



Pacific Sustainability

Brussels, 10.30 – 12.30, EEAS Building JOYE 02/A546, May 30th 2013

As a follow-up to the ECOPAS Pacific Sustainability workshop in St Andrews, May 27th & 28th, a group of social scientists, including three visiting researchers from the Pacific, will be in Brussels to present the outcomes and discuss the issues.

The peoples of the Pacific Islands have a long and distinguished history of meeting the peoples of other regions of the world in their own social and cultural terms, and of engaging with outsiders through their own economic and political interests. Consequently, as much as international cooperation to achieve development objectives in the Pacific is embedded in state-level structures and agreements, the possibilities for sustainability outcomes on the ground are shaped by the powerful mainstreamed presence of non-state actors – representing local communities and overseas finance in diverse contexts such as resource extraction and climate change.

Recent thinking on how responsible enterprise can be encouraged suggests that a focus on relations between non-state actors will reveal alternative leverage points - as much beyond as within the Pacific region. The important presence of non-state actors (and processes such as carbon markets) might create the opportunity for corporate activities to be scrutinized and shape such that development impacts in regions with less strong state governance regimes might be minimised. Three processes where influence might be exercised include: carbon markets; investor lead responsibility initiatives (such as the UN Principles of Responsible Investment); and private regulatory activities (such as the Equator Principles). The growing importance of these social dimensions to sustainability outcomes marks a wider 'cultural turn'.

The nature of the Pacific islands region also gives the effects of climate change, and the appropriate responses, a particular character. The continuing importance of subsistence in mixed economies means that people have first-hand experience of how climate changes and variability go hand-in-hand with wider changes, and have home-grown interpretations of the causes and effects in characteristically place-based terms. Whereas public opinion in Europe and America too often lags behind climate science, this is not the case in the Pacific: people are very well aware, and have been living with various impacts of climate change for decades.

The phrase 'Restoring the human to climate change in the Pacific' was coined by a Pacific island's academic, Vilsoni Hereniko, to capture the importance of starting our efforts in the right place - with Pacific people's own understandings of how the changes came about and what they mean for them in their own homelands. Scientific prophecies and international narratives are being received and explained as much as in terms of carbon dependency as through the registers of customary traditions, Christianity and a range of socio-cultural factors that have been impacted by globalization, of which climate change is but one element. Ultimately, these are the terms for appreciating the reality of climate change in the Pacific, and the real terms that international initiatives are dependent upon for success. Hereniko's point is simply that we should start where the impacts of climate change in the Pacific end up - in these distinctively human terms.

Pacific Sustainability has two related aims: Firstly, describing the kinds of relations or connections made by Pacific peoples themselves so as to portray the aspirations, constraints and cultural terms that any development initiative has to deal with. Secondly, describing the non-state governance of financial, regulatory and investment structures that shape sustainability outcomes in the Pacific. The role of each as a lever on the other will be central to the task of identifying the themes that might inform future programmes.