

## **Policy Brief: Ocean of Peace – Reflection and Next Steps**

### **Key Points:**

- Following nearly a year of drafting at the Forum Secretariat, The Ocean of Peace Declaration was adopted by Pacific Island Forum Leaders at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) meeting in Solomon Islands in September 2025.
- The Declaration is broadly worded, accommodating the different histories, priorities and perspectives of the Forum member countries. This reflects the challenge of reaching consensus at this level and the diversity across the region.
- The Declaration should be understood as building on existing regional architecture, rather than replacing it. Its practical value may lie in how far it can reinforce and connect existing Pacific frameworks on security, cooperation, climate change, non-proliferation and regional solidarity.
- Research at community level, among NGOs, civil society and youth indicated that translating the Declaration into action needed more than words at the political elite level and much greater democratic involvement at all levels of society.
- For most, peace has to be secured at a local level responding to and resolving the diverse disrupters of peace using traditional forms and fora, which people are accustomed to, adapting them as necessary to be more inclusive. This may mean building bridges between formal governance structures and localised ones.

### **Policy Implications:**

- While the adoption of the Declaration reflects a degree of consensus among Pacific Island States, there are many competing priorities and different demands being made on PICs by external actors. As has been seen with other regional declarations bi-lateral agreements may side-step these. Unless supported by both a regional implementation strategy and adopted at national level, underpinned by dedicated resources, the Declaration may be regarded as just more words.
- Implementation will also require clearer accountability mechanisms. National and regional action plans, with measurable priorities and periodic review, would help ensure that the Declaration is not treated as another aspirational regional statement but as a framework against which progress can be assessed.
- There are questions around whether the region is sufficiently strong collectively to use the Declaration as a key marker, or reference point to shape foreign policy in the face of geo-political pressure and competition. Much will depend on how it is integrated into international dialogue.
- The strength of the Declaration may, however, lie in its potential to bring into the open and broaden conversations about peace in the region and, particularly if it is robustly

incorporated into the 2050 Framework for the Blue Pacific, as a fundamental element of the Security pillar.

- The Declaration also provides a useful platform for conversations at a local level among diverse groups to address practical issues which create conflict and social division, and to link with and contribute to grass-roots peace-building initiatives.
- Particular attention should be given to youth inclusion. This means not only consulting young people but creating formal and informal pathways for participation through education, community dialogue, arts-based initiatives, and where possible representation in national and regional fora, including those linked to the Pacific Islands Forum.

## Background

1. Although not a novel concept, contemporary calls to declare the Pacific an Ocean of Peace (OoP) were first made by the Prime Minister of Fiji in 2023. His personal advocacy of this and ambition to secure regional approval of the concept through the Pacific Islands Forum was incrementally endorsed by Pacific leaders at meetings in 2024 and 2025. . The renewed momentum behind the concept also reflected growing concern about the wider regional context, including intensifying geopolitical competition, militarisation, climate insecurity, and pressures on Pacific sovereignty and social cohesion.
2. In 2024, following discussions with the Fijian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the British High Commissioner to Fiji, reached out to Professor Sue Farran (Newcastle University) who was at that time seconded by her university to the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office as a Research Fellow providing research expertise on the Pacific. The request was to research, locate and select a team of UK academics knowledgeable and experienced in peace studies, to travel to Fiji and engage with local stakeholders to determine as broadly as possible what understandings of the concept of an Ocean of Peace people had.
3. In April 2024 a team of UK academics from Oxford, Bradford, Winchester, London School of Economics and Newcastle, funded by British High Commission, Fiji, travelled to Fiji. Over a period of two weeks the team held over 20 listening sessions, engaging with over 100 Pacific stakeholders including faith leaders, youth groups, women's organisations, chiefs, civil servants, civil society actors, members of the security sector, scholars, artists, media workers, and representatives of international and regional bodies. These dialogues used traditional and arts-based approaches and were guided by a simple, open-ended question: '*An Ocean of Peace is...?*' Participants were invited to reflect freely on the meaning and potential of the concept, drawing on their own lived experiences, professional expertise, and visions for the future.
4. Several common themes emerged. The OoP evoked aspirations rooted in the Pacific Way and long-standing Pacific values including peaceful coexistence, kinship, dialogue, and collective resilience. Climate change was identified as a key threat to individual and collective security and respect for and preservation of the environment seen as essential for realising an OoP. Others described the concept as a way to renew regional solidarity and resist the pressures of militarisation and geo-political competition. Participants emphasised

the need for peace to be more than a symbolic rhetorical device, calling for action on local insecurity, political instability, economic precarity, and the lasting effects of colonialism and nuclear testing. Several saw the OoP as an opportunity to reimagine regional security on Pacific terms.

5. Some participants questioned whether the initiative could take meaningful shape amid persistent inequality and exclusion. Many stressed the importance of including women, youth, and other marginalised groups in the development of the OoP. Others reflected on the difficulty of envisioning peace without first addressing unresolved historical grievances. While the OoP looks to the future, participants emphasised its potential to address past harms and promote healing. Some also warned of the risk that the concept could be co-opted or diluted by regional or international actors. This suggests that the credibility of the OoP will depend not only on state endorsement but on whether those most affected by insecurity see their concerns, knowledge, and agency reflected in how it is interpreted and applied.
6. From these listening sessions two key outputs emerged: 1. A spoken word poem that brought together the voices of those we had heard saying what an Ocean of Peace meant to them; 2. A brief, consisting of a preamble, a short statement of principles shaped by what we heard along with justification for arriving at those principles and some suggestions, again based on what we had heard, of possible next steps. The latter was transmitted to the British High Commission (BHC) for onward communication with any such amendments as the BHC saw fit, to the Fijian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
7. During the course of 2024 the OoP was frequently referred to in the Fiji PM's public addresses, it was reflected in Fiji's first Foreign Policy White Paper, a concept note was shared with civil society and, following the September PIF leaders' meeting in Tonga, the Pacific Secretariat was commissioned to draft a declaration for submission to the 2025 leader's meeting, resulting ultimately in the adoption of the Declaration.

### **The 2025 Follow-up Research Project**

8. In September 2025, subsequent to the adoption of the Declaration of the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace, there was a further opportunity to undertake a follow-up visit to Fiji. This was funded by an ESRC IAA grant internally administered by Newcastle University, with a smaller, three-person team, in collaboration with the Pacific Centre for Peace Building (PCP), a Fiji based NGO. The British High Commission in Fiji provided networking and administrative support, facilities for hosting meetings and accommodated members of the team. The British High Commission also hosted an International Peace Day event at the end of the week-long visit.
9. The aim of this visit was to understand through listening what people thought of the adoption of the Declaration and what the next steps might be. While we had hoped to catch up with many of those that we had previously engaged with, and used the same, but slightly augmented data-base of contacts, in fact the people we met with were mostly new contacts. Through collaboration with the PCP we also had the opportunity to visit and engage with three village communities.

10. We adopted a similar approach to that used in 2024, but this time not only asking the question 'An Ocean of Peace is?' to start the conversation, but also, 'An Ocean of Peace will only come to life if? We also had the published text of the Declaration and in a number of sessions we used this, or extracts therefrom, to prompt responses from participants in terms of their opinions on the wording, how they understood it, what it failed to cover or what they saw as the strengths/weaknesses of the text.
11. We engaged with village communities in Nadi District, Rakiraki Province, and Tailevu Province. We held urban-based listening sessions at the University of the South Pacific (USP) and the University of Fiji and additional listening sessions with representatives from government, civil society, faith-based organisations, media and arts collectives, and international institutions. A total of 186 individuals participated, of whom 86 were youth (i.e. under 35).
12. The 2025 follow-on project also produced a set of outputs to support wider engagement around the OoP. 1. An open-access policy outlining key insights learned from the 2024 project and documenting the development of the OoP from an initial idea to a formal declaration. 2. A collection of poems created in collaboration with two Fijian poets and translations of the 2024 OoP poem into 8 Pacific Islander languages. 3. An OoP education resource pack designed to engage youth in local peacebuilding, co-created with PCP and Fijian youth leaders. 4. Two academic articles examining the OoP. 5. Additional policy-related outputs tailored for specific stakeholders, such as the Fiji Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Together these outputs were intended to support ongoing community engagement, learning, and policy dialogue.

## Findings

### *Village communities*

13. Bringing the Declaration down to village level, communities highlighted the value of inclusive approaches in which everyone had a voice and could be heard, no one was left out, the value of working collectively and using existing systems to resolve potential or actual conflicts, such as village meetings, church and social groupings, provided these were representative of the community.
14. While concerns were very localised there were common themes, especially the impact of climate change on everyday food and water security, as well as basic living standards such as access to roads, disrupting access to schools and markets, flooding and erosion, problems of deforestation, industrial pollution of marine resources and sea-level rise. Issues around and by young people were also shared. Elders were concerned about drugs, drinking, anti-social behaviour, lack of employment or training opportunities especially for those dropping out of school, while young people wanted to be listened to, to be included, to be given more opportunities and to be valued as members of the village.
15. A further common issue was the disjuncture between the formal governance system – central government and/or provincial government, and the community. This disjuncture resonated with the wider disjuncture expressed by almost everyone between the notion of peace at the political elite level and what it meant on the ground, and question marks

around who determined this. While the Pacific Way was generally presented positively, it was also apparent that this could be used narrowly, placing power in the hands of a few and excluding others.

### *Youth*

16. The focus of the sessions with young people, including university students, was the text of the Declaration as well as their opinions on what needed to be done to bring the Declaration to life. Given the demographics of the region with nearly 60% of the region's 14 million people under 30 years of age we considered their views to be significant.
17. Positive reaction to the Declaration included: the focus on the regional rather than individual states, which made it more inclusive especially of the smaller Pacific states – whose voices were often unheard, alongside the acknowledgment of the different needs of states; reference to the Pacific Way; the links to existing regional architecture; the focus on the importance of resilience; the role and responsibilities of external partners and the emphasis on the importance of unity. Young people noted references to the sharing of technology and information. Although much of the language was vague, there was some optimism that this could be reframed to inspire a detailed action plan(s) at national and regional level.
18. Negative comments were that the Declaration was exclusive, not inclusive and various sectors of society were not mentioned, such as non-indigenous Pacific islanders and LGBTQI+ groups. Discrimination against minority groups needed more attention and there was too little attention being paid to problems at home, such as violence against women and children. Problems of the underlying pervasive Pacific patriarchal masculinity were not addressed, nor were contemporary issues such as the discharge of nuclear wastewater by Japan, or the fossil fuel industry of near neighbours. For some this smacked of hypocrisy by Pacific leaders. The meaning of security was vague and insufficiently focussed on human security, and in this and other ways it was unclear who was to benefit from the Declaration: the Pacific or outsiders such as Australia. While the Pacific Way was acknowledged as positive it was pointed out that this does not always include decolonisation or de-militarisation. It needed to be remembered that not all Pacific island countries were yet states. One suggestion was that the Pacific Way should be a rules-based order designed by and for the Pacific rather than relying on international rules.
19. For others the Declaration was yet another piece of paper or a reiteration of existing declarations such as the Boe Declaration: words not action, to be filed and forgotten. Others thought it was an opportune time for the Pacific island leaders to make such a Declaration, marking a start to Pacific leaders being more assertive in protecting the region and its people, but it needed to be built on: to build a house you need a plan, not just an aspiration.
20. Young people had a role to play in advancing the Ocean of Peace from the ground up, through formal and informal inclusion. The former could be via a Pacific Youth Council or a Youth Representation in Parliament and/or at the Pacific Islands Forum and through formal education. The latter could be through youth-led activism and awareness raising including through arts-based initiatives. Whatever form this took, youth across the board needed to be involved and not just urban, educated, and often elite youth, but those in rural areas.

*Others: Church, Sports, Arts and Media, Civil Society*

21. The church in its various denominations and religion more broadly play a key role in Pacific society. The participants we heard were concerned that there was insufficient reference in the Declaration to the diverse racial and faith groups of the region. Peace needed respect for others and conscious efforts to develop harmony. While peace needed to start in the home, inter-faith dialogue could play an important role in building bridges and promoting understanding between diverse groups, but this needed stronger commitment from all faiths to advancing the OoP.
22. Representatives from sports, arts and media highlighted the top-down approach of the Declaration querying how 'we' – the leaders – translated into 'we' the people, the community. Criticism included unclear definitions, e.g. what kind of security is being referred to, what did 'culturally anchored' mean, and while the Pacific Way was acknowledged, had this just become a buzz word which had lost its meaning? It was felt that some topics were not sufficiently addressed such as the right of people to self-determination in Kanaky and West Papua, and the dangers of and conflicting views around deep-sea mining. There was advocacy for using the arts to promote peace, collaboration and awareness-raising. This required all art forms to be made more accessible and affordable to a wider sector of society. Included in this was the importance of freedom of expression and the recognition that art can be a language for telling and sharing the stories of Pacific peoples.
23. Representatives of civil society expressed the view that the Declaration, despite its vagueness, was a starting point. It mentioned many of the issues which were important and relevant to peace-building such as human rights, education, technology, climate change and the need for peace to be seen as something in its own right, and not just the opposite of war.
24. They were also critical. The Declaration was state-led, not people-led. There was no implementation plan or framework for accountability. Peace was undefined. There were questions around the political will and resources needed to make the Declaration a reality, and a real need to get to the root causes of issues. If the concept was to work then not only did the Declaration need some kind of legal status to make it binding, but it needed to reach all levels of society which, like the Ocean itself, was a complex, layered ecosystem.

**Conclusion**

25. Broadly the Declaration is seen as a start which needs to be taken forward at different levels. It has potential but there are deep structural and political issues which need to be addressed. Our UN participants suggested that the next crucial step was an implementation framework supported by investment. If the initiative was underfunded or not sufficiently integrated into and supported by the existing Pacific architecture then it would not progress. The 'talk' had to be 'walked', and the 'walk' needed a plan of action which was resourced. There were international opportunities to continue the dialogue but credibility had to start at home.

26. Greater thought may need to be given around what 'Peace' means in the Pacific, for whom and by whom – there was some scepticism that this is one person's vision. Those we engaged with provided valuable insights about what peace meant to them, how it was being disrupted and how it could be built. We captured these views in poems which we shared back with the communities, but there is scope for the dialogue to continue, especially through the various civil society organizations, youth groups and others who are advocating for peace and working on peacebuilding in so many different ways. So the Declaration is an opportunity to engage with the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace at different levels, from high-level international diplomacy, to a dispute in the classroom and everything in between.

Sue Farran  
Will McInerney  
Alejandro Posada-Tellez

March 2026