

ESSAY

Empowerment through entrepreneurship: ICDP case study of Australia-Pacific cooperation – Presentation on the Blue Economy at Green Rio¹

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Building on practical experience and illustrative case examples, Catherine Fritz-Kalish AM explains how locally led small and medium-sized businesses across the Pacific have collaborated to build networks of support that create economic opportunities and improve livelihoods, with lessons for coastal regions worldwide.

Good afternoon. Hello, Brazil and Blue Economy Rio Summit² participants.

I am Catherine Fritz-Kalish, and I am speaking to you from Australia.

I grew up living very close to our famous Bondi Beach, which is almost as famous as your Copacabana. Growing up by this magnificent ocean, I developed a deep appreciation for the Pacific Ocean's incredible beauty, a healthy respect for its tremendous power and increasing concern for its threatened ecology. I'm lucky to live on the world's largest island continent.

Today, I represent two organisations – the Managing Director of Global Access Partners (GAP) and the Director of the International Centre for Democratic Partnerships (ICDP). I was invited to speak because we have an exciting story about how 'Large Ocean States' of the Pacific work with Australia to develop the region's Blue Economy sustainably.

1. This is an edited transcript of the virtual presentation delivered by Catherine Fritz-Kalish AM, Director of ICDP, on the *Blue Economy panel at the Green Rio Summit on 31 October 2024 in Brazil.*

2. Green Rio / Blue Economy RIO Summit, 2024

My role today is to provide a high-level overview of the Pacific Region's Blue Economy and explore how our experience may be relevant to Brazil's sustainable SME sector.

Please consider how our experience can translate to a similar collaboration between Brazil and the Pacific region. I invite those interested in working with us to build an alliance between Brazil, Australia and the Pacific.

To frame this discussion, let's consider the Australian context. Australia's Blue Economy generates over 229 billion Australian dollars annually and supports over 700,000 jobs across diverse sectors, including offshore energy, fisheries and aquaculture, marine tourism and transport.³

Australia is a global 'blue carbon hotspot', home to 12% of the world's blue carbon ecosystems, which hold between 5% and 11% of global carbon stocks.⁴

However, just like Brazil, our coasts and marine ecosystems face numerous threats—from climate change and coastal development to land-based runoff and direct human impact. As a member of the global Ocean Panel, Australia is committed to sustainable ocean management.

We've also signed the UN High Seas Biodiversity Treaty,⁵ initiated the Sustainable Ocean Plan⁶ and established National Ocean Accounts⁷ to measure policy impact.

Our Blue Economy policy is integral to Australia's commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2030. So, we are working collaboratively with

global organisations who share our values and goals, and we are actively working alongside our First Nations peoples, the traditional custodians of our country. One example of this kind of collaboration includes the Saltwater People Alliance, which aims to address the power imbalances faced by Traditional Owners. This initiative supports the preservation of their Sea Country, helping to record and share the cultural significance of these waters.

The Pacific Island Nations' context vastly differs from Australia's regarding Blue Economy development. In total, 14 Pacific Island Nations are spread across thousands of islands.

The Pacific Islands are at the forefront of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution despite contributing less than 0.03% to global greenhouse emissions.⁸ It is the most aid-dependent region in the world – around 6.5% of the region's GDP is derived from foreign aid, rising to almost a third for small island nations, once Papua New Guinea and Fiji are excluded.⁹

Three-quarters of the Pacific population live in rural areas and rely on agriculture and fishing for their livelihoods.¹⁰ And for those outside the agricultural sector, men outnumber women in paid employment by 2 to 1, and men earn 20–50% more than women.¹¹

So, considering this context, what are some solutions to Blue Economy challenges across the Pacific? How do we develop long-lasting, meaningful connections between the people

3. DCCEEW, 2025a; Parliament of Australia, 2022

4. DCCEEW, 2025b

5. DCCEEW, 2024

6. DCCEEW, 2025a

7. ABS, 2022

8. SPC, n.d.

9. Lowy Institute, 2023

10. ACIAR, 2021

11. World Bank, 2022

of the Pacific and Australians to build a sustainable Blue Economy and make a real impact?

Our solution rests on supporting sustainable small and medium-sized businesses to grow, and we do that through the ICDP – an organisation formed seven years ago to answer the Australian Government's call for solutions to strengthen relationships and people-to-people links between Australia and the Pacific Island nations.

ICDP is an independent, non-profit organisation that aims to build businesses that engage Australian and Pacific Island entrepreneurs. ICDP started as a collaboration between government and industry. It resulted from GAP's 'Second Track' process of bringing a group of stakeholders together with a common problem and developing a solution.¹²

The ICDP network has grown to over 1,300 members, primarily from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu and Australia. Sixty per cent of our members are women entrepreneurs.

Our objectives include supporting entrepreneurs through capacity building and seed funding, enhancing collaboration in sustainable development, promoting Pacific Island women as leaders and deepening understanding between Australia and Pacific Island nations.

ICDP has also established 10 hubs across the Pacific where entrepreneurs can meet physically and virtually. We have local Hub coordinators who help us run capacity-building workshops and network events, promote quarterly newsletters and offer mentoring opportunities.

I have spent many hours talking with Pacific-based entrepreneurs, and last month, I facilitated a dialogue with representatives from six different

Pacific countries about how best to develop the Blue Economy in the region.¹³ We had robust, honest discussions to advise this Summit on the reality of the ground across the Pacific. We discussed the challenges and successes of the region.

Let me share their thoughts with you.

Taholo Kami, a well-known oceans expert from Fiji, explained that in terms of the Blue Economy and aquaculture, most ministerial meetings in the region are still dominated by the tuna industry, but building viable as well as vibrant Large Ocean States will require economic diversification and official representation from local communities as well as tuna industry interests. The sea cucumber – *bêche-de-mer* – is a billion-dollar market in China, for example, and could be one of several high-value fisheries developed in the Pacific over the next 10 years.

Tourism remains the region's other primary industry, and Cook Islands, Fiji, Samoa and Palau offer high-performing examples of success. Fiji is now exploring ways to shift the focus from highly commercial, Western-owned cruise lines to 'small house' stays that benefit local communities and allow more people to experience the natural beauty of these islands.

Local, regional and international shipping and transportation offer another avenue for growth. Vanuatu and Tuvalu are already encouraging the use of non-fossil fuels for marine transportation, ferries and fishing boats. Most small ships still rely on simple two-stroke engines and international assistance to adopt more efficient four-stroke, and eventually, electric motors will help drive this transformation.

12. Blackshaw, 2020

13. ICDP, 2024

Growing regional geopolitical rivalries put Pacific Island nations in a stronger position to leverage partnerships and attract investments in ways not possible five or ten years ago. While securing investment without surrendering sovereignty will be a balancing act, an increasing international willingness exists to fund sustainable development and climate projects.

There is a real opportunity to support and grow Pacific Island businesses, and at ICDP, we are working on the ground to do that with entrepreneurs.

Salote Waqairatu-Waqainabete, Managing Director of Landscaping Solutions and ICDP Hub Coordinator for Suva, Fiji, is one of those entrepreneurs. Having built a successful landscape supply company in Suva, an interesting observation from Salote was that while she appreciates the importance of digital literacy beyond online marketing, balancing business compliance, new technology, and financial probity with traditional obligations and priorities remains an issue, as she feels obligated to meet local criteria of success as well as Western measures.

Josh Forde from digital consultancy firm Ackama in New Zealand has operated in the Pacific for the last seven years. The company sees ample opportunities for its services in developing the region's Blue Economy. Rather than focus on geopolitical and governance concerns, the company believes that recent investment in better broadband links across the Pacific will help businesses and communities connect and take advantage of these new opportunities more agilely than countries chained to legacy infrastructure.

During our dialogue, Cam Neil, Founder of Red Hat Impact, commented that developing an

innovative finance framework like the one he is creating could help cooperatives of smaller firms develop into de-facto larger businesses, as they did in Western countries two hundred years ago. Such cooperatives can expand to a much larger size while maintaining their membership model and retooling this historic Western model could create new opportunities in the Pacific today.

So, opportunities are diverse, and local cultural and social needs must be considered.

The best way to illustrate our collaborative work at ICDP and the opportunities for sustainable business development is through a case study example.

One of the ICDP companies is called *Less than Container Load (LCL)*. My colleague James Kana is the founder and Director. He realised that small cocoa growers in the Solomon Islands could not fill a whole shipping container independently, so it was too expensive to ship their products to export markets. In response, James developed a seamless way to optimise their use of shipping containers by bringing all the growers together, sharing freight and logistics costs, and filling a container together.

Once he had developed his solution plan, James was introduced to the ICDP network, which opened a network he could use for funding and support. Seed funding from the Australian government in 2022 enabled the pilot and business plan development. More support from the ICDP Network developed the idea, and James' network developed it even further. *The Less than Container Load* pilot was a success.

But that is not all. *Less than Container Load* has diversified because of global environmental regulations. Growers wanting to export to Europe must comply with new climate impact standards,

which require tracking emissions and impact reports, so LCL could also develop a solution for this.

LCL is developing a digital platform to help organise and aggregate small farmers' produce to improve the efficiency and increase the scale of their trade. LCL continues to expand its network and is looking for further opportunities with local government, international partners, and the private sector.

ICDP has supported James, connected him with partners and supporters, and helped with capacity building.

This is one example, but many have come from collaboration through Global Access Partners, ICDP and the ICDP Pacific network.

ICDP's initiatives in the Pacific highlight the benefits of collaboration in addressing pressing challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

ICDP works with local governments, local businesses, local service providers and global NGOs and funding sources such as the Australian Government and the US Agency for International Development, and we are exploring locally led commercial solutions to Pacific issues, focusing on innovative and sustainable business practices.

As we look to the future, I encourage collaboration between Australia and Brazil's public and private sectors. What can we learn from each other? How can we leverage frameworks such as the G20, particularly the Oceans 20 Engagement Group, to enhance our efforts? Could we build on the successes of ICDP to foster similar projects with Brazilian SMEs?

Together, we can drive meaningful change and create a sustainable future for our oceans and the communities that depend on them.

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JOURNAL OF BEHAVIOURAL ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Volume 7, Numbers 1-2, 2025



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