

# ITC Policy and Practice in the Fiji Islands

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of Internet access in the Republic of the Fiji Islands in 1995, Internet policy has been developed in the country in the context of both national and regional development. Fiji has a significant tourism sector—15% of GDP in 2003 (Fiji Tourism Forum, 2003)—and Web-based information is an increasingly important source for potential visitors. The country also aspires to lead digital commerce in the region. In August 2004 the Qarese government affirmed its commitment to the “Bangkok Agenda Action Plan on Broadband and Information, Communication & Technology (ICT) development” (Bangkok Agenda Action Plan, 2004), an agreement calling for government action at a national, sub-regional and regional levels to encourage broadband access and usage. In addition to having one of the largest economies in the South Pacific, Fiji is host nation to a number of regional inter-governmental agencies, and this combination of national and regional interests is driving the rapid elaboration of ICT policy and utilization.

The government established a Department for Information Technology & Computing (ITC) in 1966 and for three decades was principally concerned with the provision of server capacity to government departments and agencies (<http://www.itc.gov.fj>). Policy development for e-governance was hindered in the late 1990s by the inability of the government’s key computing departments to retain sufficient numbers of qualified staff. This human resource issue was linked to political crises in the country, which resulted in highly qualified citizens emigrating, and to the growth of IT opportunities in the private sector. Training of local staff was supported by JICA (Japanese International Cooperation Agency) and the Government of Singapore. Key sectors making use of computing services at this time included Customs and Inland Revenue, Education, Treasury, Taxation, the Electoral Commission, and the Criminal Justice System (Information Technology and Computing Services, Department of Finance, Annual Report 1995-96).

Pressures from providing day-to-day services to government, as well as the need to address the “Year 2000” issue prevented any activity on ICT policy during the period 1997-99 (Information Technology and Computing Services, Department of Finance, Annual Report 1997-99).

## NATIONAL E-POLICY

By 2000 most government Ministries and departments in the capital, Suva, were connected to the Internet services provided through this Department. The South Cross cable was implemented in 2000, delivering strong connectivity to the rest of the world. In December 2001 the government’s ITC Department commissioned an “e-Government Strategic Plan” to provide a “whole of government” IT plan. This document proposed a 10-year development plan to put in place fundamental ICT policies, procedures and infrastructure, including whole of government policies, a disaster recovery plan and facility, service level agreements, a strategic review process, a fibre ring for government departments, intranet, links to regions, and competitive international linkage (Data #3, eGovernment Strategic Plan, 2001).

The 10-year plan established as three main themes e-development (establishing Government policy for all IT Development areas in Fiji); e-government (Infrastructure development for the civil service) and e-business (IT development involving the private sector) (Information Technology and Computing Services, 2001 Annual Report, p.10). The Government of Fiji established an ICT Council, which has commenced developing a policy framework. In 2002 the Council reported to the second Prepcom for WSIS that the Vision of the National ICT Strategy Plan was “To Develop Fiji into a Vibrant and Dynamic Pacific ICT Capital with a Thriving Digital Economy and IT Empowered Citizens.” (Manager ITC Services, 2002). That report indicated that the government’s National ICT Strategy Plan had four themes: E-government (as the responsibility of ITC Services, [www.itc.gov.fj](http://www.itc.gov.fj)); E-commerce (Ministry of Commerce); E-personal (Ministry of Education); and ICT Industry (Fiji Trade & Investment Board, [www.ftib.org.fj](http://www.ftib.org.fj)).

At this stage the Council was ready to broaden consultation to include more non-government stakeholders. A workshop on “Facilitating National Information and Communication Technology Development Strategies” held in June 2002 identified six projects worth pursuing immediately: PC recycling, national awareness campaign, rural telecom and telecentre development, policy development, e-government, and reform of the education curriculum. On the basis of such wider consultations and its

own further thinking, the ICT Council issued a draft “Fiji Information and Communications Technology Policy” in 2003 the ICT Department’s Web site began to include some substantial content. Although it lacked any content on its “e-government” page ([www.itc.gov.fj/e\\_government.html](http://www.itc.gov.fj/e_government.html)), it provided between one-third and one-half of the laws of Fiji in digital format ([www.itc.gov.fj/lawnet/alpha\\_list.html](http://www.itc.gov.fj/lawnet/alpha_list.html)).

## REGIONAL E-POLICY COMMITMENTS

Further ICT developments in Fiji are concerned with ICT for the Pacific region. The three principle drivers of these regional initiatives are the Pacific Islands Forum, agencies of the United Nations, and the University of the South Pacific.

In 1999 the Pacific Islands Forum adopted a Vision for the Pacific Information Economy, and developed a regional approach to telecommunications regulation and tariff levels through the Asia-Pacific Telecommunity, the Pacific Islands Telecommunications Association, and the International Telecommunications Union. A framework for development of ICT in the Pacific region was outlined in the 2002 regional ICT strategy, the Pacific Islands Information and Communications Technologies Policy and Strategic Plan (PIIPP) (CROP ICT Working Group, Information and Communication Technologies for Every Pacific Islander, 2002). This “Pacific Umbrella Initiative” brings together the Pacific Island Countries and territories,<sup>1</sup> donor countries,<sup>2</sup> and intergovernmental agencies<sup>3</sup> to promote the use of ICT in support of sustainable development for the people of the Pacific Islands. The project is being coordinated by the ICT working group of CROP (CROP, 2002).

This ICT working group emerged in 2001 from the merging of IT-PACNET, a technical cooperation group involving IT managers within the CROP agencies that commenced in 1995, and the Information Sector Work Group, which dates to 1998. At its inaugural 2001 meeting the ICT Working Group identified three objectives:

- Review, clarify and provide advice on the development of priorities in the information sector;
- Determine areas of complementarity and overlap and any potential gaps in the coverage of existing and proposed regional activities and initiatives in ICT; and
- Recommend to CROP implementation procedures for enhancing coordination and cooperation, and for ensuring that priority areas are adequately addressed.

This coordinated effort made possible the intergovernmental “Pacific Islands Regional ICT consultation,” in Suva in April 2003, in preparation for opportunities to take part in global dialogues under United Nations auspices. The Tokyo Declaration prepared at the Asian regional consultation prior to the World Summit for the Information Society included an “Islands Paragraph” pleading the special circumstances of Small Island Developing states:

*Special circumstances of regional Small Island Developing States: These countries, vulnerable to environmental hazards, and characterized by small, homogeneous markets, high costs of access and equipment, human resource constraints exacerbated by the problem of “brain-drain,” limited access to networks and remote locations, will require particular attention and tailored solutions to meet their needs.* (Paragraph 11, section 2, page 4 of SWIS/PC-2/DOC/6-E)

Complementing the CROP-based collaboration described above, the Fiji-based UNDP/UNOPS program has developed the “e-Pacifika Project” to facilitate the development of National ICT Strategy Plans for Fiji and various other Pacific Island countries. Other important regional organisations working on ICT development in the Pacific include the Pacific Islands chapter of the Internet Society ([www.picisoc.org](http://www.picisoc.org)).

Another significant actor in ICT development in the Pacific region is the University of the South Pacific, a University with 12 member countries spread throughout the region. The USP has an active plan to promote ICT capacity, which includes the construction of an ICT facility on its Suva campus. In 2004 the University succeeded in breaking free of Fintel’s monopoly hold over Internet access in order to gain access to the Australian universities AARNET network, and to make progress with the development of its ICT centre. In May 2004 the University responded to the Fiji Government’s ITAC Draft policy “e-Fiji: the Future Online.” While supportive of the general thrust of the draft policy, the University’s submission calls for increased emphasis on the application of ICT to human and social development. When looking at the potential for application of ICT in the improvement of health and education, policy makers need to examine more closely their regulatory and legal frameworks. The costs of telecommunications are unnecessarily high in the Pacific Islands, due to the establishment of monopoly practices. As the island nations are made up of archipelagos having distinct transport and communications challenges, ICT policies need to be established at the outset that aid in reducing rather than multiplying the digital divide. The USP framework thus encourages

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