



::Embargoed until 5am March 23 2012::

## **NGOs critical of 'consultation about consultation' on regional trade agreement**

23 March 2012

**Non government organisations from the Pacific and Australia have criticised next weeks consultations on a regional free trade agreement due to the absence of key voices and lack of focus on the real issues.**

“This is the second Non State Actor consultation and again we are seeing the key organisations from the Pacific that work on these issues unable to attend due to funding, undermining the ability of their concerns to be raised. This also appears to only be a consultation about consultation, avoiding the substantive issues contained in a regional trade agreement, issues that will have a huge impact on the lives of Pacific Islanders” commented Adam Wolfenden, Campaigner for the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG).

The Non State Actor meeting is being organised by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and hosted by the Australian government on March 26. The theme of the consultation is “*Improving Consultation*” and aims to hear comments from across the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand. PANG and other organisations from the region including the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network, and AID/WATCH will not attend the consultations.

“The negotiations on a regional free trade agreement are the most important economic negotiations facing the Pacific Islands and yet the Forum Secretariat and Australian government continue to do the bare minimum in regards to hearing from the people of the Pacific. The NSA's were established to discuss the issues of regional trade agreements, if the theme is to improve consultation they should start by talking about the substantive issues” continued Mr Wolfenden.

Australian based NGOs have criticised their own government for not living up to its rhetoric on having the interests of the Pacific at the centre of the talks.

Harvey Purse, Trade Justice Campaigner for the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET) stated that “Australia has regularly claimed that this agreement is all about the Pacific Island Countries and what they want and need. Australia has said that it will not impose an agreement that the Pacific doesn't want, and openly supports national consultations on PACER-Plus. So we welcome the announcement that Australia is attending this consultation on PACER-Plus. It is unfortunate that a significant number of Pacific voices can't be present at the NSA to express their concerns, primarily due to lack of funding. The next NSA needs to be appropriately funded and structured to include substantive issues.”

Liz Barrett, Director of independent watchdog on Australia's aid, AID/WATCH commented that “by not providing adequate funding for the voices of the region to attend it appears that Australia is being disingenuous about the consultation, limiting its scope and avoiding the uncomfortable voices from the region that have legitimate concerns about these negotiations”

The Non State Actor meeting and negotiations on the regional free trade agreement known as PACER-Plus will be held in Brisbane.

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