

Submission to the Pacific Plan Review 2013

Digital Society Foundation

Connect the Blue Continent

*a call to prioritise internet infrastructure, systems and
skills development across the Pacific Islands*

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1. Introduction

Remote Pacific Island communities are at risk of a new cycle of long-term poverty and aid dependency because they are unable to engage in global activity and knowledge-sharing enabled by affordable, broadband-speed Internet.

As the world moves into the digital era, nations and regions across the world are building the information super-highway infrastructure needed to support their societies' economic and social well-being in this new age.

Nations are co-operating within and across continents to support the international connectivity needed for economic and social development.

The Pacific Ocean is host to numerous island nations and communities which are in danger of being left behind in this transformational process.

Pacific Island governments and regional organisations have been examining this risk and some valiant efforts are being made to address the issue. However, a more comprehensive master-plan approach is needed to ensure this vibrant, often-forgotten 'Blue Continent' is properly included in the internet roadmap.

We are a group of volunteers based in Australia working with a number of Pacific Island communities through the Association of Pacific Island Legislatures to co-ordinate a call to 'Connect the Blue Continent'.

2. Why do we think broadband is so important ?

Some high level explanation of the relevance of broadband to key development themes is explained below.

2.1. Energy and environment:

The most significant contribution of Broadband access for improved environmental and energy outcomes is the increased capacity for knowledge sharing.

A vast spectrum of explicit knowledge is available online and the tacit knowledge expertise of experts around the globe can be accessed through online communications technology such as video-conferencing. With Broadband connectivity, Island communities can better access this knowledge.

For example, understanding the causes and implications of climate change, accessing the best scientific data, combined with an inherent understanding of their own environment will improve the capacity of Islands to adapt to the impacts of climate change, to which they are particularly vulnerable.

Easier access to natural resource management research is essential. An understanding of the need to diversify energy production and the options available for solar, wind, and geothermal energy generation can improve energy security and contribution to new economic activity.

2.2. Social justice and freedom:

Social justice is enabled by transparent government and well-educated societies.

With broadband access governments and communities that are physically isolated from each other can better share policies, legislation, and methods of tackling shared issues.

Most importantly, access to broadband gives communities a voice. Having a convenient link to their governments will allow citizens to share their needs and to hold government accountable for outcomes by sharing their experiences with a global audience. This is particularly important for young people as it develops self-worth and political engagement.

2.3. Health:

The Pacific Islands face disproportionately high levels of non-communicable diseases (eg diabetes) and preventable diseases (eg malaria). This is due in part to dependence on imported food not suited to the lifestyle and metabolism of Islanders and insufficient waste treatment capacity.

Climate change is significantly affecting local food production; access to broadband will provide access to research on improved cultivation techniques.

Most communities have minimal access to regular healthcare, which exasperates normally low-risk health problems. Publicly accessible Broadband will allow

better knowledge sharing on the importance of good diets and safe food handling, research on early intervention and prevention for diseases, scientific methods for low-input waste treatment and remote consultation with medical professionals.

2.4. Education, employment and infrastructure:

Broadband also provides improved education and employment outcomes. Students can engage with teachers remotely through video call classes and better access information, advanced research and interactive learning tools. This gives young people far better job prospects as they can go on to Open Access university education without having to leave their communities.

There is a lack of employment prospects in the Islands. Broadband access has the potential to create new industry and boost promotion of the region's assets, particularly eco-tourism. There is also potential for people to work remotely, communicating with head offices of businesses by email and video-conferencing. Often women, as primary carers, miss out on education and employment. They will be most significantly impacted by online access to education and employment.

These are just a few of the reasons why affordable broadband is so vital to the Pacific Islands.

3. Improving awareness amongst stakeholders

We have found that some government-based aid organisations and some parts of the NGO aid eco-system are still operating in a 'business-as-usual' mode and have not recognised that the digital economy and digital age social developments have changed the environment to the extent that they need to re-consider their approach.

Some government aid agency staff have said that UN pronouncements about the priority of broadband (ie. from the Broadband Commission, ITU etc.) are "blue sky thinking" and "not evidence-based policy". Some have commented "what has broadband got to do with food security?".

We think there is a lack of vision and understanding in some quarters as to how web systems are transforming industries and social environments on a global scale.

This is one of the drivers for our [Connect the Blue Continent](#) initiative.

We think there is a need to bring together some basic, easy-to-digest information to help policy-makers get to grip with the relationship between broadband and all the key aid thematics. We've made a start on this at:

<http://www.connect-the-blue-continent.net>

4. Master-plan approach

We have been considering the best approach to enabling broadband-speed internet access, systems and skills capacity development for the Pacific Islands region.

It should be noted that we would **NOT** recommend a single, giant network project for the Pacific.

This would almost certainly fail for a multitude of reasons. If this was how an earlier attempt to enable broadband for the region was set up then it is no surprise that it failed. Centrally-managed ICT projects simply do not work at that scale.

A smarter approach would be to carry out a master-planning exercise to examine and create an overall network design, highlighting the network nodes needed (ie. where the communities are) and broad capacity needs, secondary links, mix of potential technologies that could be used etc.

This master-plan would help to inform a multitude of smaller, more viable projects, some of which are already happening, some are planned, some are on the drawing board. It would also highlight the major areas of challenge and where intervention is most needed...ie. where there are communities but no existing or planned projects.

The ICT industry is, at its heart, an engineering discipline and the many expert engineers and public-spirited organisations in the industry would certainly rise to the challenge and come up with innovative and viable ways to get the network in place in those challenging areas.

From an engineering standpoint, the presence of a master-plan enables clearer visibility of additional opportunities to provide network coverage from existing or planned projects.

Another advantage is that a master-plan enables a 'self-organised' type of approach to getting the overall network in place, where individual jurisdictions can follow their own processes and relationships to form their part of the network while using the master-plan as a framework for contributing to regional comprehensive coverage.

From a political standpoint, the idea of a master-plan framework would be much more appealing and less intrusive to sovereignty...and would enable local jurisdictions to take control and gain political benefit from their own local projects rather than be subjugated to some kind of giant regional project.

Another consideration is that infrastructure is only part of the story. It's vital that systems and skills capacity development go hand-in-hand with the push for infrastructure. This is where regional knowledge-sharing and collaboration is

most needed. It is vital that we understand, support and share the stories of those communities who have pioneered the implementation of broadband into their island communities. There are barriers to economic, social and environmental outcomes that we do not understand enough to be able to learn and improve for adopting communities.

We also need to share the positive stories where economic development, social well-being and improved environmental outcomes have resulted from broadband adoption. Ultimately, island communities and decision-makers are mostly influenced by their peers in the same situation as themselves and enabling the showcasing of successful outcomes is vital for empowering the region to drive the ongoing initiatives themselves.

We should also be mindful of barriers to funding of individual projects. There is some commentary that World Bank pre-conditions for grants or loans are too onerous and not attuned to Pacific Island regional reality. For example, asking jurisdictions to facilitate liberalisation of the complex telecoms sector in law and create commercial competition is a very difficult ask when the local market is so small and the resources/expertise of jurisdictions is limited. It may be more effective to negotiate infrastructure funding on the basis of longer term cycles of liberalisation and competition. Enabling multi-player wholesale/retail access to broadband infrastructure is much easier to put in place once the infrastructure is actually there...

5. Positioning our initiative

Our initiative [Connect the Blue Continent](#) has been developed through relationships formed via the Association of Pacific Island Legislatures.

We are therefore more affiliated with the legislative branch rather than the executive branch of government. We are not empowered and are not attempting to put an executive policy or program in place. Rather we have carefully positioned Connect the Blue Continent as 'a call for a joint, regional, policy initiative' and we believe that a multitude of stakeholders around the world need to become more aware and supportive of the region's need for broadband investment.

We have decided to make this a Pacific Region-wide initiative regardless of political or historic affiliations that operate in the region. This does not mean we are insensitive to these existing, historic or cultural groupings. Rather we are positioning the initiative as transcending historic barriers to co-operation while highlighting and enabling the cultural and historic richness of the region to be better supported and sustainable into the future.

Whilst our direct relationships are only with a dozen or so jurisdictions, we are mindful that the issues are relevant to all island communities across the Pacific and hence our adoption of the 'Blue Continent' moniker.

[Connect the Blue Continent](#) has meaning both in the sense of connecting the region to the internet backbone...but also connecting the communities of the region with each other to empower them to take control of their futures in the next phase of human development.

We feel strongly that the region needs to accelerate investment in enabling affordable broadband, systems and skills capacity development to ensure the youngsters face a viable and positive future.

Please find more thoughts on our blog site at:
<http://www.connect-the-blue-continent.net>

and support us on FaceBook via:
<http://www.facebook.com/BlueContinent>