

# Melanesian Spearhead Group: The last 25 years<sup>1</sup>

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Sir Michael Somare

Much has been said about the achievements of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) over the last few months as we celebrated our 25 years anniversary in our various capitals. I will therefore not dwell much on them today. However, it is fair to say that from what started as a political sub-grouping, MSG's cooperation now covers most areas of human pursuit and endeavour. It is no exaggeration that MSG's cooperative efforts in political and security, trade and economic, social, cultural and sports activities have increased and strengthened in ways that our founders never imagined.

I am told that even Honourable Ezekial Alebua admitted recently that when they first met in Goroka in 1986, he never imagined the MSG would grow from a simple political 'pressure group' to a vibrant and successful organisation as it is today. We are the only sub-regional grouping within the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) area that has a formal secretariat and headquarters.

## MSG into the Future

I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to share my thoughts and listen to the Eminent Persons Group established by our leaders to draw up a vision and future plan for our organisation. I was encouraged by what I heard: MSG must be inclusive. It must be compassionate. It must have integrity.

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<sup>1</sup> Keynote address by Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare on the occasion of the Melanesian Spearhead Group 25th anniversary celebrations in Noumea, New Caledonia.

All our efforts in regional cooperation and integration must mirror these principles. Just as important is the principle that MSG must seek to help itself first. MSG must only seek outside assistance if its own resources are inadequate or its capacity is found wanting. Experiences in our region and elsewhere suggest that this approach provides some insurance against outside influence — influence that could easily lead to distortion of MSG's priorities and development agenda.

## **MSG must be in the Driver's Seat**

As we search to find areas of common interest, to pursue our quest for more enhanced cooperation and deeper integration, we must ensure that our national resources and energies are not wasted. Our MSG Secretariat, that is entrusted to help us in our undertaking to better serve our peoples, must be appropriately resourced to discharge its responsibilities. To help improve communications and implementation of the work program, MSG members should seek to open resident representative offices in Port Vila.

The last 25 years have given us valuable experience on collective action in pursuit of identified development goals — be they political, economic, trade, social, cultural, etc. That many of our neighbours, sub-groups and Melanesian communities elsewhere have expressed an interest in joining MSG is a strong validation of how well we have organised ourselves. The interest shown manifest the value others attach to MSG's role in the pursuit of common development objectives. It is no exaggeration that some critics that initially thought the Melanesian Spearhead Group enterprise was overly ambitious now consider MSG cooperation as a viable enterprise in sub-regionalism in the Pacific.

MSG is fortunate in that it can, and must, extract lessons from the workings of PIF and learn from the experience of other similar organisations elsewhere. We must avoid creating new MSG institutions to provide a public good or service if another regional or national institution is already providing them. It is no epiphany to suggest that we would be better off accessing the services from the existing regional or national institutions. What might be necessary, though, is to channel more resources to these institutions to bolster their capacity to better serve our collective interests and needs.

We must only create new institutions either because none exists to provide that public good or service, or if by doing so, it adds considerable value to existing efforts.

If experience elsewhere, by similar organisations like ours, demonstrate that binding ourselves to decisions would improve implementation of our initiatives then we should find ways to legally bind ourselves to the decisions we make. This would help strengthen MSG's credibility.

## Political and Security

Political and security concerns, namely decolonisation of New Caledonia and cessation of nuclear testing in Moruroa were the main reasons MSG was formed. New Caledonia's right to self-determination, and independence, championed by the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS), was perceived as not getting the serious attention it deserved. In addition, the then MSG leaders felt that some regional partners were undermining efforts to adopt a stronger position within the PIF.

New Caledonia's reinscription as a non-self-governing territory within the purview of the United Nations Committee of 24 is largely due to the change in approach and the concerted efforts of the MSG. It is also arguable that the Noumea Accord, and the processes leading up to it, would not have come about without the deliberate international campaign mounted by the MSG countries in support of New Caledonia's right to self-determination. These included persistent representations to the metropolitan power and the United Nations.

The Noumea Accord offers a glimmer of hope for the Kanaky people and their aspirations. It would be a sad indictment on MSG's resolve if we do not ensure the FLNKS is positioned to win the provincial elections next year. MSG has that obligation and, as a member, FLNKS is entitled to expect nothing less from the other MSG members.

MSG's responsibility extends beyond the FLNKS leadership of today. MSG owes it to the FLNKS leaders of yesteryears whose pioneering work has helped us come this far. At this juncture, I wish to pay tribute to the likes of Uregei, Machoro, Tjibaou, Yéwéné Yéwéné, and the young Kanaks in Ouvéa who paid the ultimate price for championing justice and the emancipation of the Kanaky people. MSG countries owe it to the Kanaky people to remain true to their commitment to defend and promote independence as the inalienable right of indigenous peoples of Melanesia as espoused in the agreement establishing our organisation.

Political and parliamentary instability in MSG countries continue to undermine our efforts in promoting our region as a region of opportunity, stability and prosperity. More energy must be directed in the next 25 years towards strengthening our governance institutions and good governance processes.

It is worth clarifying, though, that in many instances in MSG, political and parliamentary instability occur as a result of the democratic process at play, in particular the exercise of democratic rights. They are not indicative of the absence of democracy in MSG but simply reflect symptoms of weak governance institutions and processes.

As a group, the West Papua issue will continue to test MSG's commitment to defend and promote independence as the inalienable right of indigenous peoples of Melanesia as well as to promote their human rights. There is strong and growing support among the MSG peoples for West Papua's membership to MSG and West Papua's aspirations to self-determination.

Obviously, Papua New Guinea government's position on this issue will very much weigh on MSG's considerations in terms of how it deals with West Papua. For me personally, I believe that MSG should actively make representations to Indonesia to address the human rights abuses in West Papua. MSG must also involve West Papua in some of MSG's cultural events, sporting activities and technical skills exchanges. West Papua after all has a significant Melanesian community.

But, should the MSG leaders decide on granting West Papua 'membership', in one form or another, it should be done only on the basis that it is a Melanesian community and not because MSG countries recognise West Papua as a sovereign independent state.

MSG already has a non-state entity as a member in FLNKS. A not too dissimilar arrangement can be found in Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) where Taiwan and Hong Kong, regarded by many as part of China, participate as partners in development with independent sovereign. The point here is that we have to be inventive. Again, should a decision be made for West Papua to be a 'member' of MSG, it is not hard to imagine this serving as a venue for both Indonesia and West Papua to engage in dialogue and regularly brief MSG countries of developments in West Papua.

Fiji's current political situation is another case that will continue to test MSG solidarity as a group. It is no secret that regional decisions and approaches to Fiji have caused polarisation of views in the PIF. Even within our MSG grouping, I can sense a tenuous unity of purpose on Fiji. There is a real risk of a chasm developing between MSG members if we are not careful. I have always maintained that Fiji requires our understanding and support.

Time should not be the essence for Fiji to return to elective government. Ensuring Fiji develops a strong culture of enduring democracy, with robust democratic institutions, is most important. Melanesian values of dialogue and patience, although protracted in process, have the greatest potential to bring

about the changes we want in Fiji. This is in stark contrast to the effects that condescending tactics and heavy handed punitive actions advocated by some have had on Fiji. I would also suggest that the changing geopolitical situation in the region is a result of this.

MSG must also resist the temptation of using high 'moral ground' reasons to justify calls for it to criticise Fiji's slow return to parliamentary democracy. Although pious principles are noble they are very often void of reality on the ground. MSG needs to be pragmatic in its approach to Fiji.

With regards to the issue of nuclear testing, MSG will need to continue to be interested in the transshipment through our waters of nuclear weapons and nuclear waste material.

We must be vigilant over the mechanisms established to compensate coastal states in the event of disasters. Even with all the advances made in technology, disasters will happen and we need to ensure provision of assistance is predictable, swift and adequate under these mechanisms.

The interest shown and the entry by non-traditional powers in our region will inevitably reconfigure the geopolitical landscape and usher in new security challenges. But the notion of security extends beyond the realms of external physical threats to territorial integrity and sovereignty. Globalisation has given birth to new security issues. The resulting better communications, and easier movement across national borders of capital, goods, services and persons, has brought along with it challenges in cybercrime, money laundering, illicit cross-border trade, human trafficking, health, etc. Lack of food, absence of proper sanitation, inadequate housing and unemployment are security threats in themselves.

Another security issue concerns our porous borders. Lack of national capacity to undertake effective surveillance, means that our rich marine and land resources may be exploited in ways that are unsustainable. Even if they are developed within the legal limits there is no guarantee that fish-catch data, forest-harvest figures and mineral-export statistics reveal the true picture, thus denying us optimum benefits from our resources.

These sets of challenges I have just described require us to address them collectively as MSG and as a region. They know no borders.

Global warming and sea level rise is posing serious, if not imminent, danger to the very survival of our people on our coastlines and the low-lying islands in our region. This threat scenario calls for MSG to commit itself, and lead the way, in undertaking sustainable development practices. Having the largest landmass

in the PIF region — 99 per cent (excluding Australia and New Zealand) — MSG countries have a moral duty to resettle climate refugees from the other small island countries of the Pacific.

## Economic and Trade

Our cooperation in trade and economic activities has become somewhat the talking point of many of our colleagues in the region. And rightly so! It is the only regional trading agreement that is working in the Pacific. MSG must always remind itself of the initial cynicism which accompanied the reactions of many of our regional partners when we concluded a trading agreement with only three items to trade. The announcement generated considerable scepticism. Some, less generous, even suggested that the idea to trade with only three items was bordering on delusional.

I only belabour this point, not to disparage our critics, but to encourage us to draw inspiration from this experience as we embark on more enhanced cooperation and greater integration. There is nothing wrong with having a dream. Nor is it silly to be ambitious. MSG efforts in collective bargaining, joint provision of certain public goods and services, and general regional cooperation and integration will always attract its antagonists. But should we allow this to determine what we can and cannot do? I think the answer is obvious: we cannot and we must not!

MSG intra-trade continues to grow. Currently all items traded do not attract tariff in Fiji and Vanuatu. Papua New Guinea only has a negative list of three items and Solomon Islands is working on reducing its tariffs by 2017, a differentiated treatment granted to it by the other members because of its least developed country status. MSG countries' trade with the outside world is also growing. This is an indication of the positive growth experienced by the MSG over the last few years. There is strong indication that these growth trends will continue.

But let us not delude ourselves. It would be naïve to think that trade liberalisation, or regional cooperation and integration, are without perils. For the future, the challenges that MSG will need to address include diversifying our economic activities, growing the SMEs' (small, and medium-sized enterprises) share of our economies and further developing our export capability.

We must aggressively create an enabling environment for investment by providing reliable and affordable infrastructure, such as public utilities. This might require time-bound affirmative action by our governments to allocate resources to the development and roll-out of public goods and services to the rural areas where a large part of our populations reside.

New Caledonia, from where a member of our group comes, remains outside the MSG Trade Agreement. This is an anomaly that requires correcting. With a bit of innovation, MSG can extend the benefits of the trade agreement to the New Caledonian business community. An idea worth considering is for parties to the trade agreement to conclude a protocol with FLNKS. This protocol can provide the framework for the business community in New Caledonia to benefit from the provisions of the MSG Trade Agreement.

## Social and Humanitarian

MSG countries, despite their best efforts, still have data showing their social indices to be less than enviable. Thus, improving health, education, water, sanitation, transport and communication facilities must continue to receive our serious attention. But more importantly, MSG needs to ensure that these public goods and services are extended to reach and cover our rural populace and disadvantaged communities.

## Cultural, Traditional and Sporting

The Framework Treaty on the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture signed in 2011 is a good starting point for MSG.

The Melanesian Cup must be revived and made more permanent on the calendar of MSG. I am happy to note that New Caledonia will host the Melanesian Cup next year. The Melanesian Festival of Arts must continue to be a major event for MSG. Papua New Guinea plays host to this event next year. We must ensure that this occasion provides the opportunity for our peoples to have exchanges with a view to promoting better appreciation of the different Melanesian cultures and traditions. The educational value of these exchanges must be exploited to the maximum by ensuring that both the young and old form part of our national delegations so that the old can impart traditional knowledge to the young.

Many of our sacred cultural properties were illegally exported and are currently being held overseas in museums and private collections. It would help with national efforts if MSG were to develop a common strategy to address this issue of restitution. These sacred objects of art, in some cases human remains, need to be brought back home to rest. Adequately resourcing our museums and cultural institutions to research, document, preserve and promote our cultures and traditions would ensure that our future generations continue to have a Melanesian identity. Just as important is the need to develop appropriate

curricula to teach in our schools. Traditional institutions, such as the customary chiefs, and customary practices, such as reconciliation ceremonies, can be better leveraged for policy dissemination and conflict resolution.

## Conclusion

MSG has come a long way from its humble beginnings in Goroka. But we certainly have not reached the 'promised land' that our people deserve and expect us to deliver. The Kanaky peoples' dream of emancipation has not been realised yet. As we go forward, we must not forget that there are perils associated with regional cooperation, regional integration and trade liberalisation.

We must therefore recommit ourselves to the goals and objectives set by our leaders. There is need to redouble our efforts towards greater cooperation and integration within our national boundaries, between ourselves and with our brothers in our region.

MSG cooperation and integration has been successful because there are willing partners determined to share resources, best practices and, in certain instances, prepared to extend differentiated treatment to one another in recognition of their peculiar development needs.

I would further propose that the bigger and more well-endowed of the MSG countries, like Papua New Guinea, must accept asymmetric responsibilities if MSG cooperation and integration is to be sustained. Those well off in our group must be prepared to make sacrifices, forego certain short term benefits, for the common good and the long-term solidarity of MSG.

MSG must provide the leadership in advancing wider regional interests and concerns. It must provide the building block for wider regional cooperation and economic prosperity. Our interests are mutually reinforcing. The willingness to extend a helping hand must continue to guide MSG's approach to regional cooperation. In fact, I would venture to suggest that this sense of compassion should underpin our every effort in regional cooperation and integration.

As such, MSG must, wherever possible, employ its size and strength in the service of the wider region, especially the small island states. An MSG without the Pacific is the weaker, just as a Pacific without the MSG is the poorer. At all costs we must resist the temptation of being inward looking — there is so much to be gained from being inclusive.

The future of MSG is destined to be nothing but better. We must aim to make MSG the paragon of Pacific sub-regionalism. Together we have defied the odds and together we shall triumph.

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