

Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific

Overview

I write to contribute a short, high level submission to the Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific, drawing on my perspective as the Secretary General to the Pacific Islands Forum.

2. The Pacific Islands Forum is a political community of 18 independent states and self-governing territories in the Pacific, which focuses on deepening regional cooperation and integration to progress our Members' shared ambitions of sustainable development, economic growth, good governance and security in the Pacific region. Australia has been a member of the Forum since its inception in 1971.

3. In brief, I wish to support a revised *reengagement* of Australian broadcasting services in the Asia Pacific region. In consideration of increasing the presence of Australian media services in the Pacific, the review and its outcomes should:

- Recognise the important contribution that adequately resourced and impartial media organisations can make towards the Pacific region achieving its vision and goals outlined in the Framework for Pacific Regionalism.
- Ensure that Australia's media presence in the Pacific takes into account the unique context of a contemporary Pacific, well aware of the past, current and emerging geopolitical and geostrategic climate;
- Consider the human and environmental importance of a Pacific region with access to reliable, affordable, and non-censored media coverage, especially through shortwave radio frequencies;
- Account for a region becoming increasingly crowded with new traditional and non-traditional partners, technologies and media service providers; and
- A platform that recognizes and addresses the geographical and technical challenges in a region which is as big as it is culturally diverse.

The Pacific – renewed interest from traditional and non-traditional partners

4. The geopolitical and geostrategic climate in the Pacific has changed significantly in the five years since ABC services to the region were cut. The Pacific is becoming an increasingly crowded and complex oceanscape. In an environment such as this, impartial analysis of the forces at play is critical if Pacific citizens are to achieve their Leaders' vision of a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion, and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy, and productive lives.

5. Historically, the ABC has been a stalwart of such analysis and played a prominent role in not only supporting, but holding the region's many stakeholders and partners accountable for their contributions toward this vision. The Pacific Islands Forum and its Secretariat has been the subject of such requests for accountability in the past, something that has strengthened the organization.

6. Around the globe, the Pacific is discussed through various narratives, often without us at the table. It is becoming increasingly clear that these narratives often compete with each other, including with our own. It is vital that the people of the Blue Pacific set the *central* narrative from which external players may join the discussion, a message that media has a crucial role in spreading. If the Pacific is unable to steer its own agenda, we risk losing our vision for the Pacific. It is therefore necessary to continue building on the existing Pacific media landscape to project Pacific voices between ourselves and to the wider world. However, an ABC not engaging sufficiently in the Pacific region, is an ABC that isn't adequately presenting nor representing a Pacific voice.

The role of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Pacific

7. The Review presents an opportunity for Australia to re-establish itself as one of the leading media specialists in the Pacific region. It will have to take into account many changes including the contemporary nature of the Pacific's radio space, like the range of new traditional and non-traditional service providers.

8. In order to fulfil our ambitions for a Pacific region that practices and endeavors to strengthen good governance and its principles, a free, transparent and accountable media must be present to uphold such ideals. Good governance plays a key role in maintaining peace in the region as it contributes to strengthened legal, financial and administrative systems, and economic growth that is inclusive and equitable. What exists today is a devoted and strong Pacific media, but one that is under-resourced and under-represented for the large task at hand. We would welcome Australian broadcasting services that engage further with the existing media landscape in the Pacific to maintain and continue building upon the principles of good governance.

9. A stronger Pacific media is therefore also able to better identify potential internal and external destabilizers of peace in the region. As I mentioned previously, the interest in the Pacific is increasing at a rate by which our institutions must keep up with to ensure that our region is able to reject unfavorable engagement, and reap the benefits it is entitled to through responsible and sustainable means.

10. Climate change remains one of the greatest threats to the Pacific. Natural disasters are not new to the region, however climate change is causing increased frequency and ferocity. Reliable and accurate communication is central to ensuring that people are prepared before natural disasters strike, and are able to recover after such events.

11. While there has been rapid digitization of the urban Pacific, the reality remains that access to shortwave transmission remains the most accessible, affordable and reliable source of information for many of our Pacific nations, especially for those in rural and outer island communities. In time, the necessity of shortwave technology may fade, however it should only do so once suitable alternatives are accessible to all in the Pacific. Too many of our people rely on shortwave technology, and I stress the need for Australia to strongly consider restoring the service for those that depend on it during times of both normality and crisis.

12. As the Forum's largest and wealthiest member, Australia has the unique capability of reaching all Pacific people on a daily basis, if it chooses to. As such, with the right engagement, Australia is able to attend to the needs of Pacific people in a very frequent and meaningful way.

13. Globalisation is yet to fully overcome the issues of remoteness and size that we had hoped it would. In this review, the Pacific must therefore be considered in the unique context of today, applying contemporary and innovative means of progressing towards our vision for the Pacific. A strong Pacific media is essential to this vision, and I take this opportunity to reiterate that this review first and foremost must acknowledge the human and environmental impacts of both strong and weak media presence in the region.

14. My colleagues at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and I stand ready to provide further assistance to the Australian Government as required on the issues raised in this submission.

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Secretary General

Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat

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