

# FOREWORD

For over 25 years the International Centre for the Legal Protection of Human Rights (INTERIGHTS) has been committed to advancing human rights through international and regional mechanisms. Yet the majority of the world's population has no access to such systems. This includes the Pacific Islands Forum region, a vast geographical area embracing some 18 countries and 34 million people. This, coupled with the relatively low regional ratification rate of UN treaties (although that is hopefully beginning to change as illustrated by Samoa's announcement prior to our conference), means that if a victim of alleged human rights abuses cannot obtain redress at the domestic level they have nowhere to turn. The result is denial of justice and impunity for offending states.

Through my work and discussions with human rights activists in the region over a number of years, as part of INTERIGHTS litigation and capacity building work, I have become aware that there is an increasing groundswell that the status quo cannot continue. The challenge is how to convert desire for change into a practical agenda for action. As some of the articles in this collection highlight, there have been a number of previous unsuccessful attempts to produce a human rights treaty and mechanism for the Pacific region. However, as authors also stress, the current political climate, coupled with an increasingly vocal civil society, has the potential for a different outcome.

This collection of articles, skilfully edited by my conference co-organiser, Dr Petra Butler, is the product of a rich discussion of regional civil society actors, academics and international experts. It took place in Samoa between 27 and 29 April 2008. The articles provide an excellent overview and analysis of current human rights issues and challenges – both domestic and regional – together with strategies for addressing them. However, they cannot fully convey the collective enthusiasm and momentum of those three days in Apia to work together on initiating much-needed reforms.

In addition to Petra and her colleagues at the Faculty of Law, Victoria University of Wellington, I would like to thank our hosts and fellow co-organisers, the Attorney-General's Office of Samoa, for providing such an excellent foundation for a successful event, together with our funders without which the event could not have taken place. In particular, on behalf of INTERIGHTS, I would like to acknowledge the continued commitment of the Human Rights Unit of the Commonwealth Secretariat to advancing human rights in the Pacific region. Finally, I would like to thank all of the participants, some of whom travelled many thousands of miles to attend.

When Petra and I first thought about organising such an event we wanted it to be more than an end in itself – even though readers will hopefully find the content presented here of interest – but also a platform for further action. To that end many of the participants are currently engaged in seeking to secure the changes that the region so desperately needs. I am confident that they will succeed and that millions of people will ultimately have the first new human rights system of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a system that both reflects the particular challenges of the Pacific and provides them with improved access to justice.

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February 2009