

Pacific region to increase focus on human rights

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As the world celebrates the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 2008), the Secretariat of the Pacific Community's (SPC) member countries and territories have supported a call to look more closely at the status and implementation of human rights in the Pacific.

In October 2008, the Committee of Representatives of Governments and Administrations (CRGA) – the governing body of SPC – requested SPC to specifically address human rights issues at its meeting next year.

SPC will prepare a policy paper detailing the status of ratification of human rights-related treaties and agreements by members. The paper, which will feature on the agenda of the 39th meeting of CRGA in Tonga in October 2009, will also examine the results and benefits to SPC members of ratifying those agreements.

The proposal was put forward by Cook Islands delegate Myra Moeka'a during discussions on SPC's progress in assisting its members to implement the Pacific Plan.

Ms Moeka'a pointed out that the Pacific Plan, which was endorsed by Pacific Forum leaders in 2005, includes good governance as an objective and seeks to encourage implementation and reporting of international human rights conventions and agreements by Pacific Island countries.

Since the adoption of the UN Declaration on 10 December 1948, many human rights treaties have been ratified by countries around the world, including Pacific Island countries. They include the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

These legal frameworks include important rights for Pacific women and men, such as the right to health care, water, education, participation in political life, and freedom from violence and discrimination.

SPC Director-General Dr Jimmie Rodgers says the organisation recognises that a rights-based approach to regional and national development processes is critical in underpinning SPC's work. 'We are dedicated to continuous improvement in the way we incorporate human rights principles in our delivery of services to member countries and territories and to the people of the Pacific.'

All Pacific Island countries have ratified CRC. However, ICCPR has only been ratified by Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Samoa. PNG and Solomon Islands have ratified ICESCR, while Fiji, PNG and Tonga have ratified CERD. CEDAW has

been ratified by all countries in the region except Nauru, Palau and Tonga.

SPC, through its Human Development Programme (HDP) and Regional Rights Resources Team (RRRT), ran a workshop in Tonga on CEDAW in November. The workshop was designed to support progress in specific areas to enable ratification of CEDAW by these three countries.

The workshop also provided the opportunity to highlight the benefits of ratification, including international assistance for enhancing gender equality at the national level through legislative compliance audits, technical assistance in revising laws and policies and funding for implementation activities. Additional benefits for countries include improved diplomatic ties through international recognition of their commitment to human rights.

HDP and RRRT will continue working with other regional partners to provide technical support to SPC members, not only on ratification of international human rights treaties but on their implementation at the national level.

‘We recognise that if countries are to effectively meet their commitments to human rights, long-term technical support is required,’ says Dr Rodgers.

‘We also recognise the need for all SPC’s programmes and projects – from our land and marine resources divisions to our public health programme – to fully integrate a human rights perspective in every aspect of their work.’

More information on SPC’s work, including CRGA meeting papers, is available from SPC’s website (www.spc.int). For more information on the SPC Human Development and RRRT programmes, please contact:

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