

POLICY BRIEF: LINKING THE OCEAN OF PEACE WITH FIJI'S TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief explores the potential synergies between the Ocean of Peace (OoP) initiative and Fiji's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). While the OoP could be perceived as a high-level political rhetoric focused on geopolitics, our listening sessions in Fiji suggest that it shares significant common ground with the TRC's mandate and objectives. Both initiatives can complement and mutually reinforce each other to help address Fiji's legacies of conflict, restore the torn social fabric of Fijian societies and communities, and foster greater inclusivity and equity among Fijians of all backgrounds.

Drawing on insights from our listening sessions, our Peace Studies expertise, and lessons learnt from other truth and reconciliation processes, we offer practical recommendations for how the TRC can leverage OoP principles to advance inclusive transformation while navigating the delicate balance between tradition and structural change. We believe that, by engaging with the OoP, the TRC has an opportunity to deepen its peacebuilding potential within Fiji and expand its reconciliation efforts to the wider region, contributing to a broader Pacific vision for peace. In turn, truth and reconciliation processes within Pacific nations can serve as key building blocks for realising the OoP's vision, making the two initiatives deeply interconnected.

Our recommendations are intended as reflections on potential linkages between the OoP and the TRC, rather than prescriptive directives. Their applicability will depend on Fiji's unique context, and we offer them as a starting point for further discussion rather than fixed solutions.

METHODOLOGY

This brief draws on insights from 20 listening sessions conducted in Suva, Fiji, in April 2024 by a team of Peace and Pacific Studies experts, as part of the Fiji-UK Policy Research Project. These sessions engaged a diverse range of participants, including leaders and members of religious groups, security forces, government officials, youth and civil society organisations, women's and human rights collectives, universities, media outlets, international NGOs, and intergovernmental bodies.

The research aimed to listen to and document diverse Fijian perspectives on the meaning, scope, and potential of the OoP initiative. The Fiji-UK Policy Research Project was conducted at the invitation of Fiji's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and supported by the British High Commission in Suva.

1. REFRAMING THE OCEAN OF PEACE: BEYOND GEOPOLITICS

The OoP has been perceived as Prime Minister Rabuka's high-level geopolitical vision for the Pacific. However, our listening sessions revealed that the concept of the OoP resonates with ordinary Fijians in ways that may align with the TRC's objectives. Participants across civil society, youth groups, religious leaders, state forces, women's organisations, and government actors identified the OoP as an opportunity to:

- Address **unprocessed traumas and historical injustices** that remain unresolved, including legacies of coups, ethnic violence, colonialism, and militarisation that continue to shape daily life.
- Foster a shared, **forward-looking narrative** that acknowledges past pain and suffering while promoting a hopeful future.
- **Build bridges between divided communities** through dialogue and truth-telling.
- **Engage domestic Fijian peace and security issues** – highlighting the connections amongst local, regional, and international challenges.
- **Prevent and transform all forms of structural and physical violence** across the Pacific, including violence between nations, community violence, interpersonal violence, and gender-based violence.

We heard frequent calls for the OoP to be brought down to the **grassroots level**, with community engagement playing a key role in ensuring that it does not merely remain a high-level political initiative. We see the **TRC as uniquely positioned to help translate the OoP's vision into national reconciliation efforts**, in a way that speaks to Fijians' lived experience.

2. SHIFTING POWER RELATIONS WITHOUT CENTRING GUILT OR BLAME

One of the greatest challenges of any TRC is promoting inclusive transformation without fuelling divisive, simplistic, and blame-based narratives. While truth-telling and acknowledging past injustices are vital, the process must avoid becoming a zero-sum contest of victimhood and perpetration. In our listening sessions, participants described the OoP as fundamentally **forward-looking**, with the past serving as a mirror for learning from mistakes.

Based on the views articulated by the groups and individuals we engaged with, the TRC may wish to consider the following suggestions:

A) Encourage 'Forward Commitments' instead of backward-looking punishment.

- Our listening sessions showed that many **segments of the population feel disempowered** by political and institutional structures and are looking for a way forward rather than a focus on past blame.
 - Youth groups, for instance, expressed a need for greater agency and inclusion in national decision-making, with many saying they felt ignored in discussions on peace and justice.

- Given this, there may be value in exploring how accountability can be framed in terms of **responsibility for building a better future** rather than punishment for past actions.
 - **'Forward Commitments'** could be developed, where institutions and communities acknowledge past harms while making concrete commitments to future actions that ensure non-recurrence.

B) Acknowledge structural factors behind violence and unrest.

- Academics and civil society leaders in our sessions highlighted that **past conflicts were not just about ethnicity or politics**, but were often manifestations of deeper structural issues, including the militarisation of politics and society, colonial legacies, gender inequality, and economic disparities.
- The TRC could explore ways to contextualise testimonies within broader structural forces, which may include commissioning background papers or hosting public forums to reflect on non-recurrence.
- The TRC might seek to recognise the **systemic nature of past conflicts**, acknowledging the broader context in which individuals acted to cultivate empathy and compassion – without excusing criminal activity.
 - For example, our listening sessions revealed nuanced perspectives on the military's role, including recognition that military personnel were sometimes used by political actors for their own gain.

C) Harness storytelling methodologies to shape a renewed, inclusive national narrative.

- Listening sessions revealed that **storytelling is a powerful, and commonly used, tool for peace in the Pacific** that can help overcome biases, humanise the antagonist 'other', and garner empathy.
 - Media representatives, academics, and community leaders stressed the need for a **structured storytelling initiative** to bring peacebuilding and reconciliation to the public sphere.
 - This could take the form of verbal storytelling – such as structured dialogues and listening sessions – or non-verbal storytelling, including role-playing, artistic, mindfulness/meditation, and embodied practices.
- The TRC is in a strong position to create **safe spaces for diverse narratives to coexist**, avoiding divisive storytelling that reinforces binaries between 'victims' and 'perpetrators'.
 - One approach could involve a **'Public Conversations' project** to bring diverse perspectives together through community-based storytelling, media coverage, artistic expression, and public exhibitions.
 - Partnerships with community and civil society organisations, artistic collectives, media outlets, and religious authorities/faith groups can be particularly effective here. Participants across all these groups showed their enthusiasm to support reconciliation initiatives.

D) Ensure that historically marginalised voices are heard.

- The TRC may wish to create dedicated spaces for groups that have historically been excluded from national dialogue. Participants in our listening sessions

highlighted the **systematic exclusion of the following groups** from national dialogue:

- Indo-Fijians
 - Non-English speakers
 - Young people
 - Women, particularly if they have been affected by episodes of violence and unrest.
- One possible approach could be to **create dedicated spaces for these groups**. To this end, the TRC could:
 - Ensure multilingual facilitation in statement-taking processes.
 - Engage Indo-Fijians, including through online hearings for the diaspora.
 - Create youth-specific dialogue spaces that amplify voices from communities that have lived with the consequences of past violence but were not directly involved.

3. BALANCING TRADITION AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE

Fiji's reconciliation processes have historically been guided by the principles of the Pacific Way and the practice of Talanoa, both of which emphasise dialogue, consensus, mutual respect, and inclusion. Our listening sessions revealed that many Fijians gravitate to these concepts and practices when thinking about reconciliation processes. We believe that these traditions offer deep cultural legitimacy that can bolster TRC-led reconciliation efforts. However, we also learnt that these mechanisms can be exclusionary and carry risks of elite capture – where reconciliation is shaped on the terms of those in power rather than those most affected.

To balance the pursuit of structural transformations while honouring tradition and cultural identity, the TRC could:

A) Develop adapted Talanoa approaches (“Talanoa+”) to expand participation, equity, and inclusion while respecting cultural traditions.

- A potential approach could involve **structured dialogue formats** that include clear safeguards for equal, inclusive participation of women, Indo-Fijians, youth, and other historically underrepresented voices.
 - It could include multilingual facilitation and dialogue structures that acknowledge diverse cultural traditions of storytelling and reconciliation.
 - Reconciliation spaces could be co-designed with community representatives, who may help to shape the dialogue format – rather than simply being invited into an iTaukei-dominated space.
- **Indo-Fijian religious and cultural leaders** could be engaged to guarantee that reconciliation is not solely framed within iTaukei cultural traditions.
 - Integrating elements from Hindu, Muslim, and Christian reconciliation traditions could provide for a more pluralistic dialogue model that reflects Fiji's multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, and might be important for an inclusive and participatory process.

B) Leverage faith-based engagement for structural change.

- Participants in our listening sessions emphasised the **grassroots reach and resonance of faith leaders and groups**. We believe these can be leveraged to promote non-violence, justice, and human dignity.
- Most religions have strong ethical, historical, and spiritual traditions of reconciliation. Religious leaders showed their **readiness to contribute to reconciliation initiatives**. We believe they can help legitimise reconciliation processes and also be engaged as advocates for structural transformation.
 - However, our listening sessions also revealed that faith can be co-opted by powerful leaders and that the current government boasts a close relationship with Christian leaders, which can alienate non-Christian Fijians. We also learnt that faith institutions often reify patriarchal structures and may be reluctant to challenge them.
 - The TRC may consider engaging interfaith leaders to explore how ethical frameworks for reconciliation could draw on religious teachings across traditions, recognising the need for socio-political and institutional reform for greater equity and inclusion. This could be complemented by interfaith peace gatherings and ceremonies.

C) Frame reconciliation as cultural evolution, not cultural rejection.

- Participants in our listening sessions emphasised the importance of traditional values, culture, and identity, but we found that **these terms frequently take on different meanings across demographic groups**.
 - To navigate this tension, the TRC may wish to emphasise that traditional practices do not have to remain static – they can adapt to meet contemporary challenges and justice needs.
 - Intergenerational dialogues between elders and youth could explore how social and political practices can evolve to support justice, equity, collaboration, and inclusion, while maintaining core values.

4. THE TRC AS A PRACTICAL MECHANISM FOR MATERIALISING THE OCEAN OF PEACE

Rather than treating the OoP as a separate initiative, **the TRC has the potential to position itself as a key institution bringing the OoP's principles into practice.**

A) Engage with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to situate the TRC's work within the OoP's broader framework.

- Our listening sessions showed that Fijians across population segments see **domestic reconciliation efforts as intimately connected to broader regional conversations on peace and security**.
- The TRC could hold discussions with the PIF – which is currently in the process of developing the OoP concept – to explore **joint initiatives** that link national and regional reconciliation processes.
 - TRC-led public events could be hosted alongside PIF summits to ensure that reconciliation and acknowledgment of past injustices become key

themes within the OoP's evolution. This might require emphasising that a more peaceful Fiji contributes to a more peaceful Pacific.

- The TRC may wish to encourage the PIF and other Pacific states to recognise TRC-led reconciliation efforts as a **core pillar of the OoP agenda**.
 - The TRC's experience **could offer insights for other Pacific nations** that may consider similar processes in the future.

B) Lead public reconciliation displays grounded in the principles of the OoP.

- Participants in our listening sessions frequently emphasised the importance of **regional dialogue and cooperation** to address common issues affecting the Pacific in the past and present. Key issues highlighted included colonialism, nuclear legacies, rising sea levels and climate breakdown, militarism, civil unrest, gender-based violence, and collective security.
 - The TRC may wish to explore ways of connecting Fiji's past episodes of violence and unrest to some of the region's shared challenges.
 - Community-led peace initiatives around these issues, including memorialisation efforts, apology ceremonies, site visits, and artistic storytelling projects could be designed by the TRC to visibly link Fiji's pursuit of national reconciliation to the principles of the OoP.
 - This can shape public perceptions about the OoP so that it is not merely viewed as an abstract, elite-level concept, but as something people can see, engage with, and feel a part of.

C) Explore the feasibility of a regional reconciliation initiative.

- Representatives from civil society, security forces, and academia alluded to the need for **region-wide peace and reconciliation mechanisms**.
 - The TRC might help lay the groundwork for transnational peacemaking and peacebuilding initiatives that address legacies of colonialism, conflict, and militarisation.

D) Strengthen civil society engagement and grassroots solidarity networks.

- Our listening sessions revealed that Fiji has a long and vibrant **history of civil society activism**. However, participants from various civil society collectives expressed concerns that national policies and reconciliation initiatives (such as the Republic of Fiji Military Forces Reconciliation and Restoration Program) often fail to trickle down to the community level. Given this, the TRC could:
 - Explore partnerships with local organisations to ensure that reconciliation efforts are not just elite-driven but meaningfully integrated into communal networks. Women's groups, youth collectives, and other activist networks could serve as key facilitators of local peacebuilding dialogues and reconciliation programs.
 - Leverage existing community-based peace initiatives (such as the Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding, Transcend Oceania, and the Pacific Women Mediators Network) as models for how reconciliation efforts can be deeply rooted in local realities rather than imposed from above.
 - Advocate for the inclusion of community-led reconciliation mechanisms within PIF discussions on the OoP, seeking to position grassroots peacebuilding efforts as central to the region's future stability.

5. CONCLUSION: THE OCEAN OF PEACE AND NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

During our listening sessions, we found that the OoP represents an opportunity for national and regional transformation. Yet, without a strong national-level reconciliation framework, it risks being perceived as abstract political rhetoric rather than a tangible peacebuilding initiative.

We believe that the TRC's work could be advantageously linked with the OoP so that both initiatives complement and strengthen each other. The TRC can help to connect the OoP's high-level rhetoric with the lived experiences of ordinary Fijians, while the OoP can ensure that reconciliation in Fiji is not just nationally relevant but also a contribution to the Pacific's collective pursuit of peace.

The OoP offers:

- A unifying, forward-looking vision that reconciliation efforts can actively work towards.
- Regional connections that contextualise Fiji's reconciliation process within broader Pacific struggles for peace, truth, and justice.
- A framework for addressing not just the symptoms of conflict but its root causes.

At the same, the TRC offers:

- The first national-level 'anchor' with the potential to operationalise the OoP's objectives, grounding its principles in localised, grassroots reconciliation processes.
- A meaningful effort to confront the legacies of colonialism, civil unrest, and militarism in Fiji and the wider Pacific, laying the foundations for peacebuilding processes based on acknowledgment, inclusion, and transformation.
- An opportunity to ensure that reconciliation is not dictated from above, but shaped by the voices of those most affected by conflict and historical injustices.

The TRC has a unique potential to become a key building block of the OoP. The two initiatives can complement and strengthen each other – the TRC can ground the OoP in tangible reconciliation efforts, while the OoP can amplify the TRC's impact by connecting it to a broader Pacific vision for peace. We are confident that, if leveraged, their synergies can meaningfully contribute to a more just, inclusive, and peaceful future for Fiji and the wider region.

AUTHORS' NOTE

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