PACIFIC Security College

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POLICY PAPER SERIES

How an energy transition commissioner can secure the Pacific's renewable energy future

Cleaner power, with the people

Author: Dr Hugo Temby

In conversation with:
Cherol Ala Ianna
Toleafoa Annie Tuisuga
Associate Professor Paul Munro

About the author

Dr Hugo Temby
Research Fellow
Pacific Security College

Hugo is an interdisciplinary social scientist with research interests in energy social science, development anthropology, and Pacific studies. His PhD research investigated the social worlds of renewable energy projects in Pacific Island countries, with a view to supporting more inclusive and equitable approaches to project design and delivery. Other research projects have centred on the experiences of Australian householders with new energy technologies, and explored the cultural aspects of electric vehicle adoption.

Before joining the Pacific Security College at the Australian National University (ANU), Hugo held leadership positions with the Australian Capital Territory's City and Environment Directorate and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. He has also lived and worked for more than a decade in the Blue Pacific, in Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Vanuatu.

Hugo holds a Master of Applied Anthropology from ANU and a Bachelor of Music (Hons) from the University of Melbourne, and is a member of the Australasian Science and Technology Studies Network, the Australian Anthropological Society and the Australian Association for Pacific Studies.

About the Pacific Security College

The Pacific Security College serves members of the Pacific Islands Forum through learning and training, policy engagement and regional collaboration.

We have a holistic approach to Pacific security, encompassing traditional and non-traditional security issues, taking our lead from the Forum's *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* and the *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration*.

We work in a spirit of service and collaboration with our Pacific stakeholders in national governments, universities, civil society organisations and regional institutions.

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- The 2026 Middle East crisis highlights the need for cheaper, more secure and cleaner energy in Pacific Island Countries – but delivering the regional roll-out of renewables needs more resourcing, coordination and trust.
- A new Pacific energy commissioner could be a game changer.
- Leaders should aim big and empower the new commissioner to act as an impartial energy adviser to Pacific governments and communities, and to better coordinate the organisations that support them.
- The overarching aim should be to facilitate a more timely and equitable energy transition.

Executive summary

Successive fuel shocks from ongoing conflicts in Europe and the Middle East underscore the inherent risks of continued fossil fuel reliance – in the Pacific as elsewhere.

The push by Pacific governments to increase their renewable energy deployment has the potential to reduce these risks and deliver several wider benefits.

But calls to accelerate the transition have not yet been met with sufficient coordination or resourcing. As a result, early efforts have been uneven and have sometimes led to poor economic, environmental and social outcomes.

A new energy commissioner, whose terms of reference will be considered by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders in 2026, could be a game changer.

Leaders should aim big.

The commissioner should be an impartial energy adviser to Pacific governments and communities, and better coordinate the organisations that support them. Their aim should be to facilitate a more timely and equitable energy transition. Leaders should also consider a title for the commissioner that reflects the role's holistic brief. This paper recommends *Pacific Energy Transition Commissioner*.

Four proposed priority areas will help the commissioner address common issues in the renewables roll-out and ensure greater benefits for Pacific energy users. These are: securing investment, delivering innovative solutions, promoting more sustainable management of renewable energy assets, and advancing inclusive approaches to the design and delivery of renewables projects. Most will require close coordination with other agencies.

The commissioner must also be set up to succeed through fit-for-purpose governance arrangements.

A multi-year, untied funding contribution of FJ$18 million in total over four years should be considered, sufficient for the commissioner, a professional staff and a modest program budget. Staff should include a lead with expertise in each of the four priority areas (investment facilitation; procurement/logistics; engineering/technical; and community energy/energy access) as well as an office manager.

Building on experience with the Pacific Ocean Commissioner, the new commissioner should report directly to leaders and join existing Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific coordination mechanisms. Leaders should also consider establishing a broad-based advisory body, modelled on the Pacific Ocean Alliance, to advise the new commissioner on emerging issues.

To build regional ownership, the new commissioner must connect with their wider constituency, including Pacific energy users such as householders and businesses.

The model for the new commissioner should also evolve over time in response to changing circumstances and stakeholder feedback. Leaders should consider in the future whether to task the commissioner with an independent redress mechanism for community members who have been negatively impacted by energy infrastructure.

Energy is ultimately important because it can support people's needs and aspirations.

So it is crucial the new commissioner is equipped, and resourced, to address the transition holistically: as a social as well as technical and economic concern.

Securing the Pacific's energy future requires no less.

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Director's introduction

I am pleased to launch the latest policy paper from the Pacific Security College on an issue of growing importance in the Blue Pacific.

This paper sets out some of the critical considerations in the establishment of a new Pacific energy commissioner, one of the key proposals at this year's Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting.

As with the Pacific Ocean Commissioner, the establishment of an energy commissioner would reflect the importance of an issue particularly close to the heart of Pacific citizens and governments.

The region's energy transition has been a priority for many years. Pacific governments have set ambitious targets for their transitions to renewable energy to strengthen energy security and independence, and support sustainable development.

But there is a new sense of urgency to this work, following the recent fuel supply disruptions as a result of the conflict in the Middle East.

Few communities have been untouched by the effects of the fuel crisis. Shortages and price volatility have highlighted the region's reliance on imported fossil fuels.

The crisis has far-reaching consequences for national and regional security, including implications for national resilience, essential services, and the wellbeing of Pacific people.

The proposal for a Pacific energy commissioner reflects the recognition that collective action and regional coordination can help address these challenges.

In this paper, Hugo Temby explores the potential role and mandate of such a commissioner – or the *Pacific Energy Transition Commissioner* as he suggests – and recommends the position be empowered to support a more timely and equitable energy transition.

He examines how the commissioner could support coordination across the region and overcome some of the barriers to the widespread adoption of renewables, delivering bnefits for Pacific governments, and ultimately, Pacific communities.

Our policy papers are intended to support regional conversations and we are grateful to the experts who have responded to both the sector-specific dimensions of the role, and also broader considerations for effective policy development and implementation. I thank Cherol Ala Ianna, Toleafoa Annie Tuisuga and Associate Professor Paul Munro for their contributions.

The Pacific Security College policy paper series seeks to encourage informed debate, dialogue and policy development. The views expressed are those of the author and respondents, and do not represent the official positions of the College, our university, or our funder.

Our policy papers *do* reflect our strong belief that effective policy emerges from engaging with a diversity of perspectives, and from exploring how we can work together to realise the shared vision set out by Forum Leaders in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

Professor Dave Peebles
Director
Pacific Security College
August 2026

Towards a resilient, renewable Pacific future

Pacific policymakers have long understood that the benefits of renewable energy systems – renewables – do not stop at climate action. They are also a play for resilience and human security.

Implemented wisely, renewables have considerable potential to support the region's energy access aspirations. Across the Blue Pacific Continent, small-scale solar and microgrid technologies are already delivering power to people and places that traditional grids have not reached.

The 2026 Middle East conflict, and the global energy crisis it unleashed, is just the latest reminder that the Pacific's reliance on expensive, unreliable fossil fuel imports is a source of energy insecurity. By contrast, renewable energy can, in theory, be made more cheaply and securely closer to home.

Recent research suggests that smaller-scale renewables such as solar and microgrids will be more resilient in the face of climate hazards (Okonkwo et al. 2025 and Xu et al. 2024). More frequent extreme weather is already straining Pacific power grids, and the threat to such infrastructure is projected to increase from mid-century (IPCC 2022).

Phasing out dirty energy will also lead to wider societal benefits, including better health outcomes. The production and use of fossil fuels degrade local environments and are a major driver of preventable death (Vohra et al. 2021).

So it is no surprise Pacific governments have set some of the world's most ambitious renewables targets, including several national and regional commitments to 100% renewable energy generation in the coming decade.

But as Pacific energy and transport ministers agreed at their 2026 meeting in Port Moresby, the region's renewables ambition has not yet translated into results 'on island'.

Several common issues are at play:

- There is a **widening gap between needed and actual investment**, due partly to difficulties accessing finance, and partly to a lack of 'shovel ready' projects.
- Projects that do secure investment must then overcome several **delivery risks**, including during procurement and installation.
- Once built, projects can be **challenging to integrate, operate and maintain** in Pacific contexts, with several projects operating well under capacity.
- And recent research has shown that projects have sometimes been rushed to completion with insufficient attention to the **needs and aspirations of energy users** (Anantharajah and Setyowati 2022).

The question remains: how might Pacific governments realise a more inclusive transition? And how might the regional architecture better support this endeavour?

> … a 100% renewable energy future for the Blue Pacific [is] critical to achieving energy security, reducing vulnerability to external shocks and advancing climate and development priorities.
>
> – Pacific energy and transport ministers, *Manubada Call to Action*, 2026

Why a new commissioner is needed

Energy transitions are complicated everywhere.

But the sheer size and diversity of the Blue Pacific Continent introduce additional considerations that have not always been fully accounted for by energy planners and businesses.

This is where the new commissioner comes in.

First proposed in 2023, the idea is the commissioner, with a team of experts, could focus global attention on the region's energy transition and help uplift national planning efforts.

Another meaningful contribution would be to better coordinate the many actors already involved in the sector (see figure 1).

The commissioner would also complement the Pacific's leadership in related policy spaces. These include the push for meaningful climate action under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, for climate accountability at the International Court of Justice, and for 'last mile', Pacific-led climate solutions via the Pacific Resilience Facility.

But what models for a commissioner might meet the moment? And in a crowded policy space, what should they do to add most value?

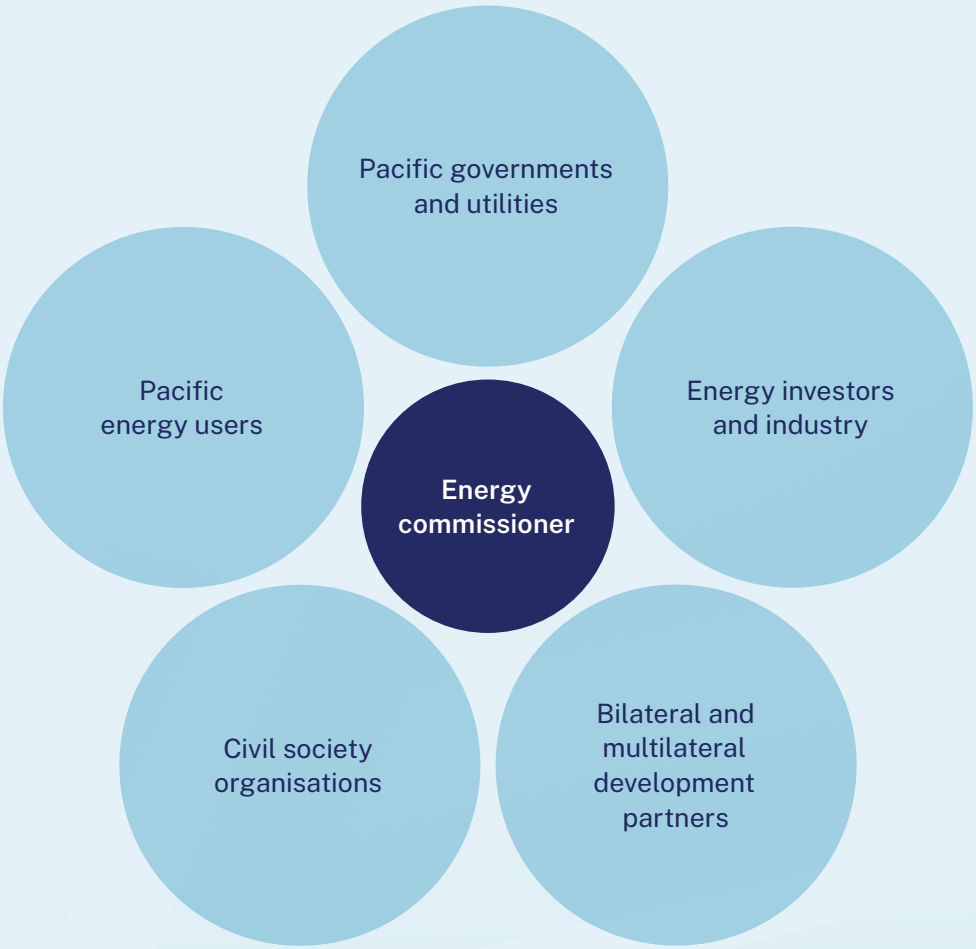

Figure 1. The Pacific energy commissioner could help coordinate the region's many energy actors

An impartial energy adviser to governments and communities

A hypothetical Pacific Island Country has received an unsolicited proposal from a multinational energy company to develop and operate a large solar and battery project.

On paper, the project is compelling. The company suggests it will bring energy prices down, and they intend to train and employ several locals during construction and maintenance. Crucially, the project will help the country achieve its ambitious renewable energy targets, which have been lagging.

But the proposal also raises difficult questions. How might the government ensure the contract price and conditions represent value for money? Will the chosen technology suit local conditions? Is the grid able to accommodate new variable generation? Who is responsible if something goes wrong?

More fundamentally: is more generation even the top priority for the country's stretched energy system?

Grappling with these questions, the government asks its bilateral and multilateral development partners for advice. But some of these partners have an interest in the project going ahead as it would contribute to internal performance indicators.

Fortunately, the government can access impartial advice from the Pacific Energy Transition Commissioner.

The commissioner and their team have been working with other Pacific energy actors – including Pacific energy users – and have developed resources to help governments navigate exactly these questions. They are also able to connect the country's energy planners with other regional experts.

Later in the year, at the biannual meeting of the multi-stakeholder Pacific Energy Transition Alliance, the commissioner hosts a *talanoa* with the energy industry to advocate for better practice project development in Pacific contexts.

Recommendations for policy design

As the Māori proverb *kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua* argues, before embarking on any journey, it is essential to understand the past. Accordingly, the following recommendations for policy design – which speak to the new commissioner's mandate, priority areas and governance – are grounded in a review of similar models from the region and further afield (see annex A on page 24).

Lots in a name: mandate, aim and title

This paper recommends an ambitious mandate for the new commissioner, who should be the **principal energy adviser** to Pacific governments and – crucially – to Pacific communities.

Their aim should also be ambitious: to facilitate a **more timely and equitable** energy transition.

Leaders should also consider a title for the new commissioner that reflects this holistic brief. This paper recommends ***Pacific Energy Transition Commissioner***.

It is vital the Pacific's response to the 2026 energy crisis is consistent with its longer-term plans to address climate change. Both crises are caused by fossil fuels and can only be solved by decarbonisation. But it is essential that Pacific peoples, who have contributed least to climate change, are not saddled with the cost of climate action.

For this reason, as well as policy coherence, the commissioner should retain the mandate to consider energy access, affordability and reliability, as well as the social impacts of decarbonisation policy. This would also be consistent with the 2023 leaders' decision to establish the commissioner, which envisages a twin focus on renewable energy and a just transition away from fossil fuels.

Potential priority areas

Four priority areas should be considered for the new commissioner. These address some common issues in the energy transition and will help ensure greater benefits for Pacific energy users.

1. **Securing investment.** Under this priority area, the commissioner could advocate with global, regional and local partners to improve the amount and quality of financial support for appropriate renewables projects. The commissioner could then help coordinate existing efforts to strengthen energy planning and project preparation capabilities, in the longer term.
2. **Delivering innovative solutions.** Here, the commissioner could collaborate with the Pacific Community and national governments to identify innovative, implementable regional solutions to common delivery, procurement and logistical challenges for renewables projects. These could include joint procurement, standardised contracts, pooled technical capacity, and refurbishing existing infrastructure.
3. **Promoting more sustainable management of renewable energy assets.** Work to improve the sustainable management of renewables infrastructure is led by national energy planners and utilities, with support (for grid-tied systems) from the Pacific Power Association. There may be scope for the commissioner to support this work through advice and resources on best practice grid integration, operating and maintenance models, and equipment decommissioning and end of life arrangements.
4. **Advancing inclusive approaches to the design and delivery of renewables projects.** There is less existing work under this priority area. Here, the commissioner could, with the Centre for Sustainable Futures at the University of the South Pacific and other experts, develop models to increase Pacific peoples' access to, ownership of, and benefits from renewable energy. This work should also consider:
   - principles for, and approaches to, inclusive, whole-of-island energy planning (see UNSW and UNDP 2025)
   - whether a Pacific renewables redress mechanism or a developer rating scheme may be warranted to improve industry behaviour, and options for delivery
   - resources and capacity building for Pacific energy users, workers, landowners and other renewables stakeholders. Ideas include installing, operating and maintaining solar, batteries and electric vehicles; negotiating with developers; and where to go with a complaint.

Setting up for success: governance arrangements

The commissioner must also be set up to succeed through fit-for-purpose governance arrangements.

1. **Resourcing.** A multi-year, untied funding contribution of FJ$18 million in total over four years should be considered, sufficient for the commissioner, a professional staff and a modest program budget for policy development, engagement and running costs. The staff should include a lead with expertise in each of the four proposed priority areas (investment facilitation; procurement/logistics; engineering/technical; and community energy/energy access) as well as an office manager.
2. **Reporting.** If the new commissioner's mandate is to provide independent, impartial advice to Pacific governments and communities, it follows they should report directly to leaders. Similar arrangements are already in place for the Pacific Ocean Commissioner, who reports to leaders through Pacific Islands Forum and other arrangements.
3. **Coordination**. The new commissioner should join existing Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific coordination mechanisms, as has the Pacific Ocean Commissioner. Leaders should also consider establishing a broad-based body, modelled on the Pacific Ocean Alliance, to advise the new commissioner on emerging issues. Perhaps named the *Pacific Energy Transition Alliance*, the body should include relevant representation from traditional leaders, civil society, industry and academia.
4. **Engagement.** To build regional ownership, the new commissioner must connect with their wider constituency – notably, including Pacific energy users such as householders and businesses. Engagement efforts should include deliberative Pacific dialogue, or *talanoa* (Park et al. 2023), and localised material to better support the energy transition in each Forum member country.
5. **Learning.** The new commissioner's model should evolve over time in response to changing circumstances and stakeholder feedback. Leaders should consider in the future whether to task the commissioner with an independent complaints handling or redress mechanism for community members who have been negatively impacted by energy infrastructure. Such a mechanism could draw on comparable experiences, including with the Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, the Green Climate Fund, and the multilateral development banks.

The opportunity ahead

Energy matters because it can support people's needs and aspirations.

So it is crucial the new commissioner is equipped, and resourced, to address the transition holistically: as a social as well as technical and economic concern.

At the 55th Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting in Palau, leaders have an opportunity to shape the energy transition for the coming decades.

It will take both ambition and inclusion to secure the Pacific's energy future.

In conversation with...

Cherol Ala Ianna
Director-General,
Ministry of Youth, Justice and Community Services, Vanuatu

As we witness the hardening of global geopolitics and the severe economic shocks of the 2026 Middle East crisis, it is clear that energy security is no longer just a development goal – it is a cornerstone of our national sovereignty. If we are to truly realise the vision of an 'Ocean of Peace' and protect the Blue Pacific from being marginalised by external strategic competition, we must break our crippling dependence on imported fossil fuels. A Pacific energy commissioner is not merely a technical necessity; it is a vital strategic shield that will anchor our energy independence directly within our regional peace architecture, ensuring our transition is dictated entirely on our own terms.

From a governance perspective, the greatest threat to our green transition is not a lack of political will, but the chronic fragmentation of donor-driven projects and overlapping institutional mandates that stretch our microstates to their limits. I believe the commissioner must be structurally empowered to cut through this noise, enforce the *Manubada Call to Action*, and serve as a fiercely impartial adviser to our governments. We need a central authority with the political weight to vet complex international commercial agreements and align the unique capabilities of our existing regional organisations into a single, unyielding front that protects Pacific interests from lopsided or predatory arrangements.

Ultimately, the success of this office will hinge on trust and its ability to bridge the gap between high-level diplomacy and our customary landowning communities, where the physical reality of the energy transition actually takes root. When our leaders gather in Palau this August, we must resist the temptation to create another toothless bureaucratic layer and instead aim big by granting this commissioner a comprehensive mandate to coordinate, advocate, and protect. By institutionalising an independent champion who respects the Pacific Way, we can transform our fractured energy vulnerabilities into a unified, self-sustaining zone of long-term resilience and peace.

Toleafoa Annie Tuisuga
Manager, Environment and Renewable Energy Division, Scientific Research Organisation of Samoa

This paper is a timely read, effectively linking a governance idea – a new Pacific Energy Transition Commissioner – to something that matters to Pacific people right now: energy security in a time of global fuel shocks. The paper also does not shy away from what is not working in the Pacific energy space. It is upfront about the problems: insufficient investment, projects that run into trouble during procurement, systems that are built but underperform once running, and projects pushed through without properly consulting the communities they are meant to serve.

The comparative review of similar models is equally valuable. Placed side by side, the comparison makes one thing clear: models without real authority tend to build trust slowly and can stall when disputes arise, whereas models with greater resourcing and a broader mandate can achieve more, but require stronger political will to get established.

That's really where ownership becomes central, and it warrants close attention. As the paper acknowledges, the role will only succeed if it becomes more than a regional office producing reports that go unread. The reporting line matters. Having the commissioner report directly to leaders, rather than being absorbed administratively into the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific, is meant to safeguard independence, but only if leaders actively use that channel rather than letting it become a formality. The proposed advisory body is where genuine community ownership will either take hold or fail to materialise. The paper rightly emphasises that engagement must involve authentic *talanoa* rather than one-directional information sharing, the essential distinction between a commissioner genuinely of the Pacific and one merely operating within it. Should that body become dominated by technical experts and industry representatives, with too few traditional leaders, landowners and civil society voices, the commitment to serving communities will not hold up in practice. This has been an important lesson gained through our experience with energy projects in Samoa.

The proposed funding model is also telling – an untied funding of FJ$18 million over four years is meant to stop any one donor from having too much influence over the commissioner's agenda. But this depends on Pacific countries contributing meaningfully themselves, rather than relying on one or two big partners to cover the cost, since funding and influence tend to move together. The Pacific Power Association offers a useful positive precedent here. Established in 1992 and funded through member subscriptions rather than external donors, it is governed by a board drawn from the region's own utility chief executives, giving Pacific institutions direct control over its direction.

Finally, a question worth sitting with: given how uncertain things are right now with fuel and energy access, there's a tension the paper points to but doesn't fully resolve, between speed and proper consultation. Fuel shocks push governments to get renewables built fast, while the paper's push for equity and inclusion calls for a more deliberate approach. The commissioner is positioned to reconcile these pressures, a genuinely difficult task. It is worth asking which side the commissioner would take when these pressures collide directly, for instance, where a donor-funded project is fast-tracked during a fuel price spike. Insulating the role from donors' own targets is the right instinct, but that independence will be tested hardest precisely when energy insecurity is greatest, which, as the paper itself notes, is now.

Associate Professor Paul Munro
Environment and Society Group,
University of New South Wales

Dr Temby's contribution arrives at the right moment, and its central recommendation is highly pertinent and should receive strong support. The proposal for a Pacific Energy Transition Commissioner, and particularly one empowered to offer impartial energy advice to governments and communities across the region, is an exciting prospect. It builds on existing Pacific-wide initiatives, such as the *Framework for Energy Security and Resilience* in the Pacific, that have sought to articulate a collective Pacific voice on the region's energy futures. A commissioner offers a way to give that voice institutional weight.

The case for impartiality is critical, as the diversity of the region makes general advice close to useless. Grid electricity access ranges from under 20% of the population in some Pacific countries to near universal coverage elsewhere. Some national systems already draw heavily on renewable generation, while others remain almost entirely dependent on imported diesel. Countries approaching universal access still face some of the highest tariff rates in the world, while supply chains are highly exposed to global fuel shocks, as the 2026 crisis has acutely demonstrated. There is no single Pacific energy problem, and so there can be no single prescription. What is needed, and what the proposed commissioner could provide, is advice that starts from national and community priorities, rather than from a template.

This matters because donor funding for new energy projects often presents a quandary for Pacific governments. The need for infrastructure is real and pressing, but donor initiatives do not always align neatly with national priorities. Project design is frequently shaped as much by funding cycles, procurement rules and donor agency performance indicators as it is by the needs of the energy users. As such, Dr Temby's hypothetical of the unsolicited solar and battery proposal will be uncomfortably familiar to many energy planners in the region.

The consequences of this misalignment are visible on the ground. Research across the Pacific, including work I have been involved in, has repeatedly found that poorly implemented projects can sometimes create more burdens than benefits: systems installed without maintenance arrangements, spare parts that take months to arrive, and infrastructure abandoned well short of its design life. Pacific utilities and energy departments genuinely value the support they receive. Yet they often find that reliance on fossil fuel imports has been replaced by a heavy dependency on external technical expertise, given the complexity of many modern renewable energy technologies. As such, decarbonisation on these terms is at risk of exchanging one form of dependency for another.

This is why the paper's attention to sustainable management and inclusion is so important, and why support mechanisms must address the whole life of an energy system rather than just its installation. Repair, maintenance, spare parts logistics, local technical training and end-of-life planning are where energy transitions succeed or fail in Pacific contexts, and they are precisely the areas that project-based funding often handles poorly. A commissioner with a mandate to convene, advise and advocate across these unglamorous but essential areas could shift practice in ways that more investment alone cannot. The ethical adherence to an equitable transition as well as the proposed redress mechanism also warrants serious consideration as communities affected by energy infrastructure currently have few avenues for recourse.

One note of caution. The commissioner must add capacity rather than another layer of bureaucracy for already strained national administrations, and their independence will depend on adequate, untied resourcing of the kind the paper recommends. If these conditions can be met, the opportunity is immense. Energy transitions are social as much as technical undertakings, and Dr Temby's framing of Pacific energy users as the commissioner's constituency, rather than as beneficiaries of projects designed elsewhere, is the core ethos for the realistion of an equitable energy transition.

Contributor profiles

Cherol Ala Ianna
Director-General, Ministry of Youth, Justice and Community Services, Vanuatu

Mrs Ala serves as Director-General of Vanuatu's Ministry of Youth, Justice and Community Services. She was previously Director-General of the Prime Minister's Office from 2022 to 2025, and Director-General of the Ministry of Internal Affairs from 2016 to 2022. Mrs Ala was Chair of Vanuatu's National Recovery Committee, which is responsible for managing the recovery process after a disaster, until 2025 and remains a member of the committee.

Mrs Ala has consistently championed inclusive and sustainable approaches to governance in these roles. She has played a pivotal part in shaping national policy, coordinating interagency responses to emerging security challenges, and strengthening institutional resilience in alignment with the Boe Declaration's expanded concept of security. She is a member of the Pacific Security College Advisory Board.

Toleafoa Annie Tuisuga
Manager, Environment and Renewable Energy Division, Scientific Research Organisation of Samoa

Ms Tuisuga leads the Environment and Renewable Energy Division at the Scientific Research Organisation of Samoa, which aims to research, develop and implement solutions that address environmental challenges and promote sustainable energy practices in Samoa.

She is committed to advancing scientific knowledge and applying innovative strategies to protect our natural ecosystems, while promoting Samoa's and the Pacific's transition to cleaner and more efficient energy systems.

Ms Tuisuga holds a Master of Science (Environmental Science) from Victoria University of Wellington.

Associate Professor Paul Munro
Environment and Society Group,
University of New South Wales

Dr Paul Munro is Scientia Associate Professor in Human Geography with the Environment and Society Group at the University of New South Wales. His research examines forest histories and political ecologies of energy, with empirical grounding across sub-Saharan Africa, including Uganda, Ghana, Malawi, Zambia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. From 2009 to 2018 he co-founded and ran Energy for Opportunity, which delivered more than 200 renewable energy projects across West Africa, ranging from small-scale solar installations to village-level mini-grids.

He is the author of *Colonial seeds in African soil* (Berghahn 2020) and, with collaborators, *Electricity capital and energy poverty* (Palgrave Macmillan 2025), the latter a global study of energy poverty and electricity infrastructure. More recently his work has turned to the Pacific, with a focus on Vanuatu, where he co-leads *Fixim Sola*, an off-grid solar repair training initiative, and has written on electricity access and infrastructure in the region, including leading the report *The last nautical mile* (UNDP 2025).

Annex A:
Review of similar models

This paper is informed by a review of four similar models from the region and further afield: the Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, the Mekong River Commission for Sustainable Development, Australia's Net Zero Economy Authority, and the Pacific Ocean Commissioner.

Some are more obviously relevant than others, but all deal with some combination of Pacific regionalism, energy and/or climate transition, and transboundary resource management.[1]

Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner

The Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner (AEIC) was established in 2024 by the Australian energy minister, expanding on the earlier National Wind Farm Commissioner, which operated from 2014. The stated aim of the commissioner is "helping to make the energy shift smoother and fairer".

To do this, the commissioner helps Australian community members with complaints and enquiries about new and existing renewables projects. They also provide advice and resources on best practice approaches (especially regarding complaints handling and community engagement) to governments, industry and landowners. Finally, the commissioner provides plain language information on the energy transition and specific renewables projects to the public. The commissioner has no role in investment facilitation, infrastructure planning or technical advice.

1 For each model, the paper analyses its aims, functions, gaps and lessons learned. The analysis draws on websites and publicly available reports; conversations on background with relevant experts; and academic literature, where it exists.

The commissioner, who reports to the Australian energy minister, is supported by a small office of seven staff within the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. The team includes an assistant commissioner, an executive officer and assistant, a case handling unit, and a communications and policy unit.

According to expert informants and a 2018 review of the AEIC's predecessor, the model has contributed to improved government and industry complaints handling and community engagement practices.

There are several relevant lessons from the AEIC experience.

First, **community engagement is necessary, but not sufficient, for social licence**. Australians want clearer information about the energy transition – a challenge given growing misinformation – and better engagement from project proponents. But they also, reasonably, expect renewables projects to deliver real benefits to host communities.

Second, the AEIC's **lack of powers has been a help and a hindrance**. The commissioner has no coercive power to enforce mediation outcomes or overturn planning decisions. Sometimes this has allowed parties to explore solutions in an open dialogue. Other times it has further eroded trust.

Finally, as **independence is vital** in a role of this nature, the AEIC accepts no industry funding.

Mekong River Commission for Sustainable Development

The Mekong River Commission for Sustainable Development (MRC) was established in 1995 under a treaty between lower Mekong countries Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The commission aims to promote and coordinate the sustainable management and development of the Mekong's water resources, for the benefit of signatory countries and wellbeing of their people.

The functions of the commission include knowledge exchange, convening, and technical and scientific monitoring. Importantly, the commission is both a technical and policymaking organisation: its decisions are binding on members, if not always in practice. It does not have a direct investment facilitation function.

The commission is led by a chief executive officer – there is no commissioner – who reports to a governing ministerial council. The commission has a large secretariat of more than 60 fixed-term staff, organised into administrative, monitoring, planning, technical, and executive divisions.

The commission has achieved some notable wins since its establishment, including an improved technical understanding of the Mekong's water management, and improved planning and coordination between the four signatory countries.

Three lessons stand out, which might be instructive despite the different context.

The first is the **importance of inclusion**. The commission has been held back by the non-participation of the other Mekong states, Myanmar and China, though it is hard to see how this will be resolved soon.

Second, **improving donor coordination is very difficult**. While the commission has successfully strengthened regional coordination, it has not materially improved coordination with bilateral or multilateral donors.

The final lesson is the **tension between integration and sovereignty**. The commission has so far been unable to resolve disputes over dams – its thorniest issue – because, as with the AEIC, it cannot compel parties to use its consultation or conciliation processes.

Net Zero Economy Authority

Australia's Net Zero Economy Authority (NZEA) was established in 2024 by parliament. It aims to support "a better future for industrial regions, communities and workers in the net zero economy".

NZEA has a strong focus on workers and businesses at risk from the energy transition, helping them to access training, advice and redeployment programs. The authority also helps the wider community in affected regions, including through strengths-based planning, policy coordination, and investment facilitation. This includes working with First Nations communities to help them participate in, and access benefits from, the transition. Finally, the authority works with trusted local voices to provide clear information on the transition.

The chief executive office of the authority – as with the MRC there is no commissioner – reports to a board and oversees 150 staff in three divisions responsible for worker transition, regional transformations, and policy and communications.

While the NZEA is still at an early stage, it is possible to identify lessons from its experience.

First, a **broad remit and comprehensive approach** are beneficial for organisations attempting to shape transitions. This should include both fostering new opportunities and identifying and managing risks, which are experienced differently by different communities.

Second, **policy coherence is key** – within and across governments. In Australia, as in the Pacific, there are multiple agencies with a stake in the decarbonisation effort. Coordination and, where relevant, harmonisation are challenging, but crucial.

Finally, the success of the energy transition **depends on equity and inclusivity**. Public support for renewables relies on leaving no one behind – that is, on a just transition towards them. Broad partnerships, place-based approaches and community involvement in technology governance will also be required.

Pacific Ocean Commissioner

The Pacific Ocean Commissioner (POC) was established in the early 2010s by Forum Leaders. The aim, broadly, was to improve focus on, and governance of, ocean priorities through strengthening policy coordination, coherence and delivery at the national, regional and global levels.

To advance this aim, the commissioner and their small office undertake engagement and advocacy, policy and legal advice, and information sharing and reporting. They do not provide or coordinate technical advice, which is the responsibility of the Pacific Community. Nor, to date, have they played a major role in private sector coordination or investment facilitation.

Initially, the commissioner and office sat within the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), with the commissioner's role undertaken by the PIFS Secretary General. The role is now filled substantively, and the office has grown to 11 staff, including a senior adviser and experts in oceans policy, law, management, coordination, engagement, and finance.

The commissioner reports directly to leaders through the Forum process, to Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) agency heads, and, for administrative matters, to PIFS. The commissioner receives additional technical support from CROP agencies and, relevantly, can explore and assess emerging issues with the multi-stakeholder Pacific Oceans Alliance.

Three lessons stand out.

The first is the need for **role clarity in crowded policy spaces**. The commissioner's successful coordination of the Pacific's engagement with the United Nations negotiations on marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction is a noteworthy example of what can be achieved with focus, resourcing and expertise.

The second is the need to **keep evolving**. Policy independence has been bolstered by the creation of a dedicated commissioner, but aspects of the model, like its legal structure, powers and role in the CROP system, may require further consideration.

The final lesson is the need for **adequate, sustained resourcing to deliver a complex portfolio**. The work of the commissioner and office is diplomatically and technically demanding. And the need for this work is only growing with the increasing prominence of ocean issues. It has been critical to ensure the model has sufficient resources, including human resources, for success.

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Pacific Security College
JG Crawford Building 132A
1 Lennox Crossing
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: psc@anu.edu.au
Website: pacificsecurity.net

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