

Pacific Partners Outlook

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Rio+20: A Sustainable Future for the Pacific Islands?

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The June 20–22 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, better known as Rio+20, proved to be a mixed bag for the Pacific Islands, which have an enormous stake in seeing sustainable development take root.

One might deduce from media reactions that the Rio+20 conference was an abject failure. But claims that the conference failed because no binding commitments were achieved do not take into account its real purpose as an agenda setter.

The concluding document of the conference, titled “[The Future We Want](#),” embodies a vision of what sustainable development should look like. It was formulated to follow in the footsteps of the United Nations’ “[Millennium Declaration](#)” and serve as the conceptual foundation for the successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that are set to expire in 2015.

To properly assess Rio+20’s results for the Pacific Islands, one must evaluate the kind of future the document envisions on issues that affect the Pacific Islands and the quality of the voluntary commitments participant countries made to address those issues.

The Rio+20 conference was itself a critique of the MDGs’ “ends justify the means” approach to development. It relied instead on the concept of sustainable development as originally defined by the UN’s 1987 report

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Rio +20 participants pose for a picture. The conference brought together government, civil society, and business leaders from around the world to discuss sustainable development. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/agecombahia/7402016302/in/photostream/>

“**Our Common Future**,” also known as the Brundtland Report: “... development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The Brundtland Report highlights how development can be sustainable only if addressed as a complex relationship between the environment, human welfare, and the economy.

To embody this definition, the Rio+20 conference allowed all stakeholders, including states, nations, political parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and anyone with an Internet connection who had an opinion, to participate in shaping “The Future We Want.” The 45,000 participants involved in creating the document could be seen either as the ultimate manifestation of global civil society or, as the

Pew Environment Group’s Susan Lieberman called it, a “**12-ring circus**.”

With so many competing voices the results were unsurprising. The tone of “The Future We Want” is moderated by a lack of consensus. The 719 voluntary commitments that came out of the conference were made primarily by UN agencies, NGOs, and some private companies. Making coordinated efforts toward supporting sustainable development is an important step for global civil society; on the other hand, voluntary commitments from states are critical for affecting change, and such commitments were notably absent at Rio+20.

The Pacific Islands have regularly been disappointed by the international community’s failure to fulfill commitments on issues critical to their survival, including ocean degradation, overfishing, and energy dependence. Sustainable development on a global scale would improve the Pacific economies and also mitigate those dangers. Despite Rio+20’s problems, the Pacific Islands’ agenda enjoyed some noteworthy successes, as some of the strongest statements in the concluding document cover the Pacific Islands’ key concerns:

Marine protection: Some of the strongest commitments in “The Future We Want” pledge to “...protect, and restore, the health, productivity and resilience of oceans and marine ecosystems” (paragraphs 158-177). They emphasize that this should be accomplished through the framework of

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the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and commit stakeholders to intensify efforts to manage fish stocks. The commitments are voluntary but substantial if carried out. For example, the United States, Italy, and Germany pledged **to reduce sea pollutants** including litter and even agricultural runoff that causes hypoxia. This growing concern for the health of the ocean is undoubtedly welcome news for the Pacific Islands, which have large exclusive economic zones and are dependent on the ocean for food, employment, their culture, and their way of life.

Renewable energy: The energy section of “The Future We Want” (paragraphs 125-129) expresses the Pacific Islands’ interests in renewable energy. For islanders, isolation makes fossil fuels an expensive import, and becoming energy independent through renewable sources like solar and wind is a priority. This goal has already found traction through the voluntary commitments of the Barbados Declarations, in which Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Norway agreed to assist Fiji, Nauru, Palau, the Cook Islands, Tonga, Samoa, and Tuvalu in reaching their renewable energy goals by 2030 at the latest.

Unfortunately, Rio+20’s relative achievements on marine protection and renewable energy stand in contrast to the mining section of the concluding document (paragraphs 227 and 228), which is incompatible with the goal of sustainable development. Although seabed and onshore mining in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea will undoubtedly boost GDP and provide potential for development, extractive industries should not be categorized as being *sustainable*. Most export profits from mining go to the companies that make the initial investment and, compared to other industries, relatively little is reinvested in local communities. From an environmental perspective, it remains unclear what effects seabed mining will have on ocean ecology, and above-ground mining is destructive to what little land Pacific Islanders have. One need only look to the skeletons of Nauru’s phosphate industry as testimony.

From the perspective of the Pacific Islands, Rio+20 addressed many important concerns and inspired some voluntary international action. Going forward, the real test of the conference is yet to come. Only time will tell whether voluntary commitments will be met and whether “The Future We Want” will produce the kind of tangible goals that will inspire state-led action, as the “Millennium Declaration” did over a decade ago. ▲



Hundreds of young civil society members walked out of the Rio +20 conference to protest what they perceived as a weak outcome document. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/youthpolicy/7416031898/>

The Week That Was

AUSTRALIA

Australian parliament fails to agree on asylum-seeker solution.

Parliamentary negotiations on a new asylum-seeker policy fell apart June 26 as Australian lawmakers failed to reach consensus. Prime Minister Julia Gillard had hoped to negotiate a compromise with the opposition coalition following the June 21 capsizing of a boat carrying 200 asylum seekers. Gillard attempted to revive her controversial 2011 “Malaysia Solution,” which would have seen asylum seekers transferred to Malaysia in exchange for a smaller number of already-processed refugees. She also sought to reopen some island detention centers. The opposition meanwhile reiterated its commitment to return to the 2001-2007 “Pacific Solution” by which asylum seekers were interdicted at sea and transferred to nearby Pacific Islands for evaluation of their claims.

Australia and New Zealand protest South Korean decision to commence scientific whaling.

South Korea announced July 4 its intention to propose scientific whaling at next year’s meeting of the International Whaling Commission. The announcement was met with protests by Australia and New Zealand, which both argue that South Korea would be exploiting a loophole in the whaling moratorium in order to resume consumption of whale meat. South Korea claims that the minke whale population has rebounded and is eating valuable fish stocks. In response to pressure, South Korea announced July 11 that it would rescind its plan if scientists confirm that there are nonlethal alternatives.

Malaysia dismisses appeal to halt development of Lynas Corp’s rare earths processing plant.

The Malaysian government June 15 dismissed a citizens’ appeal to halt development of a rare earths processing plant by Australian-owned Lynas Corporation. Malaysia has responded to growing protests against the project by imposing new conditions on the plant’s development to mitigate the risk of radioactive leaks. The \$800 million project aims to be the largest rare earths processing plant in the world and break China’s grip on the industry. Rare earths are used in the manufacture of computers, cell phones, and many other devices.

Australian consumer spending slump ends, but future remains uncertain.

The end of fiscal year 2012 brought news of growing consumer spending in Australia, which is particularly good news for department store giants David Jones and Myer. Retail sales grew 0.5 percent between April and May, placing annual sales 3.5 percent higher than the same period last year. The long-term outlook for Australia’s retail sector



Australian department store David Jones benefitted from a rise in consumer spending in May. http://www.flickr.com/photos/chealse_88813/6892943838/

remains uncertain despite the improved spending numbers. Living costs continue to soar and some of the rebound in consumer spending has been attributed to a one-time boost from carbon tax rebates.

Australia campaigns to make Australian dollar directly convertible with the Chinese yuan. Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer Wayne Swan visited Hong Kong and Beijing the week of July 9 to lead a forum on the internationalization of China's currency, the yuan, and to press China for full currency convertibility. Securing direct convertibility between the yuan and the Australian dollar would lower the cost of trade between the two nations. The yuan is currently directly convertible only with the U.S. dollar and the Japanese yen.

NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand and United States strengthen military ties with the "Washington Declaration." New Zealand defense minister Jonathan Coleman and U.S. secretary of defense Leon Panetta June 20 signed a new defense arrangement dubbed the "Washington Declaration." The declaration commits both countries to regular high-level dialogues and cooperation in maritime security, counterterrorism, and counterproliferation in the Asia Pacific. This defense arrangement serves as a companion document to the historic 2010 Wellington Declaration, which broke a standoff over nuclear testing in the Pacific that had hampered military ties for 25 years.

New Zealand names new central bank governor. Finance Minister Bill English announced June 26 that Graeme Wheeler will become New Zealand's new central bank governor. Wheeler, a former World Bank managing director, will assume the role September 25 following a period as governor-designate during which he will finalize his policy targets. Wheeler will inherit a policy of low interest rates and one of the best performing currencies of 2012.

Bidding for oil and gas exploration permits expected to draw interest from global companies. The New Zealand Ministry of Economic Development on June 8 opened 23 oil and natural gas blocks for bids by foreign companies. The blocks, which cover 15,500 square miles, were selected because of their favorable geology and are expected to attract the attention of global oil and gas companies. New Zealand currently earns \$1.5 billion from crude oil exports.



New Zealand minister of defense Jonathan Coleman and U.S. secretary of defense Leon Panetta sign the "Washington Declaration" June 20 boosting bilateral military cooperation. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/nznationalparty/7409926596>

PACIFIC ISLANDS

Ousted Fiji prime minister pleads not guilty to charges of abuse of office. Fiji's ousted prime minister, Laisenia Qarase, appeared in the Suva high court July 4 to face charges of abuse of office. He pled not guilty to six counts of abuse of office and three counts of improperly discharging his duty. Several of the allegations against Qarase predate his political career. His lawyer applied on July 6 for a permanent stay of the proceedings. Qarase was ousted from office in a 2006 military coup.

Vanuatu Supreme Court forces president to sign expired World Trade Organization legislation. Vanuatu president Iolou Johnson Abbil signed legislation on June 22 confirming Vanuatu as a member of the World Trade Organization only to find on July 9 that the legislation had expired. The legislation was originally passed by the parliament in November 2011, but Abbil had refused to sign it amid considerable opposition from local communities. Abbil was forced to reverse his position after the Supreme Court ruled in early June that he had to sign the expired legislation. This move was allegedly to impress overseas visitors.

China gives Papua New Guinea over \$3 billion for roads. China on June 19 extended Papua New Guinea a soft loan of more than \$3 billion to rebuild its highland highway. Australia operates a five-year \$500 million highway maintenance program in Papua New Guinea and it remains unclear how the two projects will interact. The soft loan makes China the South Pacific's top aid donor to date for 2012.

Papua New Guinea election faces violence, delays. Polling in Papua New Guinea's national elections began June 23 and may be extended until July 17 due to severe delays. Electoral Commissioner Andrew Trawen has blamed the delays on poor logistics, poor weather, and the remoteness of many electorates. Security complications and violence between supporters of competing candidates have also disrupted the voting. Votes have been counted for only one of 111 seats, with Prime Minister Peter O'Neill declared the victor in his district. ▲



Vanuatu's parliament building in Port Vila. Although the parliament passed legislation in 2011 to join the World Trade Organization, the legislation expired before being signed by the president. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/flissphil/1014925647/>



A Papua New Guinea citizen casts his vote in the 2012 national elections, which have been troubled by violence and continued delays. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/comsec/7424681492/>

Looking Ahead

Australian American Leadership Dialogue (AALD) July 15-18. The American Australian Education Leadership Foundations in Washington and Melbourne will host the annual Australian American Leadership Dialogue July 15-18 in Washington. AALD is a private bipartisan diplomatic initiative that brings together leaders from both countries to explore ways to strengthen the bilateral relationship. For more information, please visit www.aald.org.

Talk on the Australia-U.S. alliance in the Asia Pacific. The Heritage Foundation will host Tony Abbott, a member of Australia's House of Representatives and leader of the opposition Liberal Party, July 17. Abbott will discuss the United States' global role, the Australia-U.S. relationship, and the role of the Australia-U.S. security alliance in the Asia-Pacific region. The event will take place at the Heritage Foundation's Lehrman Auditorium, 214 Massachusetts Ave., NE, from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Please RSVP [here](#) or call (202) 675-1752.

Discussion of U.S. naval and air power in the Asia Pacific. The CSIS Military Strategy Forum will host a discussion July 25 titled "Air-Sea Battle and the Asia-Pacific Re-Balance" with Norton A. Schwartz, chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force, and Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert, chief of naval operations. The event will take place from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. in CSIS's B1 Conference Room. For more information, contact MilitaryStrategyForum@csis.org.

Talk at CSIS on Hillary Clinton's economic legacy. The CSIS Simon Chair in Political Economy will host an Economic Statecraft Series event July 25 on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's economic legacy. The event will feature Jake Sullivan, director of policy planning at the State Department. CSIS Simon Chair Matthew Goodman will moderate. The event will take place from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. in CSIS's B1 Conference Room. E-mail simon.chair@csis.org to RSVP. ▲

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