

BUILDING POLITICAL GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS

*Advancing the Millennium
Development Goals in the Pacific Islands
through Parliamentary Strengthening*

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ANNOTATIONS

AusAID	The Australian Agency for International Development
ANU	the Australian National University
CDI	Centre for Democratic Institutions
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CIMC	Consultative Implementation and Monitoring Committee (PNG)
CROP	Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific
CSO	Civil society organisation
FIC	Forum Island Country
GoF	Government of the Republic of the Fiji Islands
GoPNG	Government of Papua New Guinea
GoS	Government of Samoa
IDEA	Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-government organisation
OLIPPC	Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PACER	Pacific Agreement for Closer Economic Relations
PICTA	Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PNG	Papua New Guinea
SPC	Secretariat of the Pacific Community
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIFEM	United Nations Fund for Women

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INTRODUCTION

For the past few years, the issue of parliamentary strengthening in the Pacific Islands has been growing in importance. Donors and local stakeholders alike have come to realise that most governance issues are highly dependent on the overarching political governance frameworks within which Executive decision-making, lawmaking and oversight take place. A growing body of evidence suggests that constituents across the Pacific are unable to articulate their needs and demands to national leaders, suggesting systemic failures in democratic governance. Pacific Islanders need legitimate state institutions of governance in which their deepest aspirations and needs can find voice. Since the drafting of the Millennium Declaration in 2000, these issues have been brought into greater focus with the need to develop proactive regulatory networks to allow for the conceptualization, consultation and drafting of enabling legislation to allow for the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

It is not the intention of this publication to make broad recommendations on how best to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in their entirety. This has been done thoroughly elsewhere (GoPNG 2004, GoS 2004, SPC and UN 2004, UNDP 2004). Rather, this booklet posits a set of practical suggestions on how strengthened lawmaking processes and improved parliamentary-constituency relations can help realize the achievement of these objectives, paying particular attention to the nation-states of Samoa, the Republic of the Fiji Islands and Papua New Guinea (PNG) (see map).

These recommendations are based on a thorough reading of the raft of reports, the handful of scholarly works that have been generated on parliaments and political governance in the Pacific Islands (Henderson 2003: 225–41, Morgan 2005, Okole 2005, Patapan, et al. 2005) and on intensive consultation with regional stakeholders conducted by the author over the past five years (Morgan 2002, 2001, 2003).

THE MDGS IN PERSPECTIVE

In September 2000, the member states of the United Nations (UN) committed themselves to achieving human development and broadening its benefits to the world's neediest people by 2015. Known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), this eight-point plan seeks to:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;
- Achieve universal primary education;
- Promote gender equality and empower women;
- Reduce child mortality;
- Improve maternal health;
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
- Ensure environmental sustainability; and
- Develop a global partnership for development.

While global progress on these goals has been mixed, measurable gains have been made in North Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe. Many Pacific Islands Countries, however, are faced by the apparent paradox that while the severity of the problems which the MDGs target is often less pronounced than in other regions, progress towards the MDGs has been limited by several key factors, notably including the absence of enabling political governance environments.

The MDGs in the Pacific

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community report on progress on the MDGs showed that in comparison to some regions, the Pacific Islands

were progressing strongly on key goals: 'the efforts by the region's people, governments and development partners have resulted in positive outcomes' (SPC and UN 2004). Already, complementary regional activities such as the Pacific Plan, PICTA and PACER are gaining momentum among the Pacific Islands' political leadership, and these will necessarily propel regional cooperation and provide the bulwarks upon which global partnerships for development — the last of the MDGs — can be built. For example, the Auckland Declaration (see insert) commits Forum leaders to attaining economic prosperity, excellence in governance, the protection of human rights and regional partnership — ideals that are to be found at the very heart of the MDGs. Hence, while financial, human and physical resources must still be brought to bear, preliminary measures have been taken to attain the MDGs.

Historically, the severity of many of the problems that the MDGs target has been less pronounced in the Pacific than elsewhere in the world. In Samoa, for example, the level of literacy is high, equitably distributed between men and women *and* between rural and urban populations (GoS 2004). In Fiji, life expectancy is comparable with Western countries, infant, child and maternal mortality rates have been halved since the 1960s and primary level education is already almost universal (UNDP 2004). Yet across the region poverty and widening income disparities are mounting concerns, not least for the fact that despite the commitment to the abovementioned agreements many small island economies face significant obstacles to economic growth, and have endured many difficulties in shifting their economies to a market footing.

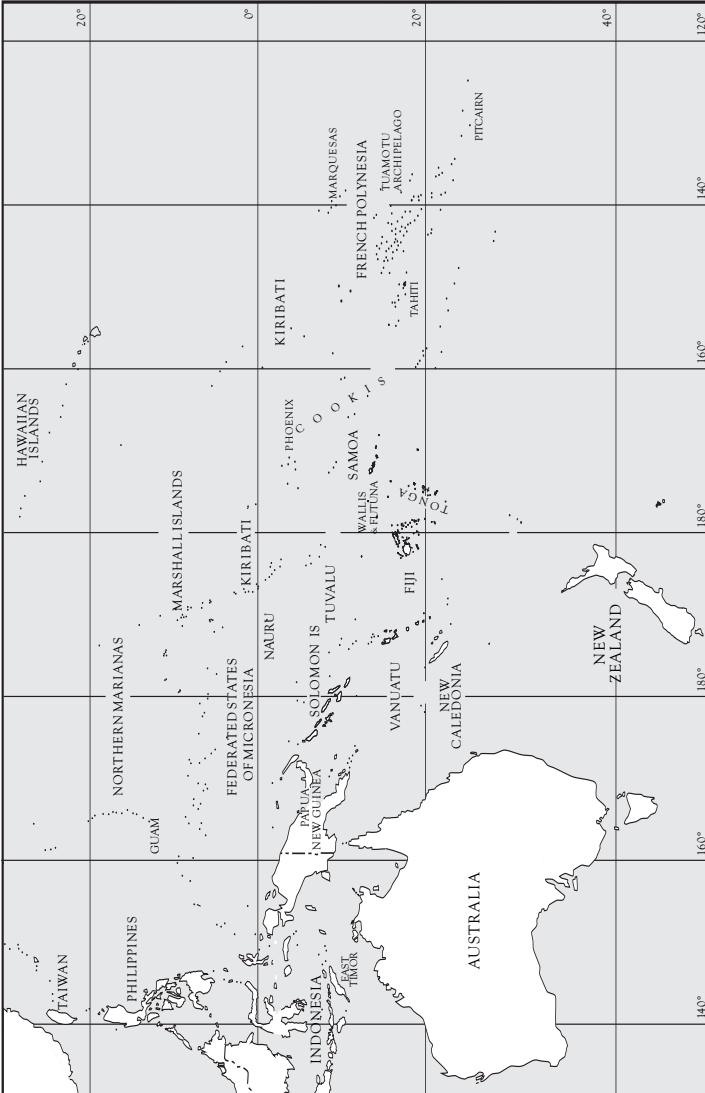
More troublingly, the prevalence and rate of infection of HIV/AIDS in PNG and the possibility that unsustainable ecological and mineral resource exploitation will lead to greater human suffering through degradation, despoliation and unfair disbursement of royalties and profits are looming as crises. The government of PNG, recognizing that the MDGs are overly ambitious for the country's development context, tailored the MDGs to a set of achievable reforms, which include halting the HIV/AIDS epidemic, curtailing

From the Auckland Declaration

Leaders believe the Pacific region can, should and will be a region of peace, harmony, security and economic prosperity, so that all of its people can lead free and worthwhile lives. We seek a Pacific region that is respected for the quality of its governance, the sustainable management of its resources, the full observance of democratic values, and for its defence and promotion of human rights. We seek partnerships with our neighbours and beyond to develop our knowledge, to improve our communications and to ensure a sustainable economic existence for all (PIF 2004).

PNG's high population growth rate, and overcoming the obstacles presented to reform by 'a very large variety of natural, socio-economic, cultural, political, geographic, language barriers and ... external aid dependency' (GoPNG 2004). Regional governments are already tailoring their expectations of success based on local factors.

Despite the progress that has been made against some of the MDGs, therefore, issues such as these suggest that more work needs to be done on facilitating the realization of this global agenda. Indeed, without the restructuring or reinvigoration of many of the region's political governance structures, the mobilization of partners and resources, the commencement of pro-poor policy reforms and budget reallocation to support them, the strengthening of parliamentary institutions able to scrutinize Executive performance and the adoption of informed, effective and principled policy-making practices, the Pacific Islands may progress little further in their attainment of the MDGs. As the South Pacific report on regional progress on the MDGs reports: 'Much of the work required to achieve the MDGs is already underway but demands greater focus and a renewed sense of urgency' (SPC and UN 2004). It is to these ends that this report is directed.



Locator Map, the Pacific Islands Region

WILL STRENGTHENING PARLIAMENTS HELP REALIZE THE MDGS?

At heart, the MDGs are policy matters and therefore largely the responsibility of the Executive. However, the importance of input from the Legislature and of broad-ranging initiatives designed to sensitize MPs to the significance and implications of the MDGs cannot be underestimated. Throughout the world, Executive branches of government agreed to pursue the MDGs without passing decisions back to the Legislature for domestic deliberation (Sharkey 2004). Accordingly, the Executive branches of the Pacific Islands supported the Millennium Declaration, and with the minimal involvement of the Legislature, ratified and then reinforced the MDGs rapidly and comprehensively.¹ Forum Island Country legislatures, elided from the initial consultations over the MDGs, have been marginalized further by their respective Executive branches. Consequently, gaps have begun to emerge in the implementation process.

The UNDP noted that ‘responsive and accountable institutions of governance are often the missing link between antipoverty efforts and poverty reduction’ (UNDP 2000). Creating stable and effective policy environments in the Pacific Islands will provide many of the preconditions needed to attain the MDGs. It is logical to assume that

1 The MDGs were emphasised and affirmed at each Forum Economic Ministers Meetings (FEMM) from 2002 to 2004, the Regional Workshop on MDGs in March 2003, the 13th Statisticians Meeting in September 2003, Pacific Islands Forum meeting in 2003, and the UN/Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) Working Group on the MDGs meeting in November 2003.

stronger legislative institutions may contribute to better poverty reduction outcomes. Nonetheless, there are significant obstacles and bottlenecks to the development of proactive state-law regulatory networks in Forum Island Countries (FICs) that will facilitate the attainment of the MDGs.

Encouraging legislative involvement in the attainment of the MDGs draws our attention back to a set of challenges that long have been faced by FIC legislatures and legislatures globally — effective lawmaking and the relationship between constituencies and their elected national representatives. In exploring these core issues, however, a series of associated matters arises: What political governance frameworks can facilitate better lawmaking? What kinds of institutions can contribute to more productive relations between members of parliament and their constituencies? How will these issues be married to facilitate the attainment of the MDGs?

In answering these queries, we need to be aware of the institutional and other constraints placed on parliaments and parliamentarians in their existing roles. Only then can the preconditions of effective parliamentary governance be determined.

There are a number of key problems associated with advocating for broad legislative strengthening to encourage the attainment of the MDGs. In particular, regional parliaments vary in size, level of support and basic structure. Fiji, for example, has a developed system of parliamentary governance involving standing, select and statutory committees, while Vanuatu is only now in the process of establishing a formalized system of standing committees. An obvious interim measure therefore would be to map all relevant legislative bodies, civil society organizations and allied institutions which may contribute to the attainment of the MDGs in the Pacific Islands, and define their roles and responsibilities. This may involve parliamentary committees, quasi-legislative committees (all those which involve MPs, in addition to other stakeholders) and participating civil society organizations (CSOs). Once this is done, external stakeholders and domestic CSOs will be better placed to engage the relevant

deliberative bodies and determine recipients of potential pro-MDG briefings. Moreover, existing support arrangements to parliaments have often been hamstrung by a lack of interagency cooperation, exacerbated by fierce competition over donor funds.

Few opposition MPs have their own staff to support research on bills before them for consideration and nor do they have access to parliamentary counsel to advise them legally of the implications, guidelines and requirements of legal drafting or to comment on the gender, poverty, educational or health implications of bills. With the exceptions of Fiji and Samoa, legislators tend not to use parliamentary committees as vehicles for interrogating the broader implications of government policy; for exploring the possible poverty reduction implications of improved transport infrastructure, of crime prevention, and so on.

Up till recently, few parliaments were furnished with specialist oversight and lawmaking organs in the form of standing and select committees, but as their merits are broadcast across the region as vehicles for stable and effective political governance, greater expectations are being placed on MPs to drive governance reform and on parliamentary administrative staff to support it. What has been found in consecutive reviews, however, is that parliamentary secretariats — clerk's offices, secretariats general, speaker's bureaux — are under resourced and severely challenged fulfilling the expectations held of them by local and international stakeholders (Clements 2001, Morgan 2003, Okole, et al. 2004).

Not surprisingly given these conditions, the thorough background analysis and evaluation of legislative options often demanded of public leaders by civil society is compromised with many parliamentarians simply not understanding the rules, responsibilities and procedures governing the lawmaking process and the contents and implications of the legislation. Simultaneously, *prima facie*, constituencies in the Pacific Islands have great trouble having their primary aspirations represented in national lawmaking processes, further distancing political elites from electors. Hence, cooperative

legislature/executive approaches to the identification of key issues, the formulation of policies and their implementation, and the monitoring and evaluation (NDI/UNDP 2004) of government programs have also faltered. These elements represent significant weaknesses in the operation of Westminster in the Pacific Islands, although recent local, regional and international strategies may be turning this tide (CDI 2005a: 2, 2005b: 3, Lindroth 2005, 'Vanuatu Parliament Act' 2005). Without adequate human, physical and financial resources being directed to support parliamentary governance, the difficulty of these complex tasks will increase manifestly, while the divide between the expectations of the system and its actual performance will grow.

A key challenge that remains unaddressed in the realization of the MDGs is how to incorporate legislatures in the processes of determining priorities and achieving the goals of this global agenda in meaningful ways. Without the mainstreaming of the MDGs and without the engagement in debate of the range of interests represented in the region's legislatures, the lofty global agenda of eradicating poverty, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing global partnerships for development will likely atrophy. The creation and support of appropriate, stable and responsive political governance frameworks is crucial to the attainment of each of the Millennium Development Goals (SPC and UN 2004).

CREATING REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

Lawmaking is central to the functioning of any Legislature. While the Executive generally determines the legislative agenda in any given Pacific Island country,² the Legislature remains responsible for ensuring that the laws they pass are consistent with community needs and aspirations. Through this function, the Legislature may shape the formal legal framework of a society — either by reflecting social rules and mores or determining its needs in the national interest — and thereby settle by majority vote on the direction that society takes. Throughout the Pacific Islands, legislatures are seen to be deficient in this function. While ideally representing the consent of the people, without

special effort to protect the independence of the law-making function, parliamentary systems can degenerate into *the subservience of the legislature to a dominating political executive* which expects little more of the political assembly than that it ‘rubber stamp’ government initiatives [my emphasis] (Uhr 2003: 36).

Despite the gains that have been made in the Pacific Islands since their independence, and the strength and vitality of their democratic institutions, many Pacific Legislatures are unable to transcend the dominance of the Executive. Moreover, in many parts of the Pacific the lawmaking and oversight functions of the Legislature have become subservient to the imperative to join the Executive. Little stock is placed in overseeing government performance. Thus, not only

2 Private Members Bills are incredibly rare in FICs.

does the Executive override the Legislature, but also few members of the Legislature seek to reverse this situation.

This has a number of implications.

In most of Melanesia, including PNG and Fiji, governments use their numerical dominance in parliament to suspend Standing Orders (the rules presided over by the Speaker that govern parliamentary procedure). This allows them to truncate the mandatory period required to consider bills before the Legislature and limits the amount of time parliamentary committees — where they exist — are able to spend vetting legislation and calling for submissions from civil society or industry.

Parliamentary secretariats across the region have often been unable to notify members of what bills they will be considering adequately before members arrive from their regional constituencies. Many governments do not habitually furnish legislative programs to their parliamentary secretariats before the beginning of the parliamentary session, despite clear guidelines for doing so. Without the Executive acknowledging their responsibility to provide such information democratic functioning will be diminished. Were the Executive to adhere to these existing rules and guidelines and were regional Legislatures sufficiently capable of censuring them for not doing so, many of the problems that beset the lawmaking functions of Pacific Legislatures would not transpire. However, effecting such a transition would require sufficient incentives to be provided to Executive government, in the form of a mobilised Opposition, the fear of media opprobrium or the fear of electoral defeat. Yet often this is not how the democracies of the Pacific Islands function. Because the implications of legislation are not always effectively communicated to regional constituencies and because members themselves often fail to grasp the implications of the laws that they enact, parliamentary debate has been stifled. Laws are enacted neither in the interests nor with the understanding of the people. A particular feature of legislative behaviour across the Pacific is that legislation is passed very quickly. As the Hon. Bire Kimisopa, MP for Goroka, PNG, stated during consultations with UNDP staff, executive dominance and the

suspension of standing orders 'is killing parliamentary democracy and ... our effectiveness as Members' (Okole, et al. 2004).

Parliamentary Committees

The issue of weak legislation and executive dominance is at the heart of the increasing prevalence of parliamentary committees across the Pacific Islands. Specialist committees can often provide better vehicles for community liaison, oversight and the vetting of bills for inconsistencies and biases than the whole parliament, and their focused activities can serve to transcend narrow personal or party loyalties. Most FICs have provisions for creating *ad hoc* committees or sectoral committees charged with gauging public opinion on proposed legislation built in to their standing orders and parliamentary procedures, but formalised core sector committees are a recent innovation in most areas. Understandably, not all Bills can be subject to in-depth public scrutiny but some level of interaction is clearly needed for legislation with social or economic ramifications, such as those that will further the MDGs.

Partly, this challenge can be answered by broadening the scope of involvement in parliamentary committee work to include civil society actors, industry representatives and public servants. At such time as committees in the FICs are operating effectively, they could be used by MPs to interrogate government performance against the MDGs. Committees would be entitled to demand input from the public service on the impacts of certain policies. For example, they could explore the effects that funding changes to the education sector have on the levels of primary education and on school retention rates, or investigate gender disaggregated data in relation to these areas.

Crucially, political governance systems could be nurtured and provided with the basis from which they are able to adapt to local circumstances without compromising the fundamental principles upon which parliamentary governance is predicated. It is important to bear in mind that committee systems tend to operate differently in different milieux. Once established, their operation will very much

depend on a set of local variables, such as the ability of MPs to mobilise around certain issues, the influence (positive or negative) of political parties and the preparedness of the Executive to listen to committee recommendations and amend their policies accordingly.

Once again, these matters draw our attention back to the fundamental need to strengthen the institutions of parliament and improve the capacity of staff and MPs. The ability of Pacific lawmakers to acquit their responsibilities through committee work is also dependent on the level of support they receive through their secretariats and respective ministries. Without the provision of adequate human and financial resources to these tasks, committee work can easily become a simple reward for political loyalty or a pay-off for joining government coalitions. Similarly, without adequate support and training being provided to clerks, parliamentary staff, committee staff, researchers and librarians, the architecture of political governance can become an irrelevance. The continued involvement of regional parliamentary staff in training programs, exchanges and capacity building is crucial. Similarly, the increased involvement of regional MPs in parliamentary associations, mentoring programs and study tours will provide them with comparative experiences on which to draw in their parliamentary careers, for skills and competencies to become entrenched and for the institutions of political governance to be buffered by the personal expertise of the people who work in the system. Last, the research capacity of FIC legislatures has historically been weak. A possible answer to the challenges of informing MPs in their work would be to invest parliamentary counsel with functions that support the mainstreaming of the MDG relevant issues. For example, a core task of parliamentary counsel could be to ensure gender equitable and non-discriminatory language is used in the drafting of Bills.

The Planning and Budget Cycle

Given that the attainment of the MDGs may require the reorganisation of a country's spending priorities, the planning and budget cycles represent vital openings for parliamentary deliberation

on the MDGs. National strategies are issued as government policy, rather than being approved by parliament. This necessarily reduces national commitment to the contents and implications of these policies and, in countries where political instability is endemic, it tends to minimise their longevity. The turnover of MPs in government necessarily weakens policy formulation and implementation. Regime instability requires policy advocates continually to begin their work afresh, as they lobby newly appointed ministers for policy change. Indeed, where changes of government are frequent, unavoidable lags arise in issue identification, policy development and policy implementation. Necessarily, good governance is undermined in unstable polities. Where these conditions are in evidence, progress towards the MDGs is intermittent.

Hence, it is crucial for FIC governments and donor agencies to conceptualise development plans and annual budgets in concert. In some countries, planning cycles and national budgets are integrated, but in many FICs the development strategy is considered to be the responsibility of donor agencies, with minimal linkages to appropriation bills. Government *and* opposition legislators play key roles in endorsing development strategies, tailoring national goals to achievable and sensible targets, devising or acknowledging relevant indicators of progress and monitoring executive performance through annual budget reporting, committee work and ongoing parliamentary oversight. National legislators are ideally placed to bring sub-national information to bear on national debates. Indeed, detailed information on sub-national development levels is a powerful tool in discussions about the distribution of development resources.

In that Public Accounts Committees (PACs) are entitled to draw on public comment, may investigate issues in the public interest and may subpoena witnesses in defence of financial probity, the budget cycle potentially offers a broad ranging entry point for breaking down obstacles to community-Legislature-Executive relations by drawing civil society representatives into the deliberative process progressively. It presents a critical juncture in the transition from government policy

to law, when the Executive seeks legislative approval for its vision, development priorities and economic decisions. During the budget cycle, the Legislature in cooperation with other stakeholders is required to oversight Executive spending. Indeed, budgeting highlights the raft of actors involved in priority setting and oversight of economic management, and hence of MDG programming.

Especially in small economies, the viability of the health and education sectors, for example, is predicated on monies allocated during government budgeting. Where PACs are entitled to review appropriation bills, MPs from government and opposition are able to steer the absolute direction of the budget by voting on the amount of money allocated to a certain sector. This arrangement guides appropriation bills in Samoa, where the PAC may vote to limit a budget head, although it is never entitled to raise amounts for appropriation. More commonly, Pacific Island PACs oversee fiscal probity and vet their Executives' record of success in achieving economic priorities *after* the passage of the Appropriation Bill.

Even without the direct involvement of civil society in parliamentary discussions, greater transparency in budgeting may allow civil society organisations to disseminate information regarding national budgets, and scrutinise their possible effects on the MDGs. Already in PNG, CSOs such as the Consultative Implementation and Monitoring Committee (CIMC) scrutinise national budgets, an activity which could dovetail comfortably with MDG monitoring.

Conversely, without broadening involvement in the budgeting process, FICs are likely to experience a worsening of societal ill-will regarding economic decision making. Over the past few years in the Pacific Islands, insular budgetary deliberations or preferential disbursements of state monies have occasionally sparked social unrest. Indeed, more inclusive budgeting practices might serve to strengthen and stabilize political governance in polities labelled as being driven by state-weakness, economic mismanagement and corruption.

A number of preliminary measures must be enacted before these aspects of high-level legislative oversight can be effective. Recognising

that PACs are only as effective of the cycle of accountability in which they operate, more effort needs to be put into making sure that the Executive upholds the standards of financial probity expected of it. In that most PACs rely heavily on their respective national audit offices, they remain susceptible to Executive interference. Across the region, constitutional watchdogs are considered to be under-resourced, although there are significant examples of successful investigations and oversight. Rather than act as investigative committees, PACs are generally expected to be the bodies to which ‘managers answer for their actions’, based on the findings of the reports of respective auditors-general. Despite the fact that nearly all FIC National Budgets have been changed to output or performance budget format, where resources are now allocated based on achievable targets, there is no oversight mechanism on the qualitative impact of the national budgets. There is also no single FIC legislature that is proactive in demanding prompt accountability of public institutions, let alone NGO users of public funds, for audited and delivery reports. Some PACs have not met for extended periods, while in other legislatures they function inadequately. Providing institutional strengthening and capacity building to these agencies may tip the balance in favour of financial probity.

Creating regulatory frameworks

Support the sensitization of MPs to the significance and implications of the MDGs

Encourage adherence to standing orders in parliament, as they relate to legislative schedules, time for consideration of bills etc.

Broaden the scope of committee work to involve civil society and industry in meaningful ways.

Encourage the use of committees to interrogate government performance on the MDGs through advocacy and lobbying.

Support capacity building programs in regional secretariats.

Support the involvement of regional parliamentary staff in training programs, exchanges and capacity building.

Support the involvement of regional MPs in parliamentary associations, mentoring programs and study tours.

Support the creation and strengthening of offices of parliamentary counsel with oversight of MDG compliance.

Support broader involvement of civil society and public service in budget cycle.

Support strengthening of the overall cycle of accountability including secretariat support to specialist committees and PACs, ombudsmen, auditors general, etc.

Support and strengthen state capacities to apply laws containing provisions for gender empowerment uniformly.

BRINGING LOCAL FOCUS TO THE GLOBAL AGENDA

Representative democracy places certain expectations on MPs. Voters choose their representatives to act in their interests. This involves some level of delegation of decision-making authority to the representative and is predicated on the understanding that the MP will be equipped intellectually and morally to deal with the changing exigencies of public leadership. Hopefully, the derogation of community interests to the personal agenda of the MP will be avoided and certain checks and balances are placed on the representative to ensure this, such as constitutional, statutory and judicial watchdogs, and provisions for an impartial judiciary to counterbalance Legislative and Executive powers. Given that elections are the keystone process by which the Legislature — and through it, the Executive — remain accountable to the people, the levels to which people are able to access relevant information about governance generally is crucial to democratic functioning. Indeed, the mobilisation of public scrutiny of government is crucial to effective oversight and lawmaking.

Yet across the Pacific, systems for disseminating information to constituents relating to parliamentary structures and performance and for representing constituency concerns in lawmaking are vulnerable because of incomplete state-building, histories of ineffective colonial administration, uneven development, weak communication infrastructure, disparate settlement and rugged terrain. Most Pacific Islanders have access to broadband radio broadcasts and urban people in particular have access to a varied printed media. Poor literacy levels throughout the Pacific limit the effectiveness of print media as a source of information. Despite recent attacks on media sources in Solomon Islands and the suppression of free media in Fiji during the

coup (2000), overall the Pacific Islands benefit from a relatively free media, especially when compared to the position of correlate agencies in Central Asia and Africa.

Parliamentary coverage has been a feature of Pacific media broadcasts since their respective independences, yet explanation of the meanings of parliamentary debate and the implication and ramifications of bills under consideration is limited. In much of Melanesia, for example, the roles and duties of members are unclear. Little distinction is made between Executive and Legislature; all MPs are expected to provide services, resources and employment (Okole 2002: 37–40, 2005, Okole, et al. 2004), whereas the state, ideally guided by the Executive and overseen by the Legislature, has its legitimacy diminished. In Melanesia, this has stimulated increasing ambivalence about democratic institutions among many constituents. According to Henry Okole, ‘the state’s institutional structures are convenient tools for the extension of the relational networks that exist in society’ (Okole, et al. 2004). For much of Melanesia these issues are intertwined with the nature of political party organisation. Interests are simply not aggregated by social organisations to be directed into government policy-making. Moreover, rather than parties driving the pre-selection of candidates, parties are forced to choose popular local candidates for their survival: ‘Candidates do not win because they are endorsed by parties; rather parties endorse candidates who are going to win’ (Okole, et al. 2004). Therefore, while the quality of candidates matters to the voters, the most important factor is which candidate would be able to reciprocate their support at the polls with tangible benefits (Okole 2002: 37–40).

The health of Pacific polities depends upon the reversal of trends away from popular participation, trust in institutions and support for ideals rather than individuals. As baseline activities, concerted civic education programs are needed to raise awareness and understanding about parliamentary functions throughout the Pacific to ensure that citizens are aware of the parameters of acceptable activity of their elected members, satisfied with the system’s provisions for financial probity, knowledgeable about their options for redress when they feel

that their leaders have acted unaccountably and capable of advocating for change where needed. The existing activities of CSOs which address these issues should be supported. A basic measure therefore would be to educate civil society in its broadest sense about the roles and responsibilities of the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. Ongoing public education campaigns on the political system, particularly in rural villages and in primary schools, are long-term strategies. In general, the need for civic education components to be included in school curricula development for primary and secondary schools is a broad and widely recognized problem in the Pacific; Transparency International has already begun this process in Vanuatu. Curriculum development should involve components for visiting parliament during session, where practicable. Appropriate civic education strategies and awareness raising activities, incorporating school and university curriculum development, radio programs and the like are needed in a range of sectors and jurisdictions. Simultaneously, support for further research on constituency parliament relations in the PICs is needed to inform the development of appropriate and sustainable community outreach programs, which plausibly could benefit from existing civil society organisation networks.

Parliaments cooperating with civil society

Any plan for cooperation in FICs to facilitate the realization of the MDGs raises the thorny issue of how best to effect meaningful relations between Civil society, the Executive and the Legislature. CSOs already play pivotal, albeit informal, roles in parliamentary process across the Pacific, especially regarding issues such as awareness raising and advocacy for domestic violence and family law reform. While these informal mechanisms of civil society advocacy are beneficial, one of the major political governance challenges in the Pacific Islands is the unproductive nature of many civil society-parliamentarian interactions. MPs and civil society representatives — particularly NGO activists engaged in lobbying and advocacy — are characteristically at loggerheads. One of the major challenges to

building productive political governance frameworks which can facilitate the fulfilment of the MDGs therefore is to encourage *both* meaningful alliances and healthy disagreements between civil society, Parliament and the Executive. Indeed, sometimes, the sign of life of a polity is the room stakeholders allow for opposing views and the mechanisms they employ for accommodating difference.

It creates a false premise to expect MPs and civil society to agree on all issues, but more effort needs to be made by FIC legislators to tap into the expertise of local civil society actors, and to draw on it in their roles as lawmakers, overseers of the Executive and community representatives. As privileged decision makers, lawmakers require a mastery of the options available for reducing poverty and improving political governance. Drawing on civil society expertise would open FIC legislators to all sorts of information to strengthen their understanding of issues before them for debate. Already in Fiji, civil society groups brief committee members on certain issues, representing the great progress that legislators, civil society and the parliamentary secretariat have made in strengthening mutual information sharing. Given that they are often linked into international networks of advocacy and support, civil society organizations can provide useful information networks for MPs, keeping them abreast of international developments, comparative national information and regional/local experiences of service delivery.

Throughout the life-cycle of a parliament, and at each major legislative juncture, there are opportunities for productive civil society-parliament interaction, cooperation and/or synchronization. Basic lawmaking, the budget cycle and ongoing committee work all contain entry points for civil society actors to take part in parliamentary governance. Given that certain Bills before government may not be accessible to rural or undereducated people — who nonetheless are affected by legislation — CSOs offer avenues for the dissemination of information on their content and ramifications. Already across the Pacific, CSOs are involved in advocating for legislative change, contributing to policy discussions through consultative forums and contributing to public education

programs. Civil society activities often mirror the responsibilities of parliamentary committees in terms of monitoring and evaluating Executive performance, in relation to areas such as service delivery. Civil society organizations often provide key details to the Executive and to Parliament.

The adoption of governance arrangements which encourage meaningful interaction between civil society, the Legislature and the Executive will serve to improve MP's access to information crucial to the development of proactive state law and to bringing local focus to the global agenda of the MDGs. In concert with a more active role for parliamentary secretariats in terms of drawing on civil society expertise for briefing papers, measures like these could contribute to the strengthening of the legislative cycle. Civil society groups, especially NGOs engaged in lobbying and advocacy on particular issues, such as the position of women in society, poverty, education, HIV/AIDS and public health, can provide information for government and opposition members on legislation before them for consideration. Moreover, should committee secretariats be able to formalize and standardize civil society inputs (briefing papers, submissions and the like) into committee procedures, another valuable avenue for Civil society/Legislature/Executive cooperation could be created. In the monitoring of budget rounds CSOs may be able to leverage support among MPs for pro-poor policies by holding public meetings on issues of concern for citizens, such as poverty alleviation, gender empowerment and communicable and vector borne disease eradication.

Empowering Women

Parliamentarians are strategically placed to provide leadership in advancing gender issues in political and decision-making processes. Lobbyists and advocates for change should target MPs to increase their understanding of and sensitivity to gender, democracy and development. While gender issues should be mainstreamed in the broader governance debate, professional development for parliamentarians similarly should encourage the promotion and training of

women MPs. Yet there are few powerful women leaders in FIC legislatures. While women have suffrage throughout the FICs, the record of having women elected to parliament has generally been poor. Despite their increasing employment in the upper echelons of government bureaucracies throughout the Pacific Island states, women remain under-represented in national legislatures. Throughout the Pacific — even where concrete initiatives have been taken to strengthen the position of women in society generally and in public decision-making specifically — empowerment programs have had only limited effect. Only one woman has been elected to the Tuvaluan parliament (two women are departmental secretaries). The Marshall Islands, PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu each have only one elected woman representative. Tonga has had three women elected to the Legislative Assembly but none has become a Minister. Of all the small islands states, Fiji has the strongest representation of women in national parliament: there are eight national representatives, five of whom are in the lower house and four of whom hold ministries.

International agencies and local NGOs have focussed on achievable reforms such as ensuring that laws are drafted in non-gender specific language and supporting legal and political literacy programs for grassroots women with an eye to facilitating the advancement of women at all levels of society. The PNG government has enacted legislation, aimed to enable women to participate equally with men in the affairs of the country, with limited success. Provisions are contained in PNG's *Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates* (OLIPPC) that are designed to encourage parties to support women candidates, although these have not yet translated into more women being elected to parliament.³ Enacting legislation to require a role for women in public leadership has yielded limited returns for women's empowerment overall. While the new constitution

3 Section 62 of the OLIPPC provides that a female candidate who receives 10 percent or more of the votes shall have 75 percent of her campaign expenses refunded by Central Fund Board of Management to the political party that endorsed her.

of Bougainville sets aside three seats exclusively for women, no woman stood for any of the other seats.

Of key importance would be to place the issue of women's role in public leadership more squarely on the agenda for public discussion. The assumption that public leadership is men's business is pervasive in the Pacific islands for myriad reasons, not least the predominance of conservative Christian *and* traditionalist ideologies. While there are no explicit legal barriers preventing women from running for office, societal structures make it incredibly difficult. Certain laws might contain provisions for gender empowerment, but these are often not enforced. In local circumstances where a poverty of opportunities appears to affect everyone, women's empowerment might create a backlash. PNG's poor literacy rate and limited understanding of developments outside the country means that many people do not really understand why women should be singled out for special attention. Many people argue that women should not be privileged in any way, especially as the opportunity and freedom to participate is already available. That is, many problems facing women in their attempts to be elected to public office are simply too big to be tackled in the course of a legislative strengthening project. In effect, this means women are impeded at every step along the route to election to national parliament, with this resistance often being couched in terms of tradition. The lack of overt legal impediments to their empowerment and entrenched attitudes among both women and men continue to undermine a greater role for women in public decision-making. Nonetheless, it is logical to assume that the more women in elected office the more that issues hitherto suppressed from public debate will be brought to the fore. Not least among them will be the issue of women in public leadership itself, but myriad social issues such as maternal health, domestic violence and HIV/AIDS may find greater voice in national affairs.

Assuming their future success, statutory reforms such as the provisions of OLIPPC mentioned above will provide the framework for further non-statutory strategies of empowerment. Women in

parliament may need to mobilise collectively in women's caucuses, irrespective of party differences, if they are to raise the profile of women MPs and gain higher offices within the parliament (IDEA 2002). Simultaneously, women need to rely on men in parliament for the attainment of offices. A key problem with furthering women's participation in public decision-making is that many programs tend to corral them away from men. This can be useful in building women's networks but it generally reinforces the existing problem. Hence, strategies for promotion within parliament and within parliamentary political parties are necessary. More general changes to political party organisation may need to be made to allow women into all levels of the party hierarchy. Already many Pacific Islands political parties publicly acknowledge the value of electoral support from women, especially those parties heavily dependent on urban, educated electorates. In Fiji each of the major political parties advocates several programs to improve the position of women: publicly the parties advocate strong stances on sentencing for sexual offences, making sexual harassment a crime and long-term civic education strategies. The ongoing review of the progress, opportunities and obstacles to women's political participation needs to be maintained.

Bringing Local Focus to the Global Agenda

Encourage mobilisation of public scrutiny of government.

Encourage voter education and dissemination of information to inform voter choices at election time.

Encourage civic education through curriculum development, public media etc relating to parliaments and parliamentarians.

Support MPs in their attempts to engage with civil society organisations.

Support concerted civic education programs awareness raising activities and the like about parliamentary functions, the parameters of acceptable activity and avenues for redress.

Support parliamentary secretariats in drawing on civil society expertise for briefing papers.

Encourage the formalization and standardization of civil society inputs (briefing papers, submissions and the like) into committee procedures.

Support CSO monitoring of budget rounds for pro-poor policies, gender empowerment, communicable and vector borne disease eradication, etc.

Support professional development programs for women parliamentarians.

Support and encourage programs designed to mobilise women in parliament and political parties for collective gain, promotion and so on.

Review party regulations and enabling legislation to encourage women's progression through the political hierarchy.

Support or conduct ongoing reviews of the progress, opportunities and obstacles to women's political participation.

ADVANCING THE MDGS THROUGH PARLIAMENTARY STRENGTHENING

If the MDGs are to be reached in the Pacific Islands, then the existing bottlenecks and obstacles to stable and effective parliamentary governance need to be overcome. Foremost, the contents and implications of the MDGs — viz. poverty eradication, universal primary education, gender equality and women's empowerment, the reduction of child mortality, the improvement of maternal health, the combating of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, the adoption of practices supportive of environmental sustainability, and the development of global partnership for development — need to be mainstreamed in domestic political discussion. This will require the broadening of the focus of the UN and allied stakeholders in human development from the bailiwick of the Executive to include all elected representatives in discussions about the MDGs.

Armed with the knowledge of the precepts and potentialities of the MDGs, government *and* opposition MPs may be able to influence appropriation bills positively to entrench pro-poor and/or pro-growth policies, for example, especially where these are seen to support public calls for government action. Broadening the focus of discussions to include all stakeholders in the legislative process is similarly crucial to encouraging local ownership of the MDGs. Indeed, while signing on to the MDGs was correctly the role of the Executive, giving the MDGs force in law, ensuring that government policies remain consistent with them and maintaining support for their implications is the role of every MP from every electorate in the Pacific region. Overall, the Legislature itself should determine the level of

involvement in pro-MDG policies, not donor agencies. A necessary measure, therefore, will be to have parliaments issue resolutions on the MDGs, drawing their implications into domestic political debate, providing signposts for civil society actors about parliamentary support for the MDGs and providing benchmarks for national action, discrete from the Executive agenda. Where they are not already in place, mechanisms for the monitoring and evaluation of the MDGs, the domestic drafting of progress reports, and their use in public debate are crucial, as well as the improvements to national and regional development policies, recommended above.

Consulting with MPs at the earliest stages of policy advocacy may provide human development activists with the greatest chance of having their message incorporated into public debate, rather than being stifled by a lack of information or staying narrowly defined by Executive pronouncements without the commensurate involvement of the Legislature. Where they exist, committees may effect meaningful interaction between legislators and constituents and contribute to the dovetailing of community concerns, poverty reduction and pro-poor budgeting. Where they are functional — Samoa, PNG and Fiji — standing or select committees act as conduits of community, sectoral and industry sentiment relating to issues central to the MDGs.

Tasks such as the prioritization of MDGs in budgeting, including provisions for gender-sensitivity, education priorities, health and environmental sustainability, equitable and efficient domestic revenue raising (taxation) and the alignment of aid disbursements with national and sub-national priorities are of crucial importance (UNDP 2004), but their effects are unlikely to be exhaustive or sustainable without significant domestic pressure being brought to bear on Executive decision-makers. This may only be possible through the mobilisation of public sentiment, articulated through elected representatives and civil society activists.

It is here that the dual role of MPs as both representatives of community aspirations and shapers of public thinking are the clearest.

Arguably, legislatures occupy the apex of the Westminster systems which have been bequeathed to the Pacific Islands, and the Legislature should act ideally as the central forum for debates about public policy. The creation of interest groups, caucuses and the like within regional legislatures which transcend the vested interests of region, ethnicity and family, and which promote the attainment of the MDGs may be one way of ensuring meaningful discussion about the global agenda encapsulated in the Millennium Declaration. The failure to do so may spell disaster for the MDGs.

Advancing the MDGs through Parliamentary Strengthening

Map all relevant legislative bodies, civil society organizations and allied institutions which may contribute to the attainment of the MDGs in the Pacific Islands, define their roles and responsibilities

Encourage the issuance of resolutions on the MDGs, drawing their implications into domestic political debate, providing signposts for civil society actors about parliamentary support for the MDGs and providing benchmarks for national action, discrete from the Executive agenda

Support and strengthen mechanisms for the monitoring and evaluation of the MDGs, the domestic drafting of progress reports, and their use in public debate are crucial.

Encourage the targeting of MPs to support NGO activism in support of the MDGs.

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APPENDIX I

Recommendations Matrix: Advancing the MDGs through Parliamentary Strengthening

Creating regulatory frameworks

Support the sensitization of MPs to the significance and implications of the MDGs

Encourage adherence to standing orders in parliament, as they relate to legislative schedules, time for consideration of bills etc.

Broaden the scope of committee work to involve civil society and industry in meaningful ways.

Encourage the use of committees to interrogate government performance on the MDGs through advocacy and lobbying.

Support capacity building programs in regional secretariats.

Support the involvement of regional parliamentary staff in training programs, exchanges and capacity building.

Support the involvement of regional MPs in parliamentary associations, mentoring programs and study tours.

Support the creation and strengthening of offices of parliamentary counsel with oversight of MDG compliance.

Support broader involvement of civil society and public service in budget cycle.

Support strengthening of the overall cycle of accountability including secretariat support to specialist committees and PACs, ombudsmen, auditors general, etc.

Support and strengthen state capacities to apply laws containing provisions for gender empowerment uniformly.

Bringing Local Focus to the Global Agenda

Encourage mobilisation of public scrutiny of government.

Encourage voter education and dissemination of information to inform voter choices at election time.

Encourage civic education through curriculum development, public media etc relating to parliaments and parliamentarians.

Support MPs in their attempts to engage with civil society organisations.

Support concerted civic education programs awareness raising activities and the like about parliamentary functions, the parameters of acceptable activity and avenues for redress.

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Encourage the formalization and standardization of civil society inputs (briefing papers, submissions and the like) into committee procedures.

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Support professional development programs for women parliamentarians.

Support and encourage programs designed to mobilise women in parliament and political parties for collective gain, promotion and so on.

Review party regulations and enabling legislation to encourage women s progression through the political hierarchy.

Support or conduct ongoing reviews of the progress, opportunities and obstacles to women s political participation.

Advancing the MDGs through Parliamentary Strengthening

Map all relevant legislative bodies, civil society organizations and allied institutions which may contribute to the attainment of the MDGs in the Pacific Islands, define their roles and responsibilities

Encourage the issuance of resolutions on the MDGs, drawing their implications into domestic political debate, providing signposts for civil society actors about parliamentary support for the MDGs and providing benchmarks for national action, discrete from the Executive agenda

Support and strengthen mechanisms for the monitoring and evaluation of the MDGs, the domestic drafting of progress reports, and their use in public debate are crucial.

Encourage the targeting of MPs to support NGO activism in support of the MDGs.

APPENDIX II

The Millennium Development Goals

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, world leaders pledged to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The 8 MDGs offer an agreed pace for development and a means by which to measure results. By 2015 all 189 United Nations Member States have pledged to:

- Goal 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2. Achieve universal primary education
- Goal 3. Promote gender equality and empowerment of women
- Goal 4. Reduce child mortality
- Goal 5. Improve maternal health
- Goal 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7. Ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8. Develop a global partnership for development

UNDP, as the UN's global development network, links and coordinates global and national efforts to reach the Millennium goals.

There are four pillars of UNDP's strategy in support of the goals:

- Integrating the MDGs into all aspects of the UN system's work at the country level, including creating new guidelines for country assessments and national development frameworks;
- Assisting developing countries in preparing MDG reports that chart progress towards the goals, in cooperation with other UN agencies, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, civil society and other partners;
- Supporting the Millennium Project, led by Professor Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University, and the Millennium Campaign to build global support for the goals;

- Supporting advocacy and awareness-raising efforts based on national strategies and national needs. Developed countries focus on trade, aid, technology and other support needed to reach the MDGs, while in developing countries, the aim is to build coalitions for action and help governments set priorities and use resources more effectively.

MDGs at the country level

Through the UN country teams worldwide, UNDP leads efforts to help countries integrate the Millennium Development Goals into their national development frameworks. Countries are tailoring the MDGs to national circumstances, building them into national development strategies and policies, and incorporating them in budgets and ministries' priorities. The goals are also integrated into assistance frameworks and programmes.

For more than 70 of the poorest countries, the main strategic tool is a nationally-owned poverty reduction strategy, which relates to national budgets, development activities and other assistance frameworks.

Charting progress

Countries — Dozens of national MDG reports have been issued, and more are under preparation. The plan is for each developing country to have at least one report, either nationally or as a region, by September 2005 when the UN Secretary General presents a Global Report on progress towards achieving the MDGs.

Donor countries are also being encouraged to prepare reports that analyse their contribution to Goal 8. In the Pacific several Pacific island countries are in the process of preparing national MDG reports — Fiji, Samoa, PNG, Solomon Islands and Tonga are amongst these.

Regions — UNDP collaborates with other UN agencies, governments and regional commissions on regional MDGs reports. In March 2003,

representatives of Pacific Island Countries met to discuss how the Millennium Development Goals could best be incorporated into national strategies. This was a significant step towards devising a cohesive approach to achieve these goals as a sub-region and as a means of contributing towards the realisation of this global challenge. Since then, Pacific Island Countries have incorporated the MDGs as part of their national and regional development plans. It has also become a priority for many regional organizations to work towards achieving these goals in partnership with UNDP. Partnerships with regional organizations and with the Pacific Community (SPC) in particular saw the publishing of The Pacific Regional MDG Report in 2004.

Global — The UN Secretary-General issues a yearly report on progress toward implementation of the Millennium Declaration, including the MDGs. This report is based on information drawn from across the UN system. A comprehensive review is planned for 2005, and will draw on the MDG Reports produced nationally among other products and reports.

Millennium Project

Launched in July 2002, the Millennium Project is an independent advisory project commissioned by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and supported by the UN Development Group. Professor Jeffrey Sachs, Special Advisor to the Secretary-General on the Millennium Development Goals and Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University directs the Millennium Project.

Working in cooperation with developing countries and other partners, the project has set up an expert task force to prepare strategies to help countries achieve the goals by bringing together the best current thinking and research. Its work includes reviewing innovative practices, prioritizing policy reforms, identifying means of policy implementation and evaluating financing options.