

Ninth Meeting of the EU-Pacific interim Economic Partnership Agreement (iEPA) Trade Committee Meeting

6-7 February 2024, Apia, Samoa

Joint Conclusions and Communiqué

The ninth EU-Pacific Trade Committee under the EU-Pacific interim Economic Partnership (iEPA) took place from 6-7 February 2024, in Apia, Samoa, bringing together Senior Officials from Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Solomon Islands and the European Union (EU) (the Parties to the Agreement). Owing to their notification of intent to accede to the iEPA, Tuvalu, Niue, Tonga, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu and the Federated States of Micronesia were invited to participate in the Committee meeting as observers. To note: Tuvalu was unable to participate due to logistical impediments. The EU held bilateral meetings with some of the Pacific States prior to and in the margins of the Trade Committee. The Pacific States held for the first time a caucus meeting among themselves on 5 February 2024.

The Trade Committee was co-chaired by Ms Peseta Noumea Simi (Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Samoa) on behalf of the Pacific Parties and Ms Cristina Miranda Gozalvez (Head of Unit – Africa, Caribbean & Pacific, Overseas Countries and Territories, Directorate-General for Trade, European Commission) on behalf of the EU.

The co-Chairs acknowledged the presences of Heads of delegation of Papua New Guinea, Mr Richard Yakam (Chief Trade Officer of National Trade Office); Fiji, Mr Shaheen Ali (Permanent Secretary for Trade, Co-operatives, SMEs and Communication); Solomon Islands, Ms Jenny Barile (Deputy Director of External Trade); Samoa, Mr Henry Tunupopo (Assistant CEO, MFAT); Niue, Mr Frank Sioneholo (Head of Trade); Timor-Leste, Mr Cesar Quintas (Senior Advisor Trade); Federated States of Micronesia, Mr Anthony Rutmag (Commerce and Industries Chief); Tonga, Ms Distaquaine Tuihalamaka (Chief Executive Officer); and Vanuatu, Mr Joe Pakoa Lui (Director External Trade).

The co-Chairs also acknowledged the presence of Ambassador H.E. Barbara Plinkert (Head of EU Delegation for the Pacific, Suva).

The Committee meeting started with welcome remarks from the co-Chairs, in which they reiterated their commitment to making the iEPA work for the benefit of all the Parties. They underscored the importance of the **Samoa Agreement**, notably its strong trade and sustainability agenda, and commitments to tackle key global challenges – environmental sustainability and climate change, inclusive and sustainable economic development, oceans, seas and fisheries, security, human rights, democracy and governance, human and social development. The co-Chairs recalled that under the Samoa Agreement the Parties have committed to support the implementation and functioning of the existing iEPA between the EU and the Pacific States, encouraging the accession of interested countries.

The Parties discussed the strengthening of the iEPA and took note of ongoing efforts towards the **accession of six Pacific States to the iEPA**, namely Tuvalu, Niue, Tonga, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu and the Federated States of Micronesia. The acceding States expressed appreciation for continued technical support and cooperation provided by their peers, the EU and PIF Secretariat.

The Parties discussed the state of play of the ongoing **study on trade in services** and investment facilitation. The EU stressed that its approach towards bilateral trade negotiations would centre on binding provisions in the areas of trade in services, investment liberalisation and facilitation, and digital trade. Fiji and Samoa spoke of a more targeted and tailor-made approach to trade in services, taking account of the limited capacities of the Pacific countries, and focusing on their priority sectors.

Both Parties underlined the importance of sustainable development matters, and the key role trade can play in this regard. They noted that the provisions on **Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD)** in the Samoa Agreement have become applicable and constitute a good framework for the EU-Pacific

iEPA. Accordingly, the Parties decided to discontinue the work on the **Joint Declaration on trade and sustainable development** as its content has been superseded by the Samoa Agreement. The provisions on TSD of the Samoa Agreement can also guide implementation of the iEPA agreements. So that trade can play its role as a positive force for a green and just transition, with climate change being a matter of highest priority for the region. In this context the parties agreed to reflect this commitment in the minutes of the next iEPA Committee.

The Parties reviewed recent developments in bilateral **trade in agriculture**. The EU presented the ongoing legislative review as regards geographical indications for wine, spirit drinks and agricultural products and informed the Committee that Regulation (EU) 2023/241 on the protection of geographical indications for craft and industrial products will enter into application on 1 December 2025. The EU invited the Pacific countries to share any update about their intentions to introduce and implement legal frameworks for the protection of geographical indications. The Parties discussed opportunities for bilateral trade in organic products. Fiji welcomed the information and requested support for further capacity building in the organic sector, to help more producers meet the EU organic standard.

The PIF Secretariat provided updates on the **Regional Kava Development Strategy**, which was endorsed in principle by the Pacific ACP Trade Ministers in October 2023 and validated by the Kava Working Group in a regional workshop held in Vanuatu in November 2023. The presentation highlighted next steps, notably 2 forthcoming workshops, in March 2024 on GI and Quality Certification and June 2024 on the action plan to implement the Strategy. Fiji emphasised the increasing importance of Kava as a tradable good for the region, and the need to improve the capacity to access the EU market. Fiji underscored the absolute necessity to promote Kava as geographical indication in order to preserve the uniqueness of Kava in the Pacific region. The EU explained that Kava import remains largely non-harmonised at EU level, and each Member State is free to apply bilateral measures depending on the intended use of the Kava in the MS concerned. The EU emphasised its readiness to strengthen Pacific States' ability to export Kava to the EU market. As next step the EU committed to engage in the Regional Kava workshop planned by PIFS in March.

Each Pacific iEPA Party presented its **National iEPA Implementation Plan of Actions**. The EU underlined the existing support for such Plans of Actions through PRISE projects and acknowledged the assistance provided by PIFS under the SPIRIT project. Furthermore, the EU provided updates on iEPA related development programmes, and the mid-term review of the 2021-2027 envelope of the NDICI (Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instruments). The EU informed that a successive trade programme is being considered to foster trade and sustainable development in the Pacific. The Pacific States welcomed the presentation.

PNG briefed the Parties on the fourth **EU-PNG Business, Trade and Investment Conference** on strengthening sustainable business, trade and investment ties between the EU and PNG, which was held on 30 October 2023 in Port Moresby. The conference was well attended bringing together business, government and civil society and achieved its objectives of increasing awareness on the economic partnership agreement, informing of investment opportunities and serving as a platform for business match making.

Fiji provided updates on the successful launch of the **Fiji-EU Trade and Investment Forum**, aimed at strengthening economic and trade relations also with the rest of the region. The Forum is a key opportunity to discuss ways of fostering even stronger bilateral trade partnerships with both governments and businesses in Fiji and the Pacific and the EU. On 9 February 2024, the EU and Fiji (Investment Fiji) will hold a workshop on the potential for Kava exports to the EU market. The Forum opens opportunities for organising new activities in future focusing on other areas of common interest.

The Parties discussed issues of clarification for **operationalising the Rules of Procedure of the Trade Committee**. They agreed to set up a task force to elaborate workable rules, especially keeping in mind the accession of more parties to the iEPA. They also discussed the draft Decisions prepared by the EU

for the **Rules of Procedure of the Dispute Settlement and Code of Conduct for Arbitrators and Mediators** and the nomination of individuals with the view to establishing a list of **Arbitrators** under the iEPA. They agreed to work toward finalising these Decisions for endorsement at the next Trade Committee.

Fiji provided updates on implementation of its market access offer for goods imported from the EU and on the ratification of the Agreement. Fiji expressed satisfaction with the technical work done on the correction of errors in its market access offer and informed the Parties of the progress made in relation to tariff cuts since 2021. Fiji informed that internal procedures are underway to submit paper on the iEPA implementation to Cabinet in March 2024, for endorsement. The EU strongly welcomed these developments and looked forward to positive outcome. **Solomon Islands provided an update on the report, under preparation, on the utilisation of the global sourcing derogation**, notably on the development effects and the effective conservation and sustainable management of the resources – Article 6.6(c) and (d) of Protocol II to the iEPA. Solomon Islands aims for the report’s completion in the first quarter of 2024.

The Parties acknowledged in principle the **Proposal for a Trade Committee Decision amending the Agreement to take account of the accession of the six acceding Pacific States** (Tuvalu, Niue, Tonga, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu and the Federated States of Micronesia). The Proposal mirrors Decision No 2/2021 of the Trade Committee that was adopted at the occasion of the accession of Samoa and Solomon Islands. The amendment consists merely of adding the market access offers of the newly acceded States to Annex II to the Agreement.

The Parties endorsed the mechanism of a **Joint iEPA Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)**, based on a concept note proposed by the EU, which aims inter alia to involve the civil society in the M&E of iEPA implementation, including the achievement of trade and sustainable development objectives. However, Parties expressed their concerns on staffing constraints to undertake the Joint iEPA M & E. The Parties agreed with the EU’s offer to prepare the first draft Joint Monitoring Report for consideration by the Pacific Parties at the next Trade Committee in 2025.

The EU underlined the importance of the rules-based multilateral trading system and the need to collaborate with the Pacific States to ensure a successful **WTO MC13 (26-29 Feb 2024 in Abu Dhabi)**. The Parties spoke of interest on subsidies for fisheries (to curb illegal and overfishing), agriculture food security issues, the continual of the moratorium for promoting digital (e-commerce) development. Fiji explained the efforts it had done in particular to get other Pacific States to support and ratify the fisheries subsidies Agreement.

The Parties discussed the perspective of the adoption of the **iEPA Decision concerning technical amendments to Protocol II**. Fiji and Samoa explained their outstanding issues. The Parties agreed to work toward the adoption of the Decision through written procedure.

The Parties expressed satisfaction with the overall outcome of the meeting, and thanked Samoa for the excellent organisation and hospitality.

They agreed to organise the tenth Trade Committee meeting in Brussels in 2025, with Solomon Islands as co-Chair on behalf of the Pacific States.