
Securing our future in the Pacific



Pacific Islands Forum
with United Nations Missions

*Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji,
Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau,
Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands,
Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu*

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PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM GENERAL STATEMENT FOR THE HIGH LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM 2021.

DELIVERED BY

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Greetings,

I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the eighteen Member States of the Pacific Islands Forum with fourteen present here at the United Nations, namely; Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu and my own country, Tuvalu.

COVID-19 and the Pacific

In our Blue Pacific region, we are faced with a multi-pronged crisis comprising the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 and the devastating effects of climate change, sea-level rise and natural disasters, all of which burden peoples of the Pacific already enduring a range of inherent vulnerabilities.

The pandemic is exacerbating poverty, hunger, malnutrition and social inequality. Social challenges have escalated with increased pressure on health and traditional support systems. People are losing their jobs and their livelihoods resulting in hardship and suffering for families and communities across the region.

COVID-19 border closures remain, affecting the region's connectivity and the financial viability of our airlines. Tourism has essentially come to a complete standstill for many tourism-dependent Forum Island Countries.

Employment levels have declined substantially as many people have lost their jobs or are working on limited hours. Tourism-dependent economies have been the worst hit in this regard. For instance, in Fiji, more than 150,000 tourism-related jobs were directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19, leading to a fall in household incomes. Informal sector activity has increased as unemployed families seek other income and livelihood sources. Women's economic security has been diminished and needs specific attention.

The pandemic continues to impact our region's Ocean-driven economic sectors. COVID-19 has led to major disruptions to our fisheries sector, reinforcing the need for the Blue Pacific and the international community to renew ambition and action on the Ocean at national, regional and global levels, including towards a pandemic recovery which advances the goals of the Paris Agreement.

Our health systems, already struggling to meet a range of existing health challenges associated with Non-Communicable Diseases, are facing severe pressure in countries such as Papua New Guinea and Fiji because of COVID-19.

The pandemic has also heightened inequality and social exclusion, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities, particularly women and children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. It has adversely impacted access to basic services, food security, livelihoods, psychosocial support, safety and protection.

Evidence indicates that women's economic and productive lives have been affected disproportionately by COVID-19 and differently from men. Women earn less, hold less secure jobs and are more often employed in the informal sector. They have less access to social protection and are the majority of single-parent households.

COVID-19 has increased the incidences of gender-based violence globally. This is no different in our Blue Pacific, where we already have some of the highest rates of physical and sexual violence against women and girls – twice the global average. Gender-based violence is one of the most pervasive manifestations of gender inequality. Urgent attention and action are needed as families continue to struggle to survive in this new context.

The education authorities in most Forum Island Countries have initiated extended breaks and put in place alternative learning modes. Ensuring the sustainability of the region's education systems while maintaining the quality of the education provided is critical to safeguard the future of our youth and skilled workforce.

The COVID-19 crisis has also amplified existing resource allocation pressures that confront developing countries when social, economic and environmental priorities compete for limited budgets.

The pandemic and its related unprecedented social and economic disruption in the region also need to be managed and addressed within the parameters of our response efforts to the climate change crisis facing Pacific Island nations.

A Regional Response to COVID and Building Back Better from the Crisis

At the outset, Pacific Island Forum Leaders recognised COVID-19 as a major crisis for the Blue Pacific region, with impacts felt today and for years to come.

Our Forum Leaders quickly came together to confront the challenge of COVID-19 by invoking the Biketawa Declaration - our regional framework to collectively respond and assist one another in times of crisis. Pacific Forum Foreign Ministers met on 7 April 2020 and established a Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 (PHP-C). This pathway has enabled the effective distribution in the region of COVID-19 testing supplies, PPE and vaccines as well as the movement of medical and humanitarian personnel.

We have navigated a plethora of national, regional and international processes. Forum Leaders achieved this by acknowledging a member-driven process and respecting that our work complements national efforts by coordinating and avoiding duplication.

By establishing the PHP-C, we were able to find our niche and add value to the work of the Pacific COVID-19 Joint Incident Management Team co-led by the Pacific Community and WHO. To date, we have transported over 211 metric tonnes of PPE and humanitarian supplies along with 111 personnel. We have

made progress despite significant challenges, but what do we need to do to build back better?

Building back better means international agencies utilising existing regional mechanisms, it means tapping into our collective strength and getting the data and information right so that policies are based on evidence and resources are allocated effectively and efficiently.

We must provide quality social services, including health and social protection services that are accessible, effective and ensure universal coverage for all segments of our community, so no one is left behind.

We need digital access to close the digital divide. We need investments in ICT and education. We need green development packages to strengthen climate and energy actions that are efficient, climate-resilient infrastructure and biodiversity preservation in addition to exploring innovative climate financing opportunities and phasing out inefficient fossil fuels subsidies.

Many reports regarding our region have grand objectives but these need to be backed by solid action. Our collective voice is our strength. We need to use this voice to promote significant shifts in behaviour, access to data and technological advancements to put us back on track. Through the collective voice, we also need to ensure collective action to implement our commitments.

As a leader in resilient development solutions, the Pacific has launched the Pacific Resilience Facility, a unique self-financing mechanism which will provide critical financing for risk reduction in Pacific countries without any accompanying increase in debt. It is a Pacific-owned, Pacific-led solution, answering a clear need and will allow the region to invest in small grant-based but high-impact projects to make communities disaster-ready.

We acknowledge that the burden of COVID-19 response and recovery ultimately falls on the region's governments to protect the most vulnerable by investing in universal healthcare, social protection and climate-resilient infrastructure. We are still falling short of where we should be on these commitments. The areas of regression are alarming but not entirely surprising.

Our goals can only be met with support, partnership and assistance from the region's development partners and donors. We therefore strongly urge development partner support for all Forum Island Countries recovery efforts, including those who have graduated to higher-income classification.

We need debt relief in line with G20 debt relief initiatives. We need enhanced flexibility in development financing modalities and priority areas of focus, including frontloading existing donor programmes and project pipelines.

We need an increase in the use of general budget support including concessional loans and grants to supplement operating balances and exploration of innovative development financing mechanisms.

We need continued and increasing support to strengthen Forum Island Countries' social protection systems, including those that address gender-based violence.

We need International Financial Institutions to reassess grant and loan eligibility and to utilise all available instruments so that Forum Island Countries can fully benefit from their support.

We need capitalisation of the Pacific Resilience Facility (PRF). We thank the Office of the UNSG for ongoing discussions to determine a suitable date and associated next steps to convene a Global Pledging Event. When conditions allow, the PRF will be a funding source that will be regionally available to Forum Island Countries for building economic resilience and strengthening disaster preparedness.

A business-as-usual approach is no longer an option. We must rethink, plan, and collaborate. We must work together to 'build back better' countries and economies that will (i) leave no one behind; (ii) protect the health and wellbeing of all; (iii) preserve our natural and marine environment; (iv) target low emission and be climate smart; and (v) build our resilience to future crises. We must come out of this pandemic more unified, safe, and resilient, as one Blue Pacific Continent and one Blue Planet.

The Pacific experience illustrates that effective development requires strong political leadership, effective institutions, capacity, accountability, and inclusive partnerships.

The challenge now is to focus on resourcing and implementation. We need to continue strengthening our capacities and systems for risk-informed planning, financing and decision making.

I thank you.