

Hold PACER-Plus talks, pursue development priorities, Leaders urged

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PORT VILA, Vanuatu: Civil society groups from the Pacific including churches, trade unions, gender groups, indigenous rights groups and advocacy groups have called on Pacific leaders to place a moratorium on negotiations for a new Pacific-wide free trade agreement known as PACER-Plus. They want development priorities put ahead of political timelines. The civil societies call was contained in a statement, issued in Port Vila, Vanuatu, to coincide with the annual Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting now underway. The statement says: "PACER Plus is the most important trade negotiation Pacific countries are going to undertake this decade. However, Pacific civil society organisations have not been adequately consulted about the type of development and trade relationship the Pacific should have with Australia and New Zealand. It is precisely for this reason that civil society organisations, churches and trade unions are calling for a moratorium on PACER-Plus negotiations." Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) campaigner Adam Wolfenden said the rushing of negotiations will only lead to a bad agreement for the Pacific. "Negotiations are already starting despite most Pacific Islands not having consulted with their people to determine what is in their interests. After one year we are seeing the foundations for a bad agreement," said Wolfenden. Wolfenden, who is in Vanuatu, said that "for a country like Vanuatu the issue of land is central to life and inextricably linked to any economic future and PACER-Plus agreement, yet negotiations are moving ahead without consultation with traditional owners." Instead PACER-Plus negotiations have progressed rapidly in regional spaces where priority areas have been identified. Civil society organisations have argued for the exclusion of essential services such as education, health and water, and investment. However, these are now listed as priority areas for negotiations under PACER-Plus. The call for a moratorium is also to ensure the correct sequencing of events - development first to build the supply-side capacity and trade related infrastructure which would then inform negotiations on development assistance and trade rules that prioritises Pacific development priorities. As it stands, PACER-Plus negotiations are largely focused on trade rules and opening up of markets whilst development and development assistance have become increasingly obscure. Director of Australian aid watchdog AID/WATCH, Gary Lee commented that Australian aid is being used to secure commitments from Pacific islands on trade liberalisation. "Australia is using promises of more aid to push ahead with PACER-Plus. Using its position as a major aid donor to push ahead Australia's trade interests poses serious risks to Pacific islands economies and communities. Furthermore, while trade commitments would be binding and enforceable, promises of increased aid are not," said Lee.

