



**Statement of the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Tonga
Honorable. Hu'akavameiliku**

***Seventy-eighth session of the
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
Bangkok, Thailand
and
online,
23 to 27 May 2022***

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(Time-limit: 3 minutes)***

**Your Excellency Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Executive Secretary of ESCAP
Excellencies and fellow Heads of Delegation of the members of ESCAP
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We mark a milestone. The 75th Anniversary of ESCAP! 75 years of profound transformations for our countries, our region and the planet earth that we all share.

A journey of struggles and celebrations. A journey to newly formed nation-states and new eras of international relations.

ESCAP was established when there were only 108 countries in our global community.

Now we count more than 193 independent Nation-States.

In the 1950's, many of today's Pacific Island Countries were still protectorates under colonial rulers. Today, we take our seats in gatherings like these as full and equal members of ESCAP.

The theme for this session: **A common agenda to advance sustainable development in Asia**

and the Pacific is our opportunity to advocate for greater stewardship by us over the future of our ocean space.

Let us seize the moment to think out of the box for solutions.

Your Excellencies, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about an extraordinary social and economic crisis in the region. The response of many governments of imposing social distancing, travel bans, and border closures to control the spread of the virus has caused increased unemployment and the closure of many businesses. These challenges have been met by robust economic policies which included higher government spending, reductions in taxes, and temporary financial support to businesses and highly vulnerable groups in society.

At the same time, there has been a rapid build-up in public debt resulting in an increased risk of sovereign debt distress among the member states which in turn undermines the achievement of the goals of economic growth, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development. The need to also allocate resources to meet the challenges of climate change have the potential to create a debt crisis for most developing countries which can drag on for a prolonged period of time. The policy options are stark and unenviable, particularly for small island developing states such as Tonga.

Your Excellencies, allow me to mention just one key option on the subjects of the debt for climate adaptation swap. How can we address or exchange our growing national debt for the excellent Ocean management programs we run in our countries?

A suggested debt swap for Ocean management and protection at an unprecedented scale would directly reduce the debt of Pacific Island countries in exchange for visionary ocean commitments. I would contend that this would seem to be a viable option to explore at this 78th Session.

Your Excellencies, on the 15th of January, the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai Volcanic explosion reached the same level as the 1883 Mt. Krakatoa explosion. It severely damaged the fibre-optic cables linking us to the rest of the world and placing us off the screen and practically out of touch for close to a month.

Then, we faced the community spread of COVID-19 on the 1st February 2022. This triggered the need to accelerate adaptation of digital technologies. This was truly a marked result of the double disaster that hit us.

The other important lesson of these overlapping crises for the Kingdom of Tonga is the critical need to be self-sufficient and resilient.

We must become more resilient and our shared duty is to build a better and stronger future for our children. These are the questions we must find workable answers to.

Your Excellencies, Please accept our best wishes for the deliberation in this 78th session and we will be listening intently on possible solutions to build better resilience in our regions.

Malo 'Aupito