

Report shows Pacific courts improving



Courts in the Pacific Islands have become more accountable and transparent in areas such as costs and the way they handle complaints, according to a new report.

The Cook Islands is one of 14 countries taking part in the Pacific Judicial Development Programme (PJDP), which aims to promote more effective justice systems.

The programme works with judicial officers and court staff to help collect, analyse and publish data for annual reports to track their progress.

Its activities also focus on improving public awareness, access, and delivery of services by the courts and a new report shows the PJDP is having a positive impact.

Patu Sapolu, chief justice of Samoa and chair of the PJDP, said the report shows improvements have been made in almost all key indicator areas.

"When we compare data from the 2011 PJDP Baseline Report, the findings are extremely encouraging, with improvements in 11 of the 15 indicators, particularly in the areas of case management, accessibility and complaint handling," he said.

One of the most encouraging changes was that three countries – including the Cook Islands – produced an annual report this year for the first time.

The Cook Islands Ministry of Justice released an annual report in May highlighting the lack of resources in the country's judicial system.

"The court staff are generally over-worked and under-resourced. As identified in the business plan, staff are generally underpaid relative to other government servants," the report said.

The annual report also acknowledged complaints to the justice system regarding staff not replying to emails and other methods of correspondence, and the excessive burden placed on staff from the land jurisdiction of the court.

"In part this reflects the poor quality of land records and the need to undertake manual searching in many instances," the report said.

Representatives of all 14 Pacific countries are currently in Brisbane to discuss the 2012 Court Trend Report and to attend annual meetings.

The report makes 24 recommendations on how courts report on case management issues, transparency and accountability measures, and information on accessibility and affordability of courts for all citizens.

It also suggests procedures for handling complaints concerning judicial officers and court staff.

The PJDP is implemented by the Federal Court of Australia with funding and support from New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

- Ben Chapman-Smith