

::For Immediate Release::



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Leaders must urge Trade Ministers to act on trade impact assessment

Civil society organisations from across the Pacific welcome the recommendation by the Special Sub- Committee on Regionalism (SSCR) and endorsed by the Forum Officials Committee (FOC) for the immediate release of negotiating text of regional free trade talks, known as PACER-Plus to allow for comprehensive input by civil society organisations and to properly fund social, cultural, environmental, and human rights impact assessment to determine the impacts of any proposed outcome.

“We are calling on Forum Leaders to direct their trade ministers to intervene and undertake a human rights assessment of PACER-Plus as early as the next intersessional, scheduled for the first week of October in Melbourne, Australia, where negotiations will be further progressed. This agreement will impose limits on what governments can do in the name of development yet we haven't seen any discussion about what the impacts will be for people, the environment, health, culture, and jobs.” commented Maureen Penjueli, Coordinator of the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG).

An open letter released in May targeting trade ministers has largely been ignored both by the Office of the Chief Trade Advisor (OCTA) as well as trade ministers from the respective countries. The open letter signed by over 30 Pacific civil society organisations and hundreds of individuals from across 24 island countries and territories represents a significant percentage of people who have expressed serious concern at the direction, pace, content and process for consultation.

The signatories have called for the immediate suspension of negotiations for PACER-Plus, the release of the negotiating text and a human rights impact assessment on that text. The endorsement by Forum leaders will give political impetus and direction to the negotiating machinery of PACER-Plus.

“The open letter continues to resonate today and gain support from people across the region and that indicates that this is a sentiment that is not going to go away. People want to know and people deserve to know what this secret deal is going to mean for them. In addition CSOs are concerned that the democratic processes of decision making by our respective parliaments have also been kept out by the secrecy of negotiations” added Ms Penjueli.

“Releasing the text is not without precedence. The World Trade Organisation does it regularly on negotiating issues and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) had the text released three times. The FTAA was successfully stopped because people didn't like what they saw. According to the free trade supporters such as the OCTA we have nothing to fear from PACER-PLUS, if so then they have nothing to hide,” continued Ms Penjueli.

A recent UN expert panel, including amongst others the special rapporteurs on right to food, rights of indigenous peoples, and cultural rights, recommended that all draft treaty texts be published for people to consider and human rights impact assessments undertaken for all existing and proposed trade agreements.

Noelene Nabulivou of Diverse Voices and Action for Equality and Pacific Partnerships on Gender, Climate Change and Sustainable Development (PPGCCSD) noted that “we need gender, social equity and economic justice as clear and consistent policy framework within which to pursue sustainable production, consumption, and distribution patterns, and to adequately deal with the challenges ahead of our region. For just and effective policy, this requires strong ex-ante and other human rights, environmental and social impact assessments applied to all trade and development agreements, including the proposed PACER-Plus.”

Dr Hugh Govan who works with a network of communities and NGOs that manage coastal fisheries resources around the region (LMMA Network) says “hasty moves towards free trade agreements are of grave concern and could seriously affect livelihoods and health of island communities. It is a priority for donors and island governments to invest much more in stronger environment and fisheries departments with much more emphasis on sustainable management of inshore fisheries and checks and balances on development, in particular Environmental Impact Assessments and the monitoring of these to ensure sustainable development.”

Launched amid controversy in 2009, the PACER-Plus negotiations are scheduled to be completed by July 2016.

“The time for Leaders to act on this is now. We keep hearing about how much progress is being made in the talks and the plan to wrap up text-based negotiations by the end of the year. We really can't wait any longer as it will soon be too late to make any difference,” concluded Ms Penjueli.

The next round of PACER-Plus negotiations is scheduled to take place on October 7-9 in Melbourne.

Ends//

The full open letter can be viewed at www.pang.org.fj

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