Global Justice Overcoming Poverty

Pacific Outlook Bulletin

Issue 39 | October 2023

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"We have a mandate to protect and preserve the marine environment not just for ourselves, but for future generations and to ensure we continue to have a livable planet."

~ Vanuatu's Minister for Climate Change, Ralph Regenvanu

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JAPAN'S DISCHARGE OF NUCLEAR WASTE CONCERNS PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

In August 2023, Japan began to discharge 1.3 million tonnes of treated radioactive wastewater into the Pacific Ocean from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant which was hit by a tsunami in 2011. The plant is owned by the Japanese government, which has set a 30-year time frame for the release of the nuclear wastewater, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in July declared that the process was consistent with international safety standards.

But there has been a history of nuclear harm in the Pacific. Pacific Islander peoples were told by outside experts and scientists that nuclear testing undertaken in places such as Moruroa, Fangataufa, Bikini Atoll and Kiritimati, and in Australia – Maralinga, Emu Field and Montebello Islands – were safe. They were told that illnesses such as cancers and stillborn babies were not connected to nuclear testing, and radioactivity continues cause health defects to this day. In the early 1980s Japan planned to dump 500 barrels of nuclear waste in an area east of the Marianas Trench, but this never went ahead due to Pacific Island nations protests.

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Foreign Ministers' Statement of 15 September 2023 on the release of Fukashima's wastewater says "the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (Rarotonga Treaty) provides the context for our engagement on nuclear issues, both in relation to non-peaceful and peaceful purposes. The Rarotonga Treaty records the region's 'determination to keep the region free of environmental pollution by radioactive wastes and other radioactive matter.'

"We recall with concern our nuclear testing legacy which has left lasting impacts in our otherwise peaceful and bountiful Blue Pacific."

The statement also welcomes the IAEA's proposal for an annual dialogue mechanism with the Forum on ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the release. In January prior to IAEA declaring that the release process was consistent with international safety standards PIF Secretary General Henry Puna said: "We must prevent action that will lead or mislead us towards another major nuclear contamination disaster at the hands of others."

Vanuatu's foreign minister said in August "[We are] urging polluters not to discharge the treated water in the Pacific Ocean until and unless the treated water is incontrovertibly proven to be safe to do so, and [to] seriously consider other options." Other Pacific Island nations that have expressed concerns are Niue, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands.

But although no Pacific Island is in favour of the wastewater release several have confirmed that they are satisfied that the plan is safe, including the Cook Islands, Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia under former President David Panuelo and Fiji, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister, James Marape, said in June that Japan should only proceed if internationally compliant, but has not commented since the IAEA's approval. Kiribati has called for the release to be safe. Naura, Samoa and Tonga have not commented.

Sources: Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers Statement, 15 September 2023; 'Japan risks its reputation in Oceania with Fukushima discharge' by Derek Grossman, 29 September 2023, The Interpreter, The Lowy Institute; Japan's nuclear waste has no place in our Pacific by Teuila Fuatai, 27 August 2023, E-Tangata.

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DEEP SEA MINING ON HOLD

In July the International Seabed Authority (ISA), an intergovernmental body based in Jamaica, which regulates sea-bed extraction, reached an agreement not to give the go-ahead for industrial-scale deep sea mining (DSM). The ISA's 36-member council, the body that oversees rules and regulations, said it needed more time to finalise rules, so the decision was made to delay the start of any mining operations. ISA said it would work "with a view" to adopting regulations in 2025.

On 24 August 2023 at the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) leaders declared a moratorium on deep sea mining. Leaders from Fiji, the Front De Liberation Nationale Kanak Socialiste (FLNKS), Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu agreed that seabed mining should be prohibited in their territories. They have also called for thorough and transparent environmental scientific investigations into seabed mining activities. In taking this position, the MSG has become the first sub-regional Pacific bloc to support a Pacific wide moratorium.

The MSG leaders acknowledge the ongoing negotiations on a mining code at the ISA, but they called for caution as there is still very little known of the effects of seabed mining to marine ecosystems and biodiversity. Scientists say that seabed mining runs the risk of disturbing stable seabed structures that have, so far, remained the world's largest most stable carbon and methane sinks. Deep sea mining could trigger the release of sequestered methane, a greenhouse gas thought to be 25 to 50 times more potent than carbon dioxide. DSM could have a detrimental impact on fish stocks. Also, it has been found that the deep sea contains an abundance of life. Over 5,000 species new to science, have been recently discovered in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone alone.

Pacific Parliamentarians Alliance on Deep Sea Mining (PPADSM) Chair, Vanuatu's Climate Change Minster, Ralph Regenvanu, said that deep sea mining should not be allowed to start without proper rules, regulations and procedures which insure the protection of the ocean and its ecosystems. He said as parties to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea "we have a mandate to protect and preserve the marine environment not just for ourselves, but for future generations and to ensure we continue to have a livable planet."

But as was outlined in in the February 2023 issue of the Pacific Outlook Bulletin, the Pacific Island countries are divided with regard to deep sea mining. The Metals Company is working with Nauru, Kiribati and Tonga to explore their license areas in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone. The Cook Islands is allowing exploration by other companies in its exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Since 2014, the Cook Islands has its own Seabed Minerals Policy. These countries with their small populations want to grab this economic opportunity. Advocates for DSM say that it is needed to reduce greenhouse emissions and would help meet the world's requirements for minerals such as cobalt and manganese, which are components of EV batteries, solar panels and wind turbines.

The Pacific Blue Line, which includes Pacific Island NGOs and church organisations, has issued a statement in which it says:
"Deep sea mining (DSM) is the latest in a long list of destructive industries to be thrust into our sacred ocean. It is a new, perilous frontier extractive industry being falsely promoted as a proven answer to our economic needs. While its promised benefits remain speculative, its pursuit is insidious. Even at an experimental stage, DSM is already proving harmful to Pacific communities, their livelihoods, cultural practices, and their wellbeing."

The Pacific Blue Line Statement welcomes the moratorium by some Pacific governments on DSM within their EEZs, and urges Pacific Island country governments to support a global ban on DSM.

Sources: 'What We Know about Deep Sea Mining – And What We Don't' by Oliver Ashford, Jonathan Baines, Melissa Barbanell and Ke Wang, 19 July 2023, World Resources Institute; Pacific Blue Line Statement; 'Pacific alliance adopts moratorium on deep-sea mining, halting resurgent PNG project' by John Cannon, 6 September 2023, Mongabay; 'Deep-sea mining tussle highlights divide among Pacific Island nations' by Stephen Wright, 20 July 2023, Benar News.

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TAKING THE BACK SEAT: COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY IN PNG

When most people talk about community development in Papua New Guinea, they are talking about foreign aid. However, in February and March 2023, I had the opportunity to study a different type of community development – work involving a domestic donor, the Digicel Foundation (DF). This type of work is sometimes referred to as "community philanthropy", a term for development approaches that emerge from communities or countries where the work is undertaken. While it differs from aid, it has important lessons for aid work.

My research focused on the sustainability of DF's projects and the topic was a community grant-making program operated by DF. The reason for doing this research, and specifically with DF, goes back to my work as founding CEO of DF from 2008 to 2012. My belief, formed during those years in PNG, is that sustained project benefits are crucial. I undertook a master's degree in Anthropology and Development Studies at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, The Netherlands. My thesis research focused on the question "What factors contribute to the sustainability of the projects in DF's Community Grants Program in PNG?"

DF's "Leadership for Change" Community Grants Program was launched in 2019. The program aims to support local organisations with community grants of up to 50,000 kina (approximately AUS$20,000) to deliver projects that provide local solutions to local problems.

I analysed 22 local organisations that received a community grant in 2019-20 and 2020-21 for infrastructure projects. The projects were evaluated in terms of their sustainability and assessed by measuring whether the intended results were achieved and whether they continued to exist after the withdrawal of external donor support.

Most projects (64%) demonstrated a high sustainability level. These projects are fully operational and mostly self-reliant with the intended outputs reached and most outcomes achieved. Subsequently, I investigated the potential factors contributing to the different sustainability levels of the project groups. I had three main findings.

First, community contributions matter. These local resources can be financial – the community raising part of the funds for the project – and/or non-financial – community members helping by providing unskilled or skilled labour, accommodation and/or food for the workers, clearing the road, or transporting building materials. Another kind of local resource is social capital – social knowledge and networks within the community can be mobilised for a project, for example, the village councillor knows the leaders of village cooperatives who are trusted and best placed to train community members in specific skills. And another kind of local resource is local reputational capital, through a community member or local organisation with a good reputation being involved in the project. Projects with a low level of sustainability seem to have failed due to the community not contributing, resulting in a lack of ownership.

My second finding was: communities need to have the capabilities to manage the implementation of the development activities. My findings showed that projects with a low level of sustainability seem to have failed due to recipient communities needing more capabilities to implement the project. Projects with a higher level of sustainability have in common that the grantees have capacity-building skills or work with partners that provide these skills. Strong community leadership also plays an important role. Some projects showing leaders mobilising local resources.

And third, building trust is key. To build relevant skills and confidence within communities, development actors need to trust and engage with their beneficiaries and consider them as partners. Research showed that longer term relationships were built by giving multiple grants to grantees of successful projects and introducing them to other development partners by giving them a platform to build their reputation and social networks. DF mostly liaises with NGOs, churches and community organisations that already have a long-term relationship with the beneficiaries.

Based on these key research findings, the following recommendations are for external development actors in the aid sector. Design development interventions that are community-led and focus on leveraging local assets, for example by encouraging communities to co-invest in kind. Support communities with the capacity to implement the project. If communities don't have sufficient capacity, encourage them to work with trusted local partners. Listen to what communities say they need and develop long-term relationships through partnerships.

Source: This is an edited version of 'Taking the Back Seat: Community Philanthropy in PNG' by Marina van der Vlies, which first appear on Devpolicy, *published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University. Digicel Foundation PNG supported the research. The views represent those of the author only.*

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Pacific Outlook is produced by the Grail Global Justice Overcoming Poverty Network (Australia). Published in Sydney with 6 issues per year. Contributions to Pacific Outlook and responses to its content are welcomed via the Editor.
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Design: Thanks to Marian Kelly for her donation of time and talent.