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Regional Policy Consultation

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Connect the Blue Continent

Harnessing digital technologies for a sustainable and prosperous Pacific

The Pacific Digital Adaption Challenge

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Connect the Blue Continent is a joint initiative developed by Digital Society Foundation and the Association of Pacific Island Legislatures

This paper updates the submissions made in 2013, 2015 and 2016

Contents

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1. Introduction

Many Pacific communities face a daunting challenge to navigate their way to a sustainable and prosperous future as the world advances rapidly into the digital age of human development.

Our submission deems this the *'Pacific Digital Adaption Challenge'*.

Individual communities and nations cannot tackle this challenge alone. The complexities and inter-dependencies across all facets of our modern, global socio-economic system demand a co-operative approach to harnessing digital technologies and innovation.

This is especially relevant to developing and disadvantaged Pacific communities who operate in significantly different social and economic contexts to other regions.

Mechanisms for stimulating and supporting this co-operative approach are a regional imperative.
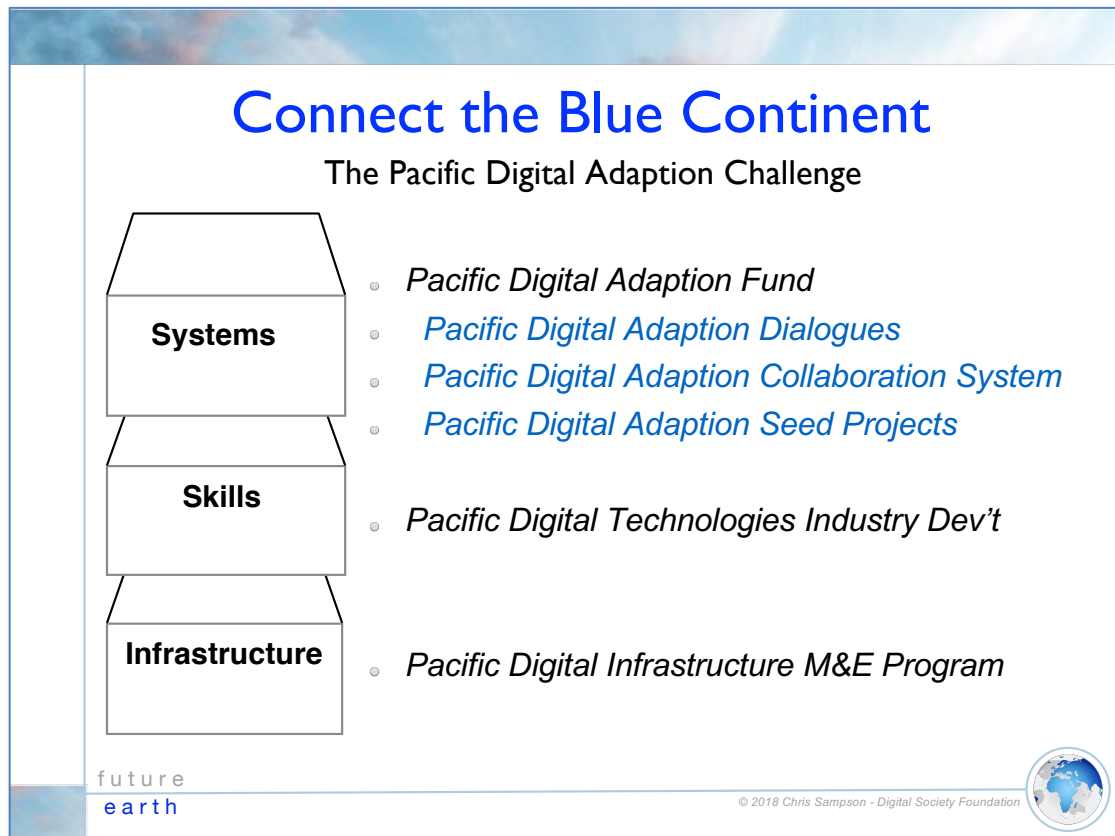
The opportunity is to lift social and economic conditions across the region far more rapidly, effectively, inclusively and in balance with our cultural and environmental responsibilities.

This submission describes a number of inter-related mechanisms needed under three broad headings:

- *Digital **Systems***
- *Digital **Skills***
- *Digital **Infrastructure***

2. Proposed mechanisms:

The mechanisms proposed are inter-dependent and are best understood as a 'stack' as illustrated below:

The following sections summarise these mechanisms, starting with the bottom of the stack – Digital Infrastructure:

2.1. Digital Infrastructure

2.1.1. Pacific Digital Infrastructure M&E Program

Mechanism proposed is a regional program to independently review, monitor and evaluate progress with universal and affordable internet connectivity for all Pacific communities.

The program will particularly examine the state of connectivity for neighbor and outer island communities and remote, rural communities throughout the Pacific.

The program will work collaboratively with industry, academia and government institutions to develop a high-level connectivity masterplan and the progress monitoring framework needed, based on the targets established by the UN Broadband Commission, International Telecommunication Union and the Alliance for Affordable Internet.

Reporting will be delivered via a Pacific-developed, data-driven, online facility for all governments, industry participants, researchers and citizens.

This program will highlight the gaps in digital infrastructure and help to bring together international efforts to close those gaps through appropriate infrastructure finance and developments.

2.2. Digital Skills

2.2.1. Pacific Digital Technologies Industry Development Program

Mechanism proposed is an industry development program to establish a vibrant, collaborative digital technologies industry throughout the region.

Public and private sector organisations cannot harness digital technologies effectively if the local workforce does not have the capacity and capability to provide the technical assistance needed.

Prioritised and aligned national government policies and strong digital technology industry associations are needed across the region to build a confident and locally-empowered digital technologies workforce.

The key differentiator for the Pacific region is the need to ensure a co-operative and collaborative industry is developed to build local ownership, wide participation and culturally-aligned practices across all communities large and small.

Global technology industry partners will connect with the Pacific more effectively through a coordinated, collaborative mechanism that is designed to build local capability and capacity.

National government procurement policies should be aligned to invest directly in local digital technologies start-ups and entrepreneurs to support capability maturity, partnership-building and industry growth.

A collaborative digital technologies industry, set up to operate at a regional level, can share the complexity burden and reduce unnecessary duplication, ensuring healthy competition but releasing the constraining effect of sparse, single-jurisdiction markets. This will enable a positive innovation eco-system to support Pacific-owned digital technologies intellectual property development, utilization and global export participation.

2.3.   Digital Systems

This is the core of the Pacific Digital Adaption Challenge.

All policy challenges are complex systems challenges. All Pacific systems across health, education, public utilities, transport, environmental protection, economic sectors such as tourism and fisheries etc. need to harness digital technologies to lift and keep pace with global competition and citizens' rights and expectations.

A 'digital lens' is needed for each policy area and the regionalism framework itself, to firmly establish the foundations of a digital age Pacific.

The proposed mechanisms to support this are:

2.3.1. Pacific Digital Adaption Fund

A new, international funding mechanism is needed, akin to Climate Adaption funding, which invests in Pacific-based and owned digital technology application, development and innovation.

This fund should bridge the gap between large-scale international development funding and the multitude of small-scale, agile, risk-tolerant and capacity-building projects needed to grow digital capability across the Pacific.

2.3.2. Pacific Digital Adaption Dialogues

Identifying and stimulating inclusive participation in the Pacific Digital Adaption Challenge, especially in the younger generations, local entrepreneurs, innovators and technicians, needs an empowering, confidence-building and self-organising approach, rather than a centralized, bureaucracy-led approach. This will help to build the inter-connected network of relationships and collaborative activities needed for a Pacific-wide digital technologies capability.

Leadership forums throughout the Pacific are already tackling this need to support self-organisation and inclusive consultation. The proposed approach will reflect and extend these efforts to strengthen local ownership and Pacific self-actualisation.

The newly-established **Pacific Connect** program, being pioneered by non-profit organization ICDP and sponsored by the Australian Government, is trialing an

approach to dialoging and network-building in the Pacific which may help to form a basis for scaling and adapting this approach for the Pacific Digital Adaption Challenge.

2.3.3. Pacific Digital Adaption Collaboration System

The complexity of a collaborative approach to harnessing and developing digital technologies across the Pacific requires the effective use of digital technology itself.

A collaboration systems platform is needed. This should be Pacific-based, owned and operated.

Elements of this platform include:

Storytelling

Highlighting inspiring stories of Pacific digital innovators, entrepreneurs, community leaders, technical specialists, teams and individuals who are helping to define and construct a sustainable and prosperous digital age Pacific.

Knowledge-sharing

A digital knowledge management environment to assist the recording, organisation, analysis and distribution of knowledge about Pacific digital technology adoption and development throughout Pacific jurisdictions.

Tacit knowledge exchange

A digital platform to underpin, support and extend relationships built through the dialogue process, assisting self-organisation of teaming and partnering for digital product and service development and implementation across the region.

Big data, analytics and machine-learning

This includes highlighting examples and enabling the sharing of re-usable techniques and systems components for data capture, analysis, visualization and machine-learning that will lift the Pacific regions' capability to manage data-driven, evidence-based policy and co-ordinate international assistance and partnerships more effectively. This should include the data flows needed to optimize visibility and progress towards implementation of all UN sustainable development goals across the region.

2.3.4. Pacific Digital Adaption Seed Projects

A series of initial projects should be started to ensure the Pacific Digital Adaption Challenge is seeded in on-ground action, investment in people and production of actual digital technology assets, rather than endless analysis, discussion and reports. Suggested seed projects should incorporate:

Emerging technologies

Technologies such as blockchain, augmented and virtual reality, sensor networks and the Internet of Things, autonomous transport, digital health devices and analytics, digital education platforms, renewable energy innovations and cloud computing have wide application possibilities for Pacific communities. Seed projects which build capability in these emerging technologies should be established.

Recordkeeping

One of the areas common to all governments is the need for effective recordkeeping, long term retention and appropriate disposal and retrieval of information, incorporating the protection of citizen's rights regarding privacy.

A collaborative project to share technologies and project resources in this area should be established. Exploring the possibilities of using digital technologies such as blockchain to replace older, inefficient systems should be a focus.

The Pacific region can pioneer the use of these types of technologies at a whole-of-community level, helping to invent the future of values-driven, digital age government, society and global/local citizenry.

Land and marine assets – traditional ownership and rights

One of the most sensitive and hard-to-administer challenges in many Pacific communities is the thorny issue of traditional ownership and rights over land and marine assets. Rather than avoiding or deferring this issue, Pacific digital innovators and entrepreneurs should work closely with local leaders, youth representatives and communities to design and deliver digital platforms which address this challenge in a culturally-intact and future-focused way.

Paperless legislatures

Another common challenge across the Pacific is the need to modernize and digitize the operations of parliaments and legislative assemblies at all levels of government. This will substantially improve efficiency, effectiveness and citizen participation in the systems of government, bringing improved social and economic stability.

These inter-related challenges are a small sample of the multitude of projects needed to address the digital divide and navigate a sustainable and prosperous future for all Pacific communities.

3. Wrap up

The regional digital divide across Pacific communities will not close itself. By default, it is widening as other regions around the world progress more rapidly to develop and implement digital technologies which advance their economies and social systems into the digital age.

Long term disadvantage for many communities across the Pacific region is a real risk.

The opportunity to embrace digital technologies and lead a collaborative, vibrant and empowering approach needs visionary regional leadership and collaboration.

Pacific communities have an opportunity to 'leap-frog' more developed jurisdictions by harnessing digital technologies in this way.

Pacific leaders and communities have already shown global leadership in climate change negotiations and adaption mechanisms.

Embracing a digital Pacific can build on this global leadership and represents an investment in Pacific youth and capability – and a confidence in achieving the aspirational vision to be a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity.