various forms of success, whether economic, as the PNA example highlights, or environmental in the case of climate action and subsequent access to climate finance. Collective diplomacy is also key to ensuring that Pacific states position themselves to take maximum advantage of the increased interest of great powers in the region.

It is in this context that we sought to understand how the leaders of Pacific ROs—the 'regionalists'—see the regional project, including both its strengths and limitations.² Existing discussion of regionalism in the Pacific tends to foreground the views of politicians, media and some academics. But the day-to-day practice of regionalism is undertaken by the technical experts in ROs themselves, including the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) agencies as well as international multilateral organisations, religious institutions and NGOs.³

We have canvassed the views of their leaders by interviewing them and identifying patterns that might emerge by comparing their individual experiences. In doing so, we add a new and under-considered perspective to the broader puzzle of why Pacific regionalism seems stuck in this cycle of hope and despair.

2 The phrase 'see like a regionalist' is an explicit reference to the work of James C. Scott (1998).

3 The nine are: Forum Fisheries Agency; Pacific Aviation Safety Authority; Pacific Power Association; Pacific Islands Development Program; The Pacific Community; Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program; Pacific Tourism Organisation; University of the South Pacific; and the Pacific Islands Forum.



What we found is that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the leaders of ROs believe strongly in the potential of regionalism to secure empowerment from within in the face of belittlement and dependence from without. In this sense, their views align with Hau'ofa's (1994) vision, outlined decades ago, for a vast and expansive 'Oceania'. But at the same time, their intimate understanding of how regionalism operates in practice offers a nuanced appreciation of challenges. Most importantly, it reveals diversity: despite a shared commitment to the regional project, there is no consensus among regionalists on the causes of the challenges facing ROs or the solutions.

This isn't a problem—heterogeneity of this type is to be expected—but mapping the tensions can help us understand subsequent actions. We identify three dilemmas in particular—1) empowerment or vulnerability?; 2) self-sufficiency or interdependence?; and 3) traditional regional donors or China donors?—and provide examples. In doing so, we reveal how the beliefs of leaders matter.

DATA AND METHOD

The data for this paper is primarily drawn from interviews with 9 regional leaders conducted between 2020 and 2022 (see table). Due to COVID-19, interviews were a mix of in-person and online semi-structured conversations. In selecting these interviewees, we primarily sought out current or recently retired leaders. We intentionally focused on diversity: of institutions; of country or sub-region; and where possible gender.

NAME	ROLE AND RO	INTERVIEW DATE
Taholo Kami	Former Regional Director for Oceania and the Pacific, International Union for Conservation of Nature	September 2022
Leota Kosi Latu	Former Director General, Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program	February 2022
Dr Manumatavai Tupou-Roosen	Director General, Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency	March 2022
Dame Meg Taylor	Former Secretary General, Pacific Island Forum	May 2022
Fe'iloakitau Kaho Tevi	Former General Secretary, Pacific Council of Churches Secretariat	October 2022
Sir Collin Tukuitonga	Former Director General, The Pacific Community/ South Pacific Commission	August 2021
Fekita 'Utoikamanu	Former High Representative, United Nations Office for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States	November 2022
Andrew Valentine	General Manager, Pacific Aviation Safety Office	October 2022
Dr Donald Wilson	Acting Dean, FNU College of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences (formerly Fiji School of Medicine)	February 2022

The leaders who participated are the ones who agreed to talk with us. As with any research, if we had access to the reflections of different leaders, we might have a different story to tell. We have chosen to de-identify the reflections we present. We did not wish for quotes to be associated with particular individuals, given they often represent a collective view. We aim to combine and show the different perspectives of regionalists, rather than place particular leaders on different sides of a debate. We hope to have provided a heuristic device that focalizes the issues and highlights

the tensions, rather than providing the final or definitive word (Corbett 2019). We believe this exercise has value because the perspectives of these leaders as a group have not previously been considered, yet their shared view as regionalists is novel and revealing.

HOW DO REGIONALISTS SEE THE REGION?

The reflections of leaders reveal three dilemmas at the heart of the regional project:

1. empowerment or vulnerability? The tension here is that while ROs were created to and continue to be viewed as a mechanism by which Pacific countries can realize a prosperous and dignified future, their existence also depends on the on-going failure of the post-colonial state to meet these objectives on its own. Regionalists are therefore required to perpetuate familiar narratives of both empowerment and vulnerability to justify ROs;
2. self-sufficiency or interdependence? The tension here is an old one—communities want to take charge of their own affairs but at the same time size-related constraints mean they rely on others to achieve economies of scale. The environmental movement and the threat of climate change are also asking new questions about what development means for Pacific countries; and
3. traditional regional donors or China? The tension here is newer: that while increased attention from great powers such as the US and China enables Pacific countries to leverage additional support, especially via ROs, it also creates incentives for individual states to negotiate bilaterally to achieve short term gains to the detriment of collective action.

We unpack each in turn. The first caveat is there are no easy solutions here. These dilemmas are inherent to the post-colonial order and thus must be managed rather than resolved. However, once we understand the inherent tensions that leaders are trying to balance, we can better comprehend their actions and decisions.

The second caveat is that the three dilemmas interact. A preference for self-sufficiency, for example, might entail lessening reliance on donors while a focus on empowerment might favor leveraging the increased attention brought by great power rivalry. Likewise, prioritizing the vulnerabilities created by climate change might align with ideas about interdependence, but it does not necessarily follow that leaders would favor traditional regional donors. The point then, following previous DLP work (Corbett 2019), is that the dilemmas are an analytic tool for organizing this discussion rather than a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that cause particular actions.

EMPOWERMENT OR VULNERABILITY?

The overwhelming pattern that emerges from the reflections of the leaders we spoke with is that they are first and foremost regionalists, as opposed to nationalists. They share a view of the Pacific that reflects the PIFs 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and Hau'ofa's (1994) vision of empowerment and self-determination from within in the face of dependence and belittlement from without. This point might seem banal—of course we would expect the leaders of ROs to be regionalists—but it is worth highlighting because being a regionalist is an explicitly political position that, at some level, entails a critique of the nation state and its (in)ability to achieve modernist developmental gains.

Regionalists are thus simultaneously advocating for the empowerment of Pacific peoples and communities, including for Pacific solutions that emphasise community and people centred development, while at the same time perpetuating ideas about the vulnerabilities of individual countries and their political and economic systems.

This view—that small population size rendered independent Pacific states unviable as an economic entity because they were unable to generate enough economic activity to cover the costs of administration and basic services—was especially prominent among local and expatriate officials during the late colonial period. The oldest arguments for regionalism have typically rested on ideas about (dis)economies of scale and the barriers they present to achieving developmental gains (see Fry 2019).

More recently, this idea has become popular among development economists at institutions like the ADB (Chand 2010). It remains a core rationalisation for contemporary regionalists who see ROs as a key way by which Pacific

countries pool resources and burden share to overcome capacity problems. But this narrative about the incapacity of the post-colonial state has also attracted criticism on the grounds that it is paternalistic and belittling.

Regionalists draw on both pragmatic and identity-based arguments to manage this dilemma. The pragmatic arguments accept the limits of the post-colonial state and its inherent vulnerabilities, but just like the independence-era officials, consider regionalism to be the main solution. From this perspective, fragmentation and division within the region, with recent politicking in the PIF or USP cited as examples, is the biggest barrier to development, as one leader reflects:

Regionalism in the Pacific is in big trouble. Right? Big trouble. It's fractured. Why? ... Gone are the days when people like Ratu Mara and ... Michael Somare. These were the founding fathers of the Forum. These guys would just simply have a talanoa, shake hands, and you know things are gonna be done. That is no longer the case. I ask the question, and this is not trying to be negative about our current leadership but [today's] leaders are different ... [they are] more interested in political expediency ... in their own national interests ... there isn't the calibre, there isn't that level of integrity ... So it's not good ... [and] my answer to that question is this, regionalism is in big trouble.

The point is that regionalists believe that Pacific states do not have to remain vulnerable, be it to economic shocks, climate impacts or geopolitical tensions, if their leaders would set aside their national differences and work together for the benefit of all. This imperative is more urgent than ever due to the impacts of climate change:

Our leaders have consistently said climate change is the most burdening issue that threatens the livelihood and future of the Pacific. And that's a correct summation of where we are. SPREP has been at every CoP... [its] role is to support leaders and amplify their concerns. But the problem is that we have other countries in the region that have their own policies that are not cohesive with a 1.5 pathway. So this is what I mean, if you talk about regionalism, everybody's got to be on the same page. But you've got a big brother Australia who focuses on fossil fuels and coal in particular and so there's a big issue there ... it's like the Titanic, we're sinking and people are still playing music. It's like Nero twiddling his thumbs while Rome burns.

An often-cited example was the failed candidature of Tukuitonga for WHO Regional Director, with regional leaders lamenting that too often national politicians work against, not with, each other in ways that undermine collective goals. As one leader lamented:

I must admit that even our leaders today are very parochial, and still very, very national minded, or national focused, or nationally driven and motivated. Not many leaders have the potential to step up into the realm where you are talking on behalf of the region and almost sacrificing your country for the benefit of the region. Those leaders come few and far in between.

The danger, from this perspective, is that geopolitical tensions in particular increase the potential for political expediency at the national level and in doing so undermine the potential of regional projects to achieve collective goods.

There is considerable nostalgia bound up in this view—Mara and Somare did not always agree (see e.g. Fry 1981)—and it relies heavily on assumptions that the spirit of decolonialisation can be maintained beyond the generation

who brought post-colonial states into being. But it is nevertheless powerful because it enables regionalists to acknowledge the vulnerabilities of Pacific countries, and their need for assistance, while positing a vision of empowerment from within in the face of belittlement and paternalism from without.

This vision for regionalism has had some success. Perhaps the most noteworthy are the increased revenues generated by the PNA (Aqorau 2020) and the impact of Pacific negotiators on global climate policy (Carter 2015). The latter in particular is important because, working alongside AOSIS, these gains have been premised on the 'performance' of extreme vulnerability, especially for low-lying atoll states (Corbett et al., 2019).

But the perpetuation of vulnerability to attract large state attention and resources comes with a cost in terms of identity (Lawson 2010). The following quote illustrates this most clearly:

Identity is a big part of who we are ... our identity, as citizens of the Blue Pacific continent, is really important. If we have people who try to undermine that narrative, and take it away, what does that mean? ... we're all part of this greater continent. And it's the connectedness to each other culturally [that makes the] difference ... It's not about the control of the ocean, it's about the caring, and nurturing, because the sea itself is the spiritual essence of identity. And that, to me, is sacred. I think we've got to really make a big effort in educating our children ... because there will be a time in generations to come [when the] islands will not exist if we continue with sea level rise. But [we can] still have sovereignty over the ocean.

There is a lot bound up in this quote. We will discuss self-determination below. For now, the important point is the shift in rhetoric, which is inspired by Hau'ofa's writings, that we have seen over the last decade or so

that seeks to reposition Pacific countries as Large Ocean States (LOS) rather than small island developing states (SIDS), with the latter associated with vulnerability and the former empowerment (Chan 2018).

Regionalists might argue that these narratives are not necessarily incompatible, with ROs designed to augment rather than replace or supersede the state, as one leader reflected:

We've got the Melanesian Spearhead Group, you've got the Micronesian group, and you've got the Polynesian group. So is that a bad thing? Not necessarily.

Regionalists might also argue these stories have particular purposes and resonate with specific audiences. The vulnerability discourse is important for generating funds. The empowerment discourse and the identity it evokes is important for engendering solidarity and cohesion among otherwise fragmented nation-states. But at some level, there is a tension that reflects the core dilemma of regionalism as a political, rather than techno-rational, project: that to be relevant, it must address problems that the post-colonial state cannot solve on its own. And the way regionalists have often sought to resolve this is to blame national politicians, as this quote illustrates:

We're not making smart choices. We do the opposite of what we need to do to save the planet. We talk about it but our behaviour is quite the opposite. So, there's a disconnect with our rhetoric and what's happening

Similarly, another argues that:

I must admit that even our leaders today are very parochial, and still very, very national minded, or national focused, or nationally driven and motivated. Not many leaders have the potential to step up into the realm where you are talking on behalf of the region and almost sacrificing your country for the

benefit of the region. Those leaders come few and far in between.

The idea that narrow-minded and ignorant nationalists are undermining an otherwise rational regional project is not unique to the Pacific—all regional projects face it to some degree. But it does point to the ongoing tension between the community and identity that regionalists seek to bring into being and the reality that many of the people they purport to be acting on behalf of do not share their vision or trust in the collective to meet their individual needs.

In sum, regionalists see ROs as mechanisms by which the inherent disadvantages of SIDS can be overcome. They are thus primarily interested in empowerment, both in a narrow technical sense but also in terms of identity, the incorporation of indigenous and local knowledge into regional policy, and the growth of Oceanic diplomacy (Carter et al. 2021; Futaiasi et al. 2023). To make their arguments, they highlight the limits of the post-colonial state. Doing so inevitably involves a critique, often implicit but increasingly vocal, of the self-interest of national politicians.

This may help explain why the two groups—politicians and the leaders of ROs—can come into conflict. Indeed, we would expect that if we talked to national politicians about ROs we would hear the opposite view: that ROs duplicate national efforts, capture donor funds meant for local communities, and often overreach their mandates by interfering in national policy.

SELF-SUFFICIENCY OR INTERDEPENDENCE?

Colonial-era pessimism about the capacity of small and geographically isolated Pacific states to achieve developmental gains rested on the assumption that self-sufficiency was a core imperative of modern states. Pacific communities were largely self-sufficient prior to colonization, with the phrase ‘subsistence affluence’ (Fisk 1970) employed to describe the ways island communities lived off the land and the sea. The benefits of modernity were said to render this lifestyle redundant.

But these ideas—which perhaps have their fullest expression in Schumacher’s classic *Small is Beautiful* (1973)—have been revived among sections of the environmental movement, which associates modernism with the existential threat of climate change. In the Pacific, they also tend to be inflected with a critique of Western globalization. Regionalism can be a solution to both problems, as the following extract describes:

I crave that, you know, my children, our children, get the opportunity to shape the future of the planet and that they do it on the basis of not what everybody else has done ... what we have here in the Pacific is what the world needs to keep and manage and sustain for its own existence. That’s what we have right now, in terms of our natural environment, what we still have in terms of the diversity of cultures and languages in the Pacific ... if you let the forces of westernization continue, it just swallows it up, and spits out Coca Cola. I just hope that we discover, or we rediscover, what’s important and we start to put values to that and then over time, as the world starts to realize how important these things are, [that] we are on the forefront in terms of helping shape what the planet should be.

This sentiment is echoed by others, who reflect that:

There is a surge in the aspirations of young Pacific Islanders to know who they are. To find their identity as Pacific Islanders. And this is one aspiration of Pacific Islanders that I hear is gaining momentum around the region, the issue of Pacific identity; knowing oneself, knowing one’s history; and therefore, being better prepared for the future. It is all about owning the narrative of your identity, rather than having your identity being defined by somebody else. I feel that in our Pacific Island region we are coming to a stage now where we see that aspiration going forward thing. We need to own our own narrative of who we are as Pacific Islanders. That’s going to be our challenge. Who we are as Pacific Islanders is grounded by that notion or the principle of self-determination, so, we are revisiting the self-determination movement, but from very, very defined areas where we do not own the narrative, where we need to own the narrative ...

When I say owning the narrative [I mean] finding places and finding ways where we can develop, we can identify our own goals, develop, and sustain our livelihoods in the way that we feel and are comfortable with, and not having to be accountable to anyone but ourselves. That I think is the challenge, the big challenge, for us and you can view it from any angle, whether it’s government, whether it’s the churches, whether it’s the economy, whether it’s, you know, this whole discussion about sovereignty, collective sovereignty, and collective identity as Pacific Islanders. That is where I think that we are heading towards. So, more and more people are interested in the history



of our Pacific Island countries, where we have come from who we are as Pacific Islanders, what are our practices or rituals or ceremonies, that identity.

Ideas about self-determination and the ability of Pacific communities to manage modernization in their own ways were central to decolonization, especially when spearheaded by theologians, as in Vanuatu (see e.g. Regenvanu 2004). But there is an inherent tension between these ideas and the types of services that many islanders seek from their governments and by extension ROs: education for the children, health care for their sick and elderly, amongst other things.

This tension was brought into sharp relief during COVID-19. Isolation shielded Pacific states from the worst effects of the pandemic, and brought the importance of self-sufficiency, especially in food, to the forefront of policy discussions in many Pacific states. Yet this has come at a cost in terms of connectedness with overseas communities and economic recovery (see Connell 2022 for discussion).

These differences have important implications for policy. Some leaders see the overarching lesson of the last decade, culminating in COVID but including the successes of PNA and climate advocacy, to be that the region should attempt to return to self-sufficiency. The following quote sums this view up:

For us, the notion of resilience is the ability for us to cope with our own means in our own region with our own capacities, rather than having to develop or depend on others. Maybe this is the one benefit that COVID has brought us. When COVID hit, people were saying, oh my god, no more tourism, you know ... what happened is Tonga became self-sufficient in produce. [People] started developing and planting each their own food, vegetables, you know, developing the sectors to the point where we were exporting ... where we thought it was a dying sector, agriculture, and fisheries, for example ... So, for us as Pacific Islanders is saying, you know, we just need to do our own stuff. We need to cater for our own people make sure that our people are well fed, you

know, rather than depending on aid and trade from overseas.

For others, while the pandemic highlighted the importance of self-sufficiency, it also demonstrated how reliant all states, including those in the Pacific, are on each other, as this leader reflects:

I think the role of New Zealand and Australia in providing support to the region is now more important than ever. They were quite instrumental in providing the vaccines for Pacific countries, otherwise, you would be still queuing up for the vaccines ... and then we still have to deal with climate change and its impact and a lot of other issues which have not stopped due to the COVID ... assistance from multilateral and bilateral partners is needed more than ever to continue the goals that were there before COVID and will, of course, remain relevant.

In this view the desire for autonomy and self-determination must be tempered by the imperatives of development which necessitate integration and outside assistance, including labor mobility and other types of free trade (Morgan 2018).

This latter perspective is important because outsiders are more interested in the Pacific than ever before. We will discuss the big geopolitical players below, but even putting them to one side, the resources potentially available to the region are rising, especially in the environmental field, as this leader reflects:

I've seen an enormous increase in terms of partners from organizations that I'd never heard of before and governments want to work with us, you know, it's not just member countries in the region, we have countries far away like Finland, Ireland, Switzerland, who have expressed an interest in terms of wanting to work with us. And for me, that's an enlargement of one's territory.

Enlargement has been made easier by technological change, which has linked the region to itself and then beyond, to the rest of the world, in ways that regionalists of previous generations could never have imagined:

In those days, we didn't have Zoom and things like that. And we weren't even really well equipped in terms of technology that was part of the thing that we did. Now we have become a digitalized institution.

Practically, leaders reflect that they often find themselves caught between nationalist and regionalist impulses. The most pertinent examples relate to staffing:

A lot of leaders [from my country] complained to me about why I didn't hire [nationals]... why are you hiring all those Tongans? What about our people? And I always made it a point to say actually I hire competence and merit; I haven't seen many of our people who meet the criteria, so what do you want me to do? ... the very first chair of the conference was the Minister of Foreign Affairs ... he was my boss. Within two weeks of me starting he rang me up and says 'oh my nephew so and so has applied for ... he is exceptional, he is very good and bla bla bla...' and he basically wanted me to appoint this guy and I said 'Minister there is a process underway I will ensure that process is followed' and he said 'oh you really should appoint him he's very good.' it was really awkward ... So, you get stuff like that and that's very hard to manage... it happens a lot.

The payoff for resisting these overtures is that ROs can be among the most highly rewarding places in the region for highly skilled Islanders to work. The hope is that the emphasis on technical competency will produce benefits for constituent countries in ways that wouldn't otherwise be possible. In many cases, regionalists believe this to be true. The problem, they lament, is that many of these benefits are difficult for local communities to see or understand. The paradox of regionalism is that even when interdependence creates self-sufficiency, the role of ROs is rarely acknowledged beyond ROs themselves.

In sum, a core tension that has bedeviled policymakers in the Pacific for decades is how to deliver both self-sufficiency and modernist prosperity. Regionalism is an often-touted solution because it can increase economies of scale. But its failings, combined with the renewed interest in anti-materialism of the environmental movement and Pacific churches, challenges some of these ideas and asks important questions about the basis of regional identity. This can help us explain why some leaders seek incremental reform to ROs while others believe the regional architecture requires a more radical rethink, which they acknowledge will take time.

TRADITIONAL REGIONAL DONORS OR CHINA?

A third, newer dilemma is rising geopolitical tensions between the US and their allies and China. While the players are new, this dilemma is an old one that both reflects and exacerbates the first two.

Increased attention means increased resources, and the US and its allies are often anxious to channel these via ROs whom they trust more than national governments. However, it also increases the likelihood that individual nations will seek to exploit these circumstances for their own short-term goals, undermining the painstaking gradualism of technical co-operation in the process (Zhang and Lawson 2017). Ultimatums by donors—e.g. support us or have your funding cut—to Pacific leaders increase the likelihood of the former winning out over the later.

There is considerable angst among politicians and policymakers from the US and their allies that they are being outbid by China in the region. But regionalists rarely see the unfolding geopolitical contest in those terms. Rather, they see it as a choice between different styles of working and different ways of managing the other two dilemmas. In this sense they are more frustrated with the US and its allies than they are enamored with China. Indeed, while China has long been a donor in the region it focuses its efforts on bilateral assistance to states with whom it has diplomatic relations rather than via ROs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022). Regionalists perceive this new dilemma as undermining their ability to balance the other two.

Regionalists have a long list of grievances about the failings of donors such as Australia and New Zealand. The first is that Australia and New Zealand rarely undertake genuine consultation and thus their assistance is seldom geared towards what islanders want.

We've had Australia and New Zealand in the region working with us for so, so long, and then China comes in. Now you can point a finger at China and say "oh wow they just put money in infrastructure" but thing with China is that, and I don't agree with the Chinese administration on many, many fronts, but this is the thing, they do what the countries want, right. When the countries need infrastructure, the Chinese will do it without much questioning. But when our leaders, and when our countries talk to Australia, New Zealand, UK, and US, about specific things, they already have a mindset of specific things that they want to do for us. That has been the problem ... I'm not saying the Chinese are perfect, and as I said, I don't agree with many of the things they do, but, at least they listen. They listen to what the countries want.



Street view of Nuku'alofa, capital of Tonga
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A second grievance is that Australia and New Zealand give assistance in such a way that the funds tend to return to them, and thus have limited tangible impacts on recipient communities. This reflects old ideas about 'boomerang' aid.

Although the relationship is still there with our usual donors, New Zealand and Australia mainly, there's still that view that Australia's the big brother and yes while it provides support to the region, it does so in a way that basically reinforces benefits that go back to Australia. The interventions involve lots of Australian experts that come to either PNG or Solomons and then the majority of that money goes back to the Australian citizens and stuff like that.

The accusation here is as much about hypocrisy as anything else. Chinese aid can be incredibly transactional, too, in part because it is inevitably bilateral rather than multilateral, albeit this might change in the future. But these transactions are not hidden beneath the rhetoric of partnership and a 'Pacific family'.

This hypocrisy has tangible impacts (cf. Wallis 2021). RO leaders are perpetually frustrated that they are dependent on short-term projects rather than long-term funding envelopes that allow for strategic vision and planning. They contend that one unintended consequence of this is the types of duplication and overreach in their operations that national politicians lament.

The third grievance is related, in that leaders identify a disconnect between rhetoric and reality, with donors only willing to put increased funding on the line when it becomes apparent that their primacy in the region is under threat.

The US has been trying to get back into the region ... they said, "we never left", and I said, "well, if you never left, why is it that China has been able to influence the region?" ...

So don't blame the Chinese because the Chinese didn't do it overnight. They won the respect of many leaders ... Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., were watching this and after a decade of China building good relationships with the countries, then they come on board ... [but] what are you doing to help the region? That's the question. What are you doing? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

In this view regional leaders want the region's traditional donors to do more, not less, and they are frustrated that it has taken increased geopolitical tensions for countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and the US to realize their interests and seek to undertake genuine consultation. Moreover, they fear that the next generation of island leaders are already much more receptive to China than they are because of the way the USA and its allies have neglected the region:

Prior to [2017], State Department came through the Pacific. I had a meeting with officials who asked me what is it that we can do to deepen our relationship with the Pacific. I asked for scholarships to mainland United States and into the Ivy League institutions for the brightest of our students, so that we would build long term relationships. And they said to me, "man, that would be a hard sell." And I said, then so be it, because we will continue to send our students to China ... people who were educated in China, how they see the world and their world, is also informed by their education in China. So if you want to have a long term relationship, you've got to open your doors so that our people have experiences.

A fourth concern is increased militarization, with regional leaders considering how they might respond in a context where countries such as Australia and New Zealand are increasingly interested in security rather than development objectives (cf. Wallis and Powles 2021).

I don't think the U.S. has got [it]. And I've said this to a congressional committee that came through, "you haven't left a good legacy in this part of the world, you've left one big mess with all your nuclear issues". And I look at some of our brothers and sisters and how they live in the Northern Pacific, and I don't want my country to end up like that ... That's the way it is. We know, Samoa, Fiji, and those of us who are independent states, that sovereignty, independence, and our sovereignty is so very, very important. And I think Australia cannot just look at us as a territory in their backyard. Anyway, that's, that's just some of my thoughts.

This has implications for the membership of ROs:

I know there were people who were very strongly thinking that Australia and New Zealand should not be a member of PIF. I'd say that's probably all going to change. And I think that Australia's got a problem. It wants to be involved at the heart of the Pacific, but it's actually at the heart of AUKUS. And it will always side with militarization and military interests, that may well not align with ours. And you know, what happened in Solomon Islands was predictable. [The] country is poor. So they are going to get the help where they can ... for the Americans, where have you been?

Yet, a fifth concern is that most regionalists are very wary of China and the potential for countries to be played off against each other:

That's what they're trying to do. And they will play us all off against each other. Believe me, they've done it in Central America. They've done it in parts of South America and in other places. We have always seen ourselves: Yes, we are Polynesian, Micronesian, Melanesia; yes, we are distinctly different in many ways, but we are

also moved by our ocean and our care and responsibility for that ocean.

Their call to their fellow leaders recognises that the region is experiencing testing times but seeks to remind them that they have come through worse before:

Our peoples have dealt with these situations. For generations, we've had them all come through here, wanting this and wanting that. And we will deal with all of them. We must deal with all of them, because then we will know what we can do ... What we don't want, we won't take it. Yeah, that's the pragmatic side.

They argue that as tempting as it to work this way, and indeed tempting for national politicians to respond in kind, the short-term, expedient approach won't work. The commitment to partnership has to be long-term and sustained.

If you want to achieve [with us] you have to have that long-term view of what it means to be part of the life of the Pacific. China is not thinking in 10 years.

In sum, rising geopolitical tensions between the USA and China have generated considerable concern among Pacific regionalists that this will make it harder to manage the other two dilemmas by increasing short-term one-upmanship and undermining long term technical assistance. But regionalists are also concerned that: assistance is too conditional; that it 'boomerangs'; that it is hypocritical; militarized and aims to divide rather than unite. While increased resources can be of incredible benefit, the way that they are being distributed has the potential to generate more problems than it solves.

IMPLICATIONS

It is perhaps unsurprising that the leaders of regional institutions believe in the regional project and its ability to deliver political, environmental, socio-cultural, and economic empowerment to Pacific communities. Nor is it especially revelatory that regional leaders have different views about how the goal of regionalism should be pursued and the challenges they face. These debates are extensively canvassed in the very public discourse about regionalism, captured in declarations, policy statements, and speeches.

What this paper adds is an attempt to provide a clear map of what the core issues are according to the leaders of ROs themselves. It is premised on the claim that their views are especially important given they are the people tasked with delivering regionalism. This perspective reinforces that there are no easy solutions to the dilemmas identified in this paper, because they arise at the intersection of key norms that underpin the international system: sovereign equality; non-interference; and the right to development (Corbett 2023).

This final lesson is perhaps the most pressing for donors and is the essence of the 'seeing like a regionalist' idea that underpins this paper: what might seem obvious to those inside the tightly knit circles of Pacific regionalism is often ignored or misunderstood by those on the outside. By articulating the dilemmas RO leaders face, and their views on the best ways forward, our aim has been to bridge this gap. If donors understood regionalists better, what they care about and the challenges they encounter, then donors might be better placed to work productively with them. More generally, our hope is that these reflections can shed some critical light on the seemingly paradoxical patterns and trends of Pacific regionalism: hope and despair, solidarity and fragmentation.

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