

Regional Cooperative Agreement for Research, Development and Training Related to Nuclear Science and Technology for Asia and the Pacific (RCA)

42nd General Conference Meeting

Discussion Paper on RCA Engagement with Pacific Island Countries

1 Background

Since the Regional Cooperative Agreement for Research, Development and Training Related to Nuclear Science and Technology for Asia and the Pacific (RCA) was established in 1972, membership has grown from six Member States to the current group of eighteen. However, much of this growth occurred not long after the formation of the RCA, with only four new members joining in the last twenty-one years, and only one in the last sixteen. Of more significance, of Member States joining the RCA, all have been under mutually recognised benefit and consent. This is in large part to all new states being from the same geographical area as the original group. As such, the RCA does not have much recent experience in dealing with requests for new membership in general and no experience at all in requests that some members might feel to be inconsistent with the current geographical composition.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to examine the possibility of further requests for RCA membership, particularly from the Pacific, and identify options for dealing with such requests.

2 RCA Membership – Criteria and Potential Candidates

Under the wording of the current RCA document (i.e. the 2011 Fifth Agreement to Extend the RCA), there exists substantial scope for other countries to join the RCA. Specifically, Article II.1 of the 2011 extension states that:

“Any Government Party to the 1987 Regional Cooperative Agreement and any Government of any Member State of the IAEA referred to in Article XII of the 1987 Regional Cooperative Agreement may become a Party to this Extension Agreement by notifying its acceptance thereof to the Director General of the Agency. “

Article XII of the 1987 RCA document states:

“Any Member State of the Agency in the area of South Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific or the Far East according to the Statute of the Agency may become a Party to this Agreement by notifying its acceptance thereof to the Director General of the Agency”

This means that if a country wishes to join the RCA, it only has to meet three criteria:

1. It is a Member State of the IAEA;
2. It is located in the area of “South Asia”, “South-East Asia and the Pacific” (SEAP) or “the Far East” according to the IAEA Statute; and
3. It notifies the Director General of the IAEA that it accepts the 2011 extension agreement.

Membership of the RCA does not require the approval of either current RCA Member States, or the IAEA Secretariat.

Of the three regional groups identified as suitable for RCA membership, all of the “Far East” Member States are currently members of the RCA, although a challenge may arise if DPRK re-joined the Agency. The other two regions – “South Asia” and “SEAP” – contain some IAEA Member States that are yet to join the RCA but could theoretically do so. These two regions pose different types of potential RCA candidates.

“South Asia” is not technically defined under the IAEA Statute, which instead lists the “Middle East and South Asia” as a regional group. If a common understanding of “South Asia” was taken, the only current IAEA Member State from that region that is currently not part of the RCA is Afghanistan. If membership was taken to include all Member States from the area of MESA, potential RCA members could include Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Whilst most of those states are now members of ARASIA and could therefore be presumed not to be interested in RCA membership, not all are. While this presents a potential challenge, it is not the main topic of this paper and will be discussed in a second paper to be tabled at the GCM.

In SEAP, IAEA Member States not currently part of the RCA include Cambodia, Fiji, Laos, Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea and Tonga (subject to the submission of instruments of ratification). However there is significant potential for more countries in this region to become IAEA Member States in coming years, which would expand the pool of possible candidates for RCA membership. Specifically, recent years have seen an increasing number of Pacific Island Countries (PICs) such as Palau, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Tonga apply for membership of the IAEA. This trend is expected to continue as more PICs seek to utilise nuclear science and applications to develop positive outcomes in areas such as health, food security, and water studies.

3 SEAP

While there is potential for countries from South-East Asia (Cambodia and Laos) to join the RCA, there is no reason for their potential membership to be treated in any different way than that of the most recent RCA member state, Nepal. There is significant need in these countries to justify involvement in RCA projects should they join the agreement. There may be a need for increased resources for RCA.

However, increased membership among PICs (described above) will create new challenges for the IAEA technical cooperation program, including the RCA. As all PICs are developing countries, they will qualify for technical cooperation assistance under the Guiding Principles of INFCIRC/267. This has already been seen with the November 2012 meeting of the Technical Assistance Cooperation Committee approving two footnote/a projects in Palau.

Given the developing status of PICs, their small but dispersed population – approximately 10 million people across 14 countries – also presents a unique challenge in how to effectively implement technical cooperation. Those small populations mean that individual PICs often do not have the technical base to appreciate the potential benefits of nuclear science and technology, or to properly regulate their safe use. Furthermore, there is an argument as to how effectively technical cooperation funds can be applied on such a small scale as would be seen in individual PICs. These challenges apply to both general technical cooperation as well as possible involvement in the RCA.

PICs stand to benefit from the work of the RCA. Indeed, this has been seen under the current RCA Marine Benchmark Study on the Possible Impacts of the Fukushima Radioactive Releases in the Asia-Pacific Region (RAS7021) which has involved the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Palau, the Marshall Islands and the Solomon Islands. At an outreach workshop for PICs held in Nadi, Fiji, in April this year, some PICs also expressed particular

interest in distance learning courses in the medical area. Given this benefit, there is an argument to be made that PIC membership of the RCA should be encouraged. However, noting the challenges described above, alternate, more efficient methods of engagement with PICs may be preferable.

There are three potential options for managing interaction with PICs:

1. Accept requests for membership from PICs. As noted above, the RCA's provisions allow this to happen without any action by the existing members.
2. Amend the RCA to more tightly restrict membership. As noted above, this option will be discussed in a second paper to be tabled at the GCM.
3. Seek alternate methods of engagement with PICs.

Option 3 would not preclude options 1 or 2, and is discussed below.

3.1 Possible Alternate Method of Engagement with Pacific Island Countries

There is an existing mechanism – the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) – that, amongst other objectives, aims to coordinate development across the Pacific by providing a means for PICs to work collectively together. Established in 1971, the PIF Member States include all of the existing IAEA Member States from the Pacific as well as likely future candidates. Furthermore, of the current RCA Member States, Australia and New Zealand are also members of the PIF, and China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand are all PIF Dialogue Partners.

Engagement between the RCA and the PIF would therefore seem a logical way to introduce PICs to the technical cooperation program while simultaneously making efficient uses of available resources.

As part of the April outreach workshop discussed above, the IAEA provided background on the benefits of technical cooperation as well as the role of the RCA within the wider technical cooperation program. In addition to all PICs, the workshop was also attended by representatives from the PIF. We understand that a number of the PICs at the workshop expressed interest in both technical cooperation and the RCA.

Given this interest, the RCA could mandate the RCA Chair, with the assistance of the Secretariat, to approach the PIF directly to ascertain whether there could be cooperation between the two organisations. Modalities for this cooperation could include establishing a memorandum of understanding (MoU). This approach would have the advantage of introducing PICs to the RCA in a manner that would be more effective for the PIF members as well as utilise RCA resources more efficiently. However, the PIF may be unwilling to engage until such time as all their members were IAEA or RCA members.