

## ***Australia-Pacific Connections for a Digital Future***

### **Inaugural Pacific Connect Forum**

**6 September 2018, NSW Parliament House**

#### **Communiqué**

1. We, the delegates of the inaugural Pacific Connect Forum, met in the Preston Stanley Room at NSW Parliament House on Thursday, 6 September 2018, at the invitation of the International Centre for Democratic Partnerships (ICDP) and Global Access Partners (GAP), with the financial support of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).
2. We congratulate Simone Pensko, Catherine Fritz-Kalish and the staff of ICDP and GAP for organising the event and the Hon. Christopher Pyne MP, Australian Minister for Defence, the Hon. Afamasaga Lepuia'i Rico Tupai, Samoan Minister for Communications and IT, and Michelle Rowland MP, Australian Shadow Minister for Communications, for their keynote speeches.
3. We thank Taulapapa Brenda Heather-Latu, Dr Ian Watt AC, Peter Kenilorea Jr and Prof Ian Young AO for their thought-provoking addresses, Andrew Carriline and Michael Collins for facilitating our discussions, and Emmanuel Narokobi, Brian Mangi and Nadia Meredith-Hunt for their updates on previous *Pacific Connect* Dialogues.
4. We welcome Australia's interest in forging stronger and more enduring strategic relationships with Pacific Island nations and see *Pacific Connect* Dialogues and the Annual Forum as an opportunity for current and emerging regional leaders to extend their networks, work on solutions to common challenges and, ultimately, develop long-term relationships through shared experiences.
5. We appreciate the opportunity to discuss the economic, social and cultural opportunities created by new submarine cables and better mobile networks across the Pacific and strongly believe that new technology can empower economic growth, cultural cohesion and community inclusion.
6. We support calls for 'One Pacific' enabled by ever-greater digital connectivity. We look forward to building and sustaining a people-centred, project-focused *Pacific Connect* community through online platforms, face-to-face events and further Dialogues. We are convinced that better interpersonal relationships between Pacific Islanders, and Australia and the Pacific as a whole, will benefit Dialogue participants and local communities.
7. We praise the efforts of the organisers and participants of previous ICDP events and trust that lessons learned from the first year of *Pacific Connect* will be factored into future activities. We hope that *Pacific Connect* will be able to unlock unused capacity and nurture the trust and empathy which underpins productive partnerships. We believe in the value of the individuals involved, rather than additional contributions to national GDP, when calculating the benefits of their interactions. While there is no metric to measure relationships, projects which are firmly rooted in the family culture of the South Pacific will be of the greatest benefit.

8. We are passionate about driving economic development, social inclusion, digital literacy and cultural understanding in Pacific Island nations and hope that improved digital connectivity will help promote and strengthen Pacific culture, education and local businesses. At the same time, we are acutely aware of many challenges which must be overcome before the Pacific is truly connected. We acknowledge the need for better digital literacy in the community and a balanced approach between short-term market opportunities and longer-term projects such as blockchain. Bridging the digital divide in rural Pacific populations can only be achieved through a balanced combination of suitable infrastructure, affordable access and usability.
9. We believe that blockchain has great potential but is best seen as an enabler of wider goals, rather than an end in itself. Digital maturity varies across the Pacific, and we suggest that barriers to digital engagement in individual regions and nations be assessed before blanket blockchain or other digital solutions can be adopted. We also suggest that end users should be engaged to discover their needs to ensure they use new services, rather than imposing complicated frameworks from above without consultation. We also need to ensure new developments are both secure and reliable.
10. We acknowledge the need for financial literacy, better payment methods and improved access to financial services for more people in the region. While the new submarine cables will help, there will still be regions without coverage which other solutions should address.
11. We recognise that there is no central repository for the data generated through research in the Pacific to be stored, analysed or assessed. We support the initiatives which aim to create digital data repositories to allow decision makers and business people to access the information they need to improve their decision making.
12. We look forward to the outcome of the business, IT and cultural projects currently under development through *Pacific Connect* and hope to participate in new activities and events. We recognise that Dialogue participants themselves should take responsibility for driving and financing their own projects to see them come to fruition. We also believe that awareness of other schemes and organisations, such as the existing PNG Digital ICT Cluster, is important to encourage the crosspollination of ideas and avoid duplication of effort.
13. We greatly enjoyed the outstanding musical performance by Tongan students of Newington College and wish them well in their further endeavours. These students exemplify the qualities and abilities of young Pacific people and inspire us to redouble our efforts to encourage the emergence and development of young leaders throughout the Pacific region.