



Tropical cyclone Pam, a category 5 storm, formed in the central south Pacific in early March 2015. The resulting swell propagated throughout the central Pacific, causing flooding and damage to communities in Tuvalu, Kiribati and Wallis and Futuna, all over 1,000 km from the typhoon's path.

SOURCE: Tyler Rozenbaum

A PACIFIC COMPACT

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2020, senior officials from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) told a parliamentary hearing they were investigating the concept of a "Grand Compact" with some small Pacific nations.¹

A Compact is an agreement between states or nations on matters where they have a common concern. Compacts have the potential to improve quality of life and achieve sustainable development goals. However, the devil is in the details. Without proper scrutiny, Compacts can be used to achieve geopolitical aims and to further colonial, neoliberal and corporate interests, resulting in negative consequences such as increased carbon emissions, environmental degradation and increased poverty.

If Pacific nations were interested in developing a compact with Australia, the Covid-19 pandemic may present them with a unique opportunity to have a good measure of power and leverage in these negotiations. This is largely due to the fact that the pandemic has highlighted Australia's dependence on seasonal workers as travel restrictions have caused significant shortages of workers to harvest crops.

EXISTING COMPACTS

There are currently four main compacts operating in the Pacific region. Probably the best known is the UN Global Compact. Despite all its good intentions to convince business and

transnational corporations to adopt principles on human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption, this Compact is still viewed as being far from satisfactory by developing countries. Pacific Forum Island Countries (PICs), with a large rural and subsistence population and on the frontline of the climate crisis, are not truly protected by this Compact. This is particularly the case when they are pushed to embrace global capitalism and the free trade agreements that are often imposed on them, ones which often only cause further environmental degradation and poverty.² Such compacts are Eurocentric and do not take into account Pacific Island voices or those from the Global South.

New Zealand has a Compact with the Cook Islands and Niue. The agreement with the Cook Islands focuses on strengthening the public sector, especially building capacity in health, education and tourism. It also includes support for critical water, sanitation and communications infrastructure.³ The Cook Islands are self-governing in 'free association' with New Zealand. It administers its own affairs, and Cook Islanders are New Zealand citizens who are free to live and work there.

The United States has a Compact of Free Association with Palau, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia. This Compact is due to expire in 2024, and negotiations for new agreements have begun. These discussions seem to largely aim to

counter Chinese influence in the region.⁴ Renewing a Compact is thus seen as crucial to Washington's Pacific allies but is sometimes perceived as colonial in approach.

In 2009 the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders agreed to the (Cairns) Forum Compact on Strengthening Development Coordination.⁵ This Compact comprised various initiatives including:

1. Annual Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) tracking;
2. Peer reviews of national institutions, policies and systems;
3. Development partner reporting on aid effectiveness commitments;
4. Public Financial Management (PFM) reforms;
5. More effective climate change financing;
6. Private sector engagement/dialogue; and
7. Investment in infrastructure development

A Compact between Australia and the Pacific, depending on timing and detail, may present an opportunity for all parties to benefit; however, there is a risk that benefits are skewed towards furthering Australia's geopolitical, development and security aspirations.

A PACIFIC COMPACT

The push for a "Grand Compact for the Pacific" appears to come from Professor John Blaxland, of the Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre.⁶ On offer is residency towards Australian citizenship for about 244,000 Pacific peoples in return for

Australia to "help administer and guarantee sovereignty to a cumulative Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of over an area of 5.118 million square kilometers." This proposed Pacific Compact is clearly driven by Australian interests and is of concern to civil society organizations

(CSOs) in the Pacific. It intersects the Pacific diaspora in Australia, who are seasonal workers and overstayers, with climate displaced migration (now and into the future) in a time of COVID-19.

According to media reports, in September 2020 senior officials from Australia's Foreign Affairs Department told a parliamentary hearing they are investigating the concept of a "Grand Compact" with some small Pacific nations.⁷ Details are scant, and it is difficult to ascertain which politicians are supportive of, or driving, this push for a Pacific Compact. Luke Gosling, Federal Member of Parliament for Solomon in the Northern Territory, and Vice-Chair of the Pacific Islands Country Group, has thrown his support for the need for such a compact. He has echoed John Blaxland's concerns that "... these ideas for a new Pacific compact should be handled respectfully, seriously and urgently."⁸ But does the Pacific need a Compact? Would it further marginalise Pacific Island voices?

Given Australia's predilection to support extractive industry developments in the Pacific region and Global South, it is difficult to imagine that the shadowy players in the push for a Pacific Compact are approaching the matter in an altruistic manner that would ensure environmental and social justice protections. The companies that are likely to profit from a Pacific Compact that grants Australia access to Pacific resources are also unknown. A push for shared control of the Pacific Island Economic Exclusive Zones indicates a neo-colonial grab of ocean resources including "proposals for seabed mining, deep-sea oil and gas exploration, climate geoengineering and the biopiracy of marine life."⁹ The question is whether Pacific leaders will be prepared to give up their sovereignty for such a proposal.

Currently there is no evidence to suggest that a compact between Australia and Pacific nations

would build capacity in health, education and tourism or support critical water, sanitation and communications infrastructure. As noted above, this is the case with the Compact between New Zealand and the Cook Islands. If the Pacific Compact is sincere in offering citizenship then why has Australia not established a Pacific access visa category with no strings attached, similar to the arrangement New Zealand has in their Compact with the Cook Islands and Niue?

The same questions apply to the Pacific Compact's claim that it will consider "Pacific environmental sensibilities." As Solomon Islands' scholar Tarcisius Kabautalaka states,

*"Climate change is exposing not only the vulnerability of island nations, but also the responsibility of countries such as Australia to reduce carbon emissions. A compact must address "the risks of environmental disaster" as well as its causes ... Canberra must change its climate policies before it reaches out to island countries for a compact of association, otherwise this will be seen as a way to excuse itself from reducing its carbon footprint."*¹⁰

The key concern regarding an Australian Pacific compact is its true political purpose. Rather than an agreement about migration, labor and aid, if implemented, its real aim seems to be to gain access to the Pacific's resources, while undermining the influence of China, and presumably bolstering that of the US. Rather than strengthen the Pacific It would essentially be an agreement to swap Australian citizenship for Pacific resources.

If Australia were granted sovereignty of resources in the Pacific as part of a Compact, development and extraction of those resources could increase negative impacts of climate change, cause further environmental

degradation, increase poverty and displace residents. With these outcomes, the Compact would, in turn, necessitate more people from Pacific Island nations to migrate to, or take on seasonal work in, Australia. Without stringent

measures to ensure environmental, social and cultural protection, a Pacific Compact has the potential to further marginalise people from low lying Pacific nations.

AUSTRALIA'S AID AGENDA IN THE PACIFIC

Since the closure of the former Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), Australian aid has been increasingly directed towards national interests and private finance over developing countries' humanitarian and development needs for real aid. It is now closely integrated with Australian diplomatic, strategic and military priorities.

AusAid was merged with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in 2013. With this merger came a change of priorities and the way that Australian Aid was administered. A more explicit focus on using aid to pursue foreign and trade policy goals and increased focus on "aid-for-trade" was implemented, with aid being fully integrated into Australia's "economic diplomacy". It is telling that the language used has changed from "aid" to "development assistance."¹¹

The declared objective of DFAT's "Australian Aid" division is to "promote Australia's national interests by contributing to sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction."¹² In official terms, the main objective of Australian ODA is no longer the "economic development and welfare of developing countries," as required by the OECD, but the promotion of "Australia's national interest." The primary purpose of aid has been transformed to be a means of serving Australian private interests.

Australia's foreign policy framework continues to prioritize the US alliance above regional Asia Pacific engagement, as well as pursuing

corporate interests at the expense of public interests. The 2017 Foreign Policy White paper states that

"Our alliance with the United States is central to Australia's approach to the Indo-Pacific. Without strong US political, economic and security engagement, power is likely to shift more quickly in the region and it will be more difficult for Australia to achieve the levels of security and stability we seek. To support our objectives in the region, the Government will broaden and deepen our alliance cooperation, including through the United States Force Posture Initiatives."¹³

Australia's relationship with the US is prioritised over that with its Pacific neighbours.

Australia has not assisted in strengthening effective global responses to current global crises, whether they be climate, food, financial or humanitarian crises. For example, Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was to announce a "gas-led recovery,"¹⁴ appointing members of the gas industry to the government-appointed coronavirus taskforce.¹⁵ This approach is profoundly short-sighted. Rather than focusing on a "green recovery," Australia's commitment to the gas industry means that carbon emission reductions has not been a priority.

It is now widely accepted that the impacts of climate change most greatly affect low-lying nations in the Global South.¹⁶ Australia's "gas-

led recovery” from the coronavirus pandemic is a lost opportunity to minimise the negative impacts of Australian industry and shows Australia’s lack of regard for its climate impacts on its Pacific neighbours.

Research confirms that there is concern in the Pacific about “a lack of balance and equality in the Australia-Pacific relationship and a belief [that] Australia doesn’t truly hear the perspectives of its neighbours.”¹⁷ It also identifies other problems saying:

“[there are] “problems with the role of international NGOs working in the Pacific,

many of which are based in Australia. Participants were concerned by the Pacific’s over-reliance on international NGOs, the crowding out of local partners and the failure of governments and international NGOs to appreciate and acknowledge the value of local knowledge.”¹⁸

Australia’s activities in the Pacific are self-serving at best. Until Pacific voices are respected and heard and DFAT’s priorities are overhauled, it is unlikely that any agreement between Australia and its Pacific neighbours will truly benefit all parties.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Australia’s aid program is managed by DFAT, the same federal department that manages the “Pacific Step Up” and seasonal workers programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted Australia’s dependence on seasonal workers from Pacific nations. With international borders closed, Australia’s agricultural industry has been struggling to recruit enough workers to harvest its produce. There is a fear that the lack of casual workers allowed to enter the country will have a significant impact on the country’s export agricultural industry.

In response, the Australian Federal Government initiated a seasonal worker program, which aims to get Pacific seasonal workers working on Australia’s farms during the coronavirus pandemic. Industry groups have chartered flights to bring in seasonal workers. The

workers must spend two weeks in quarantine before being able to work.

Seasonal workers from countries such as Vanuatu can earn up to \$25 an hour in Australia — about nine times the minimum wage in Vanuatu.¹⁹ While this is good news, there have also been allegations about poor working conditions, exploitation²⁰ and mistreatment,²¹ issues which urgently need to be addressed.

The attention that Pacific seasonal workers in Australia are currently receiving has increased awareness of the Australian agricultural industry’s dependence upon them. This awareness may provide an opportunity to have greater influence in any discussions or negotiations regarding a Pacific Compact. If a Compact were to be advanced, the current climate may assist with establishing an agreement based on equity and justice.

CONCLUSION

Historically Australia's relationships with its Pacific neighbours has been paternalistic, colonial, and focused on exploitation of the Pacific Islands' natural resources. Current discussions about a compact could be no different, as reflected in the attitude by Australian officials. For instance, According to Professor Blaxland, who has been an important leader in this proposal has stated "The ball's in the court of the individual Pacific Islands. If they want this, they can discreetly [and] quietly approach their high commissioner and say ... we are interested."²²

In an ideal world, a compact agreement centered on Pacific Island nations interests would "genuinely listen to and respect the sovereignty of these ocean states."²³ It would apply a social, environmental and gender justice lens to the common concerns being considered and would ensure that sustainable development principles are implemented. The impacts of climate change would not be minimised and Australia would recognise that it is part of the problem.

Unfortunately, this is not an ideal world; it is one of uneven power dynamics as is evident in the relationships between the Pacific Islands states and Australia. The Pacific region is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. In the not-too-distant future these impacts will increase and the ability for people to live a traditional lifestyle on the Islands will likely decrease. As a consequence, larger numbers of Pacific peoples will be drawn to migrate or undertake seasonal work in Australia. The number of climate refugees

wanting to migrate is certain to increase significantly.²⁴ These are important factors that will affect equitable negotiations on a Pacific Compact.

While there is currently no urgent need for Pacific countries to initiate discussions for the development of a Compact, at this moment, they may have an advantage, largely due to Australia's need for seasonal workers in its agricultural industry. As long as Pacific Islander voices are not marginalised, current power relations are in their favour. This process to create a fair compact should be one that does not "underestimate the dynamism of contemporary Pacific regionalism, ignores current debates over security, self-determination and sovereignty in the region, and perpetuates neo-colonial values that devalue Pacific culture, identity and agency."²⁵

If a Compact between Australia and Pacific nations was established, it must be mutually beneficial and not perpetuate the negative impacts of extractive industries, development aggression and colonial practices. Rather, it should be a fair and balanced agreement that provides the labour Australia requires while improving quality of life and ensuring sustainable development in the Pacific nations involved. It should support the "international call for people to be brought to the centre of development and that development co-operation and aid effectiveness processes are people centered, respect human rights and achieve social justice as cornerstones of aid and development effectiveness."²⁶

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