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Communities Acting for  
Sustainability in the Pacific  
Special Issue, guest edited by  
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INTRODUCTION

## Introduction: Communities Acting for Sustainability in the Pacific Special Issue

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### Abstract

This special issue of *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* emerged from discussions about the need to focus research on the diversity of the Pacific and the sustainability of Pacific peoples and communities for future generations. The issue brings together articles by researchers from Australia and New Caledonia with interests in sustainability from the disciplines of linguistics, cultural studies, social science and history in and across the Pacific region. The papers are drawn primarily from presentations at a symposium on 'Pacific communities acting for sustainability,' held at the University of Wollongong in July 2016, which involved academics from Australia and New Caledonia.

### Keywords

**Sustainability; Pacific; Australia; New Caledonia; Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea**

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Pacific communities engage in a variety of activities to sustain their social, political, linguistic and cultural heritages as well as their survival. These activities differ across time, space and geographical setting. That is they are, to use the words of Nicola Marks (in this issue), ‘dynamic and changing’ rather than static. The activities to do with sustainability can be compulsory or voluntary, but their overarching aim is to enhance survival and the relationships and networks within and between communities. Indeed, there is a growing body of interdisciplinary research from the sciences, social sciences and the humanities—see reviews by McGrail (2011); Peterson (2016); Bennett *et al.* (2016)—that identifies and endorses practices in communities that promote engagement, continuity and a healthy legacy for future generations.

The concept of sustainability has been defined differently depending on the discipline. However, over the last two decades or so sustainability has increasingly become associated with the environment; but it does not have to be so. Irrespective of the definition or discipline, the underlying theme is the maintenance of a resource of some type, for the future. The resource can be natural, for example water, actual communities, languages, and cultures and practices that assist in the ongoing maintenance of the resource. The United Nations 1987 Brundtland Report, also known as ‘Our Common Future,’ referred to sustainable development as meeting ‘the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (United Nations 1987: 16). While this definition remains workable, the premise of the report was that sustainable development required ‘not only a new era of economic growth for nations in which the majority are poor, but an assurance that those poor get their fair share of the resources required to sustain that growth. Such equity would be aided by political systems that secure effective citizen participation in decision making’ (United Nations 1987: 16). Unfortunately, this situation has not eventuated. In this issue, Nicola Marks and Edward Wolfers both refer to the Brundtland Report in their discussions of ‘caring’ as a sustainable concept and concerns about attaining sustainability in the Pacific respectively. Other initiatives, such as UNESCO’s Man and the Biosphere Programme, which was launched in 1971, clearly anticipated the need to address human development with the needs of future generations in mind, and advocated innovative and interdisciplinary means to do so (Koshy *et al.* 2008: 5).

The articles in this issue cross disciplinary and methodological boundaries to analyse the challenges and opportunities of sustainability for communities in the Pacific region. The authors ask questions about how Pacific communities cope with and comprehend the social, political, environmental and cultural changes that affect their values, lifestyle, identities, memories, and the legacies those communities will leave for future generations. The papers focus on communities in New Caledonia, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Australia

to highlight the diverse means, approaches and forces by and/or against which communities are attempting to 'maintain' themselves as sustainable entities.

In her contribution 'Population, Reproduction and IVF in New Caledonia: Exploring Sociocultural and Caring Dimensions of Sustainable Development,' Nicola Marks critiques the United Nations' Social Development Goals (SDGs). She advocates for the integration of the concept of 'caring' in sustainable development and a consideration of sociocultural practices as dynamic and evolving rather than static. Moreover, while Marks supports the publication of the new, broader SDGs, at the same time, she suggests that the United Nations needs to more overtly recognise multiple normative visions for development and sustainability. Marks proposes 'caring sustainable development' as one way forward. Using New Caledonia as a case study, she argues that 'caring sustainable development' could assist in overcoming the complex historical and colonial population divides and differences of approach between the Indigenous Kanak population and representatives of the French administration. In her research on the use of IVF, Marks argues that while IVF may seem 'untraditional' if sociocultural practices are thought of as static, it is not however the case when sociocultural practices are recognised as dynamic and changing.

Pascual's article, 'Le Musée du bagne en Nouvelle-Calédonie et ses constructions identitaires' [The Penal Colony Museum in New Caledonia and its Identity Constructions] compares representations of convict history in contemporary museum spaces in Australia and New Caledonia. Her comparative and in-depth analysis draws on historical and museographic methodologies of data collection to examine the discourses promoted by the Hyde Park Barracks Museum in Sydney and the Nouville penal colony museum in Nouméa. In particular, Pascual asks how the migrant past is connected to convict memory in public exhibition spaces. She argues that museums have a political role to play in bringing communities together and encouraging an acceptance of the convict past as part of each country's identity in order to build a sustainable legacy for future generations.

Anu Bissoonauth and Nina Parish's study, 'French, English or Kanak Languages? Can Traditional Languages and Cultures Be Sustained in New Caledonia?', analyses language use patterns in New Caledonia and attitudes to multilingualism and the maintenance of ancestral cultures as the French territory prepares for the referendum on self-determination scheduled before the end of 2018. They compare the results of two fieldwork trips carried out in urban and rural regions respectively to show a generational shift in the language habits and attitudes of New Caledonians of Melanesian descent. Importantly, they argue that while French is New Caledonia's dominant lingua franca, English is more valued than ancestral Melanesian languages by the younger generations because it is associated with international mobility and access to the English-speaking Pacific. Moreover, the authors show that while the older generations perceive the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, which houses a Research and Heritage Department, as a symbolic traditional space for Melanesian art and culture, the younger generations view it as a modern place associated with contemporary art and outdoor performances. Importantly, these potentially contradictory views are not at odds with each other but operate to support the work of the Cultural Centre.

Rowena Ward's article 'The Internment and Repatriation of the Japanese-French Nationals Resident in New Caledonia, 1941–1946,' considers how changes to the French nationality law under Vichy France had negative impacts on the Japanese community in New Caledonia. As Ward shows, the changes to the nationality laws enabled members of the Japanese 'enemy' to be arrested in New Caledonia and then transferred to Australia for internment. This in turn facilitated their repatriation to Japan rather than New Caledonia after the end of hostilities.

As a consequence, the Japanese community in New Caledonia, which had first emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, effectively disappeared. In short, Ward shows how government policies and international conflicts can adversely affect the long-term sustainability of a community.

In their paper, 'Challenges for Sustainable Communities in the Solomon Islanders: Food Security in Honiara and Livelihoods on Savo Island,' Nichole Georgeou and Charles Hawksley examine the challenges faced by a community as it engages with the emerging market economy in Solomon Islands. Based on focus group research, they highlight the diverse practices of and challenges facing different communities of Savo Islanders in accessing and engaging with the Honiara Central Market (HCM), the largest fresh food and vegetable market in Solomon Islands. The authors emphasise the importance of gender roles among Savo Islanders in influencing their engagement with HCM and how decisions on the use of the cash are made. Moreover, they highlight how different crops are produced for sale at the market in relation to specific practices of consumption and how these decisions interact to influence the long-term sustainability of the communities on Savo Island.

Finally, as a concluding statement to the special issue, in 'Sustainability: Suspensions Concerning Attainability, with Particular Reference to the Pacific,' Edward Wolfers provides an overarching historical analysis of the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development in the Pacific. He argues that before colonisation traditional Pacific societies had their own sociocultural practices to ensure the sustainability of the natural environment and of trade. He asserts that sustainability for the colonial governments in these islands was linked to preparing Pacific islanders for self-government and independence and not for the preservation of their local traditions. Concerns for sustainability in the newly independent countries, therefore, were left to international organisations and to foreign aid donors. Wolfers highlights a political shortfall in health, education, economy and government services that is undermining the sustainable development in Tonga, Samoa and Papua New Guinea. He recommends that future academic research on sustainability in the Pacific should focus on what is happening on the ground and not be restricted to government discourses and policies.

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