

Moratorium needed on Pacific trade talks, warn Pacific Civil Society Organisations

Civil society groups from the Pacific including churches, trade unions, gender groups, indigenous rights groups and advocacy groups launched a statement calling for a moratorium on negotiations for a new Pacific-wide free trade agreement known as PACER-Plus. The statement, launched in Port Vila, Vanuatu, to coincide with the annual Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting, called on Leaders to put the developmental priorities of the Pacific ahead of political timelines.

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 Mr Wolfenden.

Mr Wolfenden, who is in Vanuatu to launch the statement, 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 a 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 currently 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 island economies and communities. Furthermore, while trade commitments would be binding and enforceable, promises of increased aid are not," stated Mr Lee.

The statement calls for more thorough assessment of whether or not PACER-Plus negotiations should continue. "Globally we're still recovering from the financial and food crises, these crises should give reason to pause and consider what all our options are, not only trade liberalisation. Going ahead with a binding free trade agreement will see us continue to make the same mistakes," concluded Mr Wolfenden

The *2010 Civil Society Statement to Pacific Island Forum Leaders regarding PACER-Plus negotiations* is endorsed by organisations from across Pacific Island Countries and regional organisations like the Pacific Conference of Churches, the South Pacific and Oceanic Council of Trade Unions, Pacific Concerns Resource Centre, Council of Pacific Education and the Pacific Network on Globalisation. The statement is supported by over 20 organisations in Australia and New Zealand, including the Australian Council of Trade Unions, New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, AID/WATCH, Christian World Service and the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network.

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