

PACER Plus puts profit before people - Experts

From the Solomon Star

23 JULY 2010 ---- A proposed new free trade agreement in the Pacific, PACER-Plus, threatens the health of Pacific islanders by placing the interests of business over and above good health policies, according to a group of health professionals, academics and trade campaigners meeting in Sydney this week.

“This agreement has the potential to liberalise tobacco, alcohol and increase access to cheap processed foods,” Patricia Morton from the Peoples Health Movement Australia said.

“Elected governments will have their hands tied if they try and introduce policies to protect their people’s health.

“The full impact of this agreement on the health of people living in the Pacific needs to be assessed.

“Good health policy is about having a variety of strategies to meet the different challenges that arise, be they access to affordable medicines, bans on unhealthy foods, progressive taxation on alcohol and cigarettes, and stopping the brain drain of health professionals.

“Trade agreements undermine those options saying that health outcomes can't interfere with business interests, prioritising those interests above public health,” Ms Morton said.

The forum participants believe that to ensure the Pacific has good health outcomes PACERPlus

negotiations should be halted until the full impacts of any trade agreement are known and only continue if it is in the interests of Pacific communities.

Forum presenter, and Associate Lecturer at the University of Sydney, Anne Marie Thow commented that “the Pacific has some of the highest rates in the world of non-communicable diseases like diabetes and heart disease”.

“International trade is playing an important role in moving the dietary landscape in the Pacific away from healthy, traditionally and locally grown crops to cheap, fatty imports.

“An agreement like PACER-Plus may reduce the scope to implement policies needed to improve diets,” Dr Thow said.

Under existing PACER-Plus talks, health services have already been listed as a 'priority area', something that concerns forum participants.

According to the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET) Campaigner, Harvey Purse, “The listing as a priority area means that there will be commitments in health services”.

“The liberalisation of trade in services, especially essential services like health, predominantly results in bad outcomes for those with less money or in remote areas as private companies cherry-pick the most profitable sectors, usually the wealthy urban areas leaving underfunded public services to deal with the rest.”

The forum comes only weeks before the annual Pacific Islands Forum held this year in Vanuatu where, amongst other topics, progress on PACER-Plus negotiations will be discussed by leaders.

The aim of the forum is to build on the work of examining the links between health outcomes and trade policy from a similar forum held in Melbourne in April.

The forum is sponsored by the Menzies Centre for Health Policy, Public Health Association NSW Branch, and University of Sydney Law School.....PNS (ENDS