

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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Pacific Possibilities

Pro-Chancellor, Dr Valerie Levy; Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ross Milbourne; Dean of Education, Professor Andrew Gonczi; Dean of Nursing, Midwifery and Health, Professor Jill White; staff; distinguished guests; graduates and their families and friends.

Health and education. I can think of no more splendid professions to be part of. Not only are they vocations which affect in the most profound ways the well-being of any society, but they offer the most amazing pathways for a lifelong journey.

Both have unlimited horizons. Opportunities abound to make a difference as practitioners, system leaders and managers and policy-makers. Opportunities abound to work independently, in the community, in institutions or overseas.

And it is this last which is my focus today. Specifically, my address is about working in developing countries doing development or aid work. I have titled my talk *Pacific Possibilities*, because most of my development experience over the past six years has been in Pacific Island Countries, with some diversions into Indonesia before and during its transition to democracy.

I decided to speak on development work in the Pacific because until some six years ago, my knowledge of the Pacific was gleaned from package holidays in Fiji or Vanuatu; the famous World War Two picture of “Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels” on the Kokoda Trail; reading James A. Michener’s *Tales of the South Pacific*, the discredited Margaret Mead thesis about growing up in

Samoa; and singing Bali-Hai'i under the shower as I washed that man right outta my hair.

Looking back, I have two deep regrets. The first is that I was for so long a captive of stereotypes about the people of the Pacific Islands – wearing cultural blindfolds which stopped me from seeing and learning from the diversity, complexity and richness of their individual cultures and regional vibrancy. The second is that I came to development work so late in my career - perhaps some here today might not make the same mistake.

I would like to start with a few personal anecdotes and then move out to consider some aspects of the wider context in which development assistance happens in the Pacific.

Story 1: We were in Kiribati, travelling by boat from the island of Tarawa to the island of Abaiang. We approached the white beach, lined with school children welcoming us into their home, while their mothers and fathers fanned the lobsters they had caught that morning for us. Out swam a group of the men who offered to carry the three women ashore. Filled with goodwill, and fearing that we would look like their former colonial masters, we politely thanked them but refused their offer. In a classic Australian way, we jumped over the side of the boat and waded through thigh-high water to the beach, looking less than vice-regal I might add, to be sung ashore by the school children and invited to feast on coconut juice and lobster. They smiled all the time we were there, but we knew from their eyes that we had deeply offended the whole community by rejecting their offer to be carried ashore.

Story 2: I was at a social gathering in the Australian High Commission, talking to a nurse who was heading home to Australia the next day, three months before her assignment was up because she was sick. I thought malaria, dengue fever. Goes with the territory where communicable diseases are endemic. Only later was I to learn the truth. She was based, by herself, in a very remote part of one of the Melanesian countries of the Pacific. A pregnant woman had walked days to get her help in what she knew would be a difficult birth. The nurse helped her deliver a healthy baby, but the mother was bleeding profusely. The nurse hooked up a make-shift transfusion system and gave her own blood to the mother, knowing that otherwise she would die. Mother and baby survived. The baby was named after the nurse in the spirit of true friendship. But she had contracted an infectious disease which proved resistant to the standard medications. She had also broken some of the basic ethical rules of nursing in that country – do not jeopardise your own health for that of a patient, and do not share blood.

Story 3: We were visiting a school in Micronesia. It was made up of three huts, all built by the local village so that the youngest children would not have to travel far for their education. The walls and roof were thatch, the floors were crushed coral. Four subjects are taught in the early primary years. Each corner of the room had been arranged around one of these subjects. The Environment corner was filled with rubbish that had been washed up on the beach. The Mathematic corner was made up of row upon row of shells. I looked at these and thought how pretty they were. Then I saw. They had been carefully graded by size. And they were arranged in a series of complicated mathematical sets, designed to build sophisticated number skills. 3:6:12:24. 3:6:9:12. 3:9:12:15:18

Story 4: The teacher was standing in front of stack of butcher's paper covered in beautiful copperplate writing, which had been carefully tied together and put on a stand. She was reading a sentence and then the children would read it aloud together. I asked her what the class was and she said English. I asked what resources she was using. She pointed to the butcher's paper. Because they have no books, she had spent her Christmas holidays transcribing the full text of a book she had borrowed – Treasure Island – on to butcher's paper. All 260 pages of it.

Story 5: It was a major government department. One of their very senior people had died suddenly and young – as is so often the case within Pacific Island Countries. The funeral had been in the morning. In the afternoon I walked up to what passes as the central administration. Entry is via a double door. On one side was a small truck delivering new computers – about five of them, stacked up on one side of the entrance. On the other side, were about eight freshly slaughtered hindquarters of pigs and cows. Just lying there, in the doorway, bleeding. They were gifts from the grieving family to the dead man's work colleagues. As I walked in, following the trail of blood, flanked by hindquarters and computers, I understood just a little of the amazing capacity of Pacific peoples to hold on to the family and cultural ties of reciprocity that bind them together, while still accommodating and adapting what they find useful from cultures such as ours.

Story 6: We called him John the Baptist because he was working for the Baptist Health Services in the remote northeast of Enga Province in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. To improve their links to the outside world, the Service bought a modem with a connection link to 2 way radio. This allows them to use the radio to send email messages to Goroka which then on-sends them via the Internet. This system is being used to recruit medical students and medical officers from around the world to work in the district as volunteers, order second-hand high-cost medical equipment, and source and price medical supplies

Story 7: The final one. She was what is called in PNG a 'house mary', looking after the household of an expatriate family. She was paid decent wages by local standards but she, and her friend who looked after the house next door, decided they could earn a little extra on the side. They joined together to buy an Esky. While working in the expat houses, they would put water in the fridge to make ice and when their housework was done they would pack the ice in the Esky and set off to the market to sell it. One day, some raskols came to the market and demanded that they hand over their takings. They refused. Out came the machete and off came her arms. This is part of daily life in Port Moresby.

I tell these stories today for two reasons.

Each of them and many more, have had a profound impact on me and how I think about and do my work there and here. Each, in its own way, says something about the complexity of working in a developing country.

- They remind us that we are always a guest in someone else's country, and we will be judged by the respect we show to their ways of doing things. But this inevitably brings us up against the difficult concept of the universality of human values, a matter on which we should all have a point of view.
- That we need to understand the context – the politics, the economics and the culture – to make sense of it all.
- That we can never under-estimate the ingenuity and creativity of the people of the Pacific Island countries.
- That they extend to us great kindness and generosity, although they have little and although we have a mixed history and reputation within the region.
- That the peoples of the countries within Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia have much in common, but they are very different indeed. Samoa and Tonga are quite different from each other. These Polynesian states are quite different again from Kiribati, Tuvalu and Tokelau which are different again from Melanesian countries such as the Fiji Islands, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. On most economic and social indicators, the Polynesian countries are performing better than the Melanesian states but there are significant differences within individual countries.

The second reason I tell them today is because they hint of a dark side which should not be obscured by heart-warming tales of triumph over adversity, tales of beautiful women with frangipanis or hibiscus in their hair, and pristine waters from which the yellow fish tuna jump onto your

plate – although all these things are real. That is why development work is so challenging – we must be able to distinguish romance from reality and be prepared to work on the dark side of the moon where altruism hits realpolitik and commercial interests. Instability, poverty, lawlessness, corruption, disease, poor financial management and economic stagnation lie on the dark side.

This brings me to the second part of this address.

At the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000, the world leaders agreed to eight Millennium Development Goals. For each goal, targets have been set, mostly for 2015, using 1990 as a benchmark. Indicators have been identified to measure progress against each target. The goals are:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability ¹
- Develop a global partnership for development

As these goals indicate, Health and Education appear as the centrepiece of the national strategies of virtually all Pacific Island countries.

In health, all Pacific Island countries face the double burden of disease.

- Communicable diseases such as acute respiratory infections, diarrhoeal diseases, sexually transmitted infections and epidemic diseases such as dengue are causing considerable damage in the region. In Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, malaria is endemic. TB was declared a crisis in the Pacific Islands region in 1999 and every year, some 5,000 people become sick with it, yet only three out of every 10 people have access to proper treatment. TB rates in PNG and Kiribati are higher than some of the rates reported from 22 countries in the world where TB impact has reached emergency levels. Multidrug-

¹ ? The rising sea level is a major concern to the smaller island states such as Tuvalu - an issue on which Australia and the island countries have been at odds.

resistant forms of TB are on the rise and, as HIV/AIDS increases in the Pacific region, TB will cause more deaths.²

In passing, I should say that HIV/AIDS was originally considered a health issue, but is now recognized as a development issue incorporating social, education, economic, trade, gender, poverty, security, religious, human rights and the media.

- Non-Communicable diseases – the so-called lifestyle diseases – are also on the rise. Cardiovascular diseases, cancer, hypertension, anaemia, obesity and diabetes are increasing – some 40-45% of the people of Nauru are diabetic. Children at the open-air picture shows in Kiribati feel their way to their seats because they are night-blind. The shift in diet away from traditional foods such as taro, yams, breadfruit and sweet potato and the increased dependency on cheap imported processed foods is leading to problems of malnutrition and food insecurity. Shopping for food in the Pacific is an eye-openerpackets of instant noodles, cans of corned beef, tinned fish, biscuits, soft drinks, chocolates, potato chips, turkey tails from the US, mutton flaps from Australia and New Zealand, chicken frames, white rice and flour are gradually replacing the local staples.

The answers to such health problems do not necessarily lie within the health system itself. Clean water, sanitation and anti-dumping trade strategies may prove more effective.

In education, much has been achieved, although there is still a long way to go on the main indicators of universal primary education.

Poverty is of course a key issue for education in the Pacific island nations. Governments cannot afford to provide for all the costs and cost-sharing partnerships with villages, communities and churches is the norm. Schools, books and adequately trained teachers are in short supply. Resources in the local language are rare, and there is a heavy reliance on New Zealand and Australian texts at the secondary level. Sometimes they are customised, more often than not they do not speak to local circumstances. Learning design skills are underdeveloped and bilingualism has a long way to go. Management skills are limited at all levels of the education system. Capital funds to build schools are inadequate. Distance education is underdeveloped, and this is linked to inadequate telecommunications. But there is much hope. Development assistance has helped Kiribati produce the first teacher and student resource materials for primary schools and has

² Tom Kiedrzyński, Christelle Leper and Janet O'Connor, "Preparing For Infectious Diseases: How the region is fighting them", *Pacific Magazine*, January 2004

helped Samoa introduce a single stream secondary education system with the teaching and learning materials to support it.

While individual Pacific Island nations, and donor agencies, will continue to improve health and education, we are now moving into a new and uncertain phase of development assistance, one shaped firstly by new debates about development assistance and secondly by concerns about regional security in the face of globalisation, trans-national crime and terrorism.

Over the past five years there has been a vigorous and heated international debate about the role and effects of aid in developing countries. A broad consensus has emerged that aid is more effective in countries with sound policies.³ In those countries with sound policies, aid plays a different role and should be provided in a different way than in those countries where the policy and institutional settings are weak. Thus, aid delivery mechanisms in Samoa should be different to those in Papua New Guinea or in post-conflict situations such as Bougainville or Solomon Islands. We now have a better understanding of how poorly targeted and poorly managed aid can have a range of negative effects on developing countries.

This has turned the focus of attention of donor agencies from individual sectors such as agriculture, health and education (although these continue to comprise significant proportions of aid budgets) to questions of how to combat corruption, weak adherence to the rule of law, the breakdown of democratic processes and, more significantly, to ways of strengthening economic and financial management.

A recent review commissioned by the Pacific Island Forum, found that many of the Pacific Island countries are "close to the knife edge of economic and social viability".⁴ New Zealand's Prime Minister, Helen Clark, recently issued a warning that the Pacific risks becoming a "ghetto of conflict and poverty" if there isn't reform.

On the 6th of April, the leaders of fifteen Pacific nations (including Australia and New Zealand) met for a special one day session to discuss a new focus on issues of regional security and corruption. They issued the Auckland Declaration in which they agreed to the development of the Pacific Plan to create stronger and deeper links between the sovereign countries of the region and identify the sectors where the region could gain the most from sharing resources of governance and aligning policies.

³ AusAID, "Papua New Guinea and the Pacific - A Development Perspective", September 2003

⁴ The Eminent Persons' Group Review of the Pacific Islands Forum, April 2004

They also agreed that the key goals of the Pacific Island Forum are economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security.

As the Age newspaper noted, “The Pacific mind-set has changed, and no one is ruling out a European Union-style”. The details of implementation are yet to be worked through, “but this work could not really begin until Pacific island nations overcame the conceptual barrier to a sustained regional approach”⁵

I have presented today three dimensions of development work.

First, the practical and deeply personal experience - the human relationships on which I think effective aid ultimately depends. For its essence is facilitating change in others.

Second, the sectoral work which has to be done to overcome poverty. In both education and health it provides opportunities to work as a practitioner and will challenge the very foundation of your practice. But more importantly it provides a unique opportunity to work at a national level and in a whole-of-sector way which is rarely possible here in a world of specialisation. In health it might be piecing together disease patterns, infrastructure (clean hospitals, good nurses, transport between the health centre and the village), and policy constructs into successful and sustainable plans and building the leadership and management skills to implement them. In education it might be gathering basic statistical data about educational performance, getting teacher demand and supply in alignment, strengthening the management skills of School Committees, villages or principals, developing curriculum frameworks or it might be designing and constructing good schools. Mostly, it is all of these things.

And finally, it might involve making the links between sectoral concerns and wider questions of good governance, democracy and regional cooperation.

At each of these levels, the rewards are multiple. Technical expertise is important. Stamina is important. But more important is the capacity to take professional responsibility for our own lifelong learning, and use that as a guide to helping the people of the Pacific to take charge of their own learning and their own country, their own cultural identity and their own future.

Thank you.

⁵ The Age “Pacific leaders at last see the big picture”, April 12, 2004