

SECRETARIAT OF THE PACIFIC COMMUNITY

**THIRTY-EIGHTH MEETING OF THE
COMMITTEE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF GOVERNMENTS AND ADMINISTRATIONS**
(Noumea 13–16 October 2008)

REGIONAL POLICY AGENDA - INCREASED FOCUS ON FOCUS ON MEMBER PRIORITIES

AGENDA ITEM 3.11 - OFFICE AND STAFF ACCOMMODATION - NOUMEA/SUVA

(Paper presented by the Secretariat)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Reasonable progress has been achieved in discussions with New Caledonia and Fiji on office and staff accommodation in Noumea and Suva.
2. In Noumea, there is a critical shortage of housing for internationally recruited staff and office accommodation is starting to cause concern. Consultations between the Secretariat and New Caledonia have identified a number of options that could be pursued. A high-level political decision is needed to move this issue forward.
3. CRGA is requested to encourage New Caledonia to do its best to help SPC address its needs in relation to staff housing and office space. The representative from New Caledonia will provide an update for CRGA.
4. In Suva, the Fiji Government has provided adequate office accommodation for the short to medium term. However, the Pacific Village project is still sometime away. Staff housing is not a problem in Suva.
5. CRGA is requested to encourage Fiji to pursue the Pacific Village project to address the long-term office requirements of SPC and some other Suva-based agencies. The representative from Fiji will provide an update for CRGA.
6. Office and staff accommodation in other locations will be addressed in the context of each host country agreement signed between the member and SPC.
7. Security is now a major consideration in implementing the organisation's decentralisation policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

8. CRGA is invited to:
 - i) note the variable progress made by the Secretariat and the host governments of SPC's offices in Noumea and Suva in addressing its office and staff accommodation needs;
 - ii) encourage the Government of New Caledonia to work with the Secretariat to urgently identify a more permanent solution to the shortage of staff housing and the projected requirement for additional office space;

- iii) request the delegate from New Caledonia to brief CRGA on plans to address the issue of staff and office accommodation for SPC in Noumea;
 - iv) thank the Fiji Government for providing more office space to meet the immediate needs of SPC's regional office in Suva;
 - v) encourage the Government of Fiji to pursue the Pacific Village project to meet the longer-term office accommodation needs of SPC in Suva;
 - vi) request the delegate from Fiji to brief CRGA on plans to address the short- and long-term office requirements of SPC in Suva; and
 - vii) note that office and staff accommodation requirements in other SPC locations will be addressed in the context of individual host country agreements signed between the member and SPC.
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OFFICE AND STAFF ACCOMMODATION – NOUMEA/ SUVA

Purpose

1. This paper provides an update to CRGA on the status of office and staff accommodation at SPC headquarters in Noumea and the Suva regional office. The requirements for the Pohnpei regional office are covered in CRGA Paper 3.9: *Decentralisation of SPC Services – the SPC Regional Office for the North Pacific*. The paper also briefly considers issues relating to establishing further regional or national offices in other member PICTs.

Noumea headquarters

2. The growth of SPC programmes has affected its Noumea headquarters more than the other regional offices. This has resulted in increasing pressure on both staff housing and office space. The organisation's policy of greater decentralisation will not curb this growth at headquarters in the short term.

3. The Noumea office buildings commissioned in 1995 were designed with sufficient space to cater for staff expansion up to the year 2000. We have virtually filled all the available space over the last five years. At present, approximately 220 staff work out of headquarters. A further eight staff and their families are expected to join SPC before the end of the year so the pressure on office and staff accommodation is increasing.

a) Staff accommodation

4. SPC currently owns 46 dwellings including the Director-General's residence, for which it is paying off a bank loan at the rate of 56,391 CFP units per month (inclusive of interest) or 676,692 CFP units per year through rental income. SPC also rents 13 dwellings at Mont Coffyn, which belong to the territory of New Caledonia.

5. In addition, SPC currently rents 46 private dwellings in the Noumea rental market for 90,000 CFP units per month or 1,080,000 CFP units per year. Thus, it is costing SPC 403,308 CFP units more (or 60% more) to rent 46 dwellings in the housing market per year than the total annual repayment of its bank loan for the 46 houses it owns.

6. The number of externally rented dwellings will increase further by the end of the year with the expected arrival of eight more staff and their families. By this stage, SPC will be providing accommodation to a total of approximately 120 staff and families.

7. The local real estate market is unable to meet the demand for housing in Noumea. This has two effects. First there is a shortage of houses and secondly the cost of renting is being driven higher by high demand. This situation is unlikely to correct itself in the short to medium term. It is getting very difficult to find suitable and affordable housing for internationally recruited staff.

8. At the 2006 CRGA, the representative of New Caledonia acknowledged the difficulties SPC was facing in accommodating its staff. He confirmed New Caledonia's support for SPC's presence in New Caledonia and informed CRGA that the government would explore various options with the Secretariat to find a solution to the staff accommodation problem. The options to be explored included:

- a) payment of a housing grant by New Caledonia to SPC to offset the rising cost of privately rented dwellings;
- b) provision of additional land for construction of another residential compound similar to the Receiving compound;
- c) construction of additional housing at Mont Coffyn utilising land between existing houses. There is sufficient land available to build up to 10 to 20 townhouse style dwellings. This land is owned by the Government of New Caledonia, and an agreement would have to be reached on the gift, loan or leasing of the land.

9. A further option identified by the Secretariat was to build additional housing on the Receiving site. There is sufficient space to build 8 to 10 three-bedroom houses. However, the available land is specifically planned for a children's playground, and given the number of additional dwellings that could be provided, this option is not worth pursuing.

10. At CRGA 37, the representative of New Caledonia again informed CRGA that her government was aware of SPC's difficulties in finding suitable residential accommodation in Noumea and confirmed the Government's commitment to finding a satisfactory solution.

11. A meeting was convened in December 2007 between representatives from the New Caledonia Government, New Caledonia Estates Committee, Noumea city authorities and SPC. The meeting agreed on the same options that had been conveyed to CRGA in 2006.

12. During 2008, the Director-General raised the subject of acquiring additional land to build a housing compound with the representative of France in New Caledonia. We are waiting for feedback on these enquiries.

13. Prior to CRGA, at a meeting with representatives from New Caledonia, the Director General expressed concern about the slow progress in addressing the issue of housing for SPC staff in Noumea. There was agreement that a decision is needed at the political level to move this issue forward. It was also agreed that a high-level meeting between the government of New Caledonia, Noumea city authorities and SPC needs to be convened before CRGA 38 to try and find a long-term solution to staff housing. CRGA will be informed of the outcome of this meeting.

14. There was agreement that the best long-term option was the identification of an area of land to build additional staff accommodation, augmented by building some houses at Mont Coffyn and possible procurement of apartment blocks in the short term. At current staff numbers, SPC requires between 70 and 80 additional accommodation units.

15. It was noted that each of the options identified above presents its own challenges and necessitates further in-depth consideration and analysis by the Secretariat, the New Caledonian administration and the French Government.

16. In summary, the options for addressing staff housing requirements in Noumea are as follows:

- i) Continue to rent properties on the rental market and hope that sufficient houses will be available to meet staff needs at a price that is affordable for SPC or that can be met through the payment of a housing grant to SPC by the Government of New Caledonia;
- ii) Purchase suitable dwellings/apartment blocks that become available on the market.

- iii) Build additional houses at Mont Coffyn.
- iv) New Caledonia, as the host country, to provide an area of land to build additional dwellings similar to the SPC residential compound at Receiving;
- v) A combination of all the above options.

b) Office accommodation

17. With 220 staff, office space at headquarters is under stress. There is some capacity to accommodate a few more staff during 2009. However, beyond 2009 the Secretariat will require additional office accommodation at headquarters.

18. Two options are being explored to meet future space requirements:

- i) Build additional offices on land available in front of the former Director-General's residence, which is currently leased to the European Community;
- ii) Lease office space in the immediate vicinity of the current headquarters building.

19. The Secretariat will be discussing both options with the New Caledonian administration and the representative of France in New Caledonia.

20. The Secretariat is at present developing a policy framework for its decentralisation process. This framework will also deal with issues such as the location of programmes, which could relieve pressure on office space in both Noumea and Suva.

21. In summary, office accommodation at headquarters is getting tight. We have adequate room for growth in 2009 but beyond that we have to look at alternative space. Further consideration of the most appropriate location of programmes may help relieve pressure in both Noumea and Suva through decentralisation.

c) Funding options

22. If the decision is made to acquire further land and build additional housing in Noumea, funding for the construction of these houses or apartments could be based on the same process as for the Receiving compound, with the government guaranteeing a bank loan with a grace period for repayment, and the actual repayment being covered by income from rent.

Suva Regional Office

a) Office space

23. Good progress has been achieved in acquiring office space for the short to medium term. The Fiji Government provided two floors of a large office building located adjacent to SPC's current offices in Nabua. One floor is expected to be ready for occupation by November, and the other floor is expected to be vacated by December. Tenders for refurbishment and 'fit out' of the first available floor are being evaluated.

24. This first floor will accommodate the Regional Maritime, Adolescent Health & Development and HIV/STI Programmes. It will provide 80 work stations, 13 separate offices, 3 filing/storage rooms, a simulation room, 2 meeting rooms, and a 60-seat conference room, complete with an interpretation booth.

25. When the above programmes shift to the new location, the regional forestry programme will shift from the Forum Secretariat's premises to Nabua. Then, for the first time, all the programmes of the Land Resources Division based in Suva will be located on one site.

26. The research laboratory for the new Centre for Pacific Crops and Trees (CePaCT Lab) is currently being built. The Centre is being constructed at the CETC site in Narere and is expected to be completed in May 2009. CePaCT will then move from its current premises in Nabua to Narere.

27. The Fiji Government is still committed to the Pacific Village project. However, the Secretariat's focus during 2008 was on securing short to medium-term office accommodation. The delegation from Fiji will provide a further update on office space arrangements for SPC, including plans for the Pacific Village.

b) Staff accommodation

28. Suva has a large housing market so there are fewer problems securing staff housing there. Staff in Fiji are paid a housing allowance in accordance with the CROP-agreed formula. They look for their own housing and meet their own rental obligations. Currently, 56 staff in Suva receive this allowance.

29. A CROP Suva rental survey is planned for 2009.

Other SPC locations

30. The host country agreement between the Government of Papua New Guinea and SPC establishing a formal SPC Regional Office in Papua New Guinea is expected to be signed by the end of 2008.

31. Similarly, a host country agreement between the Government of Solomon Islands and SPC establishing a formal SPC National Coordination Office in Solomon Islands is expected to be signed before the end of 2008.

32. As the joint country strategy process unfolds, the establishment of national coordination offices in member countries will gain momentum. Having an on-the-ground presence to assist in coordinating the various areas of SPC services in-country has been a common request from members where SPC provides services across a number of sectors.

33. The office and staff accommodation required for each of these new offices will be addressed under the provisions of the relevant host country agreement.

34. A major feature of all of SPC's decentralised offices will be a common communication platform with real-time communication based on using the Pacific Rural Internet Connectivity System (RICS).

35. Security is a major consideration for SPC, particularly in Suva, Honiara and Port Moresby. An organisation-wide policy dealing with various aspects of our decentralised offices and their staff, including security, is being developed.

Conclusion

36. Reasonable progress has been achieved in discussions with host governments in New Caledonia and Fiji on meeting SPC's office and staff accommodation needs.

37. In Noumea, there is a critical shortage of housing for internationally recruited staff. Office accommodation is also starting to cause concern. CRGA is requested to encourage New Caledonia to do its best to help SPC address these concerns.

38. In Suva, the Fiji Government has provided adequate office accommodation to meet short to medium-term needs. However, the Pacific Village project is still sometime away. CRGA is requested to encourage Fiji to pursue the Pacific Village project to address the long-term office space requirements of SPC and some other Suva-based agencies.

39. Office and staff accommodation in other locations will be addressed in the context of each host country agreement signed between the member and SPC.

11 September 2008