



*UN Multi-Country Resident Coordinator Office (Suva)*

**Opening Remarks**

**by Mr Sanaka Samarasingha, UN Resident Coordinator**

**Fifth Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development  
& Capacity Building Workshop for Pacific SIDS**

25-26 November 2021

*Acknowledgments:*

- Fiji Attorney General & Minister for Economy
- Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
- Executive Secretary of UN ESCAP
- Members of the Media, Ladies and Gentlemen

Bula vinaka

From the outset, I wish to congratulate and thank the parties involved in co-hosting this meeting – it's a crucial opportunity to pause, reflect and plan after what has been a tough year for many.

It's encouraging to see so many people join physically and virtually as we take stock of the progress made by our countries to achieve our Sustainable Development Goals – the SDGs.

Unfortunately, present statistics are quite bleak, with Pacific Islands Countries and Territories currently off-track on all 17 SDGs.

There has been slow progress made on goals related to gender equality, access to basic services like healthcare, water, sanitation and hygiene, sustainable cities and communities, and the environment.

And COVID-19 has further impacted our ability to achieve these goals.

At last year's Forum, we sat together in a similar room as you are all in now, and asked a crucial question - **what will the impacts of the twin COVID-19 and climate crisis mean for sustainable development in the Pacific?**

From that one question, we were presented a unique opportunity to form a new alliance for inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery.

Similarly, after World Wars I and II, warring nations made peace, the world learned from its mistakes, and new commitments were made, the UN itself rose from such a commitment following the devastation of the Second World War.

This is where our strength lies – in our ability to get back up and try again, together. When we all work on the same side, we are resilient beyond measure and can create real, sustainable change.

While I cannot say with confidence that we have avoided reverting to the old normal of inequality, injustice and the mindless destruction of the planet, 2021 has been tough - Pacific SIDS have taken on an additional \$1.6 billion in debt as a result of COVID-19.

Industries like Tourism, accounting for 7.2% of regional GDP, have collapsed. The decline in these integral sectors has largely resulting economic contractions across the region and enormous magnitudes of job losses.

Fiji's economy experienced a 19.8% contraction and left 115,000 tourism workers unemployed. Similarly, Vanuatu's tourism employment declined by 70% and the national economy contracted by 8.5% - the biggest contraction since independence.

I don't want to give the impression that everything is doom and gloom. Even COVID-19 had a silver lining - it resulted in an unprecedented decline in greenhouse gas emissions, giving our natural environments the opportunity to truly flourish.

Despite its devastation, COVID-19 has given us the unsolicited opportunity to not only restart and recover, but to ensure future growth is more **inclusive** and **responsible**.

**Thus, I would urge us all ask ourselves the question again: what can be done to truly build back better?** And let's answer this question today so we don't keep repeating ourselves.

In his remarks at the SDG Moment in September, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, shared an answer to this very question and highlighted five areas for urgent action, to recover together and get our SDGs back on track.

### **Firstly we need to end this Pandemic**

We need to pursue a fast and equitable response mobilized on global vaccination plan aiming to reach 70% of the world's population.

As of this week, 90% of the Fijian population have been vaccinated against COVID-19. In Palau, over 15,000 people have received a second dose of the vaccine representing 87% of the population. Unfortunately, in many other Pacific countries the vaccination rates are much lower. For example, as of November 22<sup>nd</sup>, in Tonga, only 41% of the population have received their second vaccine, and in Tuvalu, this figure stands at 50%.

Until we can get vaccination rates to an acceptable level, not only in the Pacific region but globally, we will continue to battle the pandemic.

### **Secondly, we need sustainable and equitable recovery for all, so that we stay on track to end poverty by 2030**

In this regard, bold investments in systems that support human development and put people above profits, are essential. Therefore, as we begin to 'build back better', I implore business owners, operators, and members of the private sector, to align your businesses with the UN SDGs.

As we think about what it means to truly cater to all needs, we are reminded of a growing expectation of green practices from suppliers.

**A recent report from Harvard Business Review indicated that there has never been a better time to launch a sustainable offering.** Consumers—particularly Millennials—increasingly say they want brands that embrace purpose, sustainability and innovation.

By such coordinated and committed action we will also strengthen our economies, and above all create a world that is truly resilient for Pacific Islanders – now before it is too late.

It's not enough to talk about it, we must uphold our obligation to future generations through action.

And when I say 'future generation', I'm really talking about the youth of the Pacific today. They are the ones facing the life changing effects of climate change in their lifetimes.

Under 25-year-olds make up over half of the Pacific population, yet they also represent a major proportion of the unemployed, under-skilled and those most significantly affected by the economic impacts of the Pandemic.

Youth will be key to the Pacific's economic and social transformation and recovery from COVID-19. Conversely, failure to invest in this demographic may result in widespread youth unemployment and under-employment.

### **Thirdly, we need equal rights for women and girls**

SDG achievement and gender equality go hand in hand. We cannot begin to achieve one without the other. In the words of the UN SG:

*“We need bold investments to make sure every girl has a seat in the classroom — and the skills she needs to chart her own future. We need to dismantle the power structures that allow discrimination, violence and economic hardship to keep one half of humanity down. And we need to make sure that girls and women have a seat at every table.”*

### **Fourthly, we need to urgently end the war on our planet.**

The impacts of climate change are far reaching. As the climate continues to become more extreme and unpredictable, disaster risk reduction and Climate Displacement are ever increasing issues.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, more than 50,000 people in the Pacific region are at risk of having to flee their homes each year due to extreme weather events.

Climate migration internally has been happening within various countries, especially Fiji, Kiribati, Tuvalu and RMI. Findings from our surveys found that more than 70% of households in Kiribati and Tuvalu and 35% of households in

Nauru reported family members would migrate if climate stressors, such as droughts, sea-level rise or floods, worsened.

However, only about a quarter of households have the financial means to support migration, leaving many households unable to leave worsening environmental conditions.

I commend the efforts of Pacific Island Countries that, despite the challenges, are doing their utmost to reduce GHG emissions and declaring large swaths of their ocean and coastline as Marine Protected Areas. Although we didn't achieve everything that we wished for at the recent COP, our presence there was crucial. We need to continue to demand action from the big emitting countries along with continued and increased financial support.

There remains a flicker of hope:

- The launch of the Glasgow Declaration for Climate Action in Tourism, aiming to halve tourism emissions by 2030 and reach Net Zero emissions as soon as possible before 2050
- Fiji's first Blue Bond initiative was announced. Highlighting that responsible stewardship needs to be strengthened, not weakened as we recover from COVID-19.
- Over 100 world leaders have promised to end and reverse deforestation by 2030.
- £65 million was pledged to support a '*Just Rural Transition*' to **help developing countries** shift policies and practices to more sustainable agriculture and food production.
- The World Bank committed to spending FJ\$52bn in climate finance annually until 2025 through its Climate Action Plan.
- Over 10 new countries signed up to the '30by30' target to protect **30% of the world's oceans by 2030**. Among these countries were our neighbors **Samoa and Tonga**.

Climate Justice is needed to protect our planet, but it's also necessary for our health and our economy - it creates jobs, reduces our expenditure on fossil fuels, and provides us with a better living environment overall.

Let's keep these flickers burning and continue to use our voices and position to advocate for our planet.

**And finally, perhaps the most important area of all, we need solidarity.**

Partnerships nurtured and geared toward building collective action is the only way we can truly achieve Agenda 2030. And we need strong and meaningful stakeholder engagement in relation to the Voluntary National Reviews.

Consultative processes must never be superficial.

Partnerships need to catalyze cooperation that puts people first in national budgets and recovery plans.

Partnerships that hold the decision maker accountable to the experiences and rights of those most marginalized in our society.

I am confident we will see better days ahead and humanity will be able to steer clear from the worst impacts of the Climate Crisis. Hopefully history will give deserved credit for the survival of our civilization, to the efforts of the Pacific people and their perseverance.

The UN, through the work of our different agencies, will always stand by your side, ready and willing to support you to realize this vision of a cleaner, sustainable, and prosperous Pacific.

**As difficult as some of these issues might be, I hope you are able to discuss them candidly over the next two days and are able to come up with pragmatic, yet principled solutions. We have a wonderful opportunity to use the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement as a blueprint for recovery.**

Together we can. Vinaka vakalevu.