

## Wide-ranging exclusive interview with the Forum's Sec Gen

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In the lead-up to the Pacific Islands Forum in Port Vila, earlier this month, there was criticism of the way regional development initiatives, such as the Pacific Plan, are being implemented. Much of the blame was laid at the door of the Forum Secretariat - the permanent staff of the Forum which is based in Suva.

PIANGO, the Pacific Island Association of Non-government Organisations said the Forum Secretariat is failing to consult or include civil society organisations in developing key policies. The Pacific Conference of Churches, and a number of commentators, have claimed the Secretariat's efforts to implement the Pacific Plan are not delivering benefits to grassroots people or are not helping the development efforts of national governments.

The Forum Secretariat's Secretary-General Tuiloma Neroni Slade has overall responsibility for implementing the leaders decisions, including the Pacific Plan. He has just been in Australia speaking with foreign investors about the outcome of the Port Vila Forum and role they can play in helping the region meet its Millennium Development Goals. While he was in Sydney he caught up with Jemima Garrett for this exclusive interview - his first with Pacific Beat for more than a year.

*Presenter: Jemima Garrett, Radio Australia's Pacific Economic and Business Reporter based in Sydney*

*Speaker: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat's Secretary-General, Tuiloma Neroni Slade*

**GARRETT:** In the lead up to the Forum there was some criticism from civil society organisations, commentators and academics - that the forum is becoming irrelevant, that it wasn't communicating to the community and that its programs in some cases are not even relevant to national governments - how do you respond to those criticisms?

**SLADE:** That's a rather sweeping complaint - I would obviously, on the face of it, have to disagree but I think I can provide a more effective answer if I knew precisely what the object of this sweeping characterisation. I think there are many good things that the Forum does. We are speaking now about the assistance to develop the private sector. I would have thought that the response by governments and Forum leaders to encourage private sector growth, to bring them in to their discussions and have a dialogue, first time ever, I would have thought that was a very constructive and productive outcome of the Forum.

**GARRETT:** You yourself, with the Pacific Plan, identified that there had been some problems with national buy-in to the Pacific Plan - what sort of problems are you talking about there and what do you put those problems down to?

**SLADE:** I guess the problem is of generalities. The Pacific Plan is a big concept, we are dealing with a big, big region but last year in Cairns, what we did was to begin to define, in terms of the vulnerabilities of island communities, which of course is a common denominator for all of these countries. And then you say 'what are the vulnerable areas?' and when we began to pinpoint 5 main areas: the response to the global issues, H1N1, HIV/AIDS, these are the global things, ♦ climate change, which again its common to everyone. And then we begin to look at the social issues and then we begin to look at more realistic responses: the need for adaptation . We need to focus on practical programs. This is a region that is abundant in water, and the ocean, again this is not new- the Forum is about to celebrate its fortieth year -but the SPC ( Secretariat of the Pacific community) has been much longer at it and we have been doing a lot of work on trying to develop the resources of the region be it land-based or the marine area. We've been trying to ensure that our population throughout the region are healthy, well-schooled so there is a focus on the social issues. We must get on and strengthen ourselves to achieve much more of the millennium development goals. But I think what was good about the latest expression of the priorities for the region - it is much more focussed to the common denominators of vulnerability and makes my Secretariat and the other regional organisations to target their activities. We know we are doing a certain amount about fisheries, for example, but everybody is stealing our fish so we need to try to try to improve the way we can commercialise, maximise the return for our fish. We are not quite sure how we will do it, but we are starting to do it.

**GARRETT:** The Pacific Plan is five years old now. If you were talking to people at the grassroots level what would you say to them about what the principle gains have been over that time?

SLADE: First of all it is a clearer statement of what we need. It's a very informed professional statement of what we think the key priorities are. At the political level the leaders have said 'We agree with what you've mapped out. Go for it!' We need to make a start somewhere. These priorities are not the priorities of senior professionals and senior officials or the priorities of regional organisations. These are the priorities of the man, woman and child of each country. We need to get them to accept that. We need to make people feel that it is their set of priorities, not mine or my officials, and we need them to be engaged. Without understanding what this is all about, why they need to protect their foreshore, why they need to keep the mangroves healthy, why they need to help the corals in the lagoons to grow and to continue to be healthy - only the people can understand that much, much better because they have historical ways, they have historical dependence. But we need to translate all this new knowledge into the language, into a manner, in which the citizens themselves can understand and able to live with. That is what ownership is, and that must be driven by communities themselves. You've got me worked up now! (laughs)

Q This is where the criticisms of civil society organisations comes in, because they say they have skills, contacts at that level and they are asking why aren't you including them in that process of consultation?

SLADE: We need them. I am not sure that we are excluding them. Maybe we are a little short in getting them engaged but we need them. They have skills that governments do not have, and the regional organisations, we must rely on these people. They have far better knowledge and far better staying power than any regional organisation has.

GARRETT: They say that originally there was a plan for an annual dialogue process with the civil society organisations but that hasn't happened. What would you like to see done to include the civil society organisations in a dialogue?

SLADE: Well, you know these things are often two-way streets. Again, generalities, sweeping statements. Civil society, it is a large and sometimes amorphous concept. We are trying ♦ I fully agree myself and I accept the need for dialogue with civil society. They are too important not to have a dialogue with them. But there are many organisations within the terminology of civil society.

GARRETT : The civil society organisations are offering their peak bodies - would that be a way of making the dialogue work?

SLADE: Well, we've had a dialogue earlier this year on regional security issues, for example. I can't tell you how many NGO's or civil society organisations actually were within that particular area. And when we are dealing with regional security issues ..how many work in the drug related, criminal activity and so on, and the border issues. But let me repeat , I think civil society has an essential and an invaluable role to play in the overall development of our region. If there are short-comings in our own response we would obviously want to do better, as a secretariat. I consider myself as having a responsibility to reach out to civil society and it is an essential bit of the partnership strategy for the region.

GARRETT: The Pacific Conference of Churches has come up with its 'Rethinking Oceania' project to rethink the way the region does development. Now that got the endorsement of 11 Pacific countries at Fiji's 'Engaging the Pacific' summit - Is that a vote of no-confidence in the way the Forum secretariat is running its projects?

SLADE: Well, yet another sweep. Look I cannot yield to that. At the same time I really do not know what is involved with this.

GARRETT: I guess the questions is 'Is this sort of move, particularly engaging with Fiji, which is suspended from the Forum , is this sort of move undermining the role of the Forum'?

SLADE: I doubt it very much. I cannot see how it can be. No.

GARRETT: Is the Forum suffering any problems with having its headquarters in Fiji - with the questions over the rule of law, censorship of the media, Fiji being suspended from the Forum - is that causing the Secretariat problems in terms of implementing your programs?

SLADE: We are a secretariat. It is not the first time that we encounter difficulties. It is inherent in the life of any secretariat that we accept the environment of our work as it comes. It is part of the professionalism of the secretariat that it is able to function and I do believe that we are functioning as normally as we can.

GARRETT: Finally, some media have found it hard to obtain interviews with the Forum Secretariat. What role do you see for the media in terms of getting the message out about what the Forum Secretariat is doing?

SLADE: We have a media liaison unit. It is a small one but they work hard. They try to undertake the essential information services that we need for ourselves to tell our story of our activities as transparently as we can

GARRETT: I guess the problem is we get plenty of press releases but not many people to talk to and to question on important topics facing the region?

SLADE: Yes, the point is taken. I as the head of the Secretariat, everybody seems to ask for me. It is not always possible to respond to individual requests. I do get informed by my staff and we try to respond either by email or over the telephone but again,

I am sure our response could be improved better than it is, and I can only say that I am sorry if there is a feeling of inadequacy about our response to the media.

GARRETT: I guess it is important to have someone to speak on key issues. One of the issues that comes to mind is the Pacific's representative in Vanuatu - the Trade Office there - and that was something in which the role of the Forum was particularly in question, but which during a period of many weeks, there was no spokesperson from the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat available to talk - do you see that as a problem?

SLADE: There again that is a specific matter. I can tell you now that it is not ♦.the difficulty there that matters that pertain to staff arrangements, staff relations were exposed in the media. In a way, it is not satisfactory and it is not appropriate for the Secretariat to be dealing with its staff matters in public and that is not unusual. But it is the policy position of the Secretariat, that I cannot, whatever the temptation, I am not prepared to discuss staff matters, very personal, normally confidential matters pertaining to people to their situations and job situation, to discuss these matters in public.

GARRETT: Ideally, how would you like to see the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat presenting itself in the media.

SLADE: I take responsibility as the head of the organisation. We obviously..you who have a high responsibility and an important and established responsibility to play in the order of things. We need to respond to that. We try to do it as conscientiously as we can, as the Secretariat. We are a publicly-funded Secretariat and we are not unaware of our responsibility to respond with a sense of propriety and responsibility to the media.

GARRETT: If you are not available, should more officers be deputised to talk about certain issues, perhaps?  
Certainly, and as I said the front here, is our media officer and he does inform the senior officers.

GARRETT: Tuiloma Neroni Slade, thank you for joining Radio Australia.

Thank you.

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