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"We know that nuclear war would be the death of our planet. It is beyond belief that any governments - those brief political figures - arrogate to themselves the right to stop history, at their discretion."

~ Martha Gellhorn

American author and war correspondent

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THE SOUTH PACIFIC NUCLEAR FREE ZONE TREATY: 35 YEARS ON

The Pacific countries have long shown a strong commitment to a global ban on nuclear weapons and in December 2020, the first ever meeting of state parties to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ) Treaty was held to highlight the treaty 35 years after its adoption. It was a virtual meeting, organised by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

Also, on 22 January 2021, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which has been signed by 86 states and ratified by 52, came into force. This United Nations treaty includes a comprehensive set of global prohibitions on participating in any nuclear weapon activities.

The SPNFZ Treaty, also known as the Rarotonga Treaty, opened for signature on Hiroshima Day, 6 August 1985, in Cook Islands. There are 13 state parties: Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati,

Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Ten of these states have also ratified the TPNW. Since the signing of the SPNFZ Treaty, the three Micronesian states with a Compact of Free Association with the United States (Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Palau), have remained outside of the Treaty zone, although they are current observers.

Parties to the SPNFZ Treaty commit never to develop nuclear weapons, or to test them in their territories. Protocols of the Treaty prohibit the testing, use, or threat of use, of any nuclear devices within the Treaty zone. Nuclear states with territories in the zone (France, Britain and US) have signed up to the protocols as required, but the US is yet to ratify any of them.

The United States, Britain and France conducted nuclear testing programs between 1946 and 1996 in the Australian desert and the atolls of the Pacific. The US conducted 67 atomic and hydrogen bomb tests at Bikini and Enewetak atolls in the Marshall Islands and the northern Pacific. Britain tested nuclear weapons at the Monte Bello Islands, Maralinga and Emu Field in Australia from 1952 to 1957, and the British government conducted atomic and hydrogen bomb tests at Kiritimati (Christmas) and Malden Islands, now part of the Republic of Kiribati. Between 1966 and 1996, France conducted 193 atmospheric and underground tests at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls in French Polynesia. While nuclear tests have ended in the Pacific, the health and environmental impacts live on, with some islands still unsafe for human habitation and ongoing health implications on others.

The nuclear tests triggered strong protests and resistance across the Pacific, as disarmament and peace groups mobilised against the radioactive fallout across the inhabited islands. Resistance in the Pacific intensified in the 1970s, and the protests were diverse, including demonstrations at embassies, trade union bans and boycotts of French products.

The formation of a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement in the mid-70s led to the drafting of a People's Charter under which grassroots, anti-nuclear and independence movements cooperated to press for a comprehensive nuclear-free zone and the recognition of indigenous people's rights throughout the Pacific. The struggle against nuclear testing therefore became synonymous with the struggle for independence, self-determination and decolonisation.

As Greenpeace's vessel, Rainbow Warrior, was about to lead a flotilla of anti-nuclear testing protest boats to the test zone at Moruroa atoll, in July 1985, French intelligence agents responded by sinking Rainbow Warrior. A month later, Pacific leaders signed the SPNFZ Treaty.

The SPNFZ Treaty has contributed to the elimination of nuclear weapons in the Pacific. But, 35 years on, the need to review and strengthen the Treaty remains, including extending the zone to the northern Pacific. The election of President Joe Biden also presents an opportunity to renew calls for the US to ratify the Optional Protocols of the SPNFZ Treaty.

A nuclear threat remains as nine nuclear states – including China, the US, UK and France – continue to stockpile thousands of nuclear weapons. A missile fired from North Korea against a US target in the Pacific would endanger the whole region. We in the Pacific must remain ever vigilant to ensure we remain a region of peace and never again allow our territories to become a testing playground for nuclear powers.

Sources: This is an edited version of [‘The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty: 35 Years on’](#) by Ema Tagicakibau, 22 January 2021, first appeared on the [Devpolicy Blog](#), published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University. Fijian Dr Ema Tagicakibau, was Disarmament campaigner (2002-2008) with the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre in Suva, the secretariat of NFIP. She moved to New Zealand after the military coup of 2006. She is a member of the Public Advisory Committee on Disarmament and Arms Control in New Zealand.

Note: Australia is one of the states which has not signed or ratified TPNW.

FROM EXTRACTION TO INCLUSION: CHANGING THE PATH TO DEVELOPMENT IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Since Independence in 1975, Papua New Guinea's economic and social development outcomes have not matched people's aspirations or government promises. Despite its abundant riches, Papua New Guinea (PNG) lags behind its Pacific neighbours on many development indicators. This is mainly due to the path taken by successive governments. Rather than a people-centred approach, which was promoted in the years leading up to Independence and embedded in the nation's Constitution, a resource extraction policy has dominated and been sold to the people with the promise it will improve their lives.

PNG has allowed some of the world's largest mining, petroleum and timber companies onto its shores to extract gold, silver, copper, nickel, oil, natural gas, tropical hardwoods and palm oil, but the extraction of natural resources has failed to improve people's lives.

The economic and social development that has been repeatedly promised has not been delivered. Most families' standard of living has either stagnated or declined. There is poor access to clean water, sanitation and electricity. Child malnutrition, easily preventable diseases and other health issues are widespread. Meanwhile, PNG's traditional strengths in agricultural know-how and the continued resilience of the informal economies and clan kinship networks at the heart of its village life continue to sustain and support most of the population.

Extractive industries like mining, oil and gas and industrial scale logging are enclaves with little connection to the rest of the economy. Foreign companies bank most of the profits offshore, and contribute little to government revenues. And there has been poor governance and corruption.

Due to the extractive industries PNG has already lost much of its accessible forests, a disaster for a country where forests constitute a key source of construction materials, food, and medicine for large swathes of the population. The pollution of land and waterways by mining waste has also had devastating consequences for local communities compromising their access to fresh water, to food sources and to prime gardening land.

Communities opposing extractive projects often face repression, threats and violence. When they have projects forced upon them, or when they consent to them and compensation promises are never delivered, legitimate dissent and protests are often met with violence and abuse by police or private security operatives.

PNG needs to put people back at the centre of its development policies. The country has a largely rural population, living on their own land with the skills and ability to work, produce, trade, and innovate in a way that can improve their lives and those of future generations. PNG's wealth of natural resources can continue to be the basis of people's livelihoods, provided these are managed by and for the people in a sustainable, responsible, and wise way. The government needs to start by halting its attack on customary land tenure, which is the basis of the village economy.

New large-scale resource extraction projects should be rejected, at least until reform of the governance regimes is accomplished. In the forestry sector, a ban on round log exports is needed. Local communities must be placed at the heart of future forest management and downstream processing of sustainably and ethically produced timber products should be a priority. Expansion of oil palm needs to be stopped, and investment is required in agriculture that benefits farmers, feeds the country, and uses natural resources responsibly. There are hopeful signs that PNG policy makers have started the necessary shift, but a much greater, whole-of government approach is required.

Sources: From Extraction to Inclusion: Changing the Path to Development in Papua New Guinea, published by Act Now!, Oakland Institute and Jubilee Australia, October 2020.

TRUST IS AT THE HEART OF VANUATU'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Vanuatu, except for one quarantine case last November, remains COVID-free. But the coronavirus pandemic has been highly disruptive for the tourism-dependent economy. I am a hotelier and support several charitable initiatives, but since the pandemic, I have become a lobbyist for Vanuatu's economic stability and recovery, and my relationship with government has become collaborative to a degree I could not have anticipated a year ago.

The Vanuatu Government's response to and preparedness for the pandemic, has been impressive, and has been enacted while simultaneously tackling two natural disasters, a severe tropical cyclone and a volcanic ashfall. The unifying nature of this pandemic challenge has had a neutralising effect on those holding more extreme viewpoints. The 2020 Government and Private Sector Business Forum produced a dialogue from which a collaborative way forward was mapped out, and monthly High-Level Leaders Dialogues have focused energy on common purpose, rather than dissension.

When Vanuatu recorded the first COVID-19 case in November 2020, this marked the inevitable arrival of the global pandemic on our shores. The Vanuatu Government's detection and containment of the case, alongside public communication was consistent with international standards and practice. Vanuatu has returned to COVID-free status, and has managed almost 5,000 repatriations without incident since May 2020.

But what Vanuatu needs now is for its neighbours to discuss safely reopening our respective borders. While celebrating Australia Day (26 January), Australia's High Commissioner to Vanuatu reiterated that Australia stands alongside Vanuatu in addressing the pandemic. But from this side of the Coral Sea, it seems one-sided, given that Australia has opened its border to COVID-free NZ, with one-way quarantine free, while seasonal workers from COVID-free Vanuatu are required to quarantine on entry into Australia.

In July 2020, Vanuatu's Prime Minister Bob Loughman launched the Tamtam Travel Bubble initiative on the anniversary of Vanuatu's 40th year of Independence. The Tamtam Bubble allows for quarantine-free travel with countries that meet the nation's health and border criteria.

During COVID, much trust has had to be built amongst Vanuatu's labour mobility recruits, their families, and communities, in order to support the labour demands in Australia and New Zealand. Vanuatu's labour supply has been critical to ensuring that harvests in Australia have been unaffected by domestic labour shortages, and has helped support Australia's food security during the pandemic. So, when will Australia and New Zealand reciprocate by allowing their citizens to come to Vanuatu? This is trust we seek from our neighbours in support of our economy.

As a milestone year, 2020 brought COVID-19, Vanuatu's 40th independence anniversary and graduation from Least Developed Country status. I hope 2021 brings deeper trust between communities and governments, so that we can all get on with the business of socio-economic recovery and sustainable livelihoods.

Sources: 'Trust is at the Heart of Vanuatu's Economic Recovery' by Elizabeth Naru Pechan is an edited version of an article that first appeared on the [Devpolicy Blog](#) on 9 February 2021, published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University. Elizabeth Pechan is the founder and co-owner of the multi-award winning resort, The Havannah Vanuatu.

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