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Trade Guide Shines Light on Bad Deal

A new Guide released today allows Pacific Islanders to better understand the impacts of the recently concluded and controversial regional Free Trade Agreement, known as PACER-Plus. The Peoples' Guide to PACER-Plus, released by the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG), explains the murky history of the talks and the key impacts that the legal binding texts will have on people, culture, livelihoods and the environment.

“PACER-Plus will have major impacts in the Pacific and it’s critical that every Pacific Islander has the opportunity to know how it will affect them not just today but into the future when government's policy space is constrained. The Peoples' Guide to PACER-Plus breaks down the key technical aspects of PACER-Plus and explains them in more accessible language so that people can understand what the agreement means and how it will affect them”, commented PANG Coordinator, Ms Maureen Penjueli

The Guide, based on leaked legal text, looks at the controversial history of Australia and New Zealand forcing the launch of negotiations against Pacific governments wishes; what free trade is really about; the loss of policy space for Pacific people to determine their own development; the problems with the 'development assistance' and labour mobility chapters; and the impacts of PACER-Plus on livelihoods, customary land and government revenue.

“Trade deals are negotiated in secret and are often full of legal jargon that makes them completely inaccessible to governments, parliaments and ordinary people attempting to understand what they mean in practice. This Guide is a way to change that”, continued Ms Penjueli.

Last year Papua New Guinea withdrew from PACER-Plus citing concerns for their domestic industries and an independent evaluation finding the deal a 'net loss'. Fiji had threatened to withdraw if their concerns around the infant industry protections and 'most favoured nation' clause are not addressed satisfactorily. While the Government of Vanuatu wants PACER-Plus to be independently scrutinised before the Council of Ministers can determine whether or not it is in the interests of Vanuatu to sign onto PACER-Plus. The Solomon Islands have also recently reported to the World Trade Organization that with PACER-Plus they expect increased imports to offset any modest increase in their exports, with the greatest gains only coming through access to Australian and New Zealand labour markets and additional aid.

“The withdrawal of Papua New Guinea and the concerns of Fiji, the Pacific countries largest economies, shows just how unbalanced the agreement is and how it will benefit Australia and New Zealand the most. This is in no way a 'development agreement' as it has been spun by the region’s two biggest neighbours and the Office of the Chief Trade Adviser and people and their elected representatives have a right to know why”, added Ms Penjueli

“As pressure to accept this bad deal increases from Australia and New Zealand, it is critical that as many Pacific Islanders as possible are able to see what is on the table and make their voices heard. Parliaments need to engage this debate on PACER-Plus and determine whether it should be signed or not, it is the appropriate democratic forum for this very important decision”, concluded Ms Penjueli

A Social Impact Assessment of PACER-Plus was released last year by PANG and the expert authors found that PACER-Plus will have significant negative impacts on health, the right to food, and the ability of governments to regulate.

PACER-Plus negotiations were controversially launched in 2009 and is reported to be signed this June in Tonga.

The Peoples' Guide to PACER-Plus can be found at www.pang.org.fj.

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