

Transform Aqorau (2020). *Fishing for success: Lessons in Pacific regionalism*. Canberra, Australia: Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University. 172pp. http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/2020-06/tuna-aqorau_dpa_book_final_v7_june_2020.pdf

Pacific regionalism seems to be in a state of perpetual crisis, especially when compared to the much deeper integration apparent in the Eastern Caribbean. There are a number of explanations for why regional integration has proven to be such a challenge in the Pacific, including the vast ocean that separates the islands, varying colonial legacies, and, as Transform Aqorau is at pains to emphasise in *Fishing for success*, their cultural and economic diversity. The upshot is that, while contemporary discourse emphasises the unifying metaphor of the ‘Blue Pacific’, the ocean has more often served as a barrier to – rather than an enabler of – developmental cooperation.

The success of regional integration matters because it is supposed to be the great panacea to the endemic vulnerabilities of smallness. The story recounted in *Fishing for success* will long be remembered as an archetypical case study for that argument. Since independence, small island states in the Pacific have sold access to their large Economic Exclusion Zones (EEZs) to overseas fishing fleets. In 2010, the eight states that are Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) – Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Tuvalu – generated a combined US\$60 million in revenue from their tuna fishery. In 2019, they earned US\$500 million without substantially increasing the amount of tuna caught. The economic significance of this increase for small island states and their communities is enormous, and reinforces their self-presentation as ‘large ocean states’.

Aqorau was the inaugural CEO of the PNA Office in Majuro, Marshall Islands. This book is his insider account of how the PNA increased revenue from commercial fishing in the face of substantial opposition from the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), and the major players in the Pacific tuna industry, including US, Japan and South Korea. The strength of his account lies in the in-depth knowledge of the personalities and events that enabled this shift to occur. The book is full of technical details, which will be slightly daunting if, like me, you know very little about commercial fishing. But there are enough general lessons for the uninitiated to make reading this account valuable to fisheries experts and lay observers alike.

At its core, this is the story of how to create a cartel. The PNA was established in 1982 as a strategy to manage Japanese fishing interests. But, for much of the last three decades, larger states played the PNA eight off against each other so as to allow their fleets to fish Pacific waters with impunity. By working together to first introduce a ‘cap and trade’ scheme to limit the number of days in which fleets could fish their EEZs, and later monitor those who did, the PNA countries were able to control the supply of tuna and raise the price. In doing so they both increased the revenue generated from their resource but also ensured its sustainability.

Aqorau’s account identifies multiple causes. At the macro level, global overfishing has increased the price of tuna and increased the importance of the Pacific Ocean to the industry, which is now in a position to pay the higher price that PNA countries demanded. But, even though sustainability is becoming a core concern for commercial players, they – as may be expected – did not pay higher prices willingly. The cartel only works if the members remain united. Aqorau argues that at the micro level of day-to-day negotiations, policy development, monitoring and reporting, a fortuitous mix of personalities with a shared vision, commitment

and interest was key in getting a better deal for their countries. Aqorau is clear that the trust that developed between the PNA countries took a lot of informal meeting time, mostly in bars and at BBQs, to build. With friendships firmly solidified, and each country resisting the temptation to negotiate unilaterally, the promise of regionalism – that the sum is greater than the individual parts – was fulfilled.

A further factor in this success was the absence of donors. Aqorau argues that a key problem with Pacific regionalism generally, and the FFA specifically, is that the divergence of interests between the PNA eight and the other Forum states, including Australia and New Zealand, made it impossible to reach consensus. Donor demands also necessitated cumbersome and unwieldy bureaucratisation that was both costly and favoured larger states with greater capacity. A key principle in the PNA becoming independent of the FFA in 2010 was that it would be self-funding: no donors and no membership fees. The PNG government provided start-up funds and the Marshall Islands provided office space. But: the imperative was for the enterprise to become self-sufficient via the judicious use of levies. Within a few short years, the PNA Office was paying its own way and now has substantial reserves. The upshot is that this is a small, focused and uniquely homegrown regional organisation run solely for and by Pacific Islanders. Aqorau views this as the embodiment of the type of regional empowerment that Epeli Hau'ofa envisaged decades ago in his vision of Oceania as a 'Sea of Islands'.

The PNA will be held up as a model for success for a long time. But the question for social scientists is: how replicable is it? Aqorau is more tentative on this point. His account explicitly identifies the fortuitous convergence of the right people at the right time as the key to the outcome. The PNA eight shared common interests compared to the larger FFA. And, by ensuring that the PNA Office was self-sufficient, there was no conflict or tension over who would foot the bill. This alignment is rare. Regional solidarity on climate change and the impact Pacific states have had on major international climate agreements is perhaps the best comparative example. Older analogies might include opposition to nuclear testing during the 1980s and 1990s. In all cases, the lesson appears to be that it is easier to achieve cooperation on environmental issues where regionalism protects rather than impinges on sovereignty and all states have a more or less equal stake in the outcome. More ambitious proposals for integration, like the Eastern Caribbean economic and monetary union, appear to quickly fall foul of the problems that Aqorau identifies: diversity of economies and cultures.

None of this detracts from the importance of this success story. For too long, discussions of Pacific regionalism have been caught in a cycle in which integration is naively touted as the panacea to the challenge of smallness, only for its inevitable failings to beget a corrosive cynicism. Such wildly polarising narratives gloss over the lived experience of regionalism, which is inevitably a partial, temporary and incomplete project. Aqorau's insider account allows us to appreciate both the barriers to and the potential of regionalism at specific junctures and on certain issues. Perhaps this more considered stance can break the seemingly endless cycle of naive hope and cynical despondency that regionalism attracts.

Jack Corbett
University of Southampton
United Kingdom
j.corbett@soton.ac.uk
