



## **MEDIA RELEASE:**

### **NGOs call on Australia to Respect Island Country Sovereignty – Australia Risks its Reputation in the Pacific**

Non Government Organisations from the Pacific and Australia are calling on the Australian Government to not use next week's Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting to undermine the sovereignty of the Island Countries.

The call comes ahead of the upcoming decision by PIF Leaders on the mandate for the Office of the Chief Trade Advisor (OCTA), the body established to provide independent trade policy advice to the Forum Island Countries. The OCTA was a precondition of the Islands for entering into negotiations for the regional free trade agreement known as "PACER-Plus" however its mandate has again become an issue.

The Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) sees the decision as a matter of sovereignty for the Island Countries. "Previous statements by Forum Island Country Trade Ministers have made their views clear on this, they see the remit of OCTA as a decision that they and they alone should make. Sadly it appears that Australia in particular is standing in the way of allowing the Islands to determine where they get their trade advice from" commented PANG Campaigner Adam Wolfenden.

The issue has become critical following developments in trade negotiations with the European Union. Significant concerns have been expressed in relation to the support provided by the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat. Claims of negligence and conflicts of interest has prompted discussions to move the negotiation support to another body, possibly the OCTA.

Harvey Purse, campaigner for the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET) sees any attempts by Australia to undermine the sovereignty of the Islands as a major concern. "Australia continues to promote good governance in the region but now appears to be limiting the ability of the Island Governments to determine what is in their interest. Prime Minister Gillard has a chance to use this year's Leaders forum to show Australia respects the sovereignty of the Island Governments by ensuring the decision on the OCTA remains in the hands of the Island Governments," stated Mr Purse.

Funding for the OCTA continues to be an ongoing issue with Australia offering a funding agreement that the OCTA has said challenges Pacific sovereignty. "Australia seems intent to pay lip service to the OCTA by saying they support it and are happy to fund it but then turn around and offer funding agreements that limit its mandate which effectively tells the Islands where they have to get their trade policy from" continued Mr Wolfenden.

"The leaders Forum is a chance for Australia to show that it is prepared to listen to the Pacific Islands, and support their right to sovereign control of bodies like OCTA. This would demonstrate genuine commitment to good governance and development in the Pacific, or" concluded Mr Purse.

#### For more information:

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