



February 2020

The Voice of Business in APEC

By: [Aaron Soans](#) – Senior Advisor Research, The Australian APEC Study Centre



At a time of great technological disruption, economic volatility, geopolitical tensions and potential pandemics, it is tempting for economies to become more insular and protectionist. Yet, addressing these challenges requires more regional cooperation, not less, says Dato Rohana Tan Sri Mahmood, Chair of the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC).

ABAC convened a meeting in Sydney of business leaders from across Asia Pacific to discuss the year ahead and how best to advance shared goals of integration, innovation and inclusion in the region.

APEC is at a pivotal moment as it seeks to develop its Post 2020 Vision this year, laying out its roadmap for the future. ABAC is making the case for a seamless, dynamic, resilient, inclusive and sustainable Asia Pacific economic community, underpinned by a Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific. The Council comprises business leaders from the likes of Microsoft (USA), Huawei (China), Acer (Chinese Taipei), J.P. Morgan (Australia), CIMB (Malaysia), Mitsui (Japan), Sonda (Chile) and [many others](#).



These businesses operate on the front lines of global production, directly facing challenges from rising protectionism, skills shortages, carbon mitigation and the digital economy. Businesses therefore have an important role to play in advising government officials, Ministers and Leaders and helping to shape the path ahead. “As business people, we are adept at simplifying complex issues and finding innovative solutions”. Said Dato Rohana. “We have a real contribution to make here”.

Amongst the key issues discussed at the Sydney meeting were continuing threats to the rules based multilateral trading system. ABAC Members reiterated their strong support for the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the certainty it provides for investment and trade especially for small businesses and developing economies. They noted that the mid year WTO Ministerial Conference in Kazakhstan is a crucial opportunity to make progress on reforming WTO rules and resolving the impasse on dispute settlement.

On climate change, Chair Dato Rohana emphasised the importance of business leadership in spearheading the transition to a low emissions economy. ABAC’s Sustainable Development Working Group discussed several practical measures businesses and governments could take to reduce emissions.

The digital economy, it was noted, offers tremendous potential to promote the inclusion of underserved groups including women, rural, indigenous communities, and micro, small and medium sized enterprises. Inclusion of underrepresented groups and responsible business are key themes for Malaysia and a work program on these themes was developed at the meeting. ABAC is focused on maximising these opportunities by encouraging the ethical uptake of new technologies like AI and enabling interoperability of cross border data flows.

In Sydney, ABAC Members discussed these issues directly with APEC senior government officials, highlighting the issues of concern to business and the reforms needed to address them. In November, ABAC Members will meet directly with APEC Leaders in Kuala Lumpur to prosecute their case for an open and inclusive Asia Pacific region.

On the margins of the Sydney meeting, ABAC Members also discussed emerging megatrends, the future of work and women’s empowerment. Rocky Scopelliti, author and futurologist, gave a riveting account of the impact of demographic change in the context of the 4th Industrial Revolution. In subsequent panel discussions, participants discussed the impact of these changes in the services, energy and agriculture sectors.



At a lunch event, RMIT's Vice Chancellor Martin Bean, highlighted emerging skills challenges posed by disruptive technology and the shifting role of universities to address them through innovations like micro credentials and digital badges. A portfolio of 'soft skills' in a wide range of areas will better help students navigate shifting employment trends compared to a traditional four year campus based college degree, stated Mr Bean.

On women's empowerment, Senator Michaelia Cash commended the role of APEC and ABAC in promoting economic opportunities for women. Libby Lyons, Director of Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Agency raised the importance of collecting gender disaggregated data to inform executive decision making. Their comments were followed by a discussion between Joanne Gray (Managing Editor of the Australian Financial Review) and Rachel Taulelei (ABAC NZ and CEO of Kono, a Maori-owned food and beverage business, and Chair of ABAC 2021) and Kristal Kinsela-Christie (a businesswoman working to create pathways and capabilities of indigenous businesses and individuals in Australia). The conversation focused upon the particular challenges for indigenous women in business, including access to finance, media representation of indigenous women, access to education and the many obstacles presented by backgrounds that were not supportive of success in business or indeed life more generally.

ABAC 1 concluded with members setting out an ambitious workplan to guide their activities for the rest of the year. ABAC will meet again this April in Manila and in Vancouver this July before the APEC Summit in Kuala Lumpur this November.

This meeting was made possible with support from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), RMIT University, PwC and NSW Government. DFAT also supported the participation of ABAC China via video link. Product sponsors delighted our international guests with signature Australian products like nourishing health bars (Carman's Kitchen), relaxing oils (Thursday Plantation), delicious honey (Beechworth Honey), protective sunscreen (SunSense), essential ointments (Lucas' Papaw Remedies) and fortifying vitamins (Blackmores). The Australian APEC Study Centre acting as the Secretariat for ABAC Australia played a key role in facilitating this meeting. Australia's ABAC Members are Sir Rod Eddington, Robert Milliner and Tom Harley.



APEC Member Economies: Australia; Brunei Darussalam; Canada; Chile; China; Hong Kong, China; Indonesia; Japan; Korea; Malaysia; Mexico; New Zealand; Papua New Guinea; Peru; Philippines; Russia; Singapore; Chinese Taipei; Thailand; United States of America; and Viet Nam.

ABAC was created by APEC Leaders in 1995 to be the primary voice of business in APEC. Each economy has three members who are appointed by their respective Leaders. They meet four times a year in preparation for the presentation of their recommendations to the Leaders in a dialogue that is a key event in the annual Leaders Meeting.

Under Malaysia's leadership, ABAC is pursuing a work programme under the theme "Integration. Innovation. Inclusion." to respond to the challenge of maintaining the economic vitality of the Asia-Pacific Region and ensure it benefits all.

ABAC 2020 Chair is Dato Rohana Mahmood (Malaysia) and the Co Chairs are Richard von Appen (Chile) and Rachel Taulelei (New Zealand), with five (5) working group chairs, namely: Sir Rod Eddington (Australia), Regional Economic Integration Working Group (REIWG); Nobuhide Hayashi (Japan), Finance & Economics Working Group (FEWG); Hafimi Abdul Haadi (Brunei Darussalam), MSME & Entrepreneurship Working Group (MSMEEWG); Ning Gaoning (China), Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG); and Peggy Johnson (USA), Digital & Innovation Working Group (DIWG).

For further information please contact: info@apec.org.au