

Justice in the Pacific improved

PACIFIC – Pacific chief justices are contemplating the future of the region's judiciary as a five-year development programme draws to a close.

The Pacific Judicial Development Programme (PJDP) was established to improve the quality of justice in the region.

At least three-quarters of the people working in the judiciary in the Pacific are lay people with little or no legal qualifications whatsoever, RNZI reports.

For the past five years the Pacific Judicial Development Programme, funded by New Zealand and implemented by the Australian Federal Court, has been working to develop and equip these court actors with the necessary tools to do their jobs well.

The programme's team leader Dr Livingston Armytage said this has been done through regional and in-country training, capacity-building and mentoring within respective jurisdictions and the developing of on-line training toolkits that can be

accessed as and when required by court workers.

"What we have been aiming to do is improve the quality of justice across the Pacific in the 14 countries in which we work. What this means really is a whole lot of things. But one of them is that the courts obviously work more efficiently and effectively in administering justice," Dr Armytage said.

"But also that the community is more empowered and more confident to approach the courts to seek redress for their problems of injustice whatever they may be."

The programme winds up in June and while it is still not clear what exactly will be taking its place.

An interim body is to be launched in July while a new design for the future of the initiative is prepared.

The chairman of the Programme's executive committee, Samoa's Chief Justice, Patu Falefatu Sapolu says there is much more to be done to improve the

quality of justice in the region.

"The needs that existed under PJDP, even though most of them have been satisfied, there are still challenges that remain to be dealt with.

"And given the size of the region, the diversity of the people and the challenges involved and the magnitude of the task we will be working in close consultation with MFAT on the contents of this new programme when a design document has been prepared and given to the Chief Justices of the region for comments."

One of the living legacies of the programme is Samoa's Supreme Court Judge, Vui Clarence Nelson, who says he attended one of the first PJDP trainings on justice for minors as a young court worker.

He says this inspired him and led to the setting up of Samoa's first juvenile court and more recently to a position on a UN convention committee.

"If there is a good story about the impact of such pro-

grammes and how it can really make a change – well, it took a little boy from Samoa, from the back woods of the Pacific into the halls of the United Nations Committee on the Conventions of the rights of a child.

"I don't think there is a better story that illustrates the far reaching and deep impacts such training programmes can have."

Meanwhile Tangi Taoro of the Cook Islands who is just starting out on her judicial career as a lay Justice of the Peace, says she wants some continuity for the programme because there are many like her who would benefit from the training and support enjoyed by their peers.

"We definitely will need that ongoing support. And I know that we have had discussions regionally about looking at other alternatives on how the programme should support.

"But for me right now, I think that it is good to have that network, that regional network sharing wisdom and knowledge and resources." ■ **RNZI**